

10-20-2011

Our Universities: Funding Merit

Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc

Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our Universities: Funding Merit" (2011). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 122.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/122

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Architecture at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Higher Education Policy Commentary by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

Our Universities: Funding Merit

There is a shameful trend in higher education and other quarters of society that treats success as something to be considered with suspicion. Some accuse The Occupy Wall Street crowd of holding this position, but achievement and greed are not synonymous. To thrive as a nation, we must invest where it pays off. This same rule holds true in the development of resources and industries, or in the development of people.

Excellence is not attained by holding back the very institutions that deliver it. It is attained through the relentless pursuit of making that which is already brilliant even better.

Jonathan Roberts The Pursuit of Excellence: Why 'elite' isn't a Dirty Word

As the costs of education increase (they have) and state funding decreases (it has) and the expectation that it is the right of everyone to obtain a college degree climbs ever higher (it does) and faculty and staff compensation flattens out and in some cases decreases, (it has) difficult decisions must be made about where limited resources go, but unfortunately, tough calls are avoided (they are).

Merit-based aid for students is increasing and that worries some. They argue that it is anti-egalitarian...greedy. But if universities are to provide us with the continued ability to achieve excellence as a nation, potential must be our highest priority in marshalling our scarce resources.

According to a study by the *National Center for Education Statistics*, in 1995, 32% of college students received need-based financial aid while 6% received merit-based financial aid. By 2007 37% of the students received need-based aid and 14% received merit-based aid.

Excellence may be measured differently in each setting, but students, faculty and staff who attain it should be rewarded. This is what merit means. When a resource is scarce the importance of using it wisely increases. Students must realize that the funds that they are not required to pay back until after graduation, must be paid for before matriculation through the efforts they make to prepare themselves for the opportunity a university education represents.

Academically qualified students should have access to both need and merit based financial aid. Students who are at community colleges because they have not proven academic competence should only have access to need-based financial aid. There they can prove themselves and gain access to further need-based, and, potentially, merit-based aid, at senior institutions.

A harsher paradigm? Perhaps. But consider the hardship visited upon well-prepared students that comes from slicing the aid pie into ever-smaller pieces in order to accommodate those who lack either the willingness or ability to perform. Who benefits if we finance those who are most likely to leave the university without graduating, having no greater prospects than when they entered?

Is the university served by admitting students on financial aid that likely will not complete their studies? For a season it may increase enrollment and provide additional tuition and fees revenues, but it is a fool's errand to pursue short-term gain at the expense of an institution's reputation?

Are faculty and staff served with financial aid that acts as a tool of wealth redistribution, rather than an engine to further the educational mission of the university? Sadly, the hardship imposed on students who likely will flunk out, and on the ones who will struggle to succeed in a program that is underfunded benefits no one.

Are students served by encouraging them to divert their life onto a path they can't ultimately follow? This just dashes hopes, creates resentment, increases debt, and induces institutions to tune their mission away from the public interest.

An integrated approach to postsecondary education must prevail. An economic, no-frills, teaching-focused, community college education should be available affordably, for those who want the option, or need a second chance to prove themselves. But access to merit aid should be tied to rigorous academic expectations for students. Merit-based aid is a national investment. Need based aid is a helping hand.

A competitive model should allow everyone a chance to show their mettle, and finance good bets rather than false hopes. Universities are finding this out as they have spread themselves thinly to appeal to people who want to give everyone a chance regardless of whether they have earned it. Providing taxpayer backed support to enterprises that have little promise of success is political squandering of scarce resources.

Think Solyndra.

I would ask again...who is served? Not our universities or our nation.