

PARADOXES OF THE  
DEMOCRATIZATION OF  
HIGHER EDUCATION

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# PARADOXES OF THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

EDITED BY

**TED I. K. YOUN**

*Department of Sociology, Lynch School of Education,  
Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan  
India – Malaysia – China

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## LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

<i>Karen D. Arnold</i>	Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA
<i>Sarah Elizabeth Beasley</i>	Concord University, Athens, WV, USA
<i>Rebecca D. Blanchard</i>	Tufts University School of Medicine, Springfield, MA, USA
<i>Regina Deil-Amen</i>	University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA
<i>Heather Haeger</i>	California State University, Monterey Bay, CA, USA
<i>Elissa Chin Lu</i>	Clark University, Worcester, MA, USA
<i>Brian D. Reed</i>	Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, USA
<i>Heather T. Rowan-Kenyon</i>	Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA
<i>Elizabeth Storrs</i>	Tufts University, Medford, MA, USA
<i>Amy K. Swan</i>	George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA
<i>Katherine Lynk Wartman</i>	Independent Research Consultant, Longmeadow, MA, USA
<i>Ted I. K. Youn</i>	Department of Sociology, Lynch School of Education, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA



# INTRODUCTION

This volume of *Research in Social Problems and Public Policy* (RSPPP) is a special issue, focusing on a topic where social problems and policy actions come together in a particularly clear and important way. The central issue presented in this volume is how the societal goals of expanding higher educational opportunity are successfully transformed into social actions. Although there have been much progress in achieving the democratization processes in America, societal goals have not been fully realized. Consequences for larger society of such commitment to expand educational opportunity and the failure of achieving equality of outcomes are far reaching. This volume will introduce some of these paradoxical outcomes of societal reform to expand higher educational opportunity. Such paradoxes emerge from the gap between the expectation of reformers put forward by democratic ideals and the discomfoting reality revealed by many critics of mass higher education. These paradoxes raise some serious questions. Has the democratization of higher education generated class equality? The changing structure of economy and technological advancements have influenced the level of credential requirements for labor forces. Then, do increased requirements for credentials lead to unequal outcomes? Has expanded access to education facilitated social mobility for some disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in society in various points in time in history? Achievement gaps among ethnic minorities compared with whites persist as well as gaps in college going rates. An argument following these questions is that the democratization of higher education on the whole has reproduced and reinforced complex pictures of inequality of opportunity. Hence, here are possibilities for paradoxical aftermaths of this social reform.

This introductory essay focuses on two central issues. First, it examines the conditions under which the process of democratization was developed. The next is to understand some of the major social consequences of the growth and expansion of opportunity in higher education. Our examination of consequences may explain the gap between goals of social reform and reality revealed by critics of mass higher education.

## EXPANSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Over the past century, American higher education has undergone an enormous and rapid expansion. Social scientists (Archer, 1979; Ben-David, 1972; Clark, 1983; Kerr, 1978; Trow, 1962, 1979) underscore the expansion of higher education as a broad historical transformation from elite to mass higher education with an ultimate goal of moving toward universal access to higher education. This broad mass education movement could be observed in many advanced industrial societies (Blessinger & Anchan, 2015; OECD, 1974; Ramirez & Boli, 1987). In America, this phenomenal expansion of higher education over the past two centuries has generated profound consequences in the economy and society as well as the character of American higher education. In higher education, as Trow argues, major problem areas such as “student access and selection, the curriculum, governance, finance, staff recruitment, academic standards, institutional autonomy, and academic freedom” (Trow, 1962, p. 232) all have been deeply affected by the historical expansion of higher education and enlarged opportunities for education.

What has contributed to the explosive growth and the expanded educational opportunity over the past century? Social science researchers have offered three possible categories of explanation for the growth and democratization of higher education in America. They are: (1) dynamic changes in demography, particularly an explosive increase in college-going age group over a long historical period, (2) the evolution of public policies supporting the belief that expanded access is a requirement of civil society, and finally, (3) changes in the structure of economy and technology that has altered the demand for credential requirements and greater skills of labor force.

The first two categories of explanation are closely related. They focus on the vast changes in demography and the ways in which public policies are made in response to these increasing demands. In particular, the growth in numbers of college-going population following World War II has generated the ever-increasing demand for education. The unprecedented pattern of growth has led to a large transformation from the elite university system into mass higher education performing a great variety of new functions (Trow & Burrage, 2010). In his celebrated essay, “The Democratization of Higher Education in America (1962),” Trow argues that how the growth in the size of college going population has shown an important influence on the development of new forms of organization in the American system of higher education.

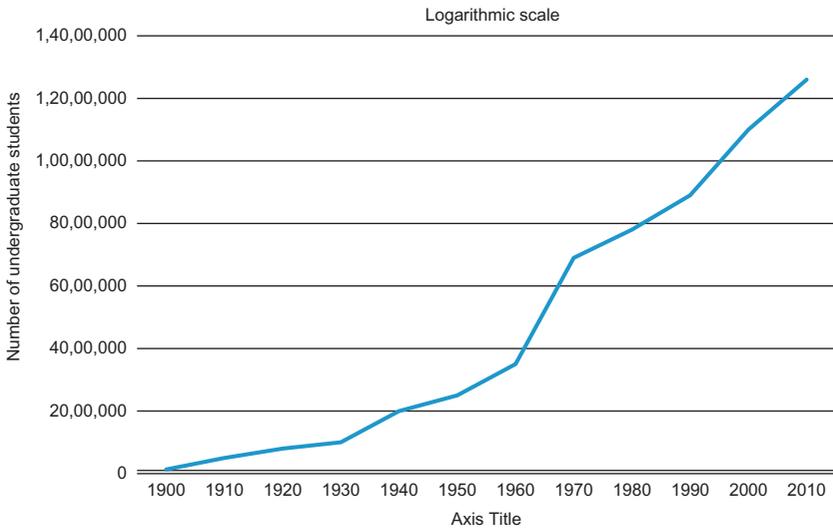


Fig. 1. Aggregate Degree-Credit Undergraduate Enrollment, 1900–2010. Source: Carnegie Council on Higher Education, 1980 and Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2010.

From 1900 to 2000, the number of students enrolled in colleges and universities and earning credits toward degrees rose from 240,000 to over 11,000,000 (Fig. 1). After the mid-1950s, rate of growth in numbers was even more dramatic, increasing at the rate of 14 percent each year until 1970. From 1970 to 2000, undergraduate enrollments more than doubled. By 2010, the size of college enrollment reached over 13.5 million. While the rate of enrollment increases is less dramatic from 1970 to 1990, from 1990 on to 2010 the college going rate among U.S. high school graduates the annual rate of growth began to move up to 24 percent.

The large increase over the extended period was due to the unprecedented increase in the population of college-going age, that is, 18–21 year-olds. From 1900 to 1970, from 11 percent to 44 percent. The rate has been increasing at an average of 4 percent a year.

What has contributed to the expansion of college going population was a sharp increase in the proportion of high school graduates entering college over the past five decades. For example, in 1940, only 25 percent of American adults had completed high school. By 1970, about 50 percent of

the adults were high school graduates. By 1990, the proportion grew to over 70 percent.

In 1945, only 30 percent of high school graduates enrolled in colleges and universities. As shown in Fig. 2, over 80 percent of recent high school graduating cohort had started college within about eight years of graduating from high school. In 2002, the figure went up to 83 percent and it continued to grow.

The second source of explanation for the growth and expanded access to higher education is various public policies directed to reform higher education that have been implemented over the past two centuries. Throughout early periods of the U.S. history, a multiplicity of forces and motives were engaged in the establishment of colleges and universities. Among these were a variety of sectarian motives, the need for various kinds of professionals, and the local effort to enhance the local identity and institution building in support of agricultural and economic development. These forces also defined the role of higher education in society and its relationship with the federal government (Ellis, 2001; Hofstadter & Smith, 1961). Before the Civil War, public policies supporting higher education were not necessarily directed to expanding access to higher educational opportunity, even though some of earlier policies provided limited financial aid to students (Rainsford, 1972).

In the mid-1960s, the goals of public policy have dramatically shifted to the idea of expanding opportunity for college-going age groups and

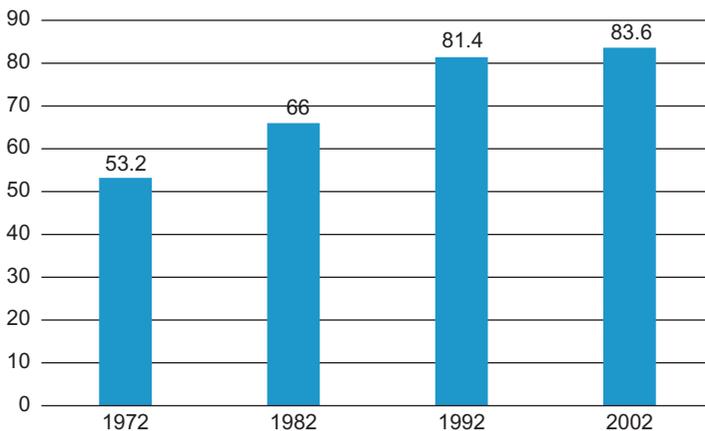


Fig. 2. Percentage of High School Graduates Who Attended College. Sources: National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (2006), National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988(2006).

promoting equality of access to higher education for low-income and disadvantaged students. Looking back in the history of federal role in higher education, the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies (1975) reviews these policy hallmarks that were mainly design to promote the democratization processes of higher education. Here are these major historical developments.

The Carnegie Council report (1975) credits the 1862 Morrill Act as the first landmark federal government policy that provided opportunities for higher education by founding of new land-grant institutions on pure, applied science and practical fields (Sundquist, 1968). It is important to note that the Morrill Act has not only created the opportunity for higher education, but also has increased the diversity in American higher education by supporting the establishment of new forms of institutions. Cornell University in New York, M.I.T. in Massachusetts, Yale's Sheffield Scientific School in Connecticut are notable examples of new forms. In some states, beneficiaries of the act were existing state-supported institutions and in other states the universities were created through a merger of an existing private liberal arts colleges with the land-grant endowment. In the South and West, the land-grant endowment created a number of new A&M institutions such as Texas A&M University and Alabama A&M University. These A&M institutions have played an important role in stimulating economic activities in the region.

Historically, the most dramatic influence of public policy supporting access to higher education was the case of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 – known as the G.I. Bill. It dramatically broadened the college-going opportunity to 8 million returning veterans from World War II. By 1960, over 3.5 million veterans had attended college of their choice (Skocpol, 1997).

Two features of the G.I. Bill are important to note. First, veterans were able to take their tuition subsidies and their stipends anywhere they wished. Second, the G.I. Bill stipulated the idea of separation of financial support from academic influence. In other words, the recipients of the G.I. Bill were not restricted to any subject matters to pursue in their educational careers. These two features later became an important guide for establishing a form of need-based financial aid to students with the freedom of choice of the institution in the Higher Education Act of 1965.

The Higher Education Act of 1965 was the first systematic way of defining the federal role in expanding educational opportunity (Rivlin, 1961; Gladieux, Hauptman, & Knapp, 1997; Gladieux & Wolanin, 1976; Hannah, 1996; Keppel, 1987). It was also a dramatic attempt to change domestic policy of promoting equality that was overshadowed by President Johnson's idea of building "the Great Society." The Higher Education Act

promulgated the principle of equal educational opportunity to those “with exceptional financial need” by utilizing federal financial assistance. If one were able to gain admission to higher educational institution, the lack of money should not prevent anyone from attending. The idea of expanding equal educational opportunity for those who less fortunate is consistent with President Johnson’s larger political goals of solving problems of equal opportunity by building “the Great Society.” The 1965 Act was subsequently amended in 1972, 1980, and 1992. Each amendment of the Act represents distinctive changes in the original policy goals of the Higher Education Act. Each change seems to reflect on unique political and economic realities that were influential over the period.

The 1972 Amendments of the Higher Education Act was an important watershed legislation that recognized higher educational opportunity as a national priority. It created the broad spectrum of federal programs of student aid that carried the form of need-based aid to the general population rather than block grants directly to the institutions that would have been linked to enrollment. The idea behind this policy was consistent with the principles that supported the G. I. Bill. That is, that the federal program of need-based student aid was intended to encourage student choices and allow institutions to be more responsive to student demand ([Carnegie Council on Policy Studies, 1980](#)).

Both the 1986 and 1990 Amendments intended to expand both eligibility and participation in federal student aid program. But unfortunately, in the late 1980s, the growing federal deficit problems has generated a more restriction to the eligibility for federal student aid to groups historically underrepresented in higher education. In that period, college costs in public and private colleges and universities have soared at the rate that outpaced inflation. The students from the middle-income and low-income families were faced with a widening gap between the level of the federal student aid and actual costs for education. In the late 1980s, the average cost of college attendance rose about 45 percent, while the median national disposable income increased only about 15 percent. Issues of affordability for college education became a national political issue. Both Democrats and Republicans in the Congress alike saw the issue of access to higher education as a major political campaign issue in the 1980s and 1990s. Given the size of national deficit, the federal support student aid to support access to higher education for the increasing number of college going students faced more reduction.

As a result of rising college costs and steadily declining federal support for student aid in the late 1980s, student loans now have replaced grants as the dominant form of federal student aid. According to Susan Hannah’s

calculation (Hannah, 1996), in the mid-1970s, about 76 percent of federal student aid was awarded in grants and about 20 percent in loans. By the late 1980s, the picture is completely reversed with 70 percent going to loans and 29 percent to grants. Over time, further legislative actions have extended federal student aid to broader segments of the society by substituting loans for grants for most of middle and low-income students. The shift has generated increased hardship among mid- and low-income families (Stampen & Cabrera, 1988). Increased reliance on loans have accumulated mounting level of consumer loans.

Finally, the third explanation for the causes of the growth and expanded access to higher education comes from the rising requirements for expert knowledge in a highly advanced technological society (Collins, 1978; Ramirez & Boli, 1987). Collins (1978), for example, contends that the dynamics of rising educational requirements for employment in emerging industrial economy have paved a way for educational expansion. The expansion of higher education reflects increased demand from competing educated status groups. The status competition among groups who are engaged in symbolic conflict over scarce cultural and political resources leads to the expansion of educational credentials. The dynamics of rising educational requirements for employment ultimately brought about the rise of credentials and status competition in advanced societies (Collins, 1978). See also Attewell (1987) for more effects of rising credential requirements for employment.

Sociological studies of the development of mass education among advanced countries (Inkeles & Sirowy, 1983; Ramirez & Boli, 1987) point out that nation states have sought more legitimate objectives of mass schooling by adopting the comprehensive school model of universal education (Ramirez & Boli, 1987). These examples represent the processes that lead to a spread of greater institutionalization of formal schooling where formal standards of admissions and selections and curricular requirements are introduced. The extensive involvements of nation states with mass schooling have led to more systematic approaches to access to higher education.

## **EFFECTS OF THE EXPANSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

For most of the Western world including the United States, Trow argues, “the watershed between the old university and the new was 1968” (1979, p. 183). The point is that 1968 may be the beginning of a large

transformation from elite to mass model with the anticipation of achieving universal access to higher education. Historians in higher education characterize the decade of 1960 as the period of democratic transformation of higher education in most industrialized countries (Duryea, 1973; Geiger, 1979; Kerr, 1978).

The important question remains. What are the long-term effects of this enormous and rapidly expanding system of higher education on society and institutions? Any major social reform such as this large transformation of higher education will often generate consequences of post-reform disappointment and possibly lead to more unanticipated results that are often contrary to the goal of reform and paradoxical to the basic ideas of reform.

I will discuss some of these effects of the expansion of higher education in America.

First, the large increases in student enrollments have left differential impacts among different types of institutions. The development of mass higher education with the disproportionately large growth of enrollments among non-elite sector institutions has generated a different set of standards and purposes among different types of institutions. For example, at the one end of spectrum of academic institutions, community colleges and public comprehensive colleges and universities have become more responsive to the increased demand for education. The students entering into community colleges and public comprehensive colleges and universities are exposed to different forms of education and oriented toward different educational goals. At the other end of the academic spectrum, traditional liberal arts colleges that have not increased their enrollment size in response to the increased demand for growth have maintained different standards and different form of education. The democratization of higher education has generated broad trends of differentiation with an increased diversity of forms and functions among institutions (Trow, 1962). In a period of dynamic expansion, more and more priorities of higher education were determined less by the institution itself than multiple constituencies in organizational environment, each demanding its interest and its vision of responsive institution. In responding to the increased demands from multiple constituencies and interests, some periphery alternative institutions began to face strong isomorphic pressures to conform to standard model in order to gain their legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott & Meyer, 1991). In search of legitimacy, these institutions have become increasingly dependent on niche seeking strategies by avoiding standard schooling template and attempt specializing key programs. The spread of this niche seeking behavior with specialization among institutions transformed higher

education into an intensely competitive environment (Kirp, 2003) and ultimately generated inequality among institutions. Diversity in higher educational organizations leads to market like competition.

Second, the development of mass higher education and large expansion of the system have generated the growth of highly educated population. The investment of education has ultimately contributed the growth of national economy and the availability of higher levels of human capital, as human capital theory experts have persuasively argued (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961).

As the economy moved from manufacturing to technologically driven form, more highly skilled professionals were in demand. The labor market demands has stimulated the expansion of higher education. At the same time, as educational requirements of jobs in technologically driven society rose, educational credentials became a key source of stratification (Collins, 1978). Credential requirements in workplaces bring about status group competition for access to better-paying jobs. The expansion of higher education and the increased access to education ultimately have led struggles over power among status groups. Educational requirements and higher level of educational credentials offered by individuals competing for position have in turn increased the demand for education by the populace. The democratization of higher education brings out the insight of how culture and social class correlate. Culture and social class are not relationally related. Social inequality is rooted in objective structures of unequal distributions of type of capital.

Third, as some critics have argued, expanded access to college has generated ironies of the outcomes. One of the commonly known criticisms (Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Trow, 1962) is the question of whether “more” necessarily means “worse.” That is whether the growth of enrollments has generated poor quality of education, debased intellectual standards or less able body of educated professionals. While it is difficult to assemble reliable sources of data to examine the precise effects of the quantity on the declining quality of education, the heterogeneity and decentralization of American higher education make up the impact of expansion on the quality of education.

The study by Attewell and Lavin (2007) reviews a number of leading criticisms made by critics of mass higher education. Attewell and Lavin (2007) examine issues of the declining value of college degree, as student enrollments increased. They also look at whether students with poor academic preparations might show low graduation or low completing rates. Finally, they also examine that empirically the post-college earning of those who are academically weak. For these with weak academic performance

they examine empirically whether graduation rates have decreased in recent years.

Attewell and Lavin (2007), Sadovnik (2011, p. 333) argue that criticisms made about the effects of mass higher education are “factually flimsy” and empirically not defensible.

Others argue that mass higher education, however, presents serious problems of generating a form of dead end trap for academically disadvantaged students by placing them in two year degree programs at community colleges. Often their aspirations are lowered and they are subject to “cooling out” (Clark, 1960) processes.

James Rosenbaum’s study (1998) demonstrates that expanded access to college often undermines the motivation toward work among academically weak and disadvantaged secondary school students. The study shows that many low achieving students are falsely encouraged to think that they can attain college degree in spite of low achievement and they put little or no effort in high school. The idea of college for all ultimately “leads to a lack of effort,” Rosenbaum concludes.

The important question is whether the expanded access to higher education generated equality of opportunity. The social goal of expanding access to higher education has revealed many complex paradoxes, despite many recent progresses toward enlarging access to higher education. Access alone does not necessarily guarantee in achieving social equality. The expansion of higher education on the whole has reproduced and reinforced class inequality and status group competition with persistent achievement gaps among racial groups. More and more class-based inequalities in college attendance and educational attainment show a very powerful influence on outcomes of education.

This volume will contribute more explanations for these paradoxes by presenting some useful examples shown in these essays.

The essay by Lu focuses on the rising level of student loans among middle and low income families. The politics of fiscal crisis and the between the level cost of education have changed the eligibility for federal student aid. The students from the middle and low income families were faced with the widening gap between the level of the federal student aid and actual costs of education. As a result of rising college costs and steadily declining federal student aid, student loans have replaced grants as the major source of aid. The essay concludes that how social class background and cultural capital are important explanation for the behavior of the borrowers and their college experiences. It is also an example of unintended effect of the expanded access to higher education and how

the goal of student aid policy change has generated the rise of student debt.

The essay by Haeger and Deil-Amen demonstrates the experience of low income students in STEM program and how academic difficulty in the first year helps lower the aspiration level. The cooling-out process is explained by the interaction between the social class and students' performance in introductory courses in math and science. The expanded access to public higher education leaves unintended outcomes, as the cooling-out mechanisms change the behavior of students in the STEM program.

How do low-income students persist from the first to second year of college? The reports by Rowan-Kenyon, Blanchard, Reed, and Swan show that academic preparation and ability level do matter in predicting persistence, but for low-income students, cultural and peer resources, educational expectations, parents expectations, and interaction with campus resources such as faculty interaction all help the level of persistence.

How do cultural backgrounds affect educational aspirations of poor rural children? Beasley's cultural analysis of rural first generation students shows that families and class culture unmistakably influence college-going decisions and behaviors. Person's cultural legacies are powerful in explaining one's life choices. These legacies are complex mixture of attachment to family, communities, and peer relationship that explain college-going behaviors of rural, first generation students. To these rural first generation college-going students, there is a deep sense of relationship with these legacies. They also determine the choice making with respect to type of college and whether to stay with their community or leave with respect to educational choices.

Researchers track low-income student population over their educational pathways by conducting longitudinal analyses. The essay by Arnold and Wartman noticed that students and teachers inconsistently reported the information about college aspirations and enrollment intentions in the final semester of high school. There was evidence that secondary school educators inflated the notion of aspirations. This may naturally distort the understanding of multiple pathways to education and work for low-income students. Social reforms to democratize higher education may have encouraged the possibility for inflating aspiration level of students who are not quite ready for college education.

The rapid growth and the democratization of higher education lead to differential impact among different types of institution. They also increase the number of new forms of organizations in American system of higher education. This creates a legitimacy paradox within the system. Storrs'

essay examines the development of non-traditional institution that intends to serve non-traditional populations. The growth of college-going population has created a need for different type of institutions, but the quest for legitimacy drives isomorphic change and fuels mission creep. Faced with new environmental pressures, such as consumer demands for professional training, these new organizations are engaged in strategic isomorphism.

Ted I. K. Youn  
*Editor*

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