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Hand, they do appear in agreement on a number of issues, including the importance of further experimentation before launching into full-fledged, often politically motivated programs that make no provision for evaluation and the need to increase students’ own accountability for their performance. More importantly than the consensus or disagreement among the participants is the richness of the debate and the clarification of the differences in the assumptions underlying these conclusions. The volume does a good job on this front.

Overall, this book is a valuable contribution to a debate that has finally caught the attention of the general public and the political process. Every state in the union is undergoing changes to their educational systems in order to improve accountability. Unfortunately, this process is often driven by political expediency without provision for adequate appraisal and follow-up. The decentralized nature of the U.S. school system provides an opportunity for extensive experimentation on a smaller scale prior to the implementation of grander programs. Educators and, in particular, politicians would be well advised to heed the advice coming from this collection of papers.

Ronald Ferguson and Helen Ladd looked at data from Alabama to argue that smaller class sizes and teacher quality improved test scores suggesting that increasing the money used to educate students in the lowest spending districts would improve educational attainment there.

W. Steven Barnett provides an empirical assessment of some specific educational programs aimed at improving educational attainment of disadvantaged students in urban school districts. The programs all require a redistribution of resources to attain the objective. Barnett provides an evaluation of the effectiveness of each program.

William Duncombe, John Ruggiero and John Yinger use data from New York State to highlight a method for a more accurate accountability of the distribution of resources across school districts by controlling for the types of students enrolled in the school districts and the resources dedicated to teaching them. One result of the study is a clearer measure of the large differences in per-pupil funding (by type of student) across the state.

One strength of the conference volume is the introductory chapter by Helen Ladd, which provides an extensive summary of each of the papers and an acknowledgment of the various opinions expressed by the conference participants. An additional strength is the inclusion of extensive critical comments by conference participants. Eric Hanushek and Robert Meyer provide separate comments on the three papers on performance-based incentive programs, Thomas Kane on the two chapters on school choice, Jane Hannaway on Lankford and Wyckoff’s paper and William Clune and Richard Murnane on the three chapters dealing with measurements of cost. These commentaries are insightful and highlight the nature of the debate among the participants while also addressing the strengths and weaknesses of the methodologies used in the empirical analyses.

There are clear differences among the participants concerning such issues as the role of merit pay for teachers, the likely effect of lowering class size, the need for channeling more money into the public school system, and the prospects for greater school choice. On the other hand, they do appear in agreement on a number of issues, including the importance of further experimentation before launching into full-fledged, often politically motivated programs that make no provision for evaluation and the need to increase students’ own accountability for their performance. More importantly than the consensus or disagreement among the participants is the richness of the debate and the clarification of the differences in the assumptions underlying these conclusions. The volume does a good job on this front.

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Going to college: How social, economic and educational factors influence the decisions students make


This book offers useful insights about students’ post-secondary decision-making processes by focusing on the social, economic, and educational factors that influence high school students as they consider whether and where they will attend college. The authors present empirical data about the high school years to help assess the relative importance of such factors as academic ability, level of parental income and education, access to college information, and the influence of parents, counselors, teachers, and peers. The authors study the changing effects of these factors as students move through the three stages of the college choice process: predisposition, search, and choice. Information on college costs and student financial aid policies, for example, is shown to become important for students only when they are making the final choice of a college, while the same information is important to their parents at a much earlier stage.

Data for this longitudinal study is taken from surveys...
and interviews of Indiana students (primarily in high school) and their parents. One set of data is the results of a survey, begun in 1986-87, that was responded to by almost two-thirds of nearly five thousand ninth-grade students enrolled in twenty-one high schools of varying ethnic, socioeconomic, and community characteristics. In subsequent surveys, the response rate was lower. Another set of data relates to a subsample of 56 students who, with their parents, were interviewed nine times between 1989 and 1994. The study also compares the postsecondary plans of a subset of students with what they actually did after graduating from high school. Multivariate statistical techniques were used to analyze the survey data. The data collection process was undoubtedly onerous, even though all the persons from whom data were solicited lived in the same state.

The authors give detailed descriptions of the decision-making processes of eight students as they pass through the three stages of the choice process. These rather lengthy stories are used to provide background for a discussion of the statistical results and, as the authors state, to “provide the context around which most of this study was based.” They are interesting, helpful in many ways, and highlight the volatility of teenagers’ decision-making processes.

The stories make it clear that the students in the population studied differ in grade point averages, college aspirations, and postsecondary plans. By the end of his senior year, an A student who was college-bound in ninth grade had settled on a small liberal arts college in Florida, partly because of the scholarship offered. Two students with C averages were enrolling in Indiana’s only public two-year college. One student was still uncertain about her college choice. Another student planned to find “a good job locally,” after being rejected by the military for physical reasons. One student had dropped out of high school, and the other two remained unfocused in their postsecondary objectives. Regardless of the differences (and combined with the statistical results) it is evident that the support and encouragement of parents is a strong, propelling force, especially during the early years of high school, for those students who choose college.

Researchers interested in studying strategies for increasing the overall enrollment of college students might want to pay particular attention to the authors’ findings about the predisposition phase. Apparently it is at this stage that the determination to go to college is most often formed or strengthened. A prime audience for the findings regarding the search and choice phases is researchers who are developing materials for college admission officers, high school counselors, and other persons who focus on how to improve the information they give parents and students. Other research efforts might involve studying all A and B students regardless of where they live, or examining the considerations of students when choosing between public and private colleges or between two- and four-year colleges. The results of this study should have multiple uses and be helpful to ongoing research in this area.

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American higher education in the twenty-first century: Social, policy, and economic challenges  

The authors present a great deal of useful information on the current condition of higher education. The book is divided into four parts. The first, “The Setting,” includes an informative chapter on the development of the traditions of academic freedom in our colleges and universities by Robert M. O’Neil; a thoughtful essay, “Who Controls Academe?” by Berdahl and T.R. McConnell on the institutional autonomy of our universities; and a sober discussion by Ami Zusman on the financial constraints that help to determine university policy today. These chapters describe long-term trends, as well as more recent developments. Indeed, one chapter, “The Ten Generations of American Higher Education” by Roger Geiger, provides a useful summary history of the past 300 years in our colleges and universities. Interesting data are presented throughout this section on enrollment trends (past, present, and future) and on the changing financial problems of our colleges and universities.

The second part discusses external forces that constrain the university, especially the federal government, state governments, the courts, foundations and accreditation agencies. The third part discusses how the academic community faces the new century, with separate chapters on professors, students, and presidents. The final section, “Central Issues for the Twenty-first Century,” offers chapters on technological change; graduate education and research; the “multicultural revolution” and its critics; and the role of race in education.

This section also contains an article written by a professional economist, D. Bruce Johnstone’s “Financing Higher Education.” Johnstone sets forth an economic approach to a number of issues raised in this volume, including the appropriate level of financial support for