

**Title:**

**A Review of the Literature Related to Government Relations in Higher Education**

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## **A Review of Literature Related to Government Relations in Higher Education**

The foundation of sustaining the operation of a public college or university is rooted in each institution's ability to adequately fund and support its expenses. These expenditures often include faculty and staff salaries, construction projects, learning resources, and utility costs among other items. In response to these fiscal demands, public institutions rely on income derived from student tuition and fees, private giving, government and business contracts, and non-profit grants. Most institutions are also significantly dependent on state governments to provide a source of revenue. For most public colleges and universities state funding is the single largest source of revenue available to them (Cross, 2004). Without state tax dollars to support the institutions, many public institutions would not be able to sustain current operations.

State governments are spending an increasing amount on priorities other than higher education (Quillian, 2005). For instance, as a result of state constitutional mandates and recent public education reforms, elected officials are allocating more to adequately finance K-12 education than any other budget need. Second, health care costs and life expectancy are rising (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2006). As the federal government offers a 3-to-1 matching ratio for each dollar states spend on the Medicaid insurance program, politicians are prioritizing health care funding in legislative appropriations (Kane & Orzag, 2003; 2004). Third, funding for civil defense has increased as the cost for building and maintaining correctional facilities has risen. With stiffer sentences and growing conviction rates, politicians cannot afford to be seen as soft on crime when making decisions to allocate resources. Other funding needs such as entitlement programs, road improvements, and infrastructure upgrades also continue to have an impact on state higher education appropriations. Consequently, rates of

state spending in higher education will have to exceed spending in some of these areas in order to sustain the current level of service to students and the public in the coming decade (Jones, 2003).

Considering the political nature of higher education, colleges and universities employ government relations offices to articulate their interests to state legislators and elected members of the executive branch (Murphy, 2001). Hence, government relations representatives are responsible for communicating to these elected officials the needs of their institutions as they may relate to both fiscal and non-fiscal policies. The importance of the role these professionals play has grown throughout the past-quarter century as it has become more difficult to predict the decisions political leaders will make regarding higher education policies (McLendon, Heller, & Young, 2005). Additionally, each public institution often finds itself competing with peer schools for a share of the state budget; thus, the effectiveness of each government relations office becomes more integral to the financial viability of the institution (Newman, Courtier, & Scurry, 2004). A complicating factor is that new measurement techniques used for institutional assessment and formula-based funding will continue to play a role in shaping the public debate over the quality of higher education (Brooks, 2005; Martinez, Farias, & Arellano, 2005; McLendon, et. al., 2005). And, with state legislators increasingly trimming budgets and cutting taxes, public colleges and universities are finding themselves scrambling to hold on to their share. With less state revenue available to distribute, legislatures will be pressured to continue reducing the level of appropriations that public colleges and universities were allocated in years past (Jones, 2003).

Therefore, it is critical that public higher education institutions become competitive in the art of building and expanding their influence among elected state officials (American

Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2005; Murphy, 2001). Although a depth of knowledge and experience is likely essential to establishing effective communications with legislators, the structure of the organization in which government relations personnel function also plays a role in the desired outcomes of lobbying efforts. For instance, some institutions may choose to implement an organization with personnel focusing on both state and federal relations. Others may opt for building rapport primarily with state government relations, while leaving federal relationship-building to a dean or vice-chancellor of research or graduate studies. Also, even as some offices may choose to employ multiple individuals focusing on specialized tasks, others may choose to retain one individual that is responsible for all levels of government relations offices (Brown, 1985).

This review of literature, conducted primarily through resources made available through the University of Arkansas, focused on the public perceptions of higher education and the process and mechanisms necessary for building political and public support for the academy.

#### Public Perception of Higher Education

In 1997 George Connick, president of Distance Education Publications, prophesized:

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, higher education will be in the middle of a major transformation... likely to be available anywhere and anytime the consumer wants it... the control of education will have shifted from provider to consumer (Connick, 1997, p. 9).

It appears this control made a shift, given that the student culture often perceives a college degree as a receipt of purchase rather than a vehicle to professional advancement. According to Rochester University anthropology professor Robert Foster, this perception is common among the current college student generation, confirming that colleges have evolved from developing “good citizens to good workers –and now to good consumers” (Gray, 2000, p.

15). Viewed as a convenient retail commodity, Americans view the subsidizing of higher education as “dispensable and generally unnecessary” (Pan, 1998, p. 10).

This view of higher education has not always existed. For over three centuries the nation’s colleges and universities (both public and private) have been viewed as not solely places of privilege or quid pro quo exchanges, but more importantly as communities of social progress. According to Newman, Courtier, and Scurry (2004), as the country has grown and developed so have the expectations that American society holds for higher education. Early trends reflected an emphasis by colleges to graduate enough men as clergy to lead the colonial churches. In the early 1800’s moral development (of wealthy young men) was a common emphasis in college instruction. However, the Land Grant College Act of 1862 opened a new dimension of expectations to expand the study of practical subjects by bringing the knowledge and skills from the college to the community, which created significant outreach opportunities for the education of the industrial class. Nearly a half century later, formalized research institutions in the early 1900’s emphasized the benefits of research, not necessarily teaching, as the primary element of public service offered to local and state communities. Followed by the GI Bill of 1944, great expectations were levied on higher education to help millions in transition from wartime service to peacetime jobs, thus expanding enrollment at public institutions and university systems at a phenomenal pace (Newman, et al., 2004). Throughout the 1950’s the growth of nontraditional students exploded, as did the impact of technology. These events provided the impetus for the social changes that would be legislated the following decade in response to civil rights debates and desegregation issues. During this period the nation emerged with affirmative action, civil rights reform, and a national dialogue concerning the direction of an equally contentious conflict, the Vietnam War. As Newman, et al. (2004) concluded, these discussions led to a more serious

commitment by the federal government to provide broader access to college in the 1970's, when the introduction of Pell Grants and other need-based aid opened doors to students from low-income families.

As expected, the right of the campus to remain a center of debate emerged. What resulted from this long evolution is a broader and more profound set of expectations. Higher education has evolved to play a larger, more central role in American life and has become an essential part of the national quest for economic growth and social mobility. More importantly, American society has developed an expectation that higher education will serve as a central support for its public purposes.

The degree to which the public views higher education, positive or negative, hinges on a combination of variables. As described by McLendon, Heller, and Young (2005), "both the level of technical complexity and the level of public interest ('saliency') associated with a policy tends to affect the *politics* that surround the issue..." (p. 385). With this in mind, a redistributive policy (such as funding) is technically simple and maintains high levels of saliency, thus resulting in much debate between political and social factions. However, regulatory policies (particularly those concerning accountability standards) are traditionally more sophisticated and maintain a low level of saliency. This logic helps explain the high level of interest from the public when the issues consist of financial concern (i.e. tuition, financial aid, institutional funding), but less so when the conversation turns to academic or administrative management in higher education. Therefore, although Immerwahr (2004) concluded the citizenry is indeed confident in colleges and universities and retains a relatively positive view of them, peripheral factors not directly affecting institutional quality can skew public perception altogether.

The public attention paid to distributive and redistributive policies regarding higher education has remained constant throughout the past quarter-century. In an article originally authored by Tom Wicker in 1971, he noted “the combination of a general economic crisis and a sharp loss of public confidence – the two are not unrelated – appears to have brought the whole field [of higher education] under the most searching public, political and internal scrutiny” (Wicker, 1994, p. 28). Parallels can be drawn from Wicker’s observation and the reality of modern times; finances mold the public face of higher education. Although it is debatable whether all socioeconomic classes of college students are categorically touted by institutions, the ostracizing image surrounding higher education remains. Tom Mortensen, a representative of the Pell Institute of Opportunity in Higher Education, summarized this concept, writing that poor students affected by rising attendance costs are “less and less present – and even welcome – in four year colleges” (Toppo, 2005). Unfortunately policymakers are less likely to radically change student funding policies as long as a majority of the public feels that students and families should largely shoulder costs. Immerwahr (2004) concluded that 69% of citizens in 2003 believed students should be financially obligated, a statistic further validated by Zusman (2005).

Nearly two-thirds believe that students and their families should pay the largest share of the cost of a college education. Given ongoing access barriers, these perceptions may make it more difficult than in the past for historically underserved groups to enroll in a college, at a time when they are becoming a larger proportion of the college-age pool (Zusman, 2005, p. 123).

Aside from specific topics such as funding, the lack of general knowledge concerning higher education policy and organization is not only problematic for the average citizen, but it is also an issue for those who regulate it. As confirmed by Lemaitre (2002):

While this difficulty is expectable in the case of the general public... it is also a problem for academics, policy makers, government officials and quality assurance agencies. So, at

the same time that higher education is becoming an essential part of life for increasing numbers of people, there are no clear maps of a complex territory (p. 32).

Consequently, it is possible that those who are most instrumental in shaping policy and building consensus for public higher education are themselves adversely affecting its support.

Incidentally, now that two-thirds of high school graduates are entering college (Ikenberry, 2005), without a broad understanding of higher education policies, political and civic officials will be less able to communicate the growing importance of postsecondary initiatives to the public.

Lacking knowledgeable leaders to rally support, public confidence in higher education is likely subject to waver.

Therefore, the literature calls on higher education officials to emphasize to state and local leaders the social and economic benefits a post-secondary education can offer private and public sector communities.

Although the value of a college education was called into question frequently in the 1970's, higher education has become increasingly recognized since then as essential for acquiring the skills and adaptability needed in the modern workplace. The middle-class social destinations made possible by higher education are now so widely recognized that they are undoubtedly the principal force behind rising participation rates (Geiger, 2005, p. 65).

Despite this recognition, however, a recent report by Immerwahr (2004) found that lower-income and many middle-class families are increasingly sharing reservations regarding access to college. Specifically, African-Americans are feeling that opportunities to earn a college education are defined by ethnic and social classes; whereas, Hispanics view that a college education is in reach regardless of race, but for only those who hail from favorable social classes. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that even though Immerwahr (2004) reported only a 4% overall decrease in favorable ratings for state colleges between 2000 and 2004, African-American approval declined nearly 30% (from 64% to 35%) during that same period. Thus, it



appears the issue of access negatively impacts the perceptions held by underrepresented populations concerning the agenda of colleges and universities.

Overall, the pervasive feeling shared by the public indicates confidence in the performance of higher education, and views it in a positive light. Unfortunately, the threat of peripheral social and economic restrictions, particularly concerning rising tuition prices, seems to have an increasingly detrimental effect on the public perception of institutional quality (Immerwahr, 2002). As a result the public approval of colleges and universities appears to fluctuate with perceptions of access. And, for better or worse, the overall public perception of a college's primary duty is directly linked with career training. Conclusively, Ward (2004) tied these concepts together, noting that "the public lacks an adequate language with which to articulate the value of higher education beyond its role in 'getting a job'" though it recognizes the system as offering "the greatest range of choices and opportunities" (p. 10). With that said, until public higher education changes its purchase price, its policies will be perceived as a barrier, rather than a vehicle, for many citizens who seek those choices and opportunities.

Although the majority of people still believe that students from middle class families have at least as much opportunity as other students, there is a growing sense that the middle-class opportunity is weakening. Higher education critics say that paying for college is toughest for the middle class; they argue that minority students and students from poor families can access scholarships, wealthier families can afford to pay the bills, but middle class families have too much money to qualify for a scholarship and not enough to pay the bills. Many of the middle class families have felt the impact of unemployment and layoffs and now have even less opportunities than in years past (Immerwahr, 2004).

Although the topic of affordability is central to most discussions regarding a college education, the concern is largely peripheral to many Americans. The public has been relegated to wrestling with many events revolving around terrorism, war, inflation, and health care among other things. Thus, higher education has not been a major focus of public attention. Nevertheless, this does not mean that attitudes on the broader values have failed to remain stable throughout the past decade, as reported by John Immerwahr (Immerwahr, 2004). The vast majority of Americans continue to believe that obtaining a college education is more important than it was in the past, that the country can never have too many college graduates, and that the nation should not allow the price of higher education to exclude qualified and motivated students from earning a college education. With that in mind, a growing concern exists by the general public concerning the opportunity to pursue a college degree. Specifically, the perception that access is increasingly limited for aspiring college students is shared most noticeably among the African-American demographic as well as parents of high school students (Immerwahr, 2004).

In tandem with the topics of access and affordability, recent discussions among administrators and elected officials in Washington have also raised issues about inefficiency and waste in higher education. At the moment the public does not seem overly concerned with this issue. However, it may prove challenging to predict how these attitudes will change in the future. If the economy improves drastically, anxiety may diminish. Even so, there are indications that higher education may further be scrutinized should the economy show dramatic improvement. This could be particularly true if the price of college continues to increase. In times of economic downturn the general public may expect the cost of providing services to escalate. Consequently, during periods of economic recovery public opinion may grow skeptical of a higher education community that seeks to continue raising tuition rates. As Immerwahr (2004) foreshadowed, the

country may experience even greater levels of anxiety when this happens. In response to the possibility of such an event transpiring, higher education officials should be prepared to defend the organizational and financial decisions made at the institutional, state, and national levels.

### Building Political and Public Support

Observed by Cook (2004), the Republican Party, upon taking control of Congress in 1995:

On the stump and in publications... sought to distance themselves from the academic community and contributed to the erosion of public confidence in it. As the new Republican leadership drew its line in the sand, the [higher education] community realized that its [low key and non-aggressive lobbying] approach would have to change. (p. 55)

With Congressional representatives distrusting academia, and state legislators and the public increasingly perceiving higher education as more a “personal investment than a public good” (Malveaux, 2004, p. 31) and as a “private benefit rather than a broader social good” (Zusman, 2005, p. 231), higher education officials were left to develop a strategy that would increase public support and address the rising demand for financial access by disadvantaged populations.

With tax revenue allocations considered as a standard of measurement reflecting the level of public support towards maintaining a “highly diverse system of higher education” (Johnstone, 2005, p. 373), elected officials and education leaders are more aggressively articulating the importance of reinvesting or redistributing public resources to state colleges. “College and university leaders who once spent the fall overseeing the start of the new academic year instead hit the campaign trail this season, promoting bond packages, scholarship support and budget issues” (Melton, 2002, p. 31). This is indicative of reformed behavior on the part of academics, observed George Mason Public Affairs Professor Toni-Michelle Travis, noting that college administrators “believe they must obviously and visibly support funding for higher education...

[taking] for granted that the public understands where the money for higher education comes from, not any longer” (Melton, 2002, p. 31). This new attitude has paid off, as electorates have been persuaded to preserve or increase funding in various states. For instance, voters in California and Virginia have approved bonds that include financing higher education, while citizens in Massachusetts and Arkansas have chosen to sustain current state tax rates, and a plurality in Michigan decided to continue investing a portion of tobacco settlement money in public institutions (Melton, 2002). Hebel and Selingo (2001) also pointed to the efforts made by Wisconsin and Ohio administrators to place a new spin on successful college budget requests, framing them as economic stimulus investments.

Despite this creativity, though, higher education administrators in some states remain facing tough political realities when tackling funding issues. For instance, despite Virginia’s bond provision, Smith (2004) highlighted Virginia’s tax-cutting agenda which could offset the gains made by the Commonwealth’s bond initiative. He also pointed to Colorado’s move to shift higher education funding through secondary accounts and discretionary spending. Such politically expedient decisions to cut state spending serve as significant factors for declining state revenue, and ultimately, reduced financing for public colleges and universities. In the wake of what is expected to be the largest high school senior class from the nation’s public schools in 2008, states will struggle to fund public services as a result of unstable tax policies and stagnant economic growth. Given these conditions and a lack of increased federal student assistance, state and local institutions are resigned to raising student tuition rates and fees in lieu of public scrutiny.

Aside from the efforts of many elected officials to minimize post-secondary allocations as a point of emphasis in fiscal budgets, the aforementioned strategies are brief examples of

policies implemented to actively achieve a common goal: to help establish the financing of higher education as a priority for state governments. Most fundamental of the logic to do so is the need to produce an educated workforce that will contribute to society – and the economy (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004). Not only can an educated workforce lead to decreased criminal activity and entitlement claims, the tax revenue generated by college graduates reimburses their education costs several times over (National Education Association Higher Education Research Center, 2003). As a result investments in public institutions can indirectly reduce the costs associated with prison funding, welfare, and other public assistance programs, while also contributing to state commerce. Believing that the role of higher education can promote the development “of human capital essential to state and local economic development and workforce needs,” the American Association of State Colleges and Universities agrees that administrators should take a larger role in statewide planning (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2006, p. 33).

Furthermore, it has been recommended that policymakers should also be made aware that private giving, statistically, cannot replace the void left by budget cuts. The perception exists among lawmakers that colleges and universities can adequately replace lost dollars by turning to charitable revenue; however, research suggests that donors will pull back on their giving if it is perceived they are replacing state funding (Gianneschi, 2004). Incidentally, increases and decreases in state funding often act as predictors for private funding. In short, when appropriations increase, donations increase (and vice versa). Statistical evidence indicates donors prefer to make contributions to institutions that are allocated large state appropriations, but changes in giving occur when state funding fluctuates (Gianneschi, 2004). Unfortunately, to the

dismay of college administrators this trend seems to lack saliency among legislators when deciding on a budget.

Elected officials as well as the general public should recognize higher education's importance to society, its contributions, and the significance of an educated population in the management of a free and democratic society (Quillian, 2005). It is also critical for elected officials to recognize certain segments of society aspiring for a college education continue to face hurdles such as poverty and racial discrimination. Thus, these barriers often make it difficult and/or impossible to succeed in the academic arena. If the promise of education in American society is to be fulfilled, it is essential that factors beyond the academy be continually addressed. Wellman (2002) touched on the importance of the nation and its individual states to make this investment. Conveying the historical and future impact the national economy will continue to leave on the state level; Wellman correlated the economic downturn with the fiscal pressure applied to public institutions. The "double whammy" he referred to concerns the decline in public revenue coupled with the increasing matriculation at public institutions. The ability to keep pace with facilitating quality academic service, technological advances, and growing demands on personnel is a challenge that must be met with creative and innovative academic, budget, and organizational planning.

As difficult as it may seem, it is essential that the higher education community remain sensitive to (and understanding of) the competing demands that policy makers face. Sensitivity and understanding, however, do not necessarily result in resignation. Colleges and universities are finding themselves in a position to remain diligent toward ensuring that the competencies and contributions of a post-secondary education are fully understood by the public and policymakers. Quillian (2005) confirmed this, noting that a concentrated effort to provide compelling evidence

of both the personal benefits and the societal good higher education outcomes have to offer is critical to earning the trust and understanding of both the general public and policymakers. The higher education community must look critically at its own practices and traditions and embrace changes that not only maintain stability of mission, but also improve the quality of service, while controlling the cost of the educational experience. This will require collaborative efforts of accrediting agencies, governing boards, administrators and faculty members.

In lieu of these efforts, the importance of communicating higher education's message is not solely for the benefit of public funding, but also the necessary policy changes that will enable and empower institutions to rely less on state government oversight and spending. As Potter (2003) observed, the trend in state governments across the country has been to cut funding for higher education. Although 18 states were able to increase their higher education budget in 2002, the nation experienced an average of a 5% drop in state higher education appropriations. To circumvent this issue higher education leaders are agreeing to raise private revenue in exchange for greater autonomy to enact and enforce policies with reduced state oversight. Budget cuts continue to affect students in the pocketbook and in the classroom as colleges seek to find new ways to grow revenue through such means as cutting programs, reducing full-time faculty, and relying more on technology to provide academic and student services.

In responding to the evolving needs of higher education, legislators and administrators are increasingly considering this move to delegate regulatory authority from government oversight to individual campuses. Oversight of tuition rates, admissions requirements, curriculum demands, and institutional accountability are several key responsibilities slowly shifting to the responsibility of college administrators.

The clear trend of the past several years has been toward granting greater independence to individual institutions and relying less on central authority. This devolutionary process

has been driven by... frustration with governing systems, and a widespread belief that decentralization, deregulation, and a free-market approach would be more effective. (MacTaggart, 2004, p. 31)

As institutions engage in this competition for more dollars, the most meaningful change occurring may be found in their growing ability to set tuition rates. Given that legislatures are cutting taxes and limiting spending on health care programs and prison funding, institutions have little choice but to raise tuition in exchange for fewer state funds (National Education Association Higher Education Research Center, 2003).

Although many campus presidents desire to retain oversight responsibilities of tuition rates, bond initiatives, and business partnerships to sustain academic quality, legislators and students worry that such authority could lead to price hikes and less accountability (Hebel, 2003). Ironically political leaders are enabling institutions to deviate from their public mission to provide an accessible and quality education. As Zemsky (2003) noted, “the willingness of legislatures to encourage tuition increases in place of state appropriations... has helped privatize public higher education” (p. B8).

Depending on perspective, legislatures have created for themselves either an opportunity to capitalize on, or, a political dilemma to contend with. In supplanting budget oversight with reduced funding responsibility there remains no clear course of action that politicians are willing to adopt.

At the state level, many states are demanding greater and more detailed accountability of diminishing state revenues... even as other states are considering reducing controls in exchange for reduced state appropriations (Zusman, 2005, p. 123).

On the other end of the autonomy spectrum, however, legislation has also been introduced that penalizes public institutions who raise tuition costs at a rate exceeding inflation. Ehrenberg (2004) was careful not to endorse this action, reasoning that lawmakers fail to understand that



state funding allocated to institutions has declined significantly (over 30%) throughout the last 25 years. With states allocating a larger portion of their budgets to comply with federal K-12 mandates and Medicaid obligations, institutions are relying more on need-based student aid while expecting less from public funding. As a result the decrease in state support has led to increased attendance costs, fewer research opportunities, and fewer tenure-track faculty positions.

This reality means higher tuition for students as states' priorities shift to other programs such as Medicare (Manzo, 2006), while public attention (saliency) remains focused on K-12 education, as opposed to postsecondary opportunities (Ward, 2004). Admittedly, there exists some dissent in the higher education community concerning the restriction of such opportunities as the most pressing issue within academic and student affairs circles.

For example, Hicock (2006) argued:

Access to college is not the main problem. Success is. The retention rate for low-income and minority students at many institutions is much lower than for their peers; they get into college but they don't complete their education. (p. B48)

However, despite the attention academics and administrators may call to the importance of academic and student support programs, the issue of insufficient postsecondary financing remains. As Ikenberry (2001) pointed out, a quarter-century ago students in the lowest family income bracket receiving the maximum Pell award required approximately 6 percent of family income to attend a publicly funded institution; conversely, these same families in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must now invest over a third of their earnings in college attendance costs. Until effective efforts are made to increase funding for student aid as well as higher education operations, the issue of access will continue to be the centerpiece of the decline in favorable public perception and inevitably political support.

## Discussion

Public colleges and universities must effectively compete against other public service demands to garner a sufficient share of state funding. Tax dollars facilitate the quality of higher education, much like they do with roads, infrastructure, and, public transportation, etc. This was confirmed by the literature, which provided a common slate of funding priorities that public institutions must compete with for financial resources. The literature also validated this competition as a drain on resources for colleges and universities, therefore leading to higher tuition rates for students and their families. In turn, favorable public opinion of higher education wavers in light of less affordability, thus innocuously affecting the viability of public institutions to establish popular standing among elected officials and their budget priorities.

In responding to this cyclical dilemma, higher education leaders are prompted to devise strategies that will change perceptions among lawmakers and the voters. Although not necessarily negative in its entirety, public opinion of colleges and universities is declining in response to sticker price and taxpayer costs. An uninformed public may also be contributing to this perception. At first glance the casual observer may not view items such as healthcare and correctional facilities as having a direct effect on college affordability; however, the impact is quite significant. The increase in state government expenditures devoted to Medicare benefits and civil service projects are ultimately prompting institutions to raise tuition. In addition, higher education should also anticipate the effects of federal K-12 education policies, such as No Child Left Behind, beyond the secondary level. As states focus on meeting federal goals less resources will be devoted to state colleges and universities. As it concerns perceptions and policies the higher education community is charged with the responsibility to work with lawmakers and their constituents to prioritize continued support of public colleges and universities, while maintaining

essential state services elsewhere. Although various possibilities exist concerning state funding measures, public institutions of higher learning would benefit from their leaders building coalitions and diffusing misinformation among elected officials and the general public. Given these conditions, it is important for administrators to consider organizational approaches that would allow for the most influential means of delivering the higher education message to political leaders and the citizens they serve.

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