

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

How can state policies promote college accessibility

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By

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Abstract

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College education is one of the most important aspects that advances a country's growth and is the main contributor to economic and societal development, which keep a country competitive in the global economy. An educated society reduces cases of poverty, increases the average wage, improves health outcomes, and maintains a civically engaged society.

However, in recent years, higher education in the US became less accessible to its citizens. College education tuition has risen dramatically and is less affordable for low- and median-income students, which prevents many qualified students from pursuing the college education path.

This project examines the systemic obstacles that prevent many high school graduates from enrolling in and completing college education. It attempts to address methods through which state policies and funding appropriations can effectively stimulate college attainment opportunities and increase college completion rates.

Introduction

Today, more than ever before, college education is known as the foundational element that accelerates a country's growth. It stimulates its economy, keeps it competitive in the international arena, promotes equity and social mobility, and helps create a productive and healthy society that encourages civic engagement, which in turn strengthens the foundations of democracy (McLendon & Perna, 2014). Research shows that states with more educated populations appropriate less funding to social services and health services and have higher benefits from increased tax revenue, increased worker productivity, and greater civic engagement (McLendon & Perna, 2014). This makes the public return on investment for higher-education appropriation very high. Fiscal researchers have indicated that for every \$1 that states, and local governments spend to produce higher-education degrees, the public receives \$2.35 in return, which means that the estimated fiscal benefits to states are approximately 2.35 times greater than the cost (NCSL, 2015).

Today's world is changing rapidly, and with it, the demands for non-routine jobs, reflecting on short-term trends that require constant learning and new skills acquisition, in much broader fields, such as automation, ageing, new economic trends, and technology. Higher education is also the main contributor to innovation and higher rates of research and development, fostering new products and processes, and benefitting the larger society. The global world presents many opportunities for international collaboration and research excellence. This helps to find innovative solutions and adaptation to ever-expanding societal challenges such as environmental degradation, climate change, ageing societies, obesity epidemics, mass migration, extremism, conflict,

etc., and encourages countries to advance their populations to remain competitive (OECD, 2017).

These vast benefits of higher education for individuals and society at large should be a matter of urgent interest not only to the individuals who are directly affected, but also and mainly to public policy representatives at the federal, state, and local levels (OECD, 2017).

For many years the United States was the leading country in the world for college education attainment and college completion. However, today the US is lagging behind many other countries. A recent Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report indicates that although overall the U.S. college attainment levels remain above the OECD average of about 30%, “they are growing at a below-average rate compared to other OECD and G20 countries (OECD, 2017). For example, between 2000 and 2010, college attainment in the U.S grew an average of 1.3 percent a year, compared to 3.7 percent annually for OECD countries overall (OECD, 2017). These trends are also mirrored in the graduate output of higher-education institutions. In 1995, the U.S. ranked 2nd after New Zealand in terms of the higher education graduation rate. In 2010, it ranked 13th (OECD, 2017).

In the past three decades, several variables have decreased college access opportunities and contributed to this stagnation affecting the US population. College tuition has increased substantially, much more than the increase of a median-family income and has become beyond reach for many low- and middle-income families. This has prevented many Americans from gaining access to higher-education opportunities. Students must rely on federal financial aid, which cannot keep pace with the rising

tuition, and are in need of substantial student loans, which puts many students in a financially burdensome venture (NCSL, 2015).

The results are declining college attainment, declining rate of college completion, and an increased social inequality.

Evidently, states are also bound by other priorities. This includes state budget deficits and political powers that sometimes force them to reallocate state funds in a way that fixes immediate needs without addressing future outcomes that might, over time, have a much stronger impact on the larger society.

However -recognizing the hazardous future gap this situation creates and its impediment to the local economy, social equality, and demographic growth -for the past two decades, states have been trying to address this challenge locally, and with external federal assistance, by strategically enacting various policy instruments that aim to promote college accessibility.

As a country possessing one of the strongest secondary education systems in the world, the US states must leverage these strong foundations to ensure they contribute to its country's human capital, and promote societal equality by enhancing public policies that aspire to bring the US once again to dominate the academic realm in the global arena.

This study addresses the nation's multi-faceted challenge pertaining to college accessibility. The challenge is mainly derived from steadily increased tuition and a sharp decrease in state spending to universities. Despite the existence of federal, state, and institutional grant programs, they are often not sufficient to fill the gap in need (Cooker & Glynn, 2018). Through a thorough examination of state policies and funding

appropriation toward their public secondary education, this study attempts to suggest a blueprint that would allow policymakers to create an informed strategic plan to ensure an increase in college attainment and completion that in turn would sustain a productive and successful society.

But before addressing possible solutions, it is imperative to comprehend and clearly articulate the main contributors that have led to the college attainment decline in the past 30 years, and how this increased the societal gap within the states.

The literature review section displays the different variables and sheds light on the reasoning behind the college attainment national challenge.

Literature Review

Introduction

The realization that the US has fallen behind other countries and is no longer the leading force in the world in education attainment and college completion stimulated not only public discourse but academic research as well, which will be addressed in this research paper.

Although some suggest that not everyone should attend college, evidence shows that the benefits of higher education to the individuals and society are substantial. It contributes to a country's economic growth, enhances civic engagement, reduces income inequality, and overall it is critical for a democratic society and for closing demographic gaps (McLendon & Perna, 2014). In the United States, the responsibility for improving college attainment lies primarily with the fifty states. States create policies and determine the public financial resources in post-secondary education, providing oversight and accountability. States also define higher education goals and monitor performance (McLendon & Perna, 2014).

Recognizing that public policy is the main vehicle by which a state can accomplish substantial improvements, the array of articles that were researched for this capstone examined the key influences of public policy on different aspects of higher education attainment: higher education affordability, student academic readiness for college, and the role of college as an opportunity for social mobility.

Several trends that look at these different aspects of college attainment were recognized and will be addressed in this paper.

College Affordability and Enrollment Trends

The first trend that was recognized focuses on a state's enactment of policies designed

to expand access to public institutions by removing financial barriers to college attainment and completion and addresses the fiscal benefits for the state from public investment in increased college attainment.

It is clear that individuals are the primary beneficiaries of their investment in higher education. However, states are cognizant of evidence that shows that the larger society benefits from this investment, notably to an even greater extent. States with a more educated population appropriate less funding to social services and health services, and have higher benefits from increased tax revenue, increased worker productivity, and greater civic engagement (Higher Education Appropriation, 2015). This group of studies tries to identify the fiscal rate on the return to public investment in higher education. Some researchers suggest a high return of 10% on public investment, and a clear causal effect of public funding on college attainment (Tostel, 2010).

Greater college attainment correlates with increased tax revenue from increased income, reduced low-income tax credit, and decreased expenditure on Medicaid, Medicare, public healthcare, unemployment compensation, Worker's Compensation, public assistance, food stamps, housing subsidies, energy assistance, transportation assistance, child care assistance, and school lunches (Tostel, 2010).

Adding to all this, a state's investment in college education is a substantial pay-off to the government. However, despite the high benefits of college attainment on a state's prosperity and financial stability, all of the states' policies that determine college

affordability have been deteriorating, which creates an erosion in college affordability (Delaney, 2014).

In the past 25 years, the states' investment in higher education has decreased by 32%, while enrollment has increased by almost 70% (Delaney, 2014). Despite the states' overall investment in student financial aid, tuition increases lead to lower enrollment, specifically for the low-income and minority populations (Delaney, 2014). Since 2000, net tuition has increased by 48%, while state grants have increased by 10%, which clearly shows that the states' appropriations to secondary education and its aid programs do not keep up with tuition increases (Delaney, 2014). The federal government is another source of funding that supposedly helps students finance their academic endeavors, especially those who come from low-income families.

Federal contribution to college affordability. Research shows that the federal contribution to college affordability, and especially the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (AARA), is effective only if it adds to a state appropriation, which must remain the same as before. However, some states take advantage of this additional appropriation and decrease their allocations for this purpose. This makes affordable college education unattainable for many students (Delaney, 2014). Thus, although both the federal government and the states have a similar desired outcome, in order to increase college attainment in the US, whenever one is increasing funding, the other is decreasing funding. This eventually limits the benefits for the end user who is struggling to afford the college education endeavor.

College tuition and family median income. In the last 30 years, college attendance costs have increased significantly. In the 80's, college attendance cost was

calculated at about 16% of median family income, and in 2011 it went up to 33% (Delaney, 2014). The main reason for this high disparity is the slow growth, in past years, in median-family income compared to the high increase in college attendance cost (Delaney, 2014). Although states play the main role in shaping higher-education affordability, the federal government and the academic institutions also provide substantial funds to higher education (Delaney, 2014). However, federal funds are primarily invested in research and student financial aid, while institutional funds cover its operations, capital, and student financial aid. Thus, it is the investment in higher education that promotes affordability of higher education in each state (Delaney, 2014). Research shows a negative effect of college-increased tuition on students' enrollment decisions, such as the fact that increased tuition leads to lower enrollment with larger effects on enrollment for minority and low-income students. This demonstrates that college costs directly affect the individual likelihood of enrolling in college (Delaney, 2014). States provide need- or non-need-based financial aid, which supposedly is a strong motivator for college enrollment. Nevertheless, although many state expenditures on student aid programs are increasing, they do not keep pace with the increased tuition.

The imbalance between higher-education tuition and the level of financial aid creates less-affordable education and lower college enrollment, specifically for the low-income and minority populations, thus widening the states' social gap and preventing upward mobility. Research shows that individuals coming from low-income families who get a college degree have higher upward mobility than those who do not (Venator & Reeves, 2016), and while academically-educated parents pass on their educational advantages to the next generation, it is the government responsibility to promote higher-

education opportunities among populations that do not have this advantage. This challenge is broadly discussed in the next section.

College Attainment as a Social Mobilizer

The dramatic change in college affordability over the past years, and the worrisome gap between the rapid tuition increase and the level of allocated financial aid to promote college affordability, contribute to the erosion of financial support for need-based aid in the states, which means troubling implications on college attainment, especially among those who most need it: students who come from low-income families, and minorities.

College affordability has an immense societal implication, as it affects the mobility between social classes and creates inequality of opportunities between those who have the means to attain higher education and those who do not have the financial capacity to do so (Sacks, 2009). Colleges who strive for diversity consider this aspect as being achieved through the Affirmative Action Program. However, this program promotes diversity primarily through the lens of race, instead of pursuing justice and fixing societal class exclusion (Sacks, 2009). Research that examines college racial equity shows that 90% of freshman students who enrolled at the most 146 selective colleges and universities in the US came from families in the highest two quartiles of the socioeconomic classes. Only 9% came from families in the bottom two socioeconomic quartiles, which clearly shows that the Affirmative Action Act does not promote racial equality within the selective colleges (Sacks, 2009).

For many years, education served as a powerful foundation for American social mobility. However, the current U.S higher education system no longer supports social

mobility and equality, and instead cements existing social disparities (Serna & Woulfe, 2017). This situation creates a direct correlation between a family's income and college attainment to the point that the family's income is a stronger predictor for college accessibility than a students' educational ability, and "the likelihood that high school graduates will go to college declines as family income drops" (Serna & Woulfe, 2017, p. 1 from: Baum 2001; Perna 2006; Serna & Birnbaum 2014; Serna 2015).

In addition, colleges that are led by prestige and ranking became even more selective and reduced the open-door admission, which made higher education less accessible to disadvantaged students. (Serna & Woulfe, 2017).

This "institutional ignorance" towards class diversity has diminished the representation of people of color, which brings the class division in higher education to an extreme level (Sacks, 2009). In many cases minorities and low-income students have a limited range of colleges they can afford to apply to, even if they have sufficient academic requirements to apply to reputable colleges in the field of their choice, because college choice is linked to family income (Zollinger, 1984). Thus, if financial aid supposedly increases institutional choice, it does not promote equity across racial groups, especially since the fact that in order to increase college opportunities for students and promote equity to minorities, two elements are needed: financial aid and academic achievement (Zollinger, 1984).

Social classes also impact the transfers from community college to four-year college, which often contributes to future class mobility. Research shows that only 21% of the lower-middle class transfer to four-year colleges versus 36% of the upper class and 49% of the top socioeconomic class (Sacks, 2009). This data shows a growing class

divide within the population. It also raises concern for educational and economic experts, who are troubled by future societal and economic implication, which may lead to “a creation of an economically-based oligarchy, resembling a third-world country” (Sacks, 2009, pg. 83).

To summarize this trend, it is clear that college education has a vital role in creating a more educated, progressive, and tolerant society. It is a fundamental right of every citizen, as it empowers the individual to be a productive contributor to society. In order to promote equal opportunities to obtain higher education, research shows that states should integrate a systematic approach aimed at improving college access to the larger society, while strategically promoting college accessibility for low-income and minority high school graduates (Stampen & Hansen,1999). This systematic approach should be integrated within the larger goals of the states’ higher-education attainment and completion, as it must be integrated within the entire educational system's capacity to improve (Stampen & Hansen,1999).

College attainment is also affected by another important element, college readiness, which is found to be an important element to examine regarding college accessibility and will be discussed next.

College Readiness

One of the main obstacles to college attainment is lack of cooperation between secondary and postsecondary school systems, which contributes to poor college readiness among high school graduates. Considering that the US is dropping in international education ranking, it is clear that the K-12 educational system must ensure students are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education (Rippner, 2015). Thus, a

flowing communication between K-12 and higher education is a necessity. The K-12 system must have clear guidance for what students will need to know when they graduate from high school in order to help them understand postsecondary entry requirements (Rippner, 2015).

In order to address this need, the states established the P-20 councils, which are policy mechanisms that foster collaboration between the K-12 educational system and higher education in order to 1) improve the alignment between high school and college curricular standards and assessments, and 2) increase college readiness and success (Rippner, 2015). Research shows that the P-20 council's contribution toward college readiness is limited, and many times does not produce the desired outcomes. This is mainly due to state governance structures, which make it difficult to collaborate with an outside council. However, researchers also suggest that there are ways to alleviate these challenges if the P-20 council is structured properly (Perna, Armijo, 2014).

The disparities in college readiness and accessibility are even more substantial for low-income and minority students in urban high schools (Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, 2009). For many of these students, the basic information on college application processes and financial aid are not accessible. Lacking this basic "college knowledge" information increases the disparity and gaps of college readiness and accessibility to a greater extent (Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, 2009).

Colleges base their acceptance on several indicators, such as achievement test scores, grades, and required level of classes. However, the lack of collaboration between the K-12 educational system and the higher-education system itself creates smokescreens, which limit the information secondary schools must have as clear indicators of college

readiness and performance standards for those indicators. Clear standards will allow schools to assess their students' current levels, help measure their progress, and align college preparedness with college expectations. Once these standards are clear, high schools must be held accountable for their students' success in their ability to enroll in a four-year college. Lack of such clear standards increases the racial and ethnic disparities in college readiness and accessibility (Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, 2009).

Summary

The recognized three trends of this study highlight the challenges of the college educational system that require immediate attention on the state and national levels.

Although it is challenging to calculate the present value of future uncertain returns on investment in intellectual resources (Elmore, 1987), do the enhanced and deliberated review of research that was done for this study indicates that state policymakers recognize the value of current investment in future state sustainability and increased capacity by creating policy instruments to promote college accessibility. However, in order to address the pertained challenges in a most productive manner, a few issues need to be strategically addressed:

1) The structural misalignment within the larger educational system that impedes the flow of information between organizational institutions. The need of each entity to remain autonomous and self-governed prevents interaction and tight collaboration between the pre-K, K-12, and higher-education systems. This lack of inter-institutional collaboration prevents the creation of infrastructure needed to increase college readiness among high school graduates, especially in low-income and minority schools, where the access for the needed information is limited, and -2) Recognizing that public policy and

financial aid appropriations are the main vehicle by which a state can promote higher college attainment, policy makers must strategically conceptualize the funding structure that will generate and promote access to higher education. In addition, states must create a better framework to leverage federal aid funding, in order to promote college accessibility among the low-income students and minorities, and upward social mobility that helps to promote demographic equality and minimize societal gaps.

Research Gap

A thorough literature review exposed several fundamental elements that have to be addressed in order to confront the challenge of declining college attainment in the US, which in turn widens the social gaps within the local society. The notably missing evidence in the described research pertains to the question of whether there is a direct correlation between states' appropriations and higher college attainment. In other words, do states that allocate higher-educational funding per a full-time enrolled student (FTE) see relatively greater college completion rates?

After examining many scholarly articles that indicate the need for increased funds to be channeled toward a local population's college education, this research hypothesis would suggest that there is 1) a direct correlation between FTE appropriations and college completion rates, and 2) higher state appropriations per student lead to higher college completion rates.

Since this information could not be found in the above-mentioned research, the aim of this study will be to attempt to reveal whether there is a causal effect between states' appropriations and college completion, and how the level of appropriation may create plausible advancement in college completion.

Research Aim

The aim of this research is to explore how state policies and funding levels at higher-education public institutions affect the level of college completion and achievement of states' higher-education goals.

Research question: Are there causal relationships between state funds per full-time enrolled college student appropriations and higher-college completion rates?

Research Design

Introduction:

This study is proposed by the researcher in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Public Administration. The purpose of this study will be to explore the causal relationships between a states' post-secondary education objectives, its enacted policy instruments, allocated funding, and the achieved outcomes. For this purpose, the study will utilize the exploratory comparative case-study design, employing a mixed-method approach with an embedded comparative case study. The focus of this study will be to analyze higher-education policy documents and appropriated funds in the states of Wyoming and California. This will take place by collecting quantitative and qualitative data, which then can be integrated to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem (Bookshelf, 2017).

About the design:

This comparative case study will analyze and synthesize in-dept the states of Wyoming and California's enacted policies that intend to increase college attainment and completion. The study will inform the researcher by providing a set of tools that would produce knowledge that allows one to generalize about the causal question – whether there is a correlation between state's policies and funding appropriation and the college completion rate.

This comparative case study will utilize the qualitative method that incorporates quantitative data and state budget analysis, which will promote a better understanding of how contributors may influence the states' higher-education-intended outcomes, and how other states can tailor their interventions accordingly.

Utilizing the experimental research method, the researcher will measure the relationships between the independent variable represented as the states' budget appropriations toward higher education, and the independent variable which is the students' completion rate at state public colleges. In situations where causal relationships between the two variables are detected, the goal of the researcher is to see that the research findings will be transferable, in order to be utilized by similar entities throughout the nation (Blair, 2016).

This study follows the Positivist epistemology, as the researcher will be acquiring the knowledge through sensory experience. The researcher will be reviewing policy documents and state budgets that will provide him with the necessary information to analyze and compare the quantitative and qualitative data. The findings will be based on evidence found through a sensory experience (Blair, 2016).

By adhering to positivism, the researcher will observe the policy and budget documents objectively and will report on findings without involving their biased opinion.

About this study:

Given that the state of Wyoming is the leading state in the nation in support of higher education, it will be a good model to explore the state's enacted policies and measure its contribution to achieve state outcomes for higher education and the state's achievement rate. The state of Wyoming case study will be compared by the researcher to the state of California. California spends 12% of its General Fund on higher education, which is the third-largest General Fund expenditure after K-12 education, health, and

human services (Cook, 2017). However, its expenditure per FTE (full-time enrollment) student is 40% lower than the state of Wyoming's appropriation.

This in-depth cross-state comparative research will help reveal how states' policies shape their higher-education success, and will assist in developing targeted quality strategies and level of allocated state funding to promote states' goals pertaining to college completion rates, which is necessary to maintain state's economic and social progress, and ensure the United States remains globally competitive.

Comparative analysis of policy and funding framework:

The unit of analysis in this study will focus on a thorough exploration of both of these states' enacted policies to promote college attainment in their states, understanding the local trends and underlying strategies of each state, and how these strategies guide the funding channels that are chosen to be implemented.

The comparison will be done by searching the Wyoming and California official websites and identifying relevant documents, which will allow the researcher to execute a document analysis research method, interpret the documents, and code their content by relevant themes (Bookshelf, 2017). In addition, the research will examine each states' annual budget report to define trends in both states' higher-education spending levels. This will provide fertile soil for adequate comparison. The researcher will compare each state's' budget allocation and analyze how the funds for local higher institutions, are being disbursed within the institutions and how it benefits the students and motivates them to complete their college journey in a sufficient time period (Bookshelf, 2017). Drawing on these, the researcher will be able to produce a narrative synthesis, identifying the major themes and areas of policy convergence and divergence. In the future, this

material can be laid out in a larger-scale and contribute to the national policy context (Bookshelf, 2017), and help policymakers to create strategical mechanisms that ensure each state's higher education outcomes are met (Zacarias, 2016).

Findings and research limitations:

In fiscal year 2016 the state of Wyoming had an appropriated budget of **\$17,620** per full-time enrolled student. In the same year, the state of California had appropriated **\$7,122** per full-time enrolled student (Humanities Indicators, 2016). When we look at student performance in these two states, we realize the discrepancy between the two variables. A resource that indicates the rate of college graduation per state shows that in 2013, 24% of all counted students in Wyoming graduated college within four years, and 54% within six years. When we compare this data with the state of California, which appropriated about one-third of the full-time enrolled students, we see that the four-year graduation rate of all counted students was at the same year 33.6% and 64% had graduated within six years (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2013). This basic comparison presumably shows a negative correlation between state appropriation for higher education and the college completion rate, however this data also stresses the underlying limitations of such comparisons.

A closer look at different state parameters that may affect the study hypothesis reveals some extraneous variables that must be taken into an account when comparing the two case studies. Indeed, the state of Wyoming appropriates the highest funds per full-time-enrolled student, however, while the overall number of students in this state is 24,000, the total number of students in the comparison case-study, the state of California, is 1,539,822 (SHEEO, 2015).

Both states view college attainment as a state priority. Between 2010-2015, unlike many other states that reduced their public higher-educational appropriation per FTE, both Wyoming and California increased their appropriations by 15% (SHEEO, 2015). The significant difference in the number of students in each state (which in California is 65% higher) makes it challenging to create an appropriate comparison, which demonstrates one of the research limitations.

Thus, in comparing case studies for a causal relationship, it is important to consider how different the states are, their varying population sizes, the distinct amount of secondary school institutions, and the differences in student-body size. States vary in climate, energy costs, housing costs, population densities, growth rate, resource base, and the mix of industries and enterprise driving the states' local economies (State Higher Education Finance, 2015). States vary in their population tendencies. Some have a relatively homogeneous, well-educated population, while others have a large number of traditionally underserved populations and recent immigrants. Most states have pockets of poverty, but these vary in their extent and concentration (State Higher Education Finance, 2015).

Additionally, state institutions vary in their size and in their internal funding distribution. Some must appropriate higher funds toward their pension programs, some distribute more toward research, and some must utilize state funds to fill shortfalls for general operating expenses (State Higher Education Finance, 2015).

As a result of the above numerous limitations, this research may not be able to confirm the presence of a causal relationship between the two variables, state appropriations to higher education, and college-completion rates. However, this study's

discoveries outweighed the limitations by finding other important elements that can contribute to and increase college-completion rates. By identifying these elements, such as better K-12 and higher-education collaboration, policy makers may be able to create policies that might swing the pendulum, increase higher-education completion, and narrow the demographic gaps. Making top-down incremental structural changes may gradually solve fundamental challenges that would increase college accessibility and narrow the demographic gaps.

Discussion

Ethical consideration as states' moral imperative:

Ethical consideration is an important topic to discuss pertaining to college education accessibility, which is known as a fundamental aspect that contributes to upward social mobility and narrows social gaps. Research shows that college education has a vital role in creating a more educated, progressive, tolerant, and civically engaged society. It empowers the individual to be a productive contributor to society, which allows society to develop and flourish, and as such, should be viewed as a fundamental right of every citizen.

However, states' spending cuts on higher education, in recent years, cause many students, especially those from low-income families, to refrain from college education due to the high cost of becoming educated, affirming college education as privileged. Beside the financial barriers, this vulnerable student population is often lacking the needed support in navigating the complicated enrollment and financial information required to make the best educational and financial decisions for their future (Cocker & Glynn, 2018). Data shows that out of those who make it to college, Black and Latino students have the lowest retention and graduation rates nationally (Zacarias, 2016).

Understanding the crucial and important benefits of higher education for the society, its contribution to country's economic growth, and life quality of its individuals, it is the policy-makers responsibility to prioritize higher education affordability within the local political arena. It is their responsibility to establish social justice and ensure equal opportunities in order to enhance social mobility and social capital, maximize the country's talent, and increase life quality. In order to do so, states need to create a better

system of financing the postsecondary education that makes college education affordable and accessible, and to provide the needed support services, so that the vulnerable population will have adequate knowledge of how to navigate through the educational system. By providing these resources, disadvantaged students will be able to leverage their personal potential, become productive citizens, and use the gain of their academic accomplishments as a springboard to the middle class.

Research Contribution:

Solving higher education challenges requires political leaders, policymakers, and educators to address broad public policy questions. Although this project could not find a clear correlation between states' funding appropriations and college completion rates, it did identify different variables that need to be addressed as policy-makers are trying to understand the broader challenges that impede college attainment within their states. One of these challenges is the need to create a systematic approach to improve college readiness, especially for students who have been traditionally underserved by the educational system, and who have lower access opportunities to higher education. Minorities and low-income students are still underrepresented in college enrollment, completion, and ensuring that more of this population graduates high school ready for college. This is a widespread concern that must be addressed by the policy makers (Iver, Iver & Clark, 2017). Creating a collaborative educational council represented by secondary and post-secondary educators who would create aligned curricular standards and periodical assessment may assist in making the transition from high school to college more practical and feasible, even for minority and low-income students.

It is also important to streamline the college application and financial aid processes, and make sure the basic information on the college application process and financial aid are accessible, especially to minority and historically disadvantaged low-income population. It is essential that lack of knowledge is not a barrier especially for first-generation students who come from uneducated families.

Conclusion

The examination of the literature clearly indicates that college education is not only the “golden ticket” to better an individual’s life, but it is known as a positive contributor to the larger society. It directly correlates with economic growth, stability, and national economic competitiveness. Highly educated populations live fuller and happier lives and help societies to run smoothly (Yehuda, 2016).

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), educated people are more civically engaged in voting, volunteering, and contributing to the world at large by enhancing the nation’s cultural and societal growth. Educated people have a better life quality and are less dependent on social services provided by the states (Yehuda, 2016).

However, the current circumstances in the US prevent many potential students from pursuing the path of college education, as it is now unaffordable to many students who come from low- and mid-income families. In the last thirty years, due to states’ budgetary pressures and limited resources, state funding to local universities has dropped dramatically nationwide, which makes higher education less available to the general public (Yehuda, 2016).

Research shows that economic recovery increases state and local governments’ reinvestment in higher education, decreasing reliance on tuition revenue, as more state resources are available to support higher education (SHEEO, 2015). In recent years, as the economy has gotten stronger, states have begun to increase their appropriations and investment in public higher education, with expectation that the growing economy and decreasing unemployment rates would assist in increasing full-time enrollment.

Understanding the fundamental role of state policies and funding structures in promoting college-education attainment and completion, this research has attempted to examine possible correlation and causal relationships between states' policies and funding appropriations toward higher education, and their effect on college attainment and completion goals.

Due to study limitations, this exploratory comparative case study research could not prove causal relationships between states' funding appropriation and higher college completion rates. However, this study addressed different limitations that impede the increase of high education attainment in the US, beyond direct funding mechanisms, such as college readiness and equity, which must be further explored.

This study revealed several challenges that contribute to low college access opportunities in the US. However, understanding that there is no immediate fix to this systematic, national challenge requires a deep investigation of the root cause for the stagnation and sharp decline in college attainment in the last 30 years within America, in comparison to other countries in the world. Once there is a clear understanding of the main reasoning for the stagnation in college attainment and completion, it will be easier to define the role of public policy in shaping and increasing post-secondary education accessibility opportunities on state and national levels, and how such policies can increase higher-education attainment across various demographic groups (Klein, McLendon & Perna, 2014).

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