Higher Education in the Knowledge Economy: Politics and Policies of Transformation

Introduction

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American higher education has undergone a far-reaching transformation. More people are attending universities and colleges than ever before, fueled by both increases in the size of the population and rates of attendance. Policy makers, moreover, have strongly supported the sector's expansion, celebrating universities as "engines of innovation" (Thorp and Goldstein 2010) and promoting education as "the best anti-poverty program" (Obama 2010).

By 2013, 20.4 million students were enrolled in the United States' degree-granting postsecondary institutions, almost twice as many as during the mid-1980s and 20% more than merely a decade before (NCES 2016, 407–408). These numbers remain remarkable when adjusted to fulltime-equivalents (FTE). At public institutions, which educate about three-fourths of the American student population (Desrochers and Wellman 2011, 11), FTE enrollment increased from 7.1 million to 11.5 million between 1987 and 2012 (SHEEO 2013, 9). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) currently estimates that 54% of young adults in the United States will graduate with tertiary degrees during their lifetime. While 22% are expected to attain an associate's degree only, 38% are projected to gain bachelor's, 20% master's, and 1.6% doctoral degrees (OECD 2016, 68).

Yet, behind such perceived successes, structural changes have pushed the sector toward crisis (Blumenstyk 2014). A crucial shift has been the growth of for-profit providers, financed by more than $30 billion of annual student aid flowing from the federal government to education services companies. In 2009, around one in ten American students were enrolled at for-profit institutions (more than tripling the rate over a single decade), with about 86% of the revenues of the 15 publicly traded for-profit institutions coming from public sources (HELP Committee 2010). While these businesses and their investors enjoyed impressive returns, performance in terms of their educational mission has frequently been abysmal, marketing practices have often preyed on the most vulnerable, and employment conditions have tended to be poor.

At the same time, public institutions have been deeply affected by declining direct state and local spending—down to less than $6,000 in annual support per FTE student in 2012 (SHEEO 2013, 21). Seeking to make up revenue shortfalls, public universities increasingly behave as public-private hybrids. Not only have they continually increased tuition, they have also shifted the allocation of financial aid from need to merit as they sought to attract higher-testing students and move up in rankings. They, in turn, contributed to student loan debt rising to more than a trillion dollars, which does not even take into account the second mortgages and other loans that parents often end up taking out to finance their children's higher education.

Large shares of the American student population now enter the labor market burdened by their obligation to repay substantial debts, a situation that has been characterized as "indentured studenthood" (Shermer 2015) and is made worse by citizens' frequent inability to discharge student loan debt via personal bankruptcy. At the same time, a plethora of available tax benefits has disproportionately supported the wealthy, ranging from tax-exempt college savings plans to tax deductions for alumni gifts to universities. The non-taxation of endowment returns has also supported upward redistribution, given that endowments have risen to tens of billions for leading private universities and now tend to generate overall returns of $1–3 billion annually.

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Universities' strategies to cope with regressive forms of public spending have undeniably had further regressive effects. Higher education's impact on social closure and the reproduction of privilege now clearly overpowers the sector's contribution to social mobility (Mettler 2014). These changes, moreover, have not gone unnoticed by the general population. Three-fourths of Americans view higher education as too expensive to afford for most (Pew Research Center 2011), and a majority finds colleges and universities to be more interested in their bottom lines than in providing a good education (Callan 2010). To make matters worse, American companies have also disinvested from human capital development (Cappelli 2012) and frequently restrict recruitment to students from elite universities (Rivera 2015).

This symposium takes stock of these fundamental political and policy transformations in the higher education sector. It shows how higher education has found itself at the center of broader social conflicts and demonstrates that political science tools are crucial for uncovering how these conflicts are processed politically. Our discipline's analytic repertoire provides significant leverage for productively exploring the complex causal processes that have shaped the academy's continuing evolution and have generated a range of consequential outcomes across the world. The symposium develops this argument in four essays penned by newer scholarly voices. Two shorter contributions from more established analysts and two interventions from practitioners provide additional depth and breadth.

Leveraging the respective strengths of distinct entry points and approaches, the contributions sketch a rich vision for scholarly engagement with the sector's ongoing evolution and provide a range of suggestions for how policy makers could better translate democratic commitments into policies that fit contemporary socio-economic realities.

While other social science disciplines and the humanities have made substantial progress in addressing the academy's changing realities, political science has been lagging behind. In exploring what a political science of higher education could look like, the symposium brings together qualitative and quantitative, as well as comparative and historically-embedded analyses. Leveraging the respective strengths of distinct entry points and approaches, the contributions sketch a rich vision for scholarly engagement with the sector's ongoing evolution and provide a range of suggestions for how policy makers could better translate democratic commitments into policies that fit contemporary socio-economic realities. This introduction situates the symposium's articles, reviewing recent trends in higher education and elaborating upon key issues that the symposium's contributions raise for a political science analysis of the sector's ongoing institutional changes.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CRUCIBLE: INNOVATION BETWEEN PROMISE AND PERIL

Contemporary changes in American higher education have not occurred in a vacuum. They are part of the sector's transformation across the world, which has attracted criticism in many countries (e.g., Lenzen 2014; McGettigan 2013). Scholars can better understand the character of higher education's ongoing transformation—including its roots, features and scope—by placing contemporary US developments into broader historical and geographic contexts.

New thinking about both economic growth and social inclusion has deeply affected the sector. Under the influence of technological change, economic globalization, and the decline of manufacturing, economic experts have come to emphasize the distribution of human capital as central for growth and social equality in knowledge-based economies. Diagnosing a "race between education and technology" (Goldin and Katz 2008) in the name of sustaining "egalitarian" versions of capitalism (Kenworthy 2004), economists and other social scientists have called on policy makers to strengthen human capital investments through tertiary-level education.

The implementation of this agenda has diverged somewhat. In Europe, policy makers dedicated themselves to the Lisbon Agenda, which was supposed to turn the European Union into the "most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (Lisbon European Council 2000). They also launched the Bologna Process to remove barriers to this agenda by unifying the rules for tertiary students' workloads and degree requirements across the continent. In many European countries, these reforms introduced bachelor's degrees as a shorter alternative or complement to traditional MA-level qualifications.

Degree attainment rates for young people in Asia and Europe have tended to increase faster than in the United States, with average expected graduation rates for theory-based academic degrees rising by 20 percentage points across the OECD between 1995 and 2011 (OECD 2013, 55). While the US—together with Canada and Israel—still leads the world in tertiary degree attainment for 55–64 year-old adults, American attainment for 25–34 year-olds has fallen to 12th worldwide (OECD 2016, 42).

Far-reaching changes are even visible in Germany, a country with a history of providing elite-centered higher education and relying heavily on vocational education to prepare its workforce. Only a few years ago, Germany stood out (together with the United States) from other OECD countries for having tertiary attainment rates among younger adults that were only marginally higher than for older adults (OECD 2013, 37). Yet, by more than doubling expected lifetime graduation rates for theory-based academic programs between 1995 and 2011, Germany has clearly embraced mass-access higher education (OECD 2013, 63).

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National comparisons also reveal great differences in spending on higher education. The United States leads the world with expenditures of 2.6% of GDP, compared to an OECD average of 1.6%. In line with the United States, countries such as Japan, Korea, Canada, and the UK rely heavily on private spending. While both the United States and Germany spend about 1% of GDP in terms of public funds, private contributions in the US far outpace the 0.2% in Germany. European welfare states often invest significant public funds, including as much as 1.7% of GDP in Finland and Austria (OECD 2016, 207). Many European countries in turn run their mass-access public higher education systems practically tuition-free, in some cases with higher rates of degree completion and frequently with greater efficiency in terms of overall spending per degree than in the US (OECD 2013, 71).

Looking behind the numbers, however, it becomes clear that there are no silver bullets for high performance. In all wealthy democracies, policy makers' embrace of higher education has generated new financial challenges. First, the expanded sector's need for increased funding competes with other—also increasing—public expenditures, including services for the elderly or disabled, childcare (particularly in Europe), and prisons (particularly in the US).

Second, given that higher education is a labor-intensive social service, it suffers from "Baumol's cost disease": Compared to the manufacturing sector, the potential for technologically-empowered productivity increases is limited in higher education, at least without fundamentally questioning classroom-based instruction. In turn, as long as workers in higher education seek to enjoy the same wage growth as workers in other sectors, outputs will tend to become relatively more expensive over time. In higher education, this effect is further amplified by the trend that some groups of workers have enjoyed above-average increases in their compensation. While the wage share of higher education budgets has stayed fairly stable in the United States over the 21st century's first decade (Desrochers and Wellman 2011), and incomes particularly for non-tenure track, adjunct, and humanities instructors have stagnated or even fallen, compensation for top management, law, and science faculty as well as for administrative positions has increased significantly. For instance, between FY 2009 and FY 2012, average annual compensation for presidents at the 25 highest-paying public research universities in the United States rose by a third to $974,006 (Erwin and Wood 2014).

Third, the sector is plagued by what Howard Bowen described as universities' tendency to raise and spend as much money as they can in their attempts to provide excellence and attain status. At least in the United States, the effects of this "Bowen rule" appear to have been even larger than those of the cost driver theorized by William Baumol (Martin and Hill 2014). Rather than focusing on reducing costs, many American universities have continued to increase investments in the four Rs—rankings, research, real estate, and "*rah!*" sports (Craig 2015).

Keen to moderate these trends, policy makers have long perceived the need for innovation and the disruption of inherited delivery models (Christensen and Eyring 2011; Wildavsky, Kelly, and Carey 2011). During the past two decades, many countries' governments have passed laws to encourage universities' entrepreneurialism, usually by sharpening incentives through competition-enhancing processes of institutional liberalization (Schulze-Cleven and Olson 2017). Yet, these reforms' consequences have often differed from expectations. For instance, the promises of technologically-powered and productivity-increasing tools such as massive open online courses (MOOCs) have yet to be realized. Attempts to integrate them into curricula have frequently encountered roadblocks, leaving them with limited impact to date.

Instead, the consequences of liberalization have frequently highlighted the perils of innovation, many of which flow from the reforms' effects on shifting distributions of power across the sector. In the United States, policy changes have promoted the progressive financialization of the academy (Eaton et al. 2016), fueling the increasing influence of financial, business and private interests within higher education. Shifts in power have also been visible in other wealthy countries, including in Germany and Scandinavia (Schulze-Cleven and Olson 2017). Because reforms geared toward sustaining competition have frequently meant that public moneys have followed—rather than balanced—private power and spending, they have had a tendency across countries to underwrite the accumulation of privilege both within and by way of higher education (Schulze-Cleven 2015). In the context of both winner-take-all markets and politics (Frank and Cook 1996; Hacker and Pierson 2014), higher education's emancipatory leverage has been greatly reduced.

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TOWARD A POLITICAL SCIENCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

To date, the analysis of the sector's changing politics has been dominated by sociologists, historians, education specialists, and journalists (e.g., Berman 2012; Kirp 2003; Schrecker 2010; Stevens and Gebre-Mehdin 2016). Political scientists have contributed little. While many political scientists have observed higher education's transformation first-hand at their workplaces, the discipline has not "embraced education as a target of comprehensive, in-depth study" (Moe 2012).

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A few exceptions prove the rule. Scholars of American politics have made selected policy interventions on the "fall of the faculty" (Ginsberg 2011) and on students' increasing inequalities of opportunity (Mettler 2014). Moreover, comparativists have placed higher education within the contexts of comparative welfare-state building and the evolution of capitalist variety (Ansell 2010; Busemeyer 2014; Iversen and Stephens 2008). Finally, disciplinary leaders have used both reflective short pieces and parts of larger projects to warn against disturbing developments in the American academy (Brady 2013; Brown 2015; Scott and Smith 2010). Yet, these efforts have not added up to a research program on the political science of higher education.

This symposium shows that political scientists have much to contribute to a better understanding of the drivers, mechanisms, and consequences of the sector's evolution by building on Lasswell's focus on politics as distributional conflict (Lasswell 1936). Universities contribute to many dimensions of social stratification—from the distribution of income and life chances to gender and racial divisions—and they do so through multiple channels. While it is challenging to conceptualize lines of conflict, trace shifting patterns of contention, and capture ongoing institutional changes, the essays in this symposium demonstrate the promise of this endeavor.

Abstraction based on solid conceptualization allows scholars to address how conflicts get framed and processed. For instance, research could explore higher education as a site of class conflict in modern capitalism, deeply shaped by power and resources having shifted from labor toward capital. Comparative political economy scholarship provides many approaches—from micro-level perspectives to theorizing on interest groups and cross-class coalitions—that could provide effective leverage for such research. Moreover, a discursive perspective could probe the construction of solidarity and joint interests within the labor camp, be it between academic labor and students, or among the academic workforce between tenure-track, non-tenure track, adjunct, and graduate student labor.

Such inquiries could also make important contributions to theorizing on the role of ideas, power and interests behind collective action in modern capitalism more broadly (e.g., Ornston and Schulze-Cleven 2015; Schulze-Cleven and Weishaupt 2015). To highlight this potential, it is worth reviewing the contributions that the symposium's main essays make to the issue of policy feedback (Hacker and Pierson 2014; Jacobs and Weaver 2015). First, the contributions show how feedback works on different *levels*, spanning both mass politics—as Garritzmann and Rose emphasize—and the interactions of groups, which Eaton elaborates with respect to coalitions among public universities' constituency groups, and which Graf and Powell probe in their analysis of German employers' initiatives.

Second, the articles demonstrate how these policy feedback effects operate through contrasting—and often interacting—*mechanisms*. Both Rose and Garritzmann illustrate the role of actors' ideas and identities in discussing how policies have shaped the public's views on trade-offs between reform options as well as the populace's political engagement. Eaton emphasizes how policies' evolution might change the incentives they provide for actors to join social coalitions in support of policy changes. Finally, Graf and Powell join Eaton and Rose in touching on the effects of policy changes on power relations among actors.

Third, the pieces discuss how the *self-reinforcing* and *self-undermining* properties of policy feedbacks shape institutional evolution. While both Garritzmann and Rose emphasize the role of positive feedback processes in creating path dependence, other essays review how negative policy feedback can prompt the reorientation of actor strategies, be it for employers (Graf and Powell) or labor unions (Eaton).

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A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The symposium is anchored by four essays that explore diverse aspects of higher education policies and politics. Deondra Rose focuses on the United States, exploring the historical lessons of higher education's role for the transformation of American citizenship. After illuminating the highly gendered nature of the academy's postwar expansion, she probes the role of feedback effects from federal policies in shaping the inclusion of women and low-income Americans in full citizenship. While policy makers frequently needed to make use of policy windows—such as the Sputnik Shock—to overcome political obstacles to reform, they succeeded in passing legislation that had lasting effects on moderating economic, gender, and racial divisions.

Charlie Eaton probes more contemporary domestic developments, exploring the emergence of new social coalitions around the issue of student debt. While scholarship on the United States' public-private welfare state has long emphasized the difficulties of reform, Eaton shows how financialization has facilitated the formation of new alliances between student groups, unions, and think tanks in support of tuition level freezes and modifications on debt repayment. As his analysis makes clear, current developments in the sector have the potential to change actor alignments and remove blockages in the contemporary politics of public higher education more quickly than many commentators imagine.

Julian Garritzmann focuses on the growing large-n scholarship on the comparative politics of higher education, reviewing these works' findings on the sources of differences in both higher education spending and governance across the rich democracies since World War II. As scholarly debates about voter and party preferences make clear, higher education's ambivalent effects

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on social stratification—with the potential to be both socially emancipatory and divisive—provide strong challenges to theory development about the determinants of cross-national patterns. Yet, as Garritzmann reports, scholars have become increasingly sophisticated in meeting these hurdles.

Lukas Graf and Justin Powell's comparative institutionalist analysis explores the politics of tapping into "dual study" programs as a way to moderate inequalities in school-to-work transitions. Pioneered in Germany, and combining firm-provided practical training and university-based higher education, these hybrid programs enlist employers in funding and developing advanced skill formation, as well as in the provision of inclusive professional opportunities. As such, they provide strong contrasts to recent trends in the United States.

Two shorter contributions by established analysts shed light on the interaction of higher education systems and patterns of labor market stratification, as well as on the complex relationship between education and the welfare state. Ben Ansell and Jane Gingrich show that, depending on labor market structures, the returns to higher education differ greatly across countries. Marius Busemeyer reviews how education policies' ability to decrease social inequalities turns on countries' divisions between public and private funding, and between academic and vocational education.

Finally, two interventions by practitioners provide programmatic impetus for a political science of higher education by challenging us to dig even deeper. Matt Reed contributes from the vantage point of a community college administrator and frequent commentator on US higher education policy. His contribution reveals the complex—and arguably at least in part problematic—impact that policy makers' turn to performance funding has had on community colleges, which are home to over 40% of the American FTE undergraduate population and a majority of undergraduates at public institutions (Desrochers and Wellman 2011). His reflections raise crucial questions about public leadership as a form of democratic governance, its tensions with academic freedom, and the consequences for professional voice. Labor leader Kathryn Lybarger sketches the negative consequences of contemporary higher education reforms for labor standards in the academy. Reporting on union efforts to bargain for the common good, she calls on higher education managers to join emerging coalitions between students and employees' unions.

While each contribution is clearly focused on a particular set of issues, the essays are highly complementary, sketching a broad research frontier on the politics of higher education and indicating how political science research can play an important role in preparing the ground for a more effective and efficient provision of higher education. By casting light on policy making and by illuminating how institutions shape the character of distributional conflict, political scientists can help remove blockages to collective action that currently hamper the realization of democratic values. ■

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