What is Higher Education Policy?

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Abstract

Educational policy is the backbone of the American higher education system. From broad scale, governmental policy to institution specific policies, higher education institutions would not function without them. Considering policy formation to policy assessment, the issue of educational policy is ever evolving and increasingly more important in our current higher education climate.

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The field of higher education relies on policies and procedures to carry out educational missions and learning outcomes. Policies provide procedure and protocol that becomes the backbone of an institution. Without policy, accountability and consistency, both imperative to the success of a higher education institution, would not thrive. A policy is the link between the institutional mission and the day-to-day operations. Policies steer decision-making, and can be either specific to one institution or applicable to an entire region or nation.

To properly address the question, ‘what is higher education policy?’ we must first discuss the definition of ‘policy.’ Sherri Torjman effectively sums it up in her publication *What is Policy?*, “We literally eat, drink and breathe public policy… It influences virtually every aspect of our lives” (Torjman 2005, p.1). Torjman defines policy as seeking to “achieve a desired goal that is considered to be in the best interest of all members of society” (Torjman 2005, p. 4). The concept of ‘policy,’ however, can be infinitely defined. Technically, the word policy can be defined as any set of guidelines that are meant to dictate behavior or outcomes. Public policy, such as Torjman discusses, is policy as it relates to the greater community, or society, and put in place by it’s governing body. Educational policy, then, could be defined as policy in the educational setting, or policies that seek to achieve desired goals and act in the best interest of all members of the educational institution.

Policy is an important aspect of higher education. There is no area of higher education that is not affected by policy, from student organizations to academic advising, policies dictate almost all operations within an institution. In 2005, Michael Bastedo wrote of four views for looking at policy within higher education: policy as strategy, policy as entrepreneurship, policy as symbolic action, and policy as logic (Bastedo 2005). Policy as strategy aims to achieve
longevity, stability, and continued relevance for an institution. Policies can set a framework under which the institution will grow, while also setting parameters and controls for this growth to be monitored and steered. A common higher education example of ‘policy as strategy’ is the strategic plan models currently used by many American institutions. Using policies as strategy, or strategic planning, administrators make decisions, weigh outcomes, and set the course for their institutions.

Policymaking has the potential to drastically change the environment of an institution, and administrators can use policy as entrepreneurship as a means to carry out major structural or operational changes amongst their institution. Institutional entrepreneurs are able to successfully use their influence, capita, and power to institute policies amongst the various stakeholders and create broad based changes in traditions, beliefs, or practices (Bastedo 2005). Policy as entrepreneurship is different from policy as strategy, in that it is specific to one particular person or entity, rather than an entire institution initiating policies.

Organizational actions can have an important symbolic component. Policy as symbolic action is important for an institution to maintain its historic, or shared beliefs, traditions, or reputation and this can sometimes be done through policies as outward signs of convictions (Bastedo 2005). An example of policy as symbolic action would be non-discrimination policies. In our current educational climate, no one expects an institution will discriminate; rather this type of policy is put in place as a symbolic action to reinforce the beliefs or good will of an institution.

Finally, Bastedo writes about policy as logic. In recent history, a sort of ‘best practices’ has evolved when it comes to higher education policy making, and ‘policy as logic’ is using these dominant theories of action to bring about institutional changes. Policy as logic sets the
opportunity for administrators to use their own judgments or influences to decide what policies
to put in place, and how they will be carried out. The ‘logic’ piece enables a human element to
the organizational policy making process (Bastedo 2005).

Being that these four types of policies construct the backbone of higher education
institutions, it is equally important to look at policy formation and assessment processes. It is
imperative that policies are effective and correct, ineffective or inequitable policies will cause
more harm than good. In *Education policy-planning process: an applied framework*, Haddad
provides a model for even, equitable policy formation as a balance of organizational, societal,
synoptic, and incremental modes (Haddad 1995). This model demonstrates the balance
necessary for proper policy formation. This model shows two axes, the horizontal axis
measuring the range of decisions made strictly by the government, or on the opposite end,
decisions made strictly by social interest groups. The perpendicular axis of this model is the
range from one central planning authority to an incremental mode where no sweeping or drastic
reforms should be attempted. According to Haddad, policy formation needs to be balanced
between all four axis ends, and fall somewhere in the middle of this graph (Haddad 1995).
Haddad states that this balanced format of policy formation is most appropriate and effective for
education policy formation (Haddad 1995). “Policy making involves balancing a number of
contradictory demands, and soliciting support, or at least tolerance, from the many different
segments of society which have an interest in education” (Haddad 1995, p. 23).

In addition to proper policy formation, proper policy analysis and maintenance is also
vital for maintaining effective educational policies. Schouwstra and Ellman write of the
Geelhoed-Schouwstra framework, a model of policy evaluation that has been developed to
identify factors that cause policy outcomes to diverge from the intended results (Schouwstra &
This framework includes six steps: define the strategic or tactical goal of the proposed policy, identify the objectives of this goal, outline the methods or instruments through which the objectives may be realized, identify the specific activities that should lead to realizing the goal, measure performance through predetermined performance indicators, and finally, evaluation of this entire process (Schouwstra & Ellman 2006). This basic policy framework establishes what the goals and objectives of a policy are, what instruments or methods it will use, what activities will be undertaken, and how the intended results of that policy will be measured. Using this framework allows policies to be goal-orientated, less instrument, or activity-orientated, and thus, more effective, efficient, and highly sustainable (Schouwstra & Ellman 2006). By helping to identify factors that lead to the success of an identified policy, we can better understand the best practices, and determine why they work, and where they work.

There are almost infinite examples of higher education policy. One area heavily guided by policy is student affairs. Examples of student affairs higher education policies can be seen in alcohol and other drug programs, assessment and research, campus safety, student organizations, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues, health and wellness, residence life, or parent and family relations. Take just one of these areas, student organizations, for example, there are several policies typically found within a higher education institution that are created specifically for governing student organizations. Budget or financial policies, safety and risk management policies, diversity and inclusion policies, and administrative policies will be written and enforced for the benefit of this one entity of the institution. When you begin to consider how many institutional entities are housed within a typical college or university, you begin to understand the vast amount of policies the institution is responsible for, as well as understand the importance of proper policy creation and governance.
To better understand the potential impact educational policy has on students, let’s examine one subject that is heavily imbued with policy: access and retention. College readiness programs and policies can be found in every state in our nation. *The College Completion Agenda State Policy Guide* published by CollegeBoard Advocacy & Policy Center discusses the decrease in retention rates in the United States as compared to other industrialized nations, which is resulting in an education deficit that is currently threatening the global competitiveness and economic future of the United States (CollegeBoard Advocacy & Policy Center, 2010). In this guide, the CollegeBoard center states, “We must think P-16 and improve education from preschool through higher education. State legislators and policymakers can play a large role in advancing each of the recommendations (CBAPC 2010, p. 4). These recommendations include enhancing oversight through coordinated governance, promoting quality rating and improvement systems, implementing comprehensive early childhood assessments, making college and career preparation part of graduation requirements, funding comprehensive counseling programs, dropout prevention, ensuring college admission for low-income students, guaranteed admission for merit, or college loan forgiveness, to name a few (CBAPC 2010). These examples are just a small sampling of educational policies that affect students in the areas of readiness, accessibility, and retention.

Educational policy is not static, but rather ever evolving to meet the needs of the current educational climate. In 2012, Luciana Dar writes that the growing demand for higher education in the United States, and the steady decrease in public financial support, have led to an increased demand for accountability and the reshaping of the nature of the relationship between institutions and state governments (Dar 2012). Dar also states “following broader trends in U.S. politics,
higher education policy debates have become more contentious and polarized, with growing focus on the instrumental benefits of higher education (Dar 2012).

Dar describes the higher education sector as complex, being a provider of both public and private goods, funded by public and private sources (Dar 2012). Being such an all-encompassing entity, the importance of educational policy cannot be overstated. Policy regulates all aspects of higher education, ranging from within the institution to the wide scope of the federal government regulations. Policy provides accountability and aids the success of our higher education system in the United States. Policy is ever evolving and adapting to the current educational climate, and if properly fostered, will continue to do so to the benefit of both students and institutions.
References


