

Universities as a Public Good

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The current tax plan now being debated in Congress takes a swipe at higher education with a number of changes that includes taxing tuition benefits of graduate students. This law would be particularly devastating for graduate students who often receive a scholarship as a tuition waiver, which can be \$10,000 to \$40,000 depending on the university. The student never sees this money, rather it is a scholarship that waives all or part of their tuition. Many students will also teach a class or work in a research lab and perhaps receive \$15,000 to \$25,000 in salary, from which they pay all their living expenses. For most students this is not enough to cover rent and food so they also take out student loans. Current students, with such a low income, pay little or no income tax. If you add, let's say, a \$30,000 tuition waiver to their \$20,000 salary they will have to pay \$9,000 in Federal income tax. This is money they don't have and it will likely require them to pay the tax with a student loan.

At this writing, the provision to tax tuition waivers may not make it into the final bill. This is great news because this tax would be devastating to our graduate programs nationwide, and is another example of the erosion of government support for higher education.

Supporters of this legislation, we fear, would like to do away entirely with government funding of higher education because they do not see the public good served by these institutions. What is the public or common good? It is a concept that is rarely discussed today but is at the heart of our educational system and democracy itself.

Charles Dorn (*For the Common Good* 2017) traces the concept of the common/public good to John Locke, a 17th century philosopher. Locke's view is that individuals gain from education but the broader society does as well. According to Christopher Newfield in his recent book (*The Great Mistake* 2016), public higher education in particular was founded on the ideal that every qualifying student would get the same high-level education regardless of their ability to pay. Our public university system, which has long been the envy of the world, is a right afforded to all students merely because they are members of this society. There are certainly a number of private benefits to individuals who get post-high school education (higher paying jobs, longer life expectancy, greater health and happiness), but there are immeasurable public benefits as well. Individuals trained in our universities discover cures to disease, design buildings that can withstand earthquakes, contribute their skills to our self-governance, and problem-solve in our ever-changing world.

Newfield also notes that since the 1980s we have moved away from the notion of the public good in our university systems as public financing of these institutions dried up. Over the past 30 years we have drifted ever closer to a privately funded education system where the costs of education now becomes the burden of the students who attend. Many students, in this system, rack up enormous debt or do not attend college at all.

We were both in higher education in the 1980s but neither of us recall a single conversation among policy makers about shifting the cost of universities away from the public good to a pay-

as-you go model. We didn't hear this debate because most people favor low tuition at a state university system. What we did hear were the chants of "no new taxes" and political pledges to reduce taxes. Those who are behind these chants or pledges likely have the minority belief that tax dollars should not support public universities and the students and their families should assume the financial burden of education. This belief, however, ignores the role the public good plays in these institutions.

Sadly, there has been a slow drift away from the notion of universities as a public good towards the corporatization of education and the rise of for-profit institutions, with their high dropout rates, low graduation rates, and high student debt. As Newfield notes, this gave higher education a bad reputation as the goal of a corporatized higher education system is not education for the common good but rather profits for shareholders.

But it is not too late. We agree with Newfield that the damage done to the system is reversible and the first step is to reinstate the notion of the public good into all discussions of our higher education system. "Workforce readiness," and "future earnings" should be part of the discussion but should not dominate it. When we lose sight of higher education as a public good available to all who qualify, we move away from what makes our universities, and indeed our society, great.

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http://www.pantagraph.com/opinion/columnists/guest-commentary-universities-as-a-public-good/article_ad2d56c6-7c64-5944-a968-678ee92d8f28.html