



An American Perspective

Where is the 'Invisible Hand'?

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What happens in the U.S. when colleges and universities confront a public issue, in this case access to higher education, which is beyond their institutional capacity to solve? There are two answers as far as I can see: (a) quite a lot, and (b) not much.

In Chicago, we know that while the vast majority of students in the city's public (that is, publicly supported) school system aspire to a college degree, most of them do not get very far towards attaining it. The main reasons for this have to do with poor academic preparation, lack of adequate college guidance in the schools, and tuition levels that at least appear to put many colleges beyond their financial reach.

But now we learn from the Consortium on Chicago School Research that even those who are well qualified for college are not necessarily translating their aspirations into reality.* Some get bogged down in the search for the right college while others end up attending institutions far below their academic reach, such as 'two-year' community colleges. Some are simply not attending college at all.

The focus of the Consortium's report is on the schools. But how will colleges respond? After all, there has been a good deal of soul-searching within the American higher education sector in recent years about the extent to which it is no longer so much the agent of opportunity as that of social and economic inequality. This is not how it is supposed to be, but a number of forces and factors have coincided to limit the power of institutions to effectively address public issues such as access.

In the United States, the basic social contract, at least since the Second World War, says that if you want to go to college and do what you need to do in school to prepare

for it, then there will be a place for you. Leaving aside one or two escape clauses that have been inserted in recent decades, it is a contract that remains substantially in force. The great marketplace of American higher education is, after all, unparalleled by its size and diversity. The sheer number and range of institutions should, in theory at least, provide more than enough supply for the demand. But in fact, the American higher education system is highly stratified with low-income students clustered in two-year and relatively open-access baccalaureate institutions. And while students 'swirl' through and between colleges, they do so in fairly circumscribed ways. From community college to 'Ivy League' is about as much a myth as from log cabin to White House.

After all, as the argument increasingly goes, education is a 'positional good' and therefore a matter for individual or family (rather than public) investment. And colleges also see themselves very much in positional terms. Ever mindful of the rankings, they have embarked on an 'admissions arms race' for the students most likely to enhance either institutional profile or financial bottom line, and preferably both.

No one invokes Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' as the means by which this pursuit of institutional interest serves the public good, though perhaps they should. Certainly, the government's hand has not been particularly visible of late. You might even say that it has been essentially withdrawn as the focus shifted to elementary and secondary education and as budgets, or rather the lack of them, became the primary drivers of higher education policy. In fact, the pressure on state budgets has contributed to a rather peculiar paradox in American higher education. With declining state support, the major public research universities have found themselves raising tuition fairly

aggressively and in general behaving more like their private not for profit counterparts. Indeed, 'flagship' public universities trying to maintain their market position in terms of students, faculty and research funding in an era of declining state support, have found it particularly hard to maintain much of an access agenda. The average family income for students attending DePaul, a private university, is actually less than that at the 'flagship' public university in Illinois.

There is simply not much of an incentive for universities to pay attention to access. However, some institutions – and DePaul is one – have long seen themselves as agents of educational opportunity, and remain committed to it today. So, to return to the Consortium's report, we will be in the forefront of any efforts to ensure that qualified Chicago Public School students are able to translate their educational aspirations into reality. And there are other colleges in the Chicago area, both public and private, that will respond in similar fashion. In fact, there is a good deal of effort and activity underway already. But it is mostly institution-specific, for there is no mechanism, such as Aimhigher, to promote inter-institutional coordination and collaboration. This means that the sum of such college-level efforts and commitments is unlikely to rise to the level of a systematic response. For that to happen we will need a bit of a hand.

* The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago conducts research to inform and assess practice in the Chicago Public Schools. The Consortium seeks to expand communication among researchers, policy makers and practitioners on questions of school reform in Chicago. Its latest report on the postsecondary transition of Chicago Public Schools students is called 'From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College' and is accessible at:

http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub_id=122