

The Fifth Freedom: Access to Postsecondary Education in America Today

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This issue of *American Academic* investigates the current state of access to postsecondary education in America. The importance of this investigation is evident from a fact that was documented with abundant evidence in last year's issue: the benefits of postsecondary education are tangible not only for those who graduate from college but also for the communities in which these college graduates live. In addition to reaping the private benefit of increased personal income, college graduates are less dependent on public assistance and more active in civic activities than their counterparts who did not earn a college degree.¹ Because the benefits of postsecondary education are public as well as private, the nation has a stake in making postsecondary education widely accessible. Nearly four decades ago Lyndon Johnson underscored the importance of public efforts to promote what he called "the fifth freedom"—that is, freedom from ignorance. In a special message to Congress, President Johnson declared this fifth freedom equal in importance to the four freedoms that Franklin Roosevelt had proclaimed to an earlier generation as essential values for which America stands: freedom of worship, freedom of speech, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. To secure freedom from ignorance, said Johnson, requires that every person be able to develop his or her talents "to their full potential, unhampered by arbitrary boundaries of race or birth or income."²

As the contributors to this issue of *American Academic* consider the nation's progress in making postsecondary education accessible, they show that the boundaries have been redrawn but not removed. Although postsecondary education is more accessible to a larger percentage of the population now than at any other time in the nation's history, the same factors that Lyndon Johnson identified—race, birth, income—still play too large a role in determining who is

able to attend college, which college a person is able to attend, and whether a person is able to remain in college until graduation. To explain why the benefits of increased educational opportunity have not extended equally to all segments of American society, the authors identify obstacles—some longstanding and others new—that prevent some qualified students from earning a college degree or limit their access to particular types of institutions. The authors also propose practical strategies for removing or reducing many of the obstacles.

In a study of the obstacles to investing in human capital, Daniel Georgianna and Robert T. Jones examine how the private benefits of education are used to justify cuts in public funding. Because a college degree produces lifelong economic benefits for its holder, some policymakers argue that students and their parents should assume more of the cost of obtaining the degree. State legislators find this reasoning particularly compelling during periods of economic decline, when they are faced with difficult decisions about how to allocate insufficient tax revenues. When legislators reduce allocations for postsecondary education, public colleges raise tuition and fees to cover the shortfall. Georgianna and Jones examine how this pattern of spending cuts and tuition increases has intensified the class structure of postsecondary education by pricing many four-year institutions out of the reach of low-income families. The authors also note an essential flaw in the belief that funding for postsecondary education is an investment in private rather than public good: those who hold this belief ignore the substantial public benefits that accrue from making postsecondary education more accessible. Georgianna and Jones conclude that “a nation cannot prosper in the modern world economically, politically, or socially if most of its children from lower income groups are denied access to the full range of higher education institutions or saddled with debt from exercising their choice.”

The next two articles focus on first-generation college students, a population that merits much more attention from policymakers seeking to expand access to postsecondary education. In the first of these articles, Jennifer Engle identifies the demographic and educational characteristics of students whose parents did not attend college. Although this population includes disproportionately large numbers of students from low-income families and other groups with lower than average levels of college enrollment and completion, Engle cites research

showing that “first-generation status is itself a risk factor,” one that correlates with low rates of postsecondary education even after researchers control for other factors. Engle identifies an array of social and economic obstacles that first-generation students must overcome, and she also identifies programs—including TRIO and GEAR UP—that have succeeded in improving retention and graduation rates for first-generation college students. In the second article on first-generation students, Kevin M. Kniffin considers how a cycle of underrepresentation can be broken by increasing the number of first-generation students who earn graduate degrees and accept faculty and staff positions, enabling them to “contribute to the success of accessibility initiatives for successive generations of students.” Noting that first-generation students are underrepresented at every stage of postsecondary education—from undergraduate admissions to enrollment in graduate programs to hiring and tenure in faculty positions—Kniffin supplements the quantitative data by providing qualitative accounts of the experiences that hinder these students. He then reviews policies that have been proposed to facilitate better representation of first-generation students in the full array of campus roles.

No population in America faces greater obstacles to postsecondary education than undocumented students—the 1.6 million children who possess neither American citizenship nor legal immigrant status. The magnitude of the obstacles becomes clear as Jennifer L. Frum examines regulations that limit the ability of these students to attend public postsecondary institutions, qualify for in-state tuition, and obtain employment commensurate with their level of education. Citing the precedent established by the Supreme Court in 1982, when it ruled in the *Plyler v. Doe* case that denying K-12 education to undocumented children amounted to creating “a lifetime of hardship” for a permanent underclass, Frum notes that a quarter century after *Plyler v. Doe*, a college degree has become a requisite for social mobility. She also considers data concerning the economic and non-economic costs and benefits of measures to improve postsecondary educational opportunities for undocumented students. Noting that the United States faces a deficit of twelve million college-educated workers by 2020, Frum proposes strategies for removing the barriers that prevent undocumented students from earning college degrees and filling essential positions in the American workforce.

As racial barriers have fallen in American education, the percentage of African American students enrolling in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) also has fallen. Nevertheless, as Brian E. Harper makes clear in his article, HBCUs continue to play a crucial role in providing educational opportunities for African Americans. Harper sketches the evolving role of these institutions, and he notes that public support for HBCUs has diminished as the majority of African American students migrate to predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The declining enrollments and loss of tuition dollars also have made public HBCUs more dependent upon state funding—a particularly unfortunate development given that states fund HBCUs at much lower levels than predominantly White institutions. Harper acknowledges that HBCUs are under-funded and under attack from critics who question the academic rigor of these institutions; however, he also offers compelling evidence that HBCUs provide “an affordable and supportive academic and social environment for a wide range of students.” In fact, HBCUs continue to outperform PWIs in their undergraduate graduation rates for African Americans, and these HBCU graduates are more likely than their counterparts from PWIs to engage in community service and to be very satisfied with the jobs they obtain. The numbers suggest that historically Black colleges and universities merit much more support—both public and private—than they currently receive.

Although the cost of postsecondary education is a formidable obstacle for many families, the obstacle seems less daunting to students and parents who have accurate and timely information about financial aid and the process of applying for it. However, as Maria Estela Zarate and David Fabienke show in their article, many Latino families receive this information too late if they receive it at all. Reporting the results of a large-scale survey of Latino students and parents, Zarate and Fabienke note that most of their respondents were not knowledgeable about financial aid but expected that teachers and counselors would provide the information they needed. Of the respondents who were enrolled in college, 59 percent reported that they actually did receive information about financial aid when they were enrolled in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Of the respondents who were eligible for college but were not enrolled, only 41 percent reported receiving information about financial aid during their K-12 years. Zarate and Fabienke’s findings suggest that information about attending college is not

as available to Latino families as it should be, a problem that could be remedied by incorporating information about college in the curriculum for all students in middle school and high school.

When students apply for college admission and financial aid, they quickly discover that the Internet now plays an essential role in both of these application processes. As Kristan M. Venegas shows in the article that concludes this issue of *American Academic*, the shift to online applications is advantageous for affluent students but creates problems for low-income students whose schools and homes have been bypassed by the information superhighway. Although more than 90 percent of schools now have Internet-connected computers that students can use, Venegas's research reveals gross disparities in the access that students have to these computers, in the quality and maintenance of the technology that is available, and in the competence of the counselors who teach students how to use the Internet when applying for college. Venegas also notes that the low-income students who have the least access to the Internet at school are the same students who are least likely to have Internet connections at home: Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans. Venegas acknowledges that technological advances cannot be put on hold until everyone is able to benefit from them; however, she argues that it is essential to close the digital divide by giving disadvantaged students more access to the Internet and more training in how to use web-based financial aid sites. It also is essential to provide more technological training for college counselors who work in public schools and to free these counselors from other duties so that they can devote all of their work hours to assisting students. High schools that serve disadvantaged students will need additional resources to implement these measures, but colleges and universities should assume more responsibility for providing the necessary access and training.

Viewed collectively, the articles in this issue document a record of considerable progress in making postsecondary education more accessible but less progress in making it equally accessible to all qualified students. Two aspects of these articles are particularly striking: not only do the articles show how "the arbitrary barrier of income" remains in place four decades after Lyndon Johnson committed the nation to dismantling it, they also show how the failure to remove the

income barrier thwarts the nation's progress in removing other arbitrary barriers. Because the low-income population in America includes disproportionately large numbers of students from other populations whose access to postsecondary education is limited, the income barrier is itself a racial barrier, an ethnic barrier, a class barrier and a barrier of birth. So the arbitrary barrier of race still exists for African Americans and Native Americans, whose enrollment and graduation rates lag behind the overall rates for the population.³ The arbitrary barrier of ethnicity still exists for Latino students, whose desire for postsecondary education far exceeds the rate at which they attain it. The arbitrary barrier of class still exists for first-generation students, for whom academe may seem an alien culture. And the arbitrary barrier of birth still exists for undocumented students, many of whom graduate from America's high schools only to discover that their access to further education is barred.

Behind these barriers, buttressing them, are financial policies that raise doubts about the nation's commitment to making postsecondary education accessible to all who can benefit from it. Today, the nation is failing at a task that Lyndon Johnson declared vital: the task of "effectively blend[ing] support to students with support for institutions."⁴ In the new millennium, state-level allocations for postsecondary education have not kept pace with the growth in the population of prospective college students, creating a funding gap that has led public colleges to increase tuition and fees at an unprecedented rate.⁵ Inadequate allocations have hindered efforts to develop or expand necessary programs for at-risk students. At the same time, federal funding for need-based financial aid has not kept pace with the record increases in the cost of attending a four-year college, making postsecondary education less attainable for America's neediest students.⁶ Also, loans have replaced grants as the most common type of financial aid available for postsecondary education, a shift that has increased the debt burden for students from every stratum of American society. And policies concerning eligibility for in-state tuition and federal aid have not kept pace with the shifting demographics of the population, hindering the nation's effort to meet the growing demand for college-educated workers.

Taken together, these developments suggest that America must reaffirm its commitment to postsecondary education. It is essential for the nation to develop a

comprehensive plan of action and commit the resources that will make equal opportunity a reality instead of a goal. To do anything less is to deny a truth that Johnson voiced when he declared the “fifth freedom” a national priority: an investment in postsecondary education for all qualified students is an investment made not just for the individual’s sake but for the sake of the entire nation.

ENDNOTES

¹ Sarah Krichels Goan and Alisa F. Cunningham, “The Investment Payoff: A 50-State Analysis of the Public and Private Benefits of Higher Education,” *American Academic* 2 (2006): 23-24.

² Lyndon Johnson, “The Fifth Freedom,” Special Message to Congress, February 5, 1968, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29182>.

³ National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics: 2005, <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d05/>.

⁴ Johnson, “The Fifth Freedom.”

⁵ College Board, *Trends in College Pricing 2006*, http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/press/cost06/trends_college_pricing_06.pdf.

⁶ College Board, *Trends in Student Aid 2006*, http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/press/cost06/trends_aid_06.pdf.

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