

FRAGE International Insights

Growing Concerns About Higher Education ‘Access Gap’ in the U.S.

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Proponents of widening participation in the UK will not gain much encouragement from recent higher education trends across the Atlantic. In the United States, a confluence of economic forces, government policies and institutional practices has led to growing concern that market mechanisms may have reached their limits when it comes to broadening access to higher education.

For some years now, tuition fees have outstripped the rate of inflation. This year’s average increases – 8% in the public sector and 6% in the private – actually represent a moderation of recent pricing trends, though the pressure on the lower cost public colleges and

universities has been particularly acute due to state budget shortfalls.

The impact of this on students and families has been compounded over time by a shift in federal and state financial assistance policies which are placing greater emphasis on loans. While grant aid grew by 6% last year in inflation-adjusted dollars, the volume of government subsidized (reduced interest) education loans grew by 13%. More worrying still, borrowing from higher interest private loans grew by 43%.

In addition, lower income students are being increasingly squeezed by institutional recruitment practices and broader market

positioning strategies designed to enhance reputation and prestige. Ironically, this may even be compounded by institutional retention practices especially when they are driven by external rankings or accountability agendas. Colleges know very well that one of the most strategic ways to improve graduation rates, and by extension market position, is to simply ratchet up the academic and social profile of the entering class.

The result is that over the past three decades the U.S. has made little progress in narrowing the higher education access gap between the richest and poorest students. At the same time, there is a growing body of evidence that economic inequality has widened steadily since the 1970s and is now substantially wider than any other affluent nation.

How this plays out politically following the presidential election remains to be seen. While the present government is unlikely to embrace redistributive social and economic policies, it has to be said that the above trends span both Democratic and Republican administrations. What does seem all but inevitable for the foreseeable future is a higher education system unable or even disinterested in resolving its appetite for prestige on the one hand with growing public interest concerns about student access and equity on the other.

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