The Educational Policy Institute's Week in Review

Commentary 2006

Educational Policy Institute

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PREFACE

In Summer '06 I made a decision to publish a weekly electronic "news" bulletin for people who follow EPI's work. The essence of this creation isn't new nor original. But we took careful thought to make it different from the "others." First, we decided to post links to news reports for specific education issues, such as "pre-college preparation" and "postsecondary access and success." We also added an "international" section and a "Canadian" section, to ensure that our readers from beyond the US had something of interest.

Perhaps the most unique piece is that we decided to write a commentary each week; the "we" being myself and my Toronto colleague, EPI Vice President Alex Usher.

When I created the Educational Policy Institute back in 2002, I did so to provide a public research service on one hand, but also because I felt hampered to say things that needed to be said on the other. Coming from a background of membership organizations, one does feel handcuffed most of the time in what you can and cannot say. That was a big part of forming EPI – no strings attached.

The commentary provides an opportunity for Alex and me to talk about the news from our perspective — not the organization's — and to hopefully bring up issues that we think are both interesting and deserve some light.

COMMENTARY 2006 provides our thoughts and perspectives from Year 1 of the *Week in Review*, from its inaugural issue on September 1, 2006 to the final edition of the year on December 29, 2006. We hope you enjoy them (again).

Watson Scott Swail, Ed.D.
President & CEO
Educational Policy Institute

September 1, 2006

SOLVING THE REMEDIAL EDUCATION PUZZLE

Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President

Welcome to our first edition of Week in Review, our new weekly news summary documenting what we think are the major stories of the week across the US, with some international items intermixed. While this format isn't new by any standards, our focus will remain on issues of academic preparation and college access and success. In addition, Week in Review will have commentary each week on a related issue from either me or our Vice President, Alex Usher.

In this week's news, we feature a new study by the DC-based Alliance for Excellent Education, which finds that over $1.4 billion is spent at US two-year institutions for developmental (remedial) education. The issue of remediation continues to become an increasing challenge for educational institutions in the US and Canada. Critics of remedial programming suggest that if high schools did their job better, this wouldn't be an issue. That's a hard point to argue. Certainly, if our middle and high schools better prepared students for higher education, we would rely less on remedial programs later in the education process. However, education reform doesn't happen overnight and, given our track record over the past 20 years, it hardly occurs at all.

So we're stuck with this remedial problem for the foreseeable future. A few years ago, the State of New York decided that remedial programs didn't belong in four-year institutions, so they pushed them down to the community college level. Other states followed New York's lead. In some ways, this approach makes sense: community colleges are less expensive on a per capita/per course basis than universities. Beyond the fiscal horizon, we do not know if the quality of remedial education is as good as it was at the university level. To my knowledge, that research question has not been addressed (and if anyone contests, please bring it to my attention).

This remedial issue is a bigger problem than one might perceive. With No Child Left Behind and the increasing focus on accountability by the Bush Administration and policymakers across the country, it is significant that high school graduates are requiring extensive remediation at the postsecondary level. They are graduating with a diploma, but unprepared—at some level—for college-level work.

The Alliance report is correct in suggesting that this is a huge pink elephant in the education big-top, but let's be clear: there is no silver bullet here. There is no simple policy to rectify the situation. If students are unprepared for postsecondary work but aspire to study at that level, remediation is their only avenue. Forcing down remediation to the community college level, as in New York, was meant as an effort to do so, but there is little or no evidence to suggest that this policy, except on a fiscal level, has been successful.

At one level I would support a federal program that rewards schools and institutions for reducing remedial/developmental needs for underrepresented groups at the postsecondary level. The challenge, of course, is that our vision of "K-16" education is mostly a cliché; accountability from secondary to postsecondary education is pathetic. No one owns "the problem," and the system isn't built to share the responsibility or blame. Ultimately, we need to continue the conversations about K-16 or K-20 partnerships, but we need to up the ante. At some level, governments need to make it known that this is serious stuff. K-12 won't like that, nor will higher education. But it may be the only carrot/cattle prod to which those two entities will respond.

Like every other conversation, I could easily segue into the need for a national unit-record database, so we could truly see where these issues hit home. But that will have to wait for another week.

September 8, 2006

MEASURING UP 2006: WHAT EXPERTS REALLY THINK

Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President

Yesterday I was fortunate to attend the press conference for ***Measuring Up 2006***, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's report card on higher education at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. Measuring Up provides a report card for each of the 50 states, plus a national overview. In this week's commentary, I provide a brief look at the findings, but focus most on what the report didn't say and what the experts did.

The report card is divided into six areas: preparation, participation, affordability, completion, benefits (e.g., "educational capital"), and student learning. States are "graded" on a scale from A to F (but no E) on their performance in each area. I urge readers to go to the Measuring Up 2006 website to review the complete data and state report cards, but here is the quick and dirty of the report:

Preparation: According to the report, 45 states have improved on more than half the indicators in the preparation category since the early 1990s, although there are still large disparities in preparation by race and income.

Participation: The study found that the nation as a whole has made no significant progress in postsecondary participation in the past 15 years, and that matriculation to the postsecondary sector still varies greatly by race/ethnicity and income.

Affordability: The report makes a point in illustrating how the nation's colleges and universities have become considerably less affordable since the early 1990s. In fact, the report card "flunked" 43 of 50 states, and no state received an "A" or "B" grade.

Completion: Measuring Up 2006 claims that states have made modest gains in the proportion of students completing degrees and certificates, but that even the "best" performance among states is not impressive.

Benefits: Most states have increased their "educational capital" since the 1990s, as measured by the percentage of the adult population with an earned BA.

Learning: This is a new category that is in a "pilot" stage of the report, and measures student learning. The findings are limited as are the measures. Wait until '08. Or '10.

The report itself is well concocted, interesting, and contains easily digestible facts. Personally, I found the remarks made at the press conference, which won't be found in the pages of the report, much more interesting. So I reserve the remainder of this week's commentary on what others said, which included a high-level expert panel chaired by former North Carolina Governor and Chair of the National Center, Jim Hunt, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, EPI Board of Director and Dean of Education at the University of Virginia, David Breneman, and several others.

Governor Hunt opened the proceedings suggesting that Measuring Up is all about "doing better," and that the report card has been responsible, at least in part, for getting states talking and dealing with the problems that face secondary and postsecondary education. Clearly, Measuring Up has certainly done that. When the first report came out in 2000, besides the criticism of a "simplistic" grading rubric for rating states, it filled a void by cataloguing information that could be easily referenced by policymakers, media, and citizens alike. The best thing this report does it make data manageable. We can all quibble about methodology, but when you allow 50 states to basically do their own thing in the area of education, building a national and state report card system that is even remotely useful is a difficult hill to climb. The National Center has done it well.

Following the Governor, Pat Callan, the President of the National Center, correctly surmised that "completion" is the Achilles heel of American higher education. "We are operating a 20th Century system with 21st Century demands," said Callan, noting that we have not retooled our efforts our worked diligently enough to improve the success of entering students. He offered that the country needs to do revisit our strategies for the GIs following World War II and provide support for low-income and other historically underrepresented students.

Joni Finney, the Center's Vice President and the Director of the Measuring Up, briefly presented the reports major findings, noting that although states did improve in the preparation of students for higher education, the US is "clearly not in a position to replace the experience of our retiring population.

Margaret Spellings, in her brief comments, conveniently linked the improved preparation to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, although many states were turning that corner with the standards movement in the 1990s. She summed up the report by stating that it had "some cause for concern."

Dave Breneman of UVa, an economist by trade, reported that, for him, the report reinforced his grim picture of the future. "If anything," stated Breneman, "things have gotten worse over the last few years. We've ensured that those with wealth and privilege continue to have wealth and privilege." Breneman suggested that he could envision a future where an elite, highly-qualified sector of students from advantaged backgrounds attended the nation's elite institutions (status quo, really) and a group of middling students attending our regional institutions. However, his final point was the most salient: that the remainder would be "a growing underclass bereft of any real opportunity." That's a harsh statement and a warning that we hope our policymakers receive. Paul Lingefelter, the SHEEO executive director, echoed that sentiment: "We're willing to spend almost anything to educate the most able students," but that we must look at average students and those with disabilities."

The biennial reporting from the National Center, intermixed with their occasional reports (all downloadable from their website), keep the issues of preparation, access, and success—our core issues at the Educational Policy Institute—on the minds of federal and state policymakers. With rumor mills turning about the uncertainty of the future of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, I am hopeful that they stick around to keep doing this important work.

September 15, 2006

FINANCIAL BARRIERS AND COLLEGE ACCESS

Alex Usher, Vice President

This week saw the publication of the U.S. Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance's new report: Mortgaging Our Future: How Financial Barriers to College Undercut America's Global Competitiveness. Although we support the essence of the report that there is not enough need-based aid to help students access and success at the postsecondary level, there are areas of concern within the report that is worth noting for clarity and accuracy. For one, the report makes the startling – and highly misleading - claim that between 1.4 million to 2.4 million bachelor's degrees will be lost this decade because of financial concerns. Let me describe this in more detail.

The report is problematic because of a fundamental error in one of its key assumptions. Follow the report's logic for a moment. The report makes the important point that high-income students are more likely to attend a 4-year college than low-income students. It makes the important point that this is true even if one gets rid of the income bias in "college preparedness" (i.e. having taken substantive math classes in 12th grade). So far, so good.

What the report fails to do is then go on and correct for what grades students actually received in these courses. As we know from many sources (not least of which is this week's UNESCO publication on equity in schooling highlighted in this week's news), low-income students are rarely as prepared as their wealthier counterparts. Even if they complete the same courses in high school, it is simply not credible to assume – as this report does – that they are equally prepared for college. Having made that assumption, the report goes on to assume that all barriers are financial barriers and hence everyone who does not attend is a casualty of America's tuition and financial aid policies.

The real problem is more complex than that. Low-income kids may not be adequately academically prepared, but they are not unintelligent, either. They may come to a rational decision not to enroll in college precisely because they know that their lack of preparedness makes success less likely and hence makes education a riskier investment (see EPI's Grants for Students" What They Do, Why they Work for more on this). So do these students face academic barriers or financial barriers? The obvious truth is that it's a bit of both.

The Committee's report glosses over the income/academic preparation link completely. For instance, on page 18, where the metric suddenly switches from college access rates by income quartile to college completion rates by quartile. Again, we see that familiar and troubling relationship between income and completion – among those who completed Trigonometry in 1992, there was a 30 percentage-point gap in the completion rates of high-income and low-income students. The paper then simply asserts – with no empirical proof whatsoever (really, it's not there!) – that these losses were due to financial barriers.

Don't get me wrong. Financial barriers are a serious issue and need careful attention. We study these issues here at EPI, and remain in full support of improvements to the financial aid system to ensure that low-income youth have the financial wherewithal to go to college. Improvements in student aid – particularly income-based grants - are indeed urgently necessary. But improving access and success isn't just a matter of finances – it's also a matter of improving academic preparation in secondary schools.

By deliberately underplaying the latter, the Advisory Committee is perpetuating the pointless divisions in the access community between those who see costs as the main barrier to access and those who see preparation as the main barrier to access. In reality, whatever investments governments make in one of these policy fields will be vastly more productive if they are also making investments in the other as well.

September 22, 2006

AN EARLY END TO EARLY ADMISSIONS

Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President

Among the big news in higher education this week (apart from the 10 percent plan in Texas which I don't have time to get to) was Harvard's announcement, followed quickly by Princeton (not to be outdone), to dump the Early Decision/Early Action admissions programs.

Early decision/action programs have been in vogue for the past decade, allowing students to submit their applications early and be selected by as early as November or December while still in their senior year of high school. The difference between the "decision" program and the "action" program is simply that Early Decision (ED) forces students to commit to attend that college the following fall; Early Action (EA) doesn't. These programs only matter at selective institutions, which constitute approximately 20 percent of the four-year colleges and universities in the United States.

Colleges like ED programs for a number of reasons, prominent being that it lengthens the admissions year, which in turn can reduce the one-time crunch that many schools that don't do ED are forced to endure. ED also has the potential to increase the yield of students who choose a particular institution as their "first choice," which is good for an institution.

But ED has its critics. Many higher education and admissions professional acknowledge that ED and EA tend to give additional advantage to those who already have considerable advantage—students of affluent backgrounds. And this goes to reason. Students who are more affluent, who have more educational capital because of their parents' backgrounds, and who live in areas that have a higher value of postsecondary studies, are much more likely to be in a situation to think of college at an earlier age, plan for college, and take the necessary steps for college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), students from high socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, when compared to low-SES students, were much more likely to plan for college and professional studies, complete academic high school programs and test higher in academic areas, and apply for college. In fact, data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) illustrate that 79 percent of high-SES students from the original 8th-grade sample applied to at least one college compared with only 44 percent of low-SES students. Additionally, 78 percent of the high-SES students applied to two or more institutions; only 31 percent of low-SES students did the same (NCES, 1996).

My point here is that advantage begets advantage, and it is these students—the high-SES and affluent students—who are taking advantage of early decision. You can bet it wasn't the students on their own doing this. It was those students with their BA-level parents who were pursuing (or pushing) ED and EA options.

The premise behind ED isn't bad. In fact, it makes a lot of sense to higher education and those on a college track. I'll admit, in a few years, when my children are at college age and I've robbed a bank to pay for their tuition, I would definitely consider ED or EA if they were interested in a selective institution (I'm thinking State College at this point, but don't tell them that). It just makes sense. Data show that students with lower academic records get accepted at higher rates in ED than those who wait until regular decision in the spring. So why not do it? It gives an advantage to that group who has the finger on the trigger, so to speak.

But from a public policy standpoint, is ED/EA worth the cost of increasing the educational opportunity gap? Harvard doesn't think so, and nor does Princeton. Of course, these are "different" institutions that most of us could only dream about going (us or our kids). They can afford to make these choices to do the "right thing." But will others? People are now expecting many institutions to do the same. But not all will, because they perhaps don't have the staffing (anymore) to go back to the traditional system which demanded incredible hours during admissions period.

Our policies at the institutional level should focus on expanding opportunity, especially to those who historically haven't had access to postsecondary education, let alone selective institutions. It's reassuring to a certain degree that Harvard and other elite institutions occasionally do the right thing for the right reasons. Dropping Early Decision is one of them.

September 29, 2006

UNIVERSITY RANKINGS 2.0

Alex Usher, Vice President

It's been over 20 years since Bob Morse and the folks at US News and World Report began their rankings of US universities. Since then, this US invention has spread around the world – more than a dozen countries now have them and there are even a number of international rankings, too (the least reputable of which is Newsweek's recent effort, which blatantly rips off the work of other ranking organizations)

But this isn't simply a case of a US invention spreading around the world; almost unseen by the American press, university rankings in other countries are mutating into something different from the standard US News-style ranking, and becoming much more interesting and useful in the process. In particular, foreign rankings have come up with three key innovations that could change the way rankings are done in the US – for the better.

The most important global innovation in rankings is towards institutional disaggregation. Every sensible person knows that colleges are never of equal quality across all their program offerings. Institutions have good departments and bad departments – a fact that gets lots in the institution-wide ranking. Both of the main international rankings (Shanghai Jiao Tong and the Times Higher Education Supplement) now rank institutions by field of study, as do Italy's La Repubblica, England's Guardian, and Germany's CHE.

Another important innovation is the decreasing reliance on institutional sources of data. We all know those stories of institutions "gaming" their data in order to get a better ranking; that's why outside North America, rankers almost never use data from institutions. Instead, they choose indicators that can either be populated by survey data or by data from third-parties, such as national departments of education or third-party indicators. Now there's some good and some bad that goes along with that – what one gains in indicator reliability is offset to at least some degree by a decline in indicator usefulness – but it does underline the fact that US News is working off a dataset that would not necessarily be considered up to par in many countries.

The third and most interesting innovation lies in Germany, where the Centre for Higher Education Development has come up with a set of web-based "rankings" which are, for the moment, unique. As in other rankings, the CHE collects data on a range of indicators through student surveys and third-party indicators. Unlike other indicators, they do not weight the indicators, nor do they aggregate them to create aggregate "winners". Instead, users select the indicators on which they wish to "rank" institutions, enter them into the system, and the web-based server automatically creates a ranking of institutions according to the selected criteria. Even better, it's done on a department-by-department basis. (You can use an English version of the website by clicking here.

This, to my mind, is the future of rankings. It compares institutions at the level they should be compared at and it does so in a flexible way, not according to some pre-ordained, one-size-fits all weighting formula handed in an essentially arbitrary manner. Most importantly, it shows that there are many different possible answers – all of them valid - to the question "which university is the best?", because there are literally millions of possible combinations of rankings depending entirely on which criteria one chooses to judge "quality".

In fact, we at EPI were so impressed, we've decided to try something similar. On October 31, in association with The Strategic Counsel and Canada's National Newspaper, the Globe and Mail, EPI Canada will be launching The Navigator. This new interactive comparison tool doesn't get us down to the field-of-study level (yet) but it will be the first chance Canadians have to use a set of interactive rankings to compare institutions by the criteria they themselves choose.

Our major innovation is in the indicators we use in our rankings. As with many rankings, we use student survey data to populate some of our indicators. But, instead of asking students about their level of satisfaction with institutional life (which we don't believe to be especially reliable), we draw on the excellent work of people like Ernie Pascarella and Pat Terenzini and ask them questions which relate to their engagement at the institution.

The resulting product – once we get it down to the field-of-study level – should be the best of all worlds. We'll have student data reflecting what really matters inside institutions, we'll have impartial third-party data, we'll have a customization tool that allows young people to compare institutions according to what matters to them, and we'll have taken the rankings exercise beyond the simplistic "horse-racing" game we all know all too well.

Sounds interesting? You bet. Sounds almost exactly like what Secretary Spellings called for on Tuesday? Sure does. When can we expect this idea to migrate into the United States? Stay tuned – or give us a call…

Enjoy the weekend.

October 6, 2006

INCREASING STUDENT SUCCESS

Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President

I write this week's commentary from beautiful Hilton Head, South Carolina, where we are hosting our fall Retention Retreat. Not a bad gig, I must say. Most interesting is to hear stories from our participants, who hail from over 25 institutions across the US and Canada, from two-year, four-year, and proprietary institutions.

This is the choir, of course. The people who are here are those who believe in what they do and have some responsibility on campus to change the trajectory of student success. As I mentioned in my opening comments on Thursday, the easy part is coming to Hilton Head to learn about student retention. The hard part starts next week when they're back in reality; when they must answer the difficult questions about what they should do to increase student retention and persistence.

Some of our attendees have been told to "solve' the institution's retention problem. Others are trying to be more proactive and get ahead of the game. We have dozens of TRIO Student Support Services people here. It's refreshing to hear of institutions giving these TRIO directors a leadership role on campus, because they have been doing many of the right things for a long time. The trick is to expand SSS from 200 to 2,000 students.

At our Retention Retreats, we often, if not always, get the "silver bullet" question. That is, tell us the one thing we need to do to increase student retention;

give us the easy answer and make "this" go away, or show us an institution that we can model. Unfortunatley, the retention game isn't so simple. George Kuh and his co-authors of *Student Success,* their 2005 book describing 20 successful schools, make the very astute comment that all 20 schools achieved success in very different ways. There is no easy way; no simple solution. Achieving success in student retention is about gaining collective buy-in that something must be done, followed by a process of investigation of what works on their campus, where they need improvement, and mapping a plan for making it happens. Not easy work.

To that end, we are in the final stages of developing the Institutional Student Retention Assessment (ISRA), funded by Lumina Foundation for Education and currently in beta testing. This web-based instrument will guide institutional teams through a process of self-analysis and documentation to better understand what they currently do for students and where they could improve. It also will help them prioritize strategies and activities, because, quite simply, one can't do it all. But institutions must start somewhere. We hope the ISRA, a free resource to institutions coming January 2007, will help in that regard.

It is refreshing to hear of the newfound understanding of the importance of serving students well and graduating them. This, to me, is a positive change in the past decade that I trust will continue to grow over the next few years.

At this October's meeting, some of the "best practices" offered by institutions include supplemental instruction, small learning communities, student tracking systems, and invasive counseling. The challenges, of course, are diverse. We are hearing from commuter institutions, especially two-year institutions, who only see students for classroom time--then they're gone. How does an institution engage students who aren't there but for perhaps a couple of hours a day or week? Others institutions are fight ing the "resource" issue: having the funding to make necessary changes.

We certainly don't have all the answers, but we do try to put participants through a process of how to think through these issues; how to build consensus on campus on what the challenges are and what can be done to ameliorate these issues.

We remind people to visit our sister site, www.studentretention.org, for information about student retention. Enjoy your weekend.

October 13, 2006

RETURNS TO EDUCATION

Alex Usher, Vice President

There were two interesting articles out this week on access to education - one by Clive Crook in the Atlantic and another by George Leef on the website TCSDaily. Both of them make the case that the relationship between expanding college participation and economic growth isn't as tight as is commonly thought.

This isn't a new point – Alison Wolf made it very convincingly some years ago in Does Education Matter, and EPI backed it up last year in Is More Better? by EPI President Watson Scott Swail for the Gates Foundation. While it is certainly of value to individuals to get a college education, there is a point beyond which the social benefit starts to decline. The demand for undergraduate education, in other words, isn't being pulled by the demands of the labour market, but rather pushed by credential inflation.

Now some people have unfortunately taken this nugget to mean that access programs are useless or counterproductive because, on aggregate, we have too many people in PSE. This is absolutely not the case. Even, at the margin, the social value of a degree may be declining, the value to the individual who receives it is substantial because education is still the "ticket" required to compete in today's economy. Now, if there were no barriers to education that systematically worked against people from certain income or ethnic backgrounds, then we might be able to say "who cares about expanding access," because then limiting aggregate access wouldn't work systematically in favour of one group of people. Trouble is, these barriers to exist, and therefore the solution of limiting aggregate access would have differential effects across the population.

To put it another way, in pursuing a "fairness" agenda for postsecondary access, we may, from an aggregate point of view, introduce inefficiencies into the PSE system. That's an inconvenient truth for those of us who want to argue for access – but we should be honest about it. And we should also be ready to argue that since the real alternative to a strong access agenda is a hereditary oligarchy, a little inefficiency isn't too high a price to pay.

All that said, the data does imply a looming problem on the horizon. If undergraduate education is now more about credentials than human capital, it can't be long before the credential value of the bachelor's degree itself starts to drop (since a credential is a positional good, it loses its value as more people obtain it). How long will it be until a bachelor's degree becomes the equivalent of a high school diploma – a necessary but on-its-own-inadequate piece of paper? And how long before the hot political topic in education is "access to graduate education"?

Just something to ponder...

Enjoy the weekend.

October 20, 2006

COSBY AND THE ENGINEERING KIDS

Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President

This week I had the honor of attending a fundraising gala in New York City for the National Action Council on Minorities in Engineering, better known as NACME. If you don't know them, you may know their slogan—"MATH is Power."

The awards ceremony was posh, held at the glorious Waldorf Astoria and attended by some of America's most affluent people, including Stephen Bechtel of the global conglomerate Bechtel Corporation. Bechtel received the NACME Corporate Citizenship Award for his contribution to diversity.

The feature for the evening was Bill Cosby, the 69-year old comedian. Cosby is a friend of NACME CEO John Brooks Slaughter, the former Occidental College President, and also entertained at the 2004 event. Cosby, perched in his chair at the front of the stage, directly facing the audience, had the crowd in hysterics over his observations about marriage, especially his analogy of the matrimonial institution to chess; "why can the King move but one square at a time while the Queen can go anywhere she wants, taking players down as she goes."

Cosby and others were in attendance because students from underrepresented groups have been, well, underrepresented in the sciences, especially engineering, for seemingly ever. Today, only 12 percent of undergraduate engineers in the US are underrepresented minorities, and only 4 percent of minority high school graduates complete the math and science courses necessary to enter the engineering field. And this is after decades of hard work by NACME, NSF, NIH, HACU, HENAAC, and other organizations dedicated to expanding access to the sciences through research and scholarship programs. We still have barely made a dent, even though the percentage of people of color in the U.S. has risen dramatically. In a globally-competitive environment, where competition is less about Arizona vs. New York than the US vs. South Korea, our ability to attract students into STEM areas (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) seems critical to success in the U.S.

Perhaps that's why Bechtel and other industry leaders understand that Latino, Black, Native Americans, and other underrepresented groups are key players in our ability to remain globally competitive. If it stands true that we can't produce enough engineers and scientists to remain competitive, then it follows that society and the individual would benefit from targeting these underrepresented groups, including women, to enter and succeed in STEM disciplines.

This all comes in light of last week's commentary by Alex Usher, which focused on the "credentialization" of higher education. While it stands true, in an economic sense, that the value of an undergraduate degree will fall as more people earn them, it doesn't cover the areas where there is a dearth of students, such as engineering. Our best bet is to move more of our historically underrepresented students into the STEM areas, which will ultimately make the US more competitive on a global scale.

At EPI, we initiated a study this week to measure the impact of NACME scholarships for underrepresented students. These scholarships provide $2,000 per student per year to help reduce the financial burden of attending engineering school. During our visit, we met with a gaggle of students over pizza to discuss their experiences. Of the 10 students in our focus group, all were graduates of a community college, which is interesting because it shows that students, especially those of color, are either forced or choose to take the 2-year step toward a 4-year degree. This is something we've known for some time, but it was particular interesting to see an entire group use this mode of access.

We can't say much about the study at this point, but the students did say that the scholarships allowed them to work less, or not at all, or lessen their loan burden than if they didn't receive the grant support. These are all important things to consider in the fight to earn an engineering degree, which is arguably more difficult, academically speaking, than many other disciplines in higher education.

In addition to the money, it is also interesting to note the support networks required by students to succeed. The FIU students talked about it, and I've heard from many students who say the same thing. People who have heard me speak understand my penchant for invoking the words of Art Levine, the former head of Teacher's College and now the new President of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation. Levine commented that it takes "one arm around one child" to make a difference in the lives of the underrepresented to succeed to and through higher education. The students at FIU would attest to that statement. However, they also had "grit" to succeed. These students were motivated.

So back to Bill Cosby. Cosby started and finished the night by telling the relatively affluent audience that their money was good. Indeed, important. But there is much more to it than money. He said we need to "massage the brain" of these students. Make engineering exciting and motivate students to work their way toward STEM careers, which must start at middle school due to the enhanced mathematics and science curriculum necessary for admissions. Cosby alluded to the four horsement of the apocalypse—Algebra, Geometry, Calculus, and Trigonometry. "Those four have killed more people than anything else in our society," said Cosby. "We must stroke their brains and give them time."

He finished with this: "If you ask me to tell you why I have passion for comedy, I can. I love what I do and that's why I keep doing it. You have to do the same thing to students. It's about passion."

By the way, the evening helped raise $4 million for engineering scholarships and programs for NACME.

Have a good weekend, everyone. Enjoy the massage.

October 27, 2006

SCARY THINGS

Alex Usher, Vice President

Higher education is a great boon to those fortunate enough to get it. There was a time when we were making strides towards making this education more accessible for all. Now, in most developed countries, we seem to have hit a ceiling. People from ethnic or racial minorities, people from low-income backgrounds, etc., aren't making relative progress the way they used to. Things aren't necessarily getting worse (though in some places the problem is clearly there), but progress is elusive. Even in places where tuition has dropped – Ireland, Newfoundland and Manitoba, to name but three – there is no evidence that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are making any headway. My personal opinion is that this is because the real barriers to accessibility lie at much earlier ages of development and that much of what we're doing at the post-secondary level – tinkering at the margins with tuition and aid – is only slightly more effective than pushing on a string when it comes to solving the big problems of equality.

But the fact is none of us know for sure. And worse, it seems like we've run out of ideas to make equality more of a reality. And that's scary.

I have never understood how people could be opposed to better policy research. Here's a story: I was working on a project earlier this year when we proposed a random assignment field experiment on financial aid to a group of access-oriented institutions. These institutions – who had actually initially approached our client about doing some joint research – were aghast. "You can't treat students like guinea pigs!" they said. Being the good consultant I am, I couldn't say what I wanted to, namely: "What, are you kidding me? *You* treat students like guinea pigs all the time!"

Because the fact is, every time tuition rises or falls, every time student aid is tinkered with or admission requirements are changed – heck, every time students enter a classroom - students are being subject to an experiment, just like guinea pigs. The only difference is that we don't usually bother to measure the results scientifically, through methods like random assignment. The fact is, way too many people are happy to treat students as guinea pigs as long as the treatment is equal. Differential treatment – even if it's temporary - in the name of increased knowledge is somehow anathema to people even within the allegedly enlightened academy. And that's *really scary.*

Given that the early application season is just ending I suppose I should confess my complete and utter bafflement as a Canadian about why Americans get so worked up about the admissions process. Most undergraduate institutions are providing a substantially similar education: how, then, have they been sucked into a situation where literally billions of dollars are being sucked up in a race for prestige, full of branding and marketing exercises designed to blow molehill-differences into perceived mountainous sources of competitive advantage?

With a few honourable exceptions, undergraduate university programs are like cabbage-patch kids. Yes, they're all individuals with their own name and "personalities". But grow up: they're just dolls!

The fact that the American public has been sucked into a massive war for educational status, with people trampling over each other in their rush not just to get their kids into the "right" college, but the right high school, elementary school and day care, is a sign that as a society we have come to believe that opportunity is not expandable, and that it is some kind of fixed resource to be fought over. And that's *really really scary*.

But what's really *really really scary* is how little effort we've put into trying to change this mentality. Sure, lots of people have complained about the tendency of magazines like *US News and World Report* to promote a one-size-fits-all definition of quality among parents push institutions into a ruinous arms race. But has anyone done anything about it?

Well, now we at the Educational Policy Institute have done so. Next Tuesday, in co-operation with the *Globe and Mail* (Canada's National Newspaper) we will be unveiling the "University Report Card Navigator". It's university rankings with a big twist: you do the ranking, according to the indicators that matter to you. We provide data on 25 indicators – many of them based on student engagement-related data – and you choose the five that matter to you to generate your own personalized rankings. If you remember your permutations and combinations math from high school, that's just over 6 million possible combinations of rankings. What more graphic way to show that there's no such thing as a "best" school – just a school that's best for *you*.

It's only in Canada for now, but we'd be interested in talking to anyone in the US who wants to help us expand the concept. If you want to check it out as of Tuesday, go to www.theglobeandmail.com and look up the Navigator. And let us know what you think – we're always eager for feedback.

Enjoy the weekend.

November 3, 2006

DO WE KNOW WHAT TO DO?

Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President

This has been a busy week for educational researchers and for EPI. Two major conferences are happening as I write this commentary: the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) in Anaheim, California, and the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC) in Washington, DC. Both deal, in part, to expanding access and success at the postsecondary level, similar to our mission at EPI. Both organizations involve many of the same people, and--in logic that I can't quite understand--both are being held on opposite coasts on the exact same dates. Brilliant. Ladies and gentlemen, these are the leaders of higher education in the US… and we shouldn't be worried?

I spent the past two days at the NPEC conference in DC, just two blocks from the White House. This has been a very well planned event with all the right people: Vincent Tinto, Derek Bok, Jim Hearn, George Kuh, Tom Bailey, Bridget Terry Long, David Longanecker, Paul Lingefelter, and many other top notch individuals who have much to say such that we understand how much we have to learn. Even U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings dropped by for a while.

The theme of the NPEC conference is "Spearheading a Dialogue on Student Success." Five papers were commissioned for the event, including a lead-off piece by Jim Hearn of the University of Georgia. Jim's piece summarized the five papers and identified the common themes. One in particular buttressed

Alex Usher's Halloween commentary of last week by stating that student success at the postsecondary level starts far before students finish high school. This is something that we are only beginning to grasp. While postsecondary educators and policy analysts have been lamenting the lack of focus on PSE by the Bush Administration for the past five years, there is great truth in our need to do much better in K-12 education before any real changes in higher education will emerge, at least from the student perspective. That doesn't mean the Administration, along with states and philanthropies, shouldn't be focusing more on higher education, but we do have to find a better way to engage students from Pre-K on to learn.

In talking about student learning at the K-12 level, A new report came out this week saying that students in Korea and other nations, who do much better in mathematics and other core academic areas than Americans, hate taking those courses as much ore more than US students. But they do it, learn it, and excel it, so to speak. Somehow, if we truly want to take off the "glass ceiling" we've self imposed on postsecondary access and success, students will have to develop a better set of academic skills in elementary and secondary school, and that's a problem that involves everybody. Expecting postsecondary institutions to pick up the pieces in remedial (sorry, developmental… but don't let me digress) education is asking far too much for "higher" education.

The Hearn paper also noted the importance of further integration between K-12 and postsecondary education to encourage student success. We've given this a wonderful name in the United States: K-20 integration. I love it. I particularly enjoy going to states who spout off about their K-20 "collaboratives." Great semantic engineering, but I'm not seeing a whole lot of change in actual practices. Jim's right, though. Until we figure how to best tie these two entities—that of compulsory education and elective, postsecondary education—students will continue to face challenges determining their education and vocational futures.

There was a funny moment at the conference, because most presenters in front of the 500+ audience were talking in a theoretical perspective about what "should be," or what their research "posited." I overheard one lady in the audience say a little too loudly, "Enough, enough, enough. What are we supposed to do?" Vince Tinto echoed this sentiment in his comments, as written in this Thursday's InsideHigherEd.org. "Will all due respect to my colleagues, one might argue that we already have sufficient research on student success. What is missing in our view is the ability to transform the knowledge that we have into practical knowledge."

Back to the lady in the audience, isn't this the catch? What to do? I've said before that when we conduct our Retention 101 workshops: participants ultimately want to know what to do. But--collectively speaking--we do a poor job of providing information on what works. At the NPEC Conference, Harvard's Bridget Terry Long said that all strategies must be somewhat local because every campus is unique. While this is ultimately true, we don't even do a decent job of providing information on what "could" work on campuses.

This point is the main impetus behind EPI's effort to build an international database on "What Works" in student success. The project, supported in part by TG (formerly known as the Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation), will produce a searchable web-based portal where practitioners can search for peer-reviewed strategies, complete with contact information so that individuals can make direct contact to program administrators. EPI will be releasing more information on the Effective Practices Database in the near future. We're also looking for further financial support, so...

I would also like to quickly report that this was an important week for EPI. On Tuesday we released the UNIVERSITY NAVIGATOR, which is our online web portal for students and parents to rank institutions based on their own interests, not those determined by other organizations (like US News and World Report or MacLeans Magazines). EPI created the Navigator in partnership with the Globe and Mail, Canada's largest newspaper. Unfortunately, the Navigator only works with Canadian universities at this time, but we are hoping to bring it down to the US in the very near future.

Secondly, EPI recently won a series of bids on research projects in the US and Canada. Over the next year, EPI will conduct an evaluation of the Reading First program in North Carolina; in Canada, we secured a contract with the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum (Forum canadien sur l'apprentissage) to conduct a national survey of apprentices whose in-class experiences occur in a private (i.e. non-community college) setting, and a contract for the Government of Ontario to conduct an evaluation of the Government's Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy. All very cool stuff.

Have a relaxing weekend.

November 10, 2006

THE AFTERMATH

Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President

On Wednesday I reported on the early outcomes from the U.S. election. At that time I stated that it wasn't quite the "tsunami" that some had predicted. In hindsight, I guess it was. Montana trickled over, and then so toppled George Allen in Virginia. In the end, the Democrats took over the House AND the Senate, leaving the President with the judiciary.

I don't want to beat this dead horse too long, but given the week that was, I have a few more thoughts about the outcome and impact that this election may have on education and other things.

First things first. I know Joe Leiberman is from Connecticut, not Vermont. Give me a break. They just seem the same (sorry Don H.). I stand corrected.

Second, now that the Senate has officially entered the Democrat column, real changes are not only possible, but probable. On Thursday, Speaker-in-waiting Nancy Pelosi had her lunch meeting with President Bush and they all put on nice faces, regardless of the fact that Ms. Nancy recently called the President "incompetent" and an "emperor with no clothes." In return a few weeks ago, when asked about Pelosi becoming the first female speaker of the House, Bush said, "That's not going to happen." Washington civility: another oxymoron.

News flash to the President: Pelosi is on deck to become the Speaker, and she now has control, although not filibuster control, of both Houses. The only thing the President has at this point is the veto, and we'll see if the lame duck (I mean that in a Presidential way, of course) has the audacity to use it. In some cases, such as stem cell and others, he probably will because it send a strong message to his right wing base, which the GOP will need in 2008 to have any hope. But he'll have to be judicious with it.

Pelosi is already flexing her muscle. On Wednesday morning, she said that the President must "signal a change of direction" and that a change in the "civilian leadership at the Pentagon" would be a start. A few hours later, Rumsfeld was gone. I'm not suggesting she had much to do with that. Quite obviously, Bush was going to do it anyway—they interviewed the Secretary of Defense-elect Gates last week in Texas—but it did show that the election is going to have an impact.

Interesting, the President had a breakfast meeting yesterday morning with his close cabinet people, including Cheney, Gonzales, Boehner, and others, and at a subsequent press conference said that they will be pushing through legislation over the next two months, before the new seats are taken on Capitol Hill. And to put salt in the wounds, he put Josh Bolton's name forward to the Senate to be voted on for the U.N. Not going to happen, but a nice try, anyway.

In education, the Democrats appear to be moving fast. George Miller, likely the incoming chair of the Education and the Workforce panel, released a statement Wednesday morning only hours after the election to announce that, working in a bipartisan way (yeah), "we will act quickly to raise the national minimum wage and to cut interest rates in half on college loans." Senator Kennedy, who will now take over the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, announced that he will first look to raise minimum wage in the country. In his acceptance speech Tuesday evening, Kennedy said: "I'll fight for education, to make sure that our schools serve all our children well and that college is affordable for every student." The Devil is in the details, of course, and we'll have to wait weeks or months to see how this all turns out.

Other areas of interest include the Education Secretary's "The Future of Higher Education Commission." Some say that it is DOA (not the Loverboy song), but the Commission's white paper had some good ideas in it, so let's hope the baby doesn't get thrown out with the bathwater, so to speak.

There have been some mumblings about the future of the Institute of Education Sciences, since it was renamed and reconstrued following Bush's win in 2000. IES has focused on Campbell Collaboration-style, evidenced-based research in education to a zealous degree. Many education researchers feel that IES went way over the edge on this, but even if that holds true, they were at least pushing in the right direction. I'll be surprised if IES changes that much, and I'm not sure I would argue that it should (more emails will come…).

I discussed student aid on Wednesday. We do know that there will be a push for increased Pell Grants, and I'll be surprised if there is any problem pushing that through. The DEMs say that they will use the $23 billion that Congress plucked from student aid last year to pay for it. It still won't cover the bill, however. The DEMs also say they will cut student loan interest rates by half.

Let's hope that the Democrats doesn't focus exclusively on tuition and fee issues as part of the "college crunch." Back in June, Senator Clinton joined other Democrat Senators in calling attention to the rising costs of higher education by way of the Student Debt Relief Act. "Instead of increasing the burden on families," said Clinton, "we should be doing everything we can to make college more affordable so we can open the doors of higher education to more students." But as those of us in student aid research understand, focusing on tuition and fees as futile, because the cost of going to college, on average, is less about fees and more about the total cost of attendance. For instance, they suggested a college tuition tax deduction of up to $12,000. That would certainly help a lot of families, but for most attending a public institution it would be better if it covered cost of attendance, which averages about $17,000 at public four-year institutions.

How will GEAR UP and TRIO programs fare? Probably the same, but they will have to wait for the next budget cycle. I don't expect the Democrats to heap as much abuse on programs like Upward Bound and Talent Search, but remember that this is the most centrist Democratic party we've ever seen. Heck, even Heath Schuler, the former Washington Redskins quarterback, won a seat in Congress for the Democrats in the western hills of North Carolina (but to be honest, he's a lightly-painted Republican at best).

The big challenge for the Democrats, of course, is how to pay for their promises and balance the budget at the same time. They promised to do both. With Iraq funding still omnipresent, this is a tall order over the next two years. And we're not even talking health care or prescription drugs yet.

Yes, I could go on. At least we're finally talking about higher education again in Washington. As I said on Wednesday, the next two years should be interesting. Stay tuned.

Enjoy your weekend.

November 17, 2006

SO LAST CENTURY

Alex Usher, Vice President

There was much joy and self-congratulation this week about the release of the Institute for International Education's Open Doors report, which noted that foreign student numbers, after a precipitous post 9-11 dip, were now returning to pre-9-11 levels. Cheers all around, America isn't slipping after all!

To me, though, the celebratory tone of the articles seemed fundamentally misplaced, for two reasons. First, because it is based on a particular assumption of what foreign students mean to the American economy. The dominant view – espoused most recently and most loudly by Richard Florida in his book The Flight of the Creative Class, is that foreign students are key to America's economy because they add to the country's stock of human capital and hence make the country more productive and capable of generating wealth and prosperity. The post 9-11 fall in applications was worrying because it meant that short-term National Security considerations were impeding long-term economic growth by making it harder for international students to come to America.

Now, at one level, this argument has always had a nasty tinge to it – as for some (though emphatically not Mr. Florida himself) it has come to be a shorthand for distinguishing between "good immigrants" (mostly educated and Asian) and "bad immigrants" (mostly uneducated and Hispanic). But more importantly, it is based on the idea that those that are educated in America stay in America. Having tasted the riches of America and the possibilities and rewards it offers to talented scientists and innovators, of course these students will stay, right?

Not so fast. Yes, historically, many have indeed stayed – but it has never universally been true. Students from the Gulf states, for instance – i.e. those who saw the most precipitous post 9-11 declines - were always the ones least likely to stay in the US. This in turn suggests that much of the worry about the post 9-11 blip was misplaced to begin with. More importantly, though, there is mounting evidence (though admittedly hard data is patchy) that Chinese and Indian students in particular no longer see a student visa as a gateway to citizenship. And who can blame them? Their own economies are dynamic and exciting and offer many opportunities for advancement without the pain of cultural separation that often accompanies a move stateside.

This isn't to say that foreign students are only valuable to America if they choose to stay afterwards. Obviously, their mere presence on the country's campuses -- with their different knowledge sets and perspectives -- creates an enriched educational experience for everyone.

But let's not fool ourselves – there is a danger that China and India see American research universities as an outsourcing agent for training their own best and brightest. Just as we feel it is cheaper to make our DVDs in China and place our call centres in India for cost reasons, they conversely may decide not to spend billions in the creation of expensive research universities and instead simply send their best and brightest to America for academic finishing school for a few years before bringing them home. And that phenomenon should at least prompt everyone to re-think how foreign students are funded at big research universities.

However, while all of this is important, it is also a minor quibble compared with the larger issue raised in the IIE report. And it is this: to a very large degree, to the extent that the American education community thinks of international education as contributing to education, it thinks of it only in terms creating magnets for talent that will increase domestic human capital. But this thinking is at least ten years behind the times.

Foreign students used to come to North America because the supply of university spaces was so constrained in their own countries. That's not true any more: over the last ten years, university spaces around the world have doubled, with the greatest growth coming in China and East-central Europe. So they aren't lacking for space anymore – what they are lacking are quality education and credentials.

Now quality credentials are one thing US research universities have in spades. But only a very few students will ever be able to pick up and move to the US to obtain them. Yet the global market for quality is huge – if American universities can partner with overseas institutions to help improve quality abroad through joint programs, twinning arrangement etc, then the potential market size jumps from thousands to millions.

The real opportunity for universities lies in finding ways to export educational services and credentials, either virtually or through partnership arrangements, rather than in importing warm bodies. What we need, in short, is a shift in thinking about international education from a model centered on student mobility to one centered on program mobility. But to do that requires institutions to think less about teaching (which happens in a specific classroom location) and to think more about learning (which can happen anywhere) – and that's a tough shift.

Unfortunately, since IIE doesn't (and, in fairness, can't) measure these activities, America's shortcomings in this area can't be put under the spotlight. But they're there, all the same. The twenty-first century is the age of global, universal higher education; the worry must be that American educational institutions are continuing to face this world with strategies that are fundamentally twentieth century in nature.

Enjoy the weekend.

November 24, 2006

ENDLESS FLOWS OF PUS (POINTLESS UNIVERSAL SUBSIDIES)

Alex Usher, Vice President

Governments all over the US and Canada have recently come up with some new boutique spending programs allegedly for "access to education." Sadly, very few are targeted well (or indeed, at all), with the likely result of wasted money and missed opportunity. I'd like to take a quick look across the continent and note some of the more egregious pieces of waste coming down the pipe.

Loyalty Tax Bonus Schemes. Back in 1999, the Government of Saskatchewan -- which, like most prairie provinces and Midwestern states, has a significant youth out-migration problem -- came up with a cute scheme to keep people inside the province after graduation. Any university graduate who stayed within the province could receive a small tax break for the first five years after graduation. It wasn't worth much at first – only about $350/year -- but it rose gradually to the current level of $1000/year.

Now many of Canada's provinces have a problem with 'brain drain,' so it was hardly surprising that others would look to this model as a way to fund education. Last year, New Brunswick announced that young graduates would be eligible for $10,000 in tax rebates over five years. And last week, not to be outdone, the Manitoba government announced in its Speech from the Throne that it would provide tax rebates of up to 60 percent of students' tuition if graduates stayed in the provinces for a few years after graduation.

From the US perspective, many states have launched similar endeavors, but usually focused in areas of need, such as medicine, teaching, and nursing.

Now all of this would be great if there were one shred of evidence that this kind of measure either improved access to education (New Brunswick’s contention) or staunched out-migration (Saskatchewan and Manitoba’s stated policy goal). But there isn't.

So what is the likely result of these programs, which distribute money to all graduates, regardless of need? They will, in all likelihood, simply provide windfall gains to people who would have gone to PSE and settled in the province regardless. Nice for them, I suppose, but these windfalls are taking up resources that could be better used for access purposes by more focused expenditures on grants and support programs for low-income students or for better debt management programs.

Loan Subsidies. Canada and the United States share a funny way of subsidizing student loans. Both governments pay 100% of nominal student loan interest while students are in school and then charge market rates of interest after graduation. The new Democratic leadership in the House and Senate seem determined, however, to subsidize student loans in order to have students pay less than market rates during repayment.

Now this is clearly going to be a good thing for borrowers – but it comes with an opportunity cost. Every dollar spent here is a dollar that won’t be spent on Pell Grants. Will lower student interest rates provide the same access gain as Pell Grants? Highly unlikely. Do all students need this interest rate cut? Some do, certainly, but most students will pay back their loans without this help. For them, the Democratic student loan proposals represent a windfall gain. A more cost-effective proposal would be to significantly raise the deferment/forbearance threshold so that fewer lower-income graduates have to bear crushing debt loads. That way, much more money would be concentrated on those graduates with definite and obvious financial problems.

Baby Bonuses. Following the 2001 UK election, the Labour Party promised the creation of a Child Trust Fund – a 250 pound payment paid into a special registered, tax-free account to which parents could also contribute. The desired result was to give youth turned 18 a certain amount of capital – a kind of 'citizenship entitlement' - they could spend in a manner of their choosing when they reached the age of majority.

This idea crossed the pond to Canada in 2004 when the then-Liberal government introduced the Canada Children's Bond – a $500 payment to children of low-income parents at birth, followed by $100 annual top-ups, into a Registered Education Savings Plan (Canada's version of a 529 plan). In the past two years, Alberta and British Columbia have followed suit by setting up similar education birth bonds, but unlike Ottawa's plan they have not targeted the payments by income.

We have absolutely no evidence as to the effectiveness of any of these measures. The UK one seems to be drowning in apathy – less than 50 percent of parents have actually cashed their baby bonds. No evidence has yet come in on the Canadian experiment, but it's low-income focus does at least have the benefit of being based on some key research on asset-based poverty initiatives by Michael Sherriden and seems to be the closest. The BC and Alberta initiatives -- those are middle-class give-aways, pure and simple.

The sad fact is that politicians -- whether American or Canadian, left- or right-wing -- don't seem to like targeting these days. There's more votes, apparently, in spreading money thinly and appearing to be doing something rather than spending money wisely and actually accomplishing something. Pointless, Universal Subsidies (PUS) are apparently A-OK as long as there are middle-class votes to be won.

Ok, I'm exaggerating a bit – all these new spending initiatives for future students, current students, and graduates will undoubtedly produce some benefits for people who need it. And to that extent, they are all good initiatives. But they could all be providing a lot more aid to people who really need it if they were targeted better.

It can be hard to tell a politician whose heart is in the right place that his or her idea is dumber than a bag of hammers. Heart-in-the-right-place politicians don't come along every day, after all. But it's our job to do so --stupidity in the service of good causes isn't really something any of us should support.

Enjoy the weekend.

December 1, 2006

IN SEARCH OF BETTER DATA

Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President

My commentary today focuses on the important issue of data in education. Perhaps serendipitously, I attended two events this week in Washington, DC focusing on this issue. The first was the quarterly meeting of the Data Quality Campaign, a national, collaborative effort to encourage and support state policymakers to improve data collection efforts across the country (and of which EPI is an endorsing partner). The second event was a conference sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) called "Fixing Failing Schools: Is the NCLB Toolkit Working?"

Truth be told, one cannot talk about data collection in the United States without talking about the legislative elephant "No Child Left Behind" Act, signed into law in January 2002. It has totally pushed the discussion and practice of states, districts, and schools on data collection at the K-12 level. There is seemingly no one left untouched by NCLB. And the impact of NCLB is not only in K-12 education. While the IPEDs debate and efforts of NCES at the U.S. Department of Education is not connected in a legislative manner to "more and better" data at the postsecondary level. And that is a good thing.

At the Data Quality Campaign event on November 29, Institute for Education Sciences (IES) director Russ Whitehurst stated that there is consensus that unit-record student data (a) provides the most accurate portrait of students, (b) is a powerful tool for improving the performance of schools, and (c) is a powerful resource for policy issues. I believe all to be true, but there seemed to be consensus at the AEI event that NCLB hasn't done what it was originally designed to do, even through better and more data—and that's to improve classroom practice. It has succeeded in forcing states to collect better data in a better manner, but when asked about impact on classroom, the speakers almost unanimously replied that it had done little if anything about classroom practice. And this included many right-wing commentators, including Diane Ravitch, former Assistance Secretary of Education under Bush I in the early 1990s and Checker Finn, President of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and a senior fellow at the right-wing Hoover Institution. Ravitch summarized what she read and heard suggesting that NCLB has not worked.

But NCLB has had an impact on data collection and quality in the five years that NCLB was enacted. EPI has been talking with a many state-level data people for a project we are conducting for the National Council on Disability that looks at the impact of NCLB on student achievement and data availability. Our perception, to this point, is that NCLB has definitely pushed states farther down the data line than they would have without. But true to the point of the AEI panels, there is impact evidence of an impact on classroom efforts five-years in.

This brings up an important point about to what end the federal government can go in mandating educational efforts at the state level. Through NCLB, the federal government took a large step into state jurisdiction (our Canadian friends surely can relate to the importance of provincial/state autonomy in education matters), and are using the Act as a model for conditioning-through-compliance, in a very B.F. Skinner model by punishing states who do not show "Adequate Yearly Progress," or AYP, by students and schools.

It's funny, in retrospect, that it took a Republican president to engage in this activity, since it is a very anti-Republican manner of public policy. President Clinton tried, unsuccessfully back in the mid-1990s, to implement "voluntary" national tests to the states. He couldn’t get Congress or the states to budge on that one, but within a few years, a Republic president came in and went far, far beyond what was suggested by Clinton.

But NCLB does two things. First is it mandates this AYP effort, forcing states to put themselves in a position to actually document progress, although the government doesn't tell them how. And ED punishes states (or districts/schools) that do not make AYP by withholding funds. This is far different than supporting states to act in a certain way (e.g., like asking them to collect data), especially in a jurisdiction that is historically and constitutional theirs. Getting compliance with data collection is one thing—but punishing/rewarding them on actual student progress is a completely different level.

For me, I've changed my tune on this issue. I've always supported NCLB, but I found myself nodding my head in agreement with most of those at AEI yesterday that the government has gone too far and should perhaps push NCLB in a slightly different direction when it comes up for reauthorization next year. Don't focus so much on AYP, but rather, help states put the mechanisms in place that then would allow the federal government, from the bully pulpit, to publicize the efforts of states—positive and negative. Perhaps ED could produce something like the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's Measuring Up Report Cards, which I discussed back in September. Use public pressure to push states, but don't punish those that obviously need as much help, and funds, to make the changes necessary to assist students. I found myself in agreement with former assistant secretary of education Mike Smith, who said yesterday at AEI: "I'm much bigger on positive incentives than negative incentives."

Of course, my viewpoint is not shared by everyone. Katie Haycock of the Education Trust thinks NCLB, while not perfect, should not let states of the hook. As she put it yesterday, she's seen plenty of states that have lots of disaggregated data with "crappy results." And she's right. But if the data are better, and if they're used by some organization, whether that be the federal government or some other organization (maybe even EPI), then the pressure will be on those states to perform or answer for their performance. At least in theory…

For those higher ed folks out there, I hope you've kept on reading because this is an important issue at the postsecondary level, because of a third issue. Insidehighered.org published a great article this morning (good work, Doug) on the Department of Education's push for unit-record data through the

"Huge IPEDs" mechanism. As I said earlier, while discussion of data at the postsecondary level has been an increasing issue over the past decade, NCLB has pushed the envelope. According to the article, Huge IPEDs (that's really what they call it) is an effort to dramatically expand the data collected by institutions and report to the federal government to keep in compliance with Title IV regulations of the Higher Education Act. If institutions don't comply, they don't get Title IV aid, and, for intents and purposes, cease to be a postsecondary institution. It's a heavy lever. But the insidehighered.org article correctly surmises that Huge IPEDS IS an effort on behalf of ED to push states and institutions to unit-record data, an issue of some contention in the US at the postsecondary level, and one discussed by our colleague Alex Usher a while back.

The discussion, at the K-12 and postsecondary levels, is all moving toward unit record data, where we can track students individually across the education spectrum. Only Florida does this real well right now, but states are improving. As Timothy Webb of the Tennessee Department of Education said at the Data Quality Campaign meeting on Wednesday, through NCLB pressures, they were able to produce more dirty data, in a much faster way. But they are now moving toward quality data, which is ultimately important.

So it's interesting to see how the federal government can flex its muscles to change practices at the state and local levels. It's certainly creative, especially the Huge IPEDs approach, but we'll have to see if it and NCLB ultimately meet their goals.

Enough blabbering for now. I'd invite readers to visit the Data Quality Campaign website below. I'm told the panel webcast will be available after December 12. Also visit the AEI website to download papers and video at the following address.

http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/events/registration.cfm

http://aei.org/events/eventID.1351,filter.all/event_detail.asp

Have a great weekend. Think data.

December 8, 2006

THE COMPLEXITY OF SIMPLIFICATION

Alex Usher, Vice President

Kudos to Susan Dynarski and the folks at the Kennedy School for getting people to think outside the box on student assistance. For those of you who might not pay close attention to comings and goings on Capitol Hill, Ms. Dynarski and her co-author, Judith Scott-Clayton, made an appearance in front of a House committee on education related to their new paper which looks at possible ways of simplifying student assistance.

At the hearing and in their paper, Dynarski and Scott-Clayton made two points -- one excellent and long-overdue -- and the other a bit more problematic and controversial. The first point is that the standard student financial aid form is too complex: comparable in length to the tax form without any of the latter's clarity. This is an oft-made point, but one made well by the authors and well worth repeating. After filling out a tax form, one knows how much is owed, whereas no one is the wiser about a student aid package after filling out the FAFSA. *(I often wonder if governments have ever thought of the damage they do young people's civic mindedness with these forms. Think about it: a student aid form is usually the first time a young person encounters the federal government. Should we therefore be surprised at how cynical young people are these days with respect to government and its ability to effect positive change? FAFSA and its Canadian equivalents are a terrible advertisement for public service.)*

However, the authors do not simply rail against complexity in the FAFSA – they actually demonstrate how useless most of it is. According to the authors, if you were to discard everything except parents' income, parents' marital status, family size, and number of family members in college, 72 percent of Pell grant recipients would have an unchanged Pell amount, and the correlation between current Pell amounts and Pell amounts under the new system is a staggeringly high 88 percent. As the authors say, if we are prepared to eschew all the micro-equity that has been engineered into the system and accept a little bit of "rough justice", we could introduce Pell-on-a-postcard – a program so simple everyone could understand it.

This is an excellent point and one to which everyone should provide wholehearted support (in Canada, this same point was made most cogently by our colleague Fred Hemingway about three years ago, but governments have largely ignored his advice). Unfortunately, this excellent point is inevitably going to be obscured by the fuss about the authors' second main point: which is that student aid would be even more simple if tax credits and Pell grants were combined and then delivered through the tax system via (if I understand their proposal correctly) something that looks like a hybrid between a voucher and a refundable tax credit.

This, to put it mildly, is a big leap – and a clear example of why even the most brilliant academic economists shouldn't be allowed anywhere near the process of program implementation. Yes, it is true that with the simplified Pell system, pretty much all the necessary data could be collected through the tax system. Yes, it is true that vouchers for grant money could be distributed to students at tax return time, which they could redeem in September at a college of their choice. And contrary to what some knee-jerk critics might think, the proposal would have reasonably progressive effects if it could be implemented successfully (not all tax credits need be regressive)

But the fact is, there are a host of practical reasons why this wouldn't work. I have no doubt that their schemes would work well for traditional students who live in traditional two-parent families and who start school in September. For children of divorced parents, there would be the legal and administrative difficulty of linking the tax files of two parents who no longer live together (if they've remarried, that's an additional administrative nightmare). For students who only make the decision to go to school after tax time, there would be difficulties in accessing the necessary funding. And, contrary to the paper's dismissive attitudes with respect to asset-testing, at the most elite colleges there are excellent reasons why the institution might want to know something about parental assets – and so some students would probably have to fill out another complicated form for institutional student aid even if FAFSA did shrink to a postcard.

All that said, this is an excellent paper that deserves to be read and discussed. Student-aid-on-a-postcard is a rallying cry that deserves to be picked up on both sides of the border. So should the cause of unifying tax credits and grants into a single program that gets money to students when it's needed most. But delivering aid through the tax system? Though the authors make an intriguing case, it's an idea that needs to be viewed with some skepticism.

Enjoy the weekend.

December 15, 2006

A REVOLUTION IN SCHOOL REFORM

Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President

Yesterday, the National Center on Education and the Economy released a report called "Touch Choices or Tough Times." I don't like reading reports very much. They are typically boring, and not enough pictures. This report is different. In fact, I think this is perhaps the most important education (and economy) report since "A Nation at Risk" back in 1983.

The *Touch Choices* report offers concrete suggestions on how to improve our K-12 and postsecondary systems and ultimately make our society more competitive globally. To my fellow Canadian colleagues, I hope you read on, because this should resonate greatly to you. As a former school teacher in the St. Vital School Division in Winnipeg, I see this meaning as much to Canada as it does to the US.

The report claims that, when the first national Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce reported in 1990, they had no idea that the off-shoring of jobs from the US would also include high-level, professional-level jobs. In 2006, we see that manufacturers are now using engineers in India, China, and South Korea, for instance, to fill technical needs. The only way that we are going to change this pattern, according to the commission, is to change how we educate students and adults. Our ability to compete:

...depends on a deep vein of creativity that is constantly renewing itself, and on a myriad of people who can imagine how people can use things that have never been available before, create ingenious marketing and sales campaigns, write books, build furniture, make movies, and imagine new kinds of software that will capture people's imagination and become indispensable to millions. (Executive Summary, p. 6)

To reach this goal, the commission has offered 10 recommendations for action, which are perhaps the most bold of any recommendations that I've seen in a long time. And not only bold, but doable. I won't cover them all here, but I will discuss a few of the main points.

The foundational point made by the report is that we don't do education particularly well in the US, a point that has been buttressed by Bill Gates and others recently. The US system educates over 55 million public school students each year. That's a lot of kids. But it does so in a systematic process developed for the coming of the industrial age in the early 20th century.

To that end, the commission recommends that the entire school system be revolutionized, incorporating Board tests at the 10th grade to "filter" students, changing the way public schools are funded and teachers are renumerated, and even changing the entire structure of oversight and responsibility for education.

For instance, the commission suggests instituting the 10th grade tests across the country, based on national standards in core course work, to determine whether students are prepared for postsecondary. The level of this assessment would assume a minimum competency for community college, such that students could matriculate to a community college upon passing the 10th-grade test. They suggest this based on the knowledge that other countries assume that their 16-year old students are ready for college. Students who pass could also stay in high school and work toward their second Board exams. If they score well enough on those, they would be allowed access to selective four-year institutions.

Of course, one instantly questions what this means for students who are below the margin in our current system. Would they not be forgotten? The commission has thought of that issue, and suggests that if their recommendations are followed, 95 percent of students should pass the first Board test.

Their support includes revamping the school funding process by making it a state -- not a local -- issue, and dispersing funds through a formula to where funds are most needed. This makes a lot of sense, because the current system is terribly antiquated.

Most interesting is their tact on teaching. The commission recommends that salaries for teachers be massively improved, with starting salaries of about $45,000 and top salaries above $95,000. Where does the money come from? Again, the commission stresses that if their recommendations are followed, the system can afford to do this and other interventions.

The salary issue is important. As a former teacher who has taught with wonderful teachers on both sides of the 49th parallel, I also understand that many teachers just shouldn't be there. The report acknowledges that school systems are "recruiting more of our teachers from the bottom third of the high school students going to college than is wise. To succeed, we must recruit many more from the top third." And that's tough to do. Unless salary and professionalism can be increased, "professionals," in the true sense of the word, will not enter the education field.

The only problem I have with the report is a recommendation to take schools away from local authority and have them awarded to independent contractors. That hasn't worked well where it's been implemented, and I shudder to think what would happen with 110,000 schools in the US under total independent control. We'd have a charter school on every corner, and one only look as far as the track record of charter schools (for those who don't know, it isn't too pretty).

The report also offers something I've supported and mentioned for years: having the federal government create a savings account for every baby in the US. They suggest starting a $500 account for the child, which of course would compound over time, and allow for employer tax-free contributions. Makes a lot of sense. It won't solve the woes of college costs, but it will help immensely and get people, all people, thinking about postsecondary education.

It's about time we start talking about real changes in elementary and secondary education, because we have punted on the issue for years. The cynic in me says that the recommendations in this report will never happen. Perhaps we need to bring James Baker in for his blessing. But I am hopeful that much of this will resonate with policymakers and practitioners, and that we can get away from partisan bickering and the barriers often put up by special interests.

Bottom line: this is a report worth reading. To download the executive summary, click here.

Have a great weekend.

December 22, 2006

TWO RANDOM THOUGHTS BEFORE THE HOLIDAYS

Alex Usher, Vice President

1) Higher Education in Impoverished Communities

We've been working recently with the Government of Ontario evaluating some of their programming with respect to aboriginal students. And one of the key conflicts we've heard about are tensions within the education system between funding at different levels of the education system. While obviously in an ideal world every individual student would have his or her needs met, when it comes down to making choices about resource allocation, should money be prioritized at the secondary level -- where drop-out rates are high and basic literacy levels remain low as a result of a plethora of social and financial level -- or at the post-secondary level where those who make it through the secondary system can make real strides in terms of succeeding in the labour market?

This kind of struggle is hardly restricted to North American aboriginals. In Africa, many universities and university leaders feel that the UN's Millennium Goals, by focusing on basic education, led funders to spend the last decade ignoring African higher education, which as a result in many countries is now in a very perilous state. Similar debates have occurred with respect to the Roma in eastern Europe and of course with aboriginal communities in the southern hemisphere as well.

In an egalitarian society, there will always be an instinct to focus on basic skills for all before moving on to support "higher" skills for an elite few (it is for this reason that cheap or free public higher education for an elite is so often the hallmark of a deeply inegalitarian society… think of Puerto Rico, for instance). But this puts higher education at a disadvantage: how can higher education make its case with appearing to seem elitist or inegalitarian itself?

Part of the problem is that universities in these kinds of communities or jurisdictions have historically had trouble making the case about how higher education benefits all of society - even those who do not attend. Arguing positive public externalities of research and teaching in the abstract is very difficult for universities even where access is relatively evenly distributed; in poorer communities it is nearly impossible.

If things are going to change, institutions in impoverished countries or communities don't just need to think about their messaging, they need to think about their mission. Both their teaching and their research needs to show tangible benefits -- not abstract ones -- to the communities in which they are located. That may mean abandoning hopes for a serious basic research capacity in the near future. So be it -- concentrate on the applied research and technology transfer to win support and make the community richer. Engagement with the broad community -- not just the power elite -- is the key to long term growth in these situations.

And, more generally, universities worldwide need to get more serious about defining how higher education can aid in development. A manifesto for education as a tool in the broader process of economic development in poor countries could act as a rallying call for key funders to actually re-engage in this area. But without such a document, the "basic education" agenda will steamroller the higher education agenda every time. Anyone who has the time to write and energy such a document in 2007 would be giving the whole world a present!

2) Teaching the Humanities to Count

We live in an age of metrics. Institutions are getting used to the fact that their work is coming under increasing scrutiny and there is a growing desire on the part of policy makers to be able to measure change over time in the sector.

There are some who think that this development inevitably privileges research-intensive institutions over teaching-intensive ones. This is not simply a function of their tending to have more moolah at hand -- it's also a reflection of the fact that measurement of research activity is less contested and more standardized. And, since people tend to measure what can easily be measured, there is some concern that existing performance metrics -- as well as any money attached to them -- are gravitating too quickly towards research activities and penalizing other activities such as teaching,

There is some truth to this of course, but it skates over one of the great dilemmas of research metrics: namely, how the heck to count what it is people in the humanities -- and to a lesser extent some of the social sciences -- actually do.

In most disciplines, scholarly communication proceeds through journal articles. It therefore makes sense to count things like publications and citations, weighting them, of course, by the importance of the journal (which itself is measured through citation counts). Since science is always changing rapidly, annual citation totals are a pretty good measure of activity and prestige because high counts imply that work done by a person or institution is in fact of the cutting-edge variety.

But residents of the humanities don't communicate this way. Disciplines are more fractured and are less likely to produce "standard" journals. Work done for governments in the form of reports and studies mean more. And the main gauge of individual prestige and importance is not articles, but monographs and books, the best of which retain their importance for decades. As a result, using science-based means of measuring research output leaves the humanities at a huge disadvantage in comparison with other scholarly disciplines.

Now, undoubtedly, a lot of folks in the humanities believe that this is evidence that the entire process of measuring research output is flawed/biased/some kind of vast positivist conspiracy. But this is the wrong approach. Metrics are here to stay. The humanities should not run from them but engage with them. If they do not, their funding will undoubtedly suffer. The best possible present for the humanities in 2007 would be news that someone, somewhere is making real progress towards ways of measuring their research activities.

Enjoy the holidays.

December 29, 2006

RESOLUTIONS FOR 2007

Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President

Between the options of looking back at 2006 and looking forward to 2007, I am choosing the latter. I'm a half-full type of guy anyway. As we close this year, I am hopeful that some of us will get our act together and push education forward in 2007. Here are some thoughts.

No Child Left Behind. 2007 is the year that NCLB is due to be reauthorized by Congress. Given their track record on other reauthorizations, that's a long shot for sure. But the newcoming leaders (e.g., Kennedy et al.) say it is a priority. If so, let's hope they do enough with it to get it right. Although some people would hope the Democrats would trash it, that won't happen. Remember, Kennedy was a big advocate back in 2001 when discussions were taking place. But perhaps Congress could resolve to make it better by taking off certain performance regulations (e.g., AYP) and focusing on providing the tools for states. Let the states have final authority in how they do thinks, but give them strong incentives to act in a certain way, with a focus on what is best for students and keeping political interference at a minimum. I am nothing but a dreamer, eh?

Higher Education (Pell and Loans). This could be a better year for higher education, from a Congressional point of view (I'll leave Canada to Alex on this one), but only in a minor way. The federal budget is extremely limited now that the Democrats are basically punting on the FY2007 and focusing on the FY 2008. Smart move, politically speaking, and I agree with what they've done. However, it leaves the Education Department and other entities with basically a cut in funds, after inflation is entered into the equation. So, they won't have much money to do anything. Still, they Democrats have said they will pump up the Pell Grant for the first time since the Clintonian Age. I also expect that the Higher Education Act, due to be reauthorized in, let's see, 2004, will FINALLY be reauthorized in 2007. That's because they have to by this point. In that legislative package, expect there to be considerable movement on student loans, in terms of loan limits finally getting adjusted after decades of flat-lining. Student Groups don't want the loan limits up, because then students will borrow more. Man, what regressive thinking. Students, and their families, are now chalking up the highest level of credit card and private loan debt ever, and much is in part to their inability to borrow enough to cover their higher education expenses. Not providing necessary funding does not bring the cost of education down, so let's not play that game. Let's get real in 2007 and adjust loan limits accordingly so that students aren't stuck with ulta-high loan rates.

ED. Well, ED finally got their legs this year with Margaret Spellings at the helm. Love her or hate her, she at least is sticking her head out there and doing something, a trait her predecessary didn't have. I guess this wasn't a stretch, since the former Secretary, Houston's Rod Paige, was, at best, a puppet for the White House. Didn't do anything remotely useful in his term in office. Bush went back to the Texas well again to recruit Spellings, but she has a work ethic and obviously struck a deal with Bush not to be just another "yes" person in his cabinet. She talks hard, and seems to understand most of the issues, some which are very complex. We'll see how she steers ED in 2007 under new leadership.

Congress. It will be a good year for Congress, because they are coming from their worst year ever, so, by comparison, it must look good. To give you a benchmark, the 109th Congress, which just ended, was the least "worked" year in congressional history. In fact, the House of Representatives were in session for a meager 103 days, beating the previous low back in 1948. Just this week Steny Hoyer, the incoming majority leader of the Senate, said that they will begin meeting on January 4, while most incoming Congresses wait until the State of the Union speech in February. And if that isn't enough, the Dems also said that they will increase the working time for members from three days to 4.5 days a week. The half day was thrown in because people didn't like "5."

They'll get something done. Because if they don't, voters will continue to send them a message in 2008.

The States. Well, year after year the states seem to be a disappointment in education. Education is the first item cut from the budget when the economy goes sour, and the last thing added when it runs well. The states largely shirked their collective responsibilities to education, and then wonder why the feds have walked in with NCLB and demanded action. In 2007, the states need to improve K-12 education, increase teacher pay to get better teachers in the work force, limit tuition and fee charges in a reasonable fashion to higher education, and provide more need-based aid to students at the postsecondary level. And that's for starters...

Tuition. Will this be the year that tuition fees come in to check? No, stop dreaming. College "costs" and "prices" won't change their trends because absolutely nothing has happened to make that change happen. Policymakers in the US and in Canada have their heads in the sand on this one. It's the analogy of the frog in hot water. Because the increases, while large, are happening somewhat slowly, it hasn't hit enough of a peak to get enough serious attention. At the congressional level, all it does is spark a debate about whether student aid causes higher tuition fees, rather than dealing with the issue. It seems that the only answer people are looking for is to force more students into two-year colleges, because they're "cheaper." This is true, but in time, this is a problem, too. The two-year institutiosn are also getting more expensive, and, in time, many students will also have a hard time paying for them because they increase 2-3 times CPI. And, by taking this stance, we truly bifurcate educational opportunity (which we already have, but I'm the half full guy). I'd like to say that 2007 will be the year that we get real on college costs, but it won't be. We're just not there.

School Reform. Perhaps 2007 will be the year that school reform actually gets on track. Hhhmm. Nope. Not gonna happen. Back in March, Bill Gates said that high schools are outdated and no longer serve society well. He is correct, but we are ill-situated to make a change. I think NCLB is pushing us there, but in a such a slow manner that change in society will far outpace change in education. We need a brand new model for public education that allows for individuality. Do we really need grades in high school? Or should we push toward a model more like higher education, that allows students to push at their own pace on their own interests? There are so many compulsory courses in high school at this time that students have very little opportunity to pursue "interests" and sample academia. If you're on a college track, you have 1 or 2 options during your four years of high school. That's about it, and that's not right. There needs to be more flexibility for students, and more engagement to the 12th grade. A few weeks ago I wrote a piece focuing on the National Center for Education and the Economy's new report on high school reform. If we do that, we're golden.

The Educational Policy Institute. 2007 will be a big year for EPI. We've got some big projects on our plate and will be expanding. We also have in mind some new EPI publications that we'll share with you soon. In the meantime, we'd like to hear from you about what you'd like to see and read from us. Email me at wswail@educationalpolicy.org.

I'm at Disney World right now trying to relax. Perhaps I should put that on my resolution list. Let's wish ourselves the best in 2007. Have a fun and uneventful New Year's Eve, and we look forward to talking with you next year.