

The Right to a Quality Public College Education

McAvoy, Brighthouse, and Laden all work at public institutions whose core mission is to provide a quality public college education to undergraduates from within the state in which they are located (Wisconsin and Illinois). UW-Madison is the state flagship and enrolls about 75% of its undergraduate student body from Wisconsin or Minnesota and charges low tuition rates for those students (\$11,558/year in fees and tuition). It has an 84% 6-year graduation rate and 95% first year retention rate. It charges much higher tuition from the 25% of non-resident students, who are overwhelmingly from more affluent backgrounds than the median resident student, and it uses this revenue, in part, to subsidize in-state residents (non-residents pay \$30,800/year in fees and tuition). About 20% of the undergraduate population is Pell Grant-eligible, and those students are disproportionately (but not exclusively) residents.

The University of Illinois-Chicago is an urban university that is part of the flagship University of Illinois system, but it is not considered the flagship campus. Over 98% of its undergraduates come from in-state, and they pay roughly \$13,500 in tuition and fees per year. 59% of freshman are commuters from the Chicago area. 50% of the undergraduate students are Pell-eligible. 29% of entering freshman report that English is not their native language. 32% of incoming freshman have no parent with any exposure to college, and only 43% have at least one parent with a degree from a 4-year college. 75% of the incoming first-year class to its College of Liberal Arts and Sciences were non-white. It has about a 60% 6-year graduation rate, though as recently as a decade ago, that number was under 50% and has been as low as 31% in recent memory.

We'd like participants to think about what constitutes a quality public college education, how, in a world of finite resources, a quality public college education should be distributed, how it should be financed, and how public institutions should change in the light of the answers to those questions.

Here are some questions and observations that suggest possible avenues of thought.

- Must a quality public college education be a liberal education (and, if so, what constitutes a liberal education?). What does a liberal education mean in the context of professional qualifications (such as Business, Elementary Education, Nursing, or Social Work, baccalaureate programs)?
- What role does affirmative action in admissions play in ensuring fairness in distribution of a quality public college education? To stimulate thinking, here are some bases on

which students are preferred over other students with similar academic credentials (in some cases we know, in others we just suspect, preference):

- i) Athletic prowess (don't just think about football, but think about cross country, swimming, soccer, crew, and the many other non-revenue-generating sports). Preferences in admissions for athletes on average favor students who are more socio-economically advantaged; as does scholarship money for athletes. (Especially, in both cases, for women).
 - ii) Being male (most selective public colleges skew female, but skew less female than you would predict given the achievement gap between boys and girls at high school graduation).
 - iii) Being from a rural, or an urban, high school, or from a geographic area that would otherwise not be well represented.
- Whereas affluent private institutions operate a 'high tuition/high aid' policy, in which lower income students are offered heavily discounted tuition rates, public institutions typically operate a lower tuition/low aid policy for residents, meaning that for some low-income residents it would be less expensive to attend a private institution (which, nevertheless, many such students do not know, because they lacked the counselling that would have given them good information). High tuition/high aid policies in private institutions seem to induce sticker shock—many students do not apply to private colleges because they, wrongly, think they would have to pay the sticker price.
 - The accounting is hard to do, but some economists believe that undergraduate tuition subsidizes research in research-oriented public institutions, and there is little doubt that it does so in some fields – e.g. the humanities, in which professors typically bring in little if any research funds. Is this situation justifiable, given that lower income students either go into considerable debt, or spend many hours a week working for low pay, in order to pay tuition.
 - Ethnographic accounts (e.g. *Paying for the Party*) suggest, among other things a) that flagship institutions establish diverse pathways, some of which may be well suited only for students whose families have the social capital that enable them to use those pathways to attain careers, but that they do not counsel other students effectively to steer them away from those pathways and b) that they support environments (party dorms, the Greek system) that, again, might suit students whose families have considerable financial resources, but do not effectively counsel other students to avoid those pathways (or subsidize lower income students navigating those environments as, say, Princeton, which includes the price of membership of a supper club in its aid packages, does).
 - Due in part to the scale of the institutions, and the priorities of faculty members, access to personal contact with tenure-line faculty is highly restricted, and students with the cultural capital that enables them to feel comfortable approaching faculty members, and present themselves in a favorable light, have much more effective access to faculty. Faculty are not trained in techniques for making themselves open to, and enable them to interact in a welcoming way with, students from backgrounds in which elite campus

culture is unfamiliar. Does this matter? (e.g., is regular personal interaction with a faculty member part of 'quality' as we want to define it?). How changeable is this situation, and how might it be changed?

- A significant proportion of undergraduate students experience moderate to serious mental health issues (and, although the exact extent of sexual assault is in dispute, there is no doubt that sizeable numbers of students are victims of sexual assault, with the consequent mental health issues), and their peers, who are their main daily support network on residential campuses, are not always well-equipped to support them; they often do not know how to get help. The rapid growth in 'administrative costs' in recent years is in part a response to pressures to provide support for these students, as well as low income and first generation students, with the support that will get them through to graduation (in response to pressures to improve graduation rates). Is an environment with more diverse and effective support systems part of 'quality'? What pastoral role should *faculty* play in the lives of students?
- Most members of any given cohort do not attend college, and a much larger proportion do not graduate college – those who do not attend or graduate are, on average, considerably worse off than those who do attend and graduate. Is a quality education one that benefits the person who received it, or is it one that prepares and inclines them effectively for public service, so that they benefit others? If the latter, what does this mean for the distribution of resources within the university/college (e.g., Should Business schools subsidize Ed Schools? Should tuition cost more for some programs than for others? Should philosophy departments shrink and social work departments expand?).
- On the political left, there's a great deal of discussion about a student debt crisis. Martin O'Malley (former governor of Maryland and presidential candidate) argued for policies to improve affordability by revealing that his family has taken out \$339,200 in loans to send two children through college, though this sum is considered by financial experts to be "abnormally high" and "[makes] little sense" given the family's financial situation (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/07/09/omalleys-personal-example-college-debt-confuses-experts>). Bernie Sanders proposes that public undergraduate education be free, and Hillary Clinton proposes that nobody should have to incur debt to attend a public university or college. Do we have anything useful to contribute to how we should think about the debt crisis or about whether, indeed, there is a debt crisis?
- Public institutions are extremely diverse: large research universities, regional 4-year colleges, 2-year colleges, etc. Some are primarily residential, others primarily commuter campuses. Each institution faces different issues, and the issues discussed above arise in different ways on different campuses.