Position Paper: Analysis of Privatization Proposal

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Public state universities were originally founded to give citizens of the state access to affordable higher education. There are also federal goals for more United States citizens to complete a post-secondary education, but the government cannot order or force higher education institutions to admit more students. So, "the federal government primarily seeks to influence the higher education system by making funding available and then requiring states or schools to take certain actions in order to gain access to those funds" (Introduction, n.d., para 1). Some requirements that institutions must fulfill to receive funds include diversity of student body, use of finances, number of out of state students, and research goals.

State governments want to have influence on local higher education institutions because in-state graduates are more likely to bring socio-economic growth to the state. The state government's main concern is implementing their visions of what society needs which often includes graduates trained in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) fields. When colleges need to cater to the governmental constraints, more funding and acceptance will be directed towards students within these fields. For example, in North Carolina’s land-grant institutions, many research goals are directed towards agriculture or medical advances rather than oil processing or space exploration (Hutton, 2012). The public institutions are focused on training their graduates in research that will enhance local economy and keep graduates in-state. These goals are incentivized by receiving more funds from the state when a certain number of students or programs meet the state's goals.

On the other hand, if institutions are not funded by the state government, they will have greater autonomy. Meaning, decisions about what the school research goals are, who the school admits, and what programs receive the largest proportion of funding will be exclusively left to the school's discretion. Of course, this lends the question of where will necessary funding come from? Tuition rates are already high for many institutions, so state institutions may accept more out of state students to compensate for lost governmental funding. Alumni or corporate donors also contribute to institutions, so it is reasonable to assume that research goals may cater to the benefactor. Furthermore, if institutions are completely autonomous, they will likely become specialized as many private institutions have become. Privatizing could help land grant universities get away from their mission-stated obligations of focusing on the teaching of practical agriculture, science, military science, and engineering to further specialize on topics that interest the university or foster prestige.

I support privatization and institution autonomy. As newer generations tend to be more attracted to STEM fields or other modern sciences, privatizing could allow a university to specialize in specific areas within these fields and become more attractive choices to future students. This is not to say that there is not equal value in liberal arts fields as I expect many institutions would become specialized in these fields as well. Specializing institutions would provide clear incentives for donations from alumni or corporations to financially support future students’ training in the donor's field of interest.

With fewer governmental regulations regarding incoming students, institutions will become more selective, and the responsibility of being accessible and diverse would fall on the institution. Additionally, if governmental funds are not being received, there is less incentive for higher education institutions to maintain accreditation status through the current system. It could however, give rise to other accreditation agencies. This would simultaneously open doors for implementing competency-based learning and other tuition lowering proposals while enhancing the question of how to standardize the quality of education students are receiving.

References

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