Introduction: The Politics of Higher Education

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WRITING IN 1968, Samuel Gove and Barbara Solomon concluded their comprehensive bibliographic essay on the politics of higher education by observing that, although public elementary and secondary education is seen historically as “inseparable” from local and state politics,

The same cannot be said for the relationship of higher education and ... politics. The existing literature presents a fragmentary picture of the political involvements of public higher education, and the attitude of many writers is that of keeping colleges and universities out of politics. (pp. 181-182)

Now, 30 years later, the same assessment can still be made: As a subject of social scientific inquiry, politics of higher education research remains in a state of perpetual infancy, prone to periodic lurches but lacking in sustained and systematic conceptualization and analysis. That politics of higher education scholarship should remain so scattered and irregular is somewhat curious given the richness of the parent political science discipline and the rather steady advances of K-12 specialists in developing a politics of education literature in their own field. This 2003 edition of the Politics of Education Association Yearbook and special issue of Educational Policy represent an effort to invigorate politics of higher education scholarship, an important but long-neglected area of inquiry likely to be of interest to many social scientists, particularly higher education researchers.
The question of higher education’s relationship to external political forces and processes in the United States is by no means a uniquely contemporary one. Indeed, debate about the extent to which American colleges and universities should be insulated from external political influences, especially partisan influences, has persisted throughout the history of U.S. higher education. For example, delegates to Michigan’s second constitutional convention of 1850 took the historic step of codifying the self-governing authority of that state’s flagship public university, the University of Michigan, in the new constitution to remove direct control of the university from “meddlesome politicians” (Cudlip, 1969) in the legislative and executive branches whose interferences, delegates believed, had stunted the university’s early development. California would follow Michigan’s lead in 1879 by granting the University of California constitutional protections in an effort to render the university “entirely independent of all political or sectarian influences” (Stadtman, 1970). The University of Minnesota, its powers defined by the territorial government’s provisional constitution, predated the establishment of the state of Minnesota and retained its autonomous status upon the state’s entry into the Union. Through this early practice of “constitutional autonomy,” voters in Michigan, California, Minnesota, and elsewhere sought to elevate public universities to that of a “fourth branch of government” with authority coordinate to the legislature, executive, and judiciary. Although the 20th century would find constitutional autonomy in retreat in virtually every state where it once flourished, the episode underscores the historical struggle of American governments to strike a balance between, on one hand, the demand for public accountability of higher education in a democratic society and, on the other hand, the necessity for some measure of political insulation from majoritarian excesses.

Deepening governmental involvement in American higher education during the post–World War II era brought colleges and universities more directly under the influence of political institutions and processes at both the national and state levels. The expansion of the federal government’s involvement in higher education came primarily in the form of congressional passage of landmark student financial aid legislation (i.e., The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act or “GI Bill,” 1944; Higher Education Act, 1965; Higher Education Reauthorization Act, 1972) and programs designed to bolster the research capacity of college campuses (i.e., National Defense Education Act of 1958; National Institutes of Health, 1949; National Science Foundation, 1950). The new legislation and programs signaled a significant relational change
between the higher education community and the U.S. government, regularizing patterns of interaction between colleges and universities and the Congress and numerous executive branch agencies. These interactions, in turn, presented new opportunities for higher education to become enmeshed in larger institutional struggles and, occasionally, in partisan politics. For example, congressional debate surrounding the 1972 Higher Education Amendments saw the Washington higher education associations throw their support behind an ill-fated college finance proposal, one that would have expanded direct aid to institutions rather than provide portable aid to students as many in Congress preferred. The associations’ decision to stake their entire legislative agenda on the doomed proposal badly undermined the credibility of the national higher education lobby for the next two decades (Parsons, 1997).

More recently, the Gingrich-led Republican sweep of the U.S. Congress in 1994 pitted the Washington associations, which were unprepared for a shift in congressional party control, against the new Republican majority over the continued existence of the National Endowment for the Humanities and National Endowment for the Arts and the funding levels of certain student aid programs. Significantly, this episode of the 104th Congress led to the development of a new lobbying paradigm by the national higher education community (Cook, 1998).

Of course, higher education interacts with the American national political landscape in ways that are more routine and subtle than what is sometimes witnessed during high-stakes, higher education reauthorization episodes or in times of changing congressional party control. The annual appropriation of federal funds for academic science and for student financial aid, the practice of academic earmarking, and rule-making procedures of the U.S. Department of Education all present avenues by which higher education exerts influence over and is in turn shaped by political forces at the national level of government.

One implication of American federalism is the assigning of primary responsibility for higher education, through the reserved powers clause of the 10th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, to the several state governments. Hence, it is in the states where the full scope and variety of higher education’s interactions with external political forces are so clearly evident. In the 1960s and 1970s, higher education’s involvements with state political institutions and processes grew increasingly visible as a result of the general expansion of state governmental activity and the tumultuous social climate of that era. The centralization of state budget authority in executive budget offices brought higher education systems under direct control of governors and their staffs (Glenny, 1976). The “professionalization” movement among state legislatures greatly enhanced the capacity of legislative bodies to intervene more
directly in the affairs of campuses (Sabloff, 1997). The growing complexity and size of higher education, whose enrollments ballooned from 3.7 million in 1960 to 8.5 million in 1970 to 12 million in 1980, suggested to many state officials the need for greater regulatory oversight of higher education. At the same time, political and public scrutiny of higher education everywhere increased as a result of the student protest movement of the 1960s. Governor Ronald Reagan’s controversial dismissal in 1967 of University of California president Clark Kerr as a reaction against the protracted unrest on the University of California, Berkeley, campus symbolized the extent to which the affairs of higher education institutions had grown inextricably linked with those of the larger state political landscape. To be sure, efforts also were made during this era to distance higher education from the vicissitudes of state political pressures. The emergence of the coordinating board as a popular form of statewide organization of higher education was an effort to inject greater rationality in state planning for higher education, thereby lessening the influence of idiosyncratic political factors in the development of higher education systems (Hearn & Griswold, 1994).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the American states remained hotbeds of political activity in the higher education arena. For example, in a development closely mirroring events in K-12 education, legislatures enacted various “accountability” regimes that focused public attention on the “performance” (deficit) of higher education systems and institutions (Zumeta, 1998). Higher education themes received increased prominence in statewide elections, especially gubernatorial races, where issues such as merit scholarships, race-based university admissions policies, and state lotteries placed higher education at the center of contentious campaign debates. During this era, some legislatures and governors began using single-issue litmus tests to “politicize” the appointment process of university governing boards, resulting, according to at least one national study, in the diminished quality of public university trusteeship (Association of Governing Boards, 1998). Moreover, in those states where voters directly elect trustees of public universities, campaigns for office are said to have become increasingly partisan and ideological, with the candidates’ stances on such seemingly sideline issues as abortion occupying a central role in board elections (Healy, 1996). Colleges and universities showed greater sophistication in their efforts to influence political processes and election outcomes—no fewer than 24 political action committees in six states now make contributions to political candidates on behalf of campuses (Lederman, 1997). Finally, the past two decades witnessed growth in the number of higher education–related measures that now appear before voters in statewide ballot elections (initiatives and referenda);
with greater frequency than at any time in the past, voters are being asked to decide directly at the ballot box complex governance and finance questions and broader social morality issues that intersect the interests of campuses (McLendon & Eddings, 2002).

QUESTIONS FRAMING THIS VOLUME

This special issue of Educational Policy has as its central purpose the stimulating of scholarly interest in the politics of higher education. By the term politics, we mean the institutional arrangements in which government decisions are made, the processes by which such decisions are made, and the causes and consequences of the public policies that represent the sum of governmental activity (Dye, 2002). Accordingly, our orientation to the study of higher education politics emphasizes topical, theoretical, and methodological breadth. Specifically, this volume broadly addresses questions such as the following ones:

- How do the comparative political features of the American states influence patterns of higher education policy adoption, and how do higher education system characteristics mitigate these influences?
- What are the political antecedents and consequences of recent higher education accountability and governance reform initiatives in the states?
- To what extent does the structure of state higher education systems influence patterns of higher education policy development across the states?
- What are the implications of American federalism for the political involvements of higher education?
- To what extent does the design of federal or state higher education policies influence the sustainability or effectiveness of those policies?
- How do governmental decisions about the allocation of federal research and student financial aid funding affect core higher education constituencies and the functioning of American college campuses?
- To what extent do theories of public policy making in the political science literature provide useful lenses for understanding and explaining higher education policy phenomena at the national or state level?
- What are some of the likely causes and consequences of new supranational governmental bodies on higher education organization and policy patterns?
- What are some of the relevant substantive, theoretical, and methodological issues that scholars should consider in developing an agenda for future research on the politics of higher education?
Obviously, no single volume is capable of definitively addressing these questions. Nonetheless, our expectation is that the articles contained in this special issue, one of the few major collections of articles on the politics of higher education in the past three decades, will lend greater coherence, clarity, and systematization to future research efforts in these several areas. The eight articles of this volume are grouped according to the level of government examined, beginning with the U.S. national level, then moving to the level of the American states. A subsequent article places many of the themes found in this volume in cross-national perspective. The concluding article in this compilation sketches the outlines of a research agenda on the politics of U.S. higher education.

The opening article by A. Abigail Payne examines two politically motivated approaches employed since the early 1980s to influence the distribution of federal research funding across research and doctoral universities: congressional earmarks and set-aside programs. Using data that span almost two decades, Payne presents an econometric analysis of the effect of changes in earmarked funding and research set-aside programs on academic research activities at American universities. Her analysis provides a set of divergent findings. Funding from congressional earmarks increased the quantity of academic publications but decreased the quality of those publications, whereas research funding from set-aside programs had just the opposite effect.

Michael Mumper examines an overlooked aspect of federal and state programs created to encourage participation in higher education, namely, whether the design of a program affects its long-term sustainability. Drawing on contemporary debate in political science about the merits of universal versus targeted program designs for social policy, Mumper compares the experiences of differentially designed state tuition and aid programs and federal student financial aid programs. He concludes that although design elements appear to have made a difference in program sustainability at the federal level, design has had only a modest effect at the state level. Mumper concludes his discussion by noting the emergence of a new design strategy, which, he suggests, may prove more politically popular than either of the conventional designs.

Higher education accountability and governance issues have in recent years occupied a prominent position on the policy agendas of state governments, and three articles in the volume examine various political dimensions of these issues. The article by Delmer D. Dunn notes that most discussions of “accountability” in higher education do not consider its underlying concept or the role of accountability mechanisms in democratic governance. Dunn draws on an important mid-20th-century debate between two theorists of
democratic governance, as well as the larger public administration and democratic theory literature, to explore several recent episodes of accountability legislation in higher education and to frame lessons for contemporary higher education policy making.

The article by Jill Nicholson-Crotty and Kenneth J. Meier examines the relationship between governance structure, state political characteristics, and higher education policy outcomes, a topic about which little empirical evidence exists. Framing their analysis with theoretical insights from the literature on bureaucratic politics, Nicholson-Crotty and Meier test two competing hypotheses concerning the ability of bureaucratic structure to insulate higher education policies from state political influences, such as partisanship, political ideology, and legislative characteristics. Their analysis, which relies on observations drawn from 47 states over a 7-year period, reveals that higher education governance structures do significantly affect how political forces influence higher education policy outcomes, although the direction and strength of these relationships appear mixed.

The third governance-related article contained in this volume is one by David W. Leslie and Richard J. Novak, in which the authors present comparative case studies of higher education governance reform in five states. Using a “qualitative heuristic” approach, Leslie and Novak assess first whether “instrumental” or “political” factors constituted the explanatory effects in each case and, second, the extent to which patterns in governance reform are found across states. The authors report that political factors were usually central to the story of reform, whereas instrumental goals of the higher education community typically were of secondary importance.

Brian Pusser presents a case study of the recent contest over affirmative action at the University of California in an effort to revise the prevailing interest-articulation model of higher education governance. Building on recent work in the area of positive theories of institutions, Pusser argues for a reconceptualization of public colleges and universities as exogenous political institutions that function as sites of broader political and economic conflict within American society.

In the one article of this volume that focuses on the politics of higher education outside of the United States, Guy Neave explores the historical antecedents and the social, organizational, and political implications of the Bologna Process for higher education in Western Europe. In particular, Neave focuses on the evolution of differing conceptions of community in European higher education, and he argues that higher education’s “referential community”—that is, the community to which higher education is answerable—has shifted rather radically away from that of the nation state and toward both that
of the superordinate community (European Union influences) and subnational units (regional influences).

Finally, the volume concludes with an article by Michael K. McLendon that outlines an agenda for future research on the politics of U.S. higher education. McLendon focuses on three primary sets of recommendations for invigorating research in this area: the need for a wider range of issue coverage, the need for a broadened and enriched theoretical perspective, and the need for improved analytic sophistication and rigor. McLendon’s focus is on research approaches that are expressly comparative in nature so as to take maximal advantage of the political and policy experiments that American federalism affords.

Together, these articles serve as an initial effort to assemble a broad-based scholarship on the politics of higher education. It is our hope that this special issue of Educational Policy will provide those interested in politics of higher education research with new ideas, fresh frames of reference, and an initial research base with which to build an accumulative literature on this important but historically neglected topic.

REFERENCES


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