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Publication date: 11/24/2008

How External Misfortunes Shaped Higher Education

Introduction

The essay makes an attempt to trace the influences that external political and socioeconomic factors like World Wars I, II and Great Depression had on higher education in the U.S. This at first sight autonomous and self – contained system (as higher education had been often described during the previous centuries) proved to be one of the center points of main societal developments, at the same time being significantly influenced by external factors.

One observation could be made right in the beginning. During the periods of significant political and socioeconomic shifts higher education played the role of refuge for the society, particularly for younger generations, who found shelter from the misfortunes of the outside world within the walls of universities. As a consequence, student numbers grew significantly. These increases, in their turn, required the expansion of campuses and other facilities, the growth of teaching and research workload and funding, and called for new policies that would shape the future course of development of higher education.

Student access

The first influence that WWI, WWII and Great Depression had on higher education was directly reflected in student access to higher education.

During the World War I, there were certain declines in university enrollments as a consequence of military participation of young people. Selective Service Act of 1917 required men of 18 and older to register and serve in military. There was a mixture of feelings and attitudes regarding this process among university presidents. 'Despite the varying degrees of campus military participation, all college presidents expressed a mixture of public support for the war effort and private concern about its impact on their institutions' survival' (Thelin, 2004: 200). In response to this dilemma, in 1918 Woodrow Wilson supported military training of students on college campuses through the introduction of Students' Army Training Corps (SATC) program. This initiative yielded positive results: 'Hundreds of thousands of young men were brought onto campuses as part of the SATC' (Thelin,

2004: 200). However, it should be noted that there were certain negative consequences of this initiative that were reflected on curriculum. 'By late 1918, reviews of the SATC by university administrators and faculty had concluded that the program had intruded on regular college studies to a troubling degree' (Thelin, 2004: 201).

After World War I, and during the Great Depression student access continued to increase. 'By the 1920s, the percentage [of enrollments] doubled; and it was to reach 12 percent in the next decade. On the eve of the World War II the figure stood at 18 percent' (Lucas, 2006: 213). During this period female enrollments increased significantly. The enrollment numbers of black Americans also started to grow. 'By the mid-1930s, the number of black students attending college had grown to 19,000…by 1939, 119 doctoral degrees had been awarded to blacks by leading white colleges and universities' (Lucas, 2006: 216).

Significant increase in enrollment numbers was also noticeable after the World War II. 'By 1947, some 2.3 million students were enrolled in over 1, 800 four-year and two-year institutions; and enrollments were almost evenly divided between public and private colleges or universities' (Lucas, 2006: 216). Moreover, Thelin talks about 'the "three Ps" of prosperity, prestige, and popularity' that characterized higher education of that period (Thelin, 2004: 260). This was due to the introduction of The GI Bill, which was a breakthrough policy in student access expansion. It provided higher education opportunities to war veterans. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (popularly known as the G.I. Bill) and Public Law of 550 of 1952, 'released literally billions of dollars to help underwrite the cost of a college education for millions of returning war veterans. Colleges and universities were inundated with students. Makeshift dormitories and classrooms sprang up on campuses everywhere to accommodate their swelling enrollments' (Lucas, 2006: 252-253). As a result of GI Bill, 20% of low-SES students enrolled in institutions of higher education.

The expansion of student numbers brought about the necessity of catering for additional facilities, of opening up new departments and expanding campuses. It also called for curriculum adjustments to new requirements that in their turn triggered narrowing of specializations. It should be emphasized that all the reforms were triggered as a result of 'massification' of higher education that progressed at a full swing after the introduction of The GI Bill in 1944. At the same time the movement was started towards more selective admissions based on testing and meritocracy (Lemann, 1999).

Therefore, it could be assumed that during World Wars I, II and the Great Depression the expansion of access to higher education served as a kind of panacea for the society afflicted by wars and economic crisis. It engaged lots of young people in academic activity and provided shelter to unemployed war veterans, and to lots of people being left unemployed and bankrupt as a consequence of Black Tuesday stock market crash in 1929. Furthermore, it cured 'psychological trauma' (Loss, 2007) of soldiers, making them less alienated from the mainstream society, and hence, less socially 'dangerous'; it opened up work places for professors, as well as for university administrators, who had to cater for the increasing numbers of students. Moreover, the GI bill changed the classroom environment by enrolling more mature war veterans who had specific goals and interests in professional development.

Financial aid

The second influence that the external political and socioeconomic shifts had on higher education was reflected in the financial aid provided mostly by the federal government.

As Thelin notes, '…it is useful to consider access as a function of affordability' (Thelin, 2004: 169). In most cases affordability was addressed through financial aid programs usually conducted by federal government. Federal government often played a key role in providing financial aid to students or introducing the policy that would direct finances to higher education. In return, it 'received' social integration, support, stability, and during war times, psychologically prepared servicemen. Therefore, this mutual cooperation process between the government and higher education was beneficial for higher education, the government and the public.

Within the framework of the already mentioned SATC program that addressed the concerns of university presidents regarding declining student numbers and, hence the loss of tuition fees, during the World War I, the federal government provided generous per capita compensation to the cooperating colleges. 'Participating institutions received much-needed funds to house, feed and instruct student trainees; in return the government would receive a mentally and physically trained body of fighting men…Some colleges actually gained both new federally subsidized construction projects and student enrollments, thanks to the SATC….The positive example of cooperation during World War I set the stage both for greater public awareness of the campus as a useful resource and for future academic-government partnerships' (Thelin, 2004: 200:201).

After the World War I**,** the expansion of access to higher education necessitated the provision of financial aid to students. However, after the World War I, college-going was still an elite and expensive activity that predominantly white males could afford. Lucas (2006: 210-212) talks about the Depression era, 'massive economic dislocations' and widespread financial hardship in the 'aftermath of the stock market crash of 1929'. The collapse of banks and the overnight loss of life savings was exacerbated by skyrocketing unemployment. Consequently, 'the scene on college campuses in the thirties was thus a study in contrasts. Between 1935 and 1943, the government poured over $93 million into emergency assistance for students. Many, lacking prospects for employment, tended to remain in school any way they could' (Lucas, 2006: 211).

Besides, the federal government introduced work-study programs to make higher education more affordable for students. The work-study program emerged during the New Deal in 1933 at the University of Minnesota as a financial aid project for students to help them cover rising tuition fees (Thelin, 2004: 252-253; Story, 2002). By 1934 it was a nationwide policy.

Thereafter, the introduction of the GI Bill provided financial aid for the World War II veterans. 'No development was more vital in forging a lasting partnership between the state and higher education than the passage of the G.I. Bill of Rights' (Loss, 2007: 1). The G.I. Bill provided enrollees a $500 per month stipend (1944 dollars) to attend college (Durham, 2007). The federal government's overall investment in higher education for 1947 was $2.4 billion; that total had jumped dramatically by the late 1950s (Lucas, 2006: 253). Thus, federal government made significant provisions of financial aid for increasing numbers of students in higher education.

Research

The development of research on university campuses was the third significant influence that the external factors had on higher education.

Already in 1916, prior to American involvement in the World War I, 'George Ellery Hale had succeeded in prompting the creation of the National Research Council to coordinate the scientific efforts of industry, government and academe' (Geiger, 1993: 3). After the World War I and during the Great Depression important researches were conducted, particularly in psychology. McNeely (2008) writes about the creation of the discipline of "human relations", about the important findings made in the spheres of "emotional maladjustment",

"soldiering" and "getting to the bottom of unhappiness". Besides, 'deploying the methods of Freud and Piaget' were becoming increasingly popular (McNeely, 2008: 238-239).

During the World War II, although federally-funded research was triggered out of military and defense reasons, it still incentivized the 'pure Big Research' in flagship American universities to a considerable extent. The Manhattan Project, the invention of the Atomic Bomb, the challenges of global competitiveness in scientific breakthrough discoveries and defense - all those factors contributed to the development of the research on university campuses. Lowen (1991) talks about the development of science, especially the research conducted in physics during 1935-49. The federal government lavishly provided the leading institutions with research funding. As a result, the majority of professors were directed towards research. 'Utilizing existing faculty and facilities, literally hundreds of colleges and universities undertook to provide war-related technical training and research under federal auspices' (Lucas, 2006: 252). As Lucas states, by 1945 half of 'the income supporting academic institutions came from the national government….In the late 1940s, for example, it was estimated that upwards of 80 percent or more of the nations total expenditures for research in the physical and biological sciences was underwritten by the federal government….At the century's midpoint, a dozen or more federal agencies, not counting each branch of the armed services, was spending well in excess of $150 million annually for research contracts (Lucas, 2006: 252-253). In total, The Big Research cost $4bln to federal government. Simultaneously, the number of *academic experts* in federal government was increasing. The number of research centers on university campuses was also rising. It should be noted that with the exception of Los Alamos nuclear testing center, all the major research was based on university campuses. It gave additional value, importance and prestige to university.

In June 1940, Vannevar Bush, the president of the Carnegie Institution of Washington (CIW), proposed the idea of mobilizing American science for national defense. James Bryant Conant, the president of Harvard, understood this proposal as a suggestion to build government laboratories and 'staff them with soldier scientists' (Geiger, 1993: 3). However, what Bush had really meant was something that would start a new relationship between the federal government and universities: "We

will write contracts with universities, research institutes and industrial laboratories" (Vannevar Bush cited in Geiger, 1993: 3; Bush, 1945). Vannevar Bush envisioned universities at the helm of *The Big Research* that would move American defense and international competitiveness forward. He also introduced the concept of *indirect cost recovery*, which meant federal government covering 50 percent of additional costs for universities on top of direct research contract costs. However, 70 percent of federal grants went to prestigious universities. This caused uneven distribution of wealth among universities. Clark Kerr (2001) talks about intuitive imbalance and the idea of geographic distribution of federal research grants that would balance the even geographic distribution of funds among various universities, and not only among prestigious ones. Clark Kerr also introduced the idea of "multiversity" and emphasized its most powerful element, the invisible product – knowledge. Federal research grants significantly contributed to the production of knowledge. Thus, narrow specialization, massification of higher education, university as a part of military-industrial complex – all this, according to Clark Kerr, gave rise to "Knowledge Industry" (Kerr, 2001).

However, certain issues arose as a consequence of the initiative. First, the issue of university autonomy and academic freedom became a widely discussed topic. Tensions arose between the freedom of academia to produce knowledge and federal influence. The active involvement of the federal government in university academic life through research grants limited the freedom choice of academic and research interests of professors by narrowing down the scope of research fields to technological, military-defense or biological spheres (Geiger, 1993). To address this issue, Lyndon Johnson introduced National Endowment for Humanities to balance the even distribution of research grants among disciplines.

Besides, secrecy in research was another important issue that put transparency and democracy under question. The rising ideology of McCarthyism emphasized secrecy in research for the protection

of national interests (Morgan, 2003; Schrecker, 1998). The next concern was student dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching, as the professors were mainly concentrating on research and didn't pay attention to teaching quality. The previous overly caring *in loco parentis* attitude of the faculty towards students was changed by the so-called *faculty in absentia* practice reflecting the faculty being mainly absent from classes (Kerr, 2001). Those were the issues that would have to be tackled in the decades to come.

Why do wars seem to lead to so many changes in higher education policy and policymaking?

In the aftermath of war and destruction, countries always try to recover their socioeconomic conditions through innovations in different public structures, education being one of the significant spheres among many others. Drastic reforms in education serve as kind of triggers to re-vitalize economy and incentivize wider masses to engage in the re-building process.

Furthermore, out of purely pragmatic reasons, war could serve as an argument for policymakers to justify new policies (e.g. serving the rehabilitation of the society) and to convince government authorities to invest in them generously. Post-war reforms and policies in education are also necessary for federal government to make the country's industry globally competitive that is usually driven by scientific progress.

Another suggestion could be that education serves as a kind of 'remedy' for the recovery of traumatized psychological condition of society, particularly for returning veterans. 'I link fears of psychological maladjustment among soldiers to the state's unprecedented interest in education' (Loss, 2007). Therefore, assisting them to enroll in higher education programs would help the authorities to re-integrate returned war veterans into mainstream society, particularly under the conditions of economic hardships and high unemployment rates, and thus, decrease the incidence of social alienation and psychological depression that usually leads to unstable social conditions. 'A ground breaking 1939 Menninger Clinic study demonstrated the benefits of education therapy in the treatment of mentally ill patients' (Loss, 2007: 7).

Furthermore, the incidence of war is an indicator that something didn't work in the world politics or there was drastic disbalance in international socioeconomic structures among countries involved or affected. What would be a better sphere to put at the helm of re-establishing peaceful and balanced world order and initiating cross-country

dialogues than academia? War and peace contrast adds to the value of new education policies. Chaotic war conditions provide a sharply contrasting background for new education policies during peaceful times that immediately follow them. Hence, after war period new policies become more vivid and noticeable to the society.

However, it should be noted that there seems to be a kind of 'diminishing return' to the investments made in the post-war education policies as the time passes. One can even point to the extreme points in this respect: from the payoff of the 1944 GI Bill, where $19bln. of costs yielded $64bln. of revenue, to the post-Iraq crisis of 1991s, when there were significant cuts made to higher education owing to the recession and public good value of higher education was questioned (Callan, 2002). Perhaps we are witnessing the process of devaluation of the ideals that tend to emerge during war-times? Therefore, ever increasing number of people starts questioning the price paid and sacrifices made for the sake of war, particularly, as the society becomes increasingly pragmatic and competitive, and the causes for instigating wars become even more blurred and controversial. Policymakers are in search of more valid justifications for the policies that they wish to initiate under the pretext of 'smoothening' the grave consequences of war that started out of reasons not always clear to the millions of people who make ever stricter demands to the government to justify the public money spent for the good cause.

Conclusion

The general impression that one might get from the history of relationship between wider external factors like World Wars I, II, the Great Depression and the development process of higher education is that wars and economic crisis increased public importance of higher education. Unlike peaceful and economically stabilized times, during war and economic crisis the importance *of common cause* of university was emphasized. The *public good* importance of higher education became vivid and hence, more federal funding was directed towards universities and new policies were carried out that expanded access through heightened affordability thanks to federal funds. In addition, research was incentivized through federal research grants. This fact attracted professional academics and moved quality education forward. However, as mentioned above, as the society is becoming more pragmatic, justification of new policies for the purposes of general societal benefit is more needed than ever before. As the time passes, it is becoming increasingly difficult to articulate objectives of a new policy and justify the expenses to be spent.

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