Evaluating Student Aid in a Political Advocacy System: In Search of a Better Way

by Jacob O. Stampen

Most voters, taxpayers, policy makers and program administrators would agree with the principle that the more we know about social programs, how they work or do not work, and what impacts they have, the better we can design and run them to achieve societal goals. Why is it, then, that many programs are established and persist when knowledge as to their effects is lacking and — perhaps even more illogically — evaluations of such programs do not seem to bear any systematic relationship to policy formulation, and have even come in for a fair degree of opprobrium?

This paper reviews the state of evaluation and makes the case that problems lie not only in the political advocacy process through which policy is made, but also in the way evaluators have approached their task and presented their results. It then takes the case of one large and well-entrenched federal program, student aid, and shows from a brief review of its history that perceived societal goals and the political process — not the results of research or evaluation — have guided that history. It argues further that the political process is inevitable, and that it will not be tangibly influenced by the products of evaluation until evaluators are able to illuminate programmatic impacts in ways credible to a wide variety of decision makers. It ends by describing a project at the University of Wisconsin-Madison that shows promise of producing reliable information about the impacts of student aid.

Evaluating Social Programs

The 1960’s and early 1970’s were the brave new world of program evaluation — stimulated by the Kennedy-Johnson era requirements for systematic evaluation of major social programs, the belief of policy advocates and analysts alike that there was a right answer to any particular question of policy, and that systematic hypothesis testing with objectively gathered quantitative data would find that answer. There was also the belief that, once the right answer was known, the policy process would proceed in a well-ordered manner to use that answer in policy design and implementation.

Program evaluation did not become a panacea and has since come in for substantial criticism by its would-be users and somewhat agonizing reprisals by evaluators themselves. Most of the problems probably should have been foreseen. First, political actions are stimulated by perceived societal needs. As such they have strong proponents (or they would never have the political support needed for implementation), and typically stimulate opposition among those who lose from them or at least perceive they cannot gain from them. So-called “objective” findings are bound to be used and abused by all sides, other things being equal. Second, policies once implemented in the form of programs are run by staff who naturally acquire a

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THE JOURNAL OF STUDENT FINANCIAL AID 3
vested interest and a firm belief in the efficacy of what they are doing. “Objective” findings which run counter to that belief are rejected. These are both problems that are inherent in our political system and the way policies evolve through that system.

In addition, however, the methodology and practice of evaluation is itself problematic. The first point made above suggests that where there is a buyer for a biased evaluation, there is likely to be a seller to match. But in evaluations of social problems the most important problem is not those involving an a priori bias (which will not be discussed further). More important are the methodological inadequacies of evaluations that have made every effort to be objective. There are many examples of ill-fated attempts to apply methods originally designed for use in highly controlled “laboratory” situations in the evaluation of “messy” social programs where many of the variables were difficult to identify let alone control; quite often the verdict was — “no statistically significant effect.” However, program proponents responded — in many cases accurately — by pointing out that important variables were overlooked and that analytical methods were ill suited to the problems being investigated (Aaron, 1978).

The unsuccessful attempts to apply techniques best suited to the laboratory to complex, dynamic programs in natural settings led to contorted research designs and reports to decision makers that focused on why the methodology didn’t work rather than why the results should influence policy. Policy makers and program operators began to view evaluators as being far too ready to make summative judgments without recognizing how quickly programs become entrenched. What policy makers needed, rather — particularly at the state, local, or program operator level — were assessments of how a given program could be improved in design and/or operation to better achieve the goals specified for it.

The substantial disillusionment with program evaluation is evidenced by those whose expectations for it were high. Aaron (1978), for example, former Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation at HEW, has concluded that the academic community has not guided policy, but rather that policy has led research. Cronbach (1980, 1983), an evaluator with special experience particularly in the education area, is so disillusioned by his perception that “commissioners of evaluations complain that the messages are not useful, while evaluators complain that the messages are not used,” that he calls for new evaluation designs aimed at involving and informing policy makers, as opposed to small groups of evaluators employing one or another specific methodological approach. Similarly, Dryzek (1982) at least partially rejects studies with a particular methodology, focus, or objective, in favor of what he terms “hermeneutics,” wherein the analyst’s role is to organize interactions among affected constituencies, experts, and decision makers aimed at defining problems and identifying solutions which (one assumes) will be therefore more satisfactory.

The history of student aid legislation certainly bears out the notion that policies are often made without any major perceived need for or use of evaluation information. The evaluation research (or lack of it) that accompanied its political history, however, also indicates that the information was not at hand to provide much useful help.

The History and Politics of Student Aid

As Fenske (in Fenske and Huff, 1983) makes clear, the development of federal student aid came in a variety of steps “usually precipitated by a crisis.” Examples include the National Defense Act of 1916 which created the Reserve Officers Training Corps in World War I; programs in the 1930’s under depression era Emergency Relief Administration which enabled participating students to attend college through work-study arrangements, and the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (G.I. Bill) which rewarded past military service and became the first large-scale federal student aid program.
The next major expansion of student aid came in the 1960's when, for the first time, the federal government moved to improve access to public, private, and proprietary higher education institutions. This transition began with a crisis seemingly far removed from education. In 1957 the Soviet Union initiated a political crisis by launching the Sputnik satellite. This created an opportunity for congressmen to propose changes in pre-existing educational policies — changes which they had wanted to introduce in any case, but which could now be presented as ways to deal with the crisis. According to Morse (1977), Wayne Morse and another U. S. Senator (Joe Clark of Pennsylvania) were awaiting an opportunity to invest federal dollars in “high risk” (i.e., financially needy) college students, and quickly attached to developing legislation a proposal providing loans for such students (an unprecedented federal initiative). However, initially armed with the objective of assisting “high risk students,” the two senators quickly confronted the following array of obstacles:

“the shibboleth that support for education must forever be a state and local concern; the near hostility between elementary-secondary and higher education, exacerbated by First Amendment (church and state separation) problems; and indeed the inability of independent (private) and public higher education to accommodate each other.” (Morse, 1977, p. 3)

The resulting National Defense Student Loan (NDSL) program emerged from Congress after maneuvering a torturous path.

Once implemented, the NDSL program quickly demonstrated the willingness of students to borrow in order to obtain a higher education. However, interest rates increased rapidly, federal subsidies were needed to continue, and once these were provided a cornerstone was laid for the later creation of the Guaranteed Student Loan (GSL) program.

NDSL became the starting point for further changes during President Johnson’s War on Poverty, initiated in 1964 to accommodate rising expectations among ethnic minorities and other previously disadvantaged groups. Concerns about Sputnik were quickly overshadowed, and by 1972 the National Defense Student Loan program was renamed the National Direct Student Loan program, as part of an effort to consolidate several existing federal programs to meet the War on Poverty aims. These programs, all enacted to deal with perceived crises, included the Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963; the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, with its College Work-Study program; the Health Professions Educational Assistance Act of 1963; and the Nurse Training Act of 1964.

The next event in the policy sequence stimulated by the War on Poverty was the Higher Education Act of 1965. This marked the first effort of the federal government to integrate and develop a comprehensive set of programs providing aid to higher education institutions and students. Several new programs providing aid on the basis of student financial need were created, including the Educational Opportunity Grant (EOG) program, and the GSL program. These, together with the pre-existing programs, were subsequently continued, renamed or supplemented with new programs through subsequent amendments to the Higher Education Act in 1972, 1976, 1978, and 1980. These broadened the scope of federal involvement with higher education and ultimately elevated student aid to the federal government’s primary means of assisting higher education.

Currently existing programs administered by the U.S. Department of Education and for the most part serving students who demonstrate financial need include three grant programs (the Pell Grant (PELL), the Supplemental Education Opportunity
Grant (SEOG) and the State Student Incentive Grant (SSIG) programs, four loan programs (the GSL and the related Parents Loan for Undergraduate Students program (PLUS), the NDSL and the Auxiliary Loans to Assist Students (ALAS)), and one subsidized work-study program, the College Work-Study program (CWS). In addition there are categorical programs administered by the U.S. Department of Education and several other federal departments and agencies. Table 1 shows changes in appropriations for major federal student aid programs (in constant 1982 dollars) between 1970-71 and 1983-84.

### Table 1
Federal and State Student Aid Expenditures for Selected Years Between 1970-71 and 1983-84 in Constant 1982 Dollars (in millions)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federal Need Based Campus Based (SEOG, NDSL and Work-Study)</td>
<td>$1,461</td>
<td>$1,150</td>
<td>$1,916</td>
<td>$1,587</td>
<td>$1,602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Direct Grant (Pell)</td>
<td>1,629</td>
<td>2,905</td>
<td>2,398</td>
<td>2,304</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank Loans (GSL-PLUS)</td>
<td>2,466</td>
<td>2,204</td>
<td>6,914</td>
<td>6,242</td>
<td>6,573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Student Incentive Grant (SSIG)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Subtotal)</td>
<td>(3,927)</td>
<td>(5,530)</td>
<td>(11,820)</td>
<td>(10,299)</td>
<td>(10,536)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Categorical (Soc. Sec. Vet. Other Grants and Other Loans)</td>
<td>4,077</td>
<td>9,360</td>
<td>4,237</td>
<td>2,178</td>
<td>1,406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Need Based Grants</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>853</td>
<td>893</td>
<td>1,008</td>
<td>1,008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8,578</td>
<td>15,743</td>
<td>16,950</td>
<td>13,485</td>
<td>12,950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal and State Need Based as a Percent of Total Aid</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Need Based as a Percent of Total Need Based Aid</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Total Federal and State Need Based Grants (Pell, SEOG, SSIG, State Grants) | 899               | 2,866             | 4,291             | 3,827                   | 3,708                    |
| Loans (GSL-PLUS, NDSL) Work-Study (CWS) | 3,050             | 3,004             | 7,688             | 6,925                   | 7,225                    |
| Work-Study (CWS) | 552               | 513               | 734               | 555                     | 611                      |
| Total Loans as a Percent of Total Need-Based | 100%              | 68%               | 47%               | 60%                     | 61%                      |

Between 1963 and 1983 student aid grew (in current dollars) from $.5 billion to $16.1 billion (Gillespie and Carlson, 1983, p. 5), and by the end of the 1970s it had become of sufficient scale to generate something of a crisis on its own. This is exemplified by actions affecting passage of the 1978 Amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965, an instance when federal student aid was challenged by an
alternative — tuition tax credits. Tuition tax credits were viewed by Congressional sponsors as appealing to the middle class and several private school and religious constituencies. Student aid advocates, however, viewed them as threatening to the principle of providing aid to individuals on the basis of demonstrated financial need.

Debate over the tuition tax credit and student aid was conducted in a setting of disenchantment with regulatory bureaucracy and a sense (not documented by evaluation research) that the middle class was being neglected by existing federal programs. This initiated the efforts led by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Joseph Califano, to defuse support for tuition tax credits by making federal student aid more appealing to the middle class. The resulting Higher Education Amendments of 1978, commonly referred to as the Middle Income Student Assistance Act (MISAA), changed federal student aid in two important ways: Students from average sized families earning up to the national median income became eligible for Pell grants and the pre-existing income ceiling qualifying eligibility for Guaranteed Student Loans was removed.

The Administration-sponsored changes in Pell Grant eligibility had a relatively modest financial effect. Far more dramatic, however, was the Congress-sponsored impact of eliminating the GSL program’s income ceiling. Between 1977-78 and 1980-81 aid awarded through the GSL program increased from $1.7 billion to $6.2 billion and change of this magnitude contributed to a political crisis affecting student aid.

In 1980 Ronald Reagan was elected President as was a Republican majority in the U.S. Senate. Until the Reagan Administration, student aid has been expanded by every federal administration since the Johnson Administration. However, the Reagan Administration, at least initially, viewed student aid and particularly its GSL component, as an uncontrolled program deserving of pruning. What followed was a series of Senate-led cutbacks in student aid. In fact, Congressional actions in 1981 essentially rescinded MISAA. Pell grants became more limited and an income ceiling was reinstated in the GSL program. Overall, aid available to students from programs administered by the U.S. Department of Education declined (in constant 1980 dollars) by 21 percent. In addition, $1.6 billion in Social Security education benefits were scheduled for elimination by 1985.

The history of student aid is indeed a story of programmatic actions taken in response to perceived political battles and negotiations necessary to produce winning votes. What role, if any, does research and evaluation play in this story?

The Role of Evaluation in the History of Student Aid

By all accounts, the first major program evaluation that had any relevance for student aid was the 1946 President’s (Truman) Commission on Higher Education. It did not take as its central focus student aid but, according to Fenske (in Fenske and Huff, 1983), in its report “one can find the germinal ideas for all of the major federal and many of the state student aid programs eventually enacted.” The Commission concluded that higher education was accessible to only a small proportion of American youth and that colleges and universities “can no longer consider themselves merely the instruments for producing an intellectual elite; they must become the means by which every citizen, youth and adult, is enabled and encouraged to carry his education, formal and informal, as far as his native capacities permit (pp. 10-11).” The Commission also recommended that all racial, ethnic, and sex discrimination barriers be struck down and that economic barriers be reduced or eliminated by increasing the number of low- or no-tuition commuter institutions, especially community colleges; and by student financial aid in the form of loans, grants, and sponsored employment.
Higher education, however, was not a federally sponsored activity. Neither then nor now, due to the Constitution’s assignment of matters affecting education to the states, has there existed a federal policy on any level of education (Finn, 1978). Thus, the Commission addressed state and private institutions as well as federal government.

It is undoubtedly true, as Fenske states, that this commission “composed of twenty-eight national leaders, examined higher education in America with a thoroughness that was unprecedented prior to 1946 and was not approached again (Fenske and Huff, 1983, p. 10).” However, it is also true that its recommendations were not translated into policy until the War on Poverty initiatives started, nearly twenty years later. Even then the initiatives were not seemingly related, at least directly, to the Truman Commission or its recommendations.

During the 1950’s and 1960’s economists were successors to the Truman Commission in attempting to exert influence over public policy affecting education. The first generation of these, sometimes referred to as the “growth economists,” began producing studies suggesting higher societal returns from investment in education. Denison (1962), for example, indicated that educational investment was a primary force in increasing productivity in the United States over much of this century. “The economic benefits of investing in education led to an explosion of research on the effects of schooling on individual earnings, on the rates of return to investment in schooling, and on education’s role in stimulating more rapid economic growth (Hansen, 1983, p. 85).” Hansen goes on to describe how conclusions about education’s relationship to economic growth became associated with student aid:

Along with these developments, it became apparent that many young people who were qualified for college did not attend because they could not afford the cost. Below cost tuition (as charged at public institutions) was insufficient to overcome these deterrents. Of particular concern was the “talent loss,” that is, the loss of many able but poorer students who were unable to attend college. The very term talent loss suggested that removing the financial barriers to college education through a relatively small expenditure of public funds would be economically efficient and contribute to economic growth.

In another sense, however, this talent loss could be viewed as a distributional issue. It was asserted that qualified young people from poor families deserve the same opportunities even if the return to such investment might be low. Everyone, it was argued, should have equal educational opportunities; no one should be prevented from attending college for economic reasons (Hansen, 1983, p. 85-86).

Evidence that more education for the disadvantaged could improve economic growth, then, was a potential contribution to the debate in student aid and higher education financing. It is hard to argue, however, that such research directly influenced the debate. The War on Poverty was the impetus, and thus was a political one. The growth argument was based at least partly on empirical research, but it is not clear that the argument would have influenced the outcome one way or the other.

The next generation of economists to produce evidence potentially relevant to the debate were human capital theorists, basically following a seminal article by Friedman (1954), who argued generally from the thesis that investment in an individual’s education earned a return that could be measured by the individual’s future earnings. Friedman’s policy suggestion, following this argument, was that higher education should be financed by charging full-cost tuition and providing loans, repayable over many years, and contingent on the student’s future level of earnings.
By 1967, this idea stimulated development of what became known as the "Zacharias Plan," according to which students would be eligible for government loans covering college-related expenses. Such loans could then be repaid in small increments added to income taxes over working lifetimes. Indirectly the plan also suggested that all colleges and universities could be financed according to the private higher educational model and that "low tuition" was no longer necessary.

For the next several years, human capital theorists contributed lively and sometimes heated arguments to both sides of the higher-tuition/low tuition debate. Among these, the Hansen and Weisbrod study (1969) included calculations suggesting that California's no tuition system of financing public higher education was inequitable and that a system of financing public higher education entirely through students should be substituted for it. Also, under their proposed system, the role of government would be to provide need-based student aid for students unable to pay full instructional costs. Pechman (1970, 1971) argued that Hansen and Weisbrod had miscalculated their data and that therefore the case against low tuition had not been made. Whether or not human capital theorists could have really changed the debate had they held a more consensual view cannot, of course, be known, but coming out publicly with conflicting views certainly must have reduced the attention paid by policy makers to their arguments.

These analyses and many more like them purported to provide answers to the financing debate (for further examples, see the studies listed in the first column of Table II under "analytic"). Meanwhile, other studies were also being produced trying to translate and interpret the new information for use by policymakers and advocacy groups. Examples of these are listed in the second column of Table II under the heading "policy-oriented." These generally advocated the expanded use of financial aid for students attending both public and private colleges and universities. Even though most of the policy-oriented studies recommended that student aid be accompanied by upward adjustment in public college tuition, none of them felt the information merited elimination of the public higher education financing model.

Rivlin's work (1974) is particularly important in this respect. While acknowledging the importance of new ideas emanating from the analytic work, she found them too removed from the concerns and questions vital to policy making to be readily translatable into policy terms. She therefore called for a "forensic social science," whose purpose would be to use the techniques and data of social science, but in ways that would answer questions specifically formulated to address policy makers' concerns in ways that directly apply to the policy debate.

Rivlin's call was fully justified. The debate over how higher education should be financed had to deal with a multitude of highly technical studies encompassing a wide range of estimates regarding how student enrollments would respond to tuition increases and the extent to which student aid would compensate for such increases. In addition, the debate had raised many questions the technical studies had simply not addressed — in particular, nuts and bolts issues about whether students from different backgrounds would respond differently, with different consequences for equality of access. Whether students from poverty backgrounds would actually reject borrowing was of great concern, for example, and there was practically no information available that could be brought to bear on the issue.

In one respect, however, the debate over higher education financing may have had a constructive impact by leading credence to the idea, already implemented by the Higher Education Act of 1965, of employing student aid as a supplement to both public and private higher education financing systems. Indeed, one of Hansen and Weisbrod's criticisms of public higher education in California was that, under the low tuition system, the poor were disadvantaged in meeting noninstructional costs.
Table 2
How Should American Higher Education be Financed?
Single Framework and Implementation Studies
Associated with Policy Debate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Single Framework</th>
<th>Implementation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friedman, 1954, “Role of Government in Education”</td>
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<td>Zacharias, 1967, Equal Opportunity Bank</td>
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<tr>
<td>Campbell and Siegel, 1967, “Demand for Higher Education in the United States:</td>
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<td>1919-1964</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friedman, 1968, “Higher Schooling in America”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mundel, 1974, “Recent Developments in the Understanding of the Determinants of Demand for Post-secondary Education”</td>
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Aid for students attending public colleges could be used to overcome this problem, but equity demanded some equivalent to supplement the financing of private higher education.

Private higher education seemed to face something of a crisis during the early 1970’s, indeed, as studies emerged questioning their long-term ability to survive competition with their public higher education counterparts (Chet, 1971). At the same time a debate was underway over whether amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965 should expand student or institutional assistance. These issues came to a head during deliberations over the Higher Education Amendments of 1972, when it was decided that federal higher education assistance should mainly...
aid individuals (i.e., student aid) attending both public and private institutions, thus providing support not only for basic access, but also for a measure of "choice" between the two types of institutions.

So far, the research evaluations discussed here, however limited in execution, have been relatively global in scope, addressing issues that transcend those applying to individual student aid program components. In addition to these, numerous studies focusing on individual programs or specific aspects of student aid have been conducted in recent years. Such studies can be placed into two major categories: 1) those required by federal legislation and 2) those conducted by researchers and practitioners outside government.

Examples of federally mandated studies are periodic field audits and reports flowing into annual summaries prepared by various bureaus and departments of the U.S. Department of Education. These are mainly concerned with reporting basic information — such as the purposes of programs, numbers of participants, appropriations and dollars distributed — and rarely include either formative or summative evaluations. Rather, they tend to be merely for maintenance or operations analysis purposes. Several federal offices also collect statistical data pertaining to postsecondary education institutions and students. Among these are the National Center for Education Statistics, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the U.S. Census Bureau. However, none of these maintain extensive information about student aid recipients.

Studies by researchers outside government are sometimes sponsored by federal agencies such as the National Institute on Education or the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education or specially created bodies such as the recent National Commission on Student Financial Assistance, but more often the studies are supported by higher education institutions or organizations interested in student aid. These studies have proliferated since 1970; an annotated bibliography published in the late 1970's (Davis and Van Dusen, 1978) indicates the existence of almost 800 studies conducted mainly between 1970 and 1978. Roughly nine out of ten of these focused on the workings of student aid programs and their institutional or governmental support structures; only one in ten focused on strategies or purposes, environmental factors, or the impacts of student aid. Similarly distributed are more recent studies described by Fenske, Attinasi and Voorhees in Fenske and Huff (1983). As evidence of the unbalanced distribution, Table 3 classifies the annotated references included in this work according to the program dimensions they address and the purposes for which they were written.

The column headings in Table 3, adapted from a higher education strategic planning model developed by Shirley and Caruthers (1978), represent a universe of programmatic dimensions. For example, "Environment" studies include those focusing on political actions external to higher education which affect student aid programs. "Structure" includes studies dealing mainly with governmental and institutional policies and practices shaping and supporting student aid programs, and "Program" studies focus directly on policy and practice-related questions pertaining to specific types of programs. "Behavior" includes studies describing impacts of student aid. Finally, "Strategy" includes studies dealing with the goals of student aid. The three major purposes for which they were written are represented by the categories listed at the left of the table: Analysis for Policy, Analysis for Practice, and Data for Analysis. The combination of five column heads and three row heads produces a 15-cell metric spanning the range of possible subject matter pertaining to student aid. As can be seen, the distribution for studies is heavily weighted towards analyses of student program and support structures with the objectives of illuminating practical concerns. Analysis of overall policy questions (under the
<table>
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<th>Table 9: Classification of Student Aid Studies</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ENVIRONMENT</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Federal and state laws, regulations, political and social conditions affecting student aid support structures and programs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STRUCTURE</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Instructional and governmental policies and practices supporting student aid programs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROGRAM</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Operating, student aid programs and issues associated with various types and categories of programs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BEHAVIOR</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Impacts of student aid programs on students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STRATEGY</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Recommended goals and activities for solving inbalances in existing student aid programs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brim, and Zinno, 1978, public policy and private higher education&lt;br&gt;Carragee, 1979, overall policy recommendations&lt;br&gt;Vanhaven, 1979, problems&lt;br&gt;Franklin, 1980, aid and TDIO&lt;br&gt;Bennett, 1982, aid and minorities&lt;br&gt;Green, 1982, aid recipients and the institutions they attend</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Data for Analysis**

- Broderick, 1980, college costs
- Atteke and Gomber, 1977, number of student aid recipients
- Smith, 1980, profiles of state student aid programs
- Stamps, 1983, student aid recipient data base - public higher education

**Sources**

“Behavior” column) and studies that provide more generally usable data (the Data for Analysis’ row) to support the decision making process are much more sparse.

This brief review of the kinds of studies that have been done through the years to inform the student aid debate leads to an important general conclusion: The studies funded with the purpose of yielding more directly applicable information focus on program and structure to the neglect of legitimate concerns raised by policy makers and the general public about the overall success of student aid in reaching its policy goals. falsa see Van Dusen (1980) and Martin (1983). Moreover, the major overall policy and impact questions tend to be addressed by quantitative analysts often far removed from any specific knowledge of student aid programs and the contexts in which they must operate.

Consider, for example, Hansen’s verdict on the debates on student aid in the 97th Congress following President Reagan’s election:

The administration justified the cuts as part of a program to contain federal spending. Representatives for higher education countered with predictions that the cutbacks would reduce enrollments of financially disadvantaged students, weaken the demand for faculty members and jeopardize the financial condition of a number of colleges and universities. Neither side paid much attention to whether the student aid programs had been successful (Hansen, 1983, p. 84).

But what if they had paid attention to this issue? They would have found little help, because the results of the few studies focusing on impacts are mixed. For example, Stampen (1983) in a study encompassing federal, state, and institutional student aid in public higher education found that in aggregate aid was targeted on students from low income backgrounds. However, Hansen (1983) in an analysis of U.S. Census Current Population Reports and data from the National Center for Education Statistics found no significant percentage increase of low income students between 1971-72 and 1978-79 — years of rapid expansion in student aid — among dependent students on the basis of minority status, sex or socioeconomic status. Astin (1978), in a study of minority group participation in higher education covering a period from the mid-1960’s to 1978, found persistently unequal college graduation rates among different student groups. However, he also found that “minority representation among entering college freshmen increased by 50 to 100 percent from the mid-1970’s (p. 87).” These inconsistent conclusions indicate that we simply do not yet know much about impacts.

Given the previous discussion of issues in evaluation and how policy is made, this lack of attention to overall policy and program impacts is cause for concern. Without evaluations aimed at identifying impacts, student aid is left without evidence of accomplishment in an unpredictable world where even remote crises can trigger basic change. Paradoxically, however, evaluators disagree about how to produce evidence that is both accurate and credible. Attention now turns to a proposal for dealing with this dilemma which, in accordance with the recommendations of Cronbach and Dryzek, facilitates widespread involvement in evaluative studies.

*Where Do We Go From Here?*

This review of the history and politics of student aid, and the relatively unproductive attempts so far to produce objective information that is (or can readily be) used in the policy debate, suggests that the political advocacy process and the research/evaluation process evolve in relative isolation from one another. Some argue that the fault lies with political advocacy as a decision making mechanism, and that politics impedes the making of intelligent policy decisions. This is a difficult view to maintain unless one is also willing to forego the basis of democracy, which is
that all concerned should participate in decisions affecting them and their society. My own view, although disputed by scholars who agree with Lowi (1979), is more in line with that of McFarland (1983) and Truman (1971), who suggest that the political advocacy system's very complexity may constitute a self-correcting mechanism that at least in a general sense benefits from the numerous checks and balances and countervailing interactions among interest groups and social movements.

In any case, the fundamental point must surely be that the advocacy system is here to stay, and has also proven extremely resistant to change (Davidson 1981). This leads to the inevitable conclusion, it seems to me, that program evaluators had better direct their efforts towards improving the knowledge base of the participants in the advocacy system, if they are to have any effect on policy decisions.

The traditional view is that academics develop useful methods and approaches for establishing knowledge on which decisions can be based and evaluated. However, the extent to which such methods can truly assist decision making depends on their ability to not only interpret complex societal interactions, but also to effectively educate decision makers about problems and feasible solutions. The history of social program evaluation over the last 20 years — in many areas but perhaps to the greatest degree in matters relating to education — suggests that this is not yet happening.

Do we throw up our hands, or can progress be made if we find a better approach? A team of researchers at the University of Wisconsin which includes the author is trying an approach which may have the potential of making substantial headway.

Its fundamental premise is that evaluators cannot count on having any substantial impact on the policy process until they can substantially resolve doubts among policy makers and the public about the accuracy and relevance of the sources of their information, and the interpretability of their methodology. Our primary mission, therefore, is to develop, utilize and urge other researchers as well as practitioners and policy analysts to join us in utilizing data bases which have the capacity to provide both accurate and comprehensive descriptions of student aid and its impacts. Several projects aimed at accomplishing this goal are underway.

First, several national associations representing public and proprietary higher education institutions are following the lead of the National Institute for Independent Colleges and Universities (NIICU) in developing student aid data banks by constructing large random samples of student aid recipient records (Hodgkinson and Thrift, 1983; Stampen, 1983; Wilms, 1983).

A public higher education student aid recipient data bank was prepared by the author in 1981-82 under grants from the Ford Foundation and the Exxon Education Foundation to the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges. The author is now preparing a similar 1983-84 data base under a grant from the Ford Foundation. Appendix I shows examples of major users to date. Note that the list includes such diverse users as the American Council on Education, the Congressional Budget Office, higher education associations, major university systems, and individual institutions and the media. Projections using these data have also been used in congressional testimony and have proved capable of verifiable prediction. Other potential users are invited to participate in exploiting these valuable information sources by accessing computer tapes available through the American Council on Education Policy Analysis Service. Such a step will allow all interested users to exploit a large data base on nationally representative comparable samples of students attending public and private nonprofit colleges and universities as well as proprietary schools in the same analysis.
A second effort, also currently underway, is to develop cross-sectional and longitudinal data bases which can serve as a prototype of similar systems at the state level. For example, New York, California, Arizona and Wisconsin already have cross-sectional data bases reporting resources and expenditures for all students including aid recipients as well as students who do not receive aid. A preliminary analysis of these data bases (Stampen and Fenske, 1984) is available upon request to the author of the present article. Also Wisconsin and several other states are developing longitudinal statewide data bases enabling researchers to follow individual students over time. Such information may prove invaluable in explaining the impacts of student aid and how different kinds of students finance their college educations.

Our third effort, just beginning, is to gather information on student aid in other countries for the comparative light it will shed on our own system. This, again, will be generally available upon completion. Integration of analysis results from all three research efforts is being funded by a grant from the National Institute of Education.

The University of Wisconsin-based project has developed a team with diverse analytic and policy experiences who come to the project with sometimes sharply diverging views. Our ground rule is that every research question of interest to any one of us has to pass the scrutiny of all other team members for both policy relevance and analytical rigor. The team members are:

W. Lee Hansen (an economist with substantial experience as an evaluator of student aid and other social programs)

Marshall Smith (current Director of the Educational Research and Development Center at the University of Wisconsin, a systems analyst with policy experience as Assistant Commissioner for Policy Studies, U.S. Office of Education)

Wallace Douma (a practitioner with extensive program experience, current Director of Student Financial Aid at the University of Wisconsin)

Jacob Stampen (a policy analyst and institutional researcher with experience in the student aid area at the state and federal levels)

Although gathering universally usable data and performing prediction and other data service functions for interested users is a fundamental activity, it is not our only function. We do conduct our own analytical studies and generate our own explanatory theories. Here again, however, we think we have a valuable strategy for helping choose particularly salient policy questions and including the relevant variables. The team of researchers shall use the same data that our advocacy system clients use. In the course of our own analytic work we shall also review and comment on what others do.

We are under no illusion that we are the first ones to think of ways to improve the advocacy system’s information base. O’Neill, Rivlin, and members of Congress such as John Brademas called for this in the early 1970’s (Glazier and Wolanin, 1976). Indeed, they may have been influential to the extent that policy analysis services were later formed within government and the associations representing higher education. For example, the Congressional Budget Office was shortly afterward created to assist Congress, and data gathering and analysis have become routine functions in several higher education associations. These actions may also have
stimulated many of the earlier discussed student aid studies. They have obviously failed to stimulate the necessary impact studies, however.

We think our focus on impacts is unique and we urge others to join us in this effort to gather and compile nationally representative, easy to use and understand data bases and to conduct analyses producing the descriptive and predictive information that can inform student aid practitioners and analysts. Thus, when we produce our own analyses or review and critique the work of others, all elements of the policymaking process will be more likely to understand the basis for our conclusions.

The strategy is not without risk, of course. There remains the danger that understanding our data will not be enough to overcome resistance to our findings, should they not serve the self-interest of student aid advocates or critics. However, familiarity with our data, an open invitation to replicate (or contradict) our findings—combined with our team approach to minimizing the danger of irrelevant analyses or inappropriate variables—give us hope that our findings will generate serious consideration and provide some real assistance to those faced with the ultimate policy decisions.

References


APPENDIX I

American Council on Education

National Commission on Student Financial Assistance

Congressional Budget Office

National Institute on Education

National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges

American Association of State Colleges and Universities

American Association of Community and Junior Colleges

National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators


State government agencies.

University systems and individual institutions.

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