



Including More Student Voices in Higher Education Policymaking

Rising Tuitions and Student Debts
Mean Rising Stakes for College Students

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November 2011

Introduction and summary

The Occupy Wall Street protests highlight the difficulties that the 99 percent face in paying for a college education. The protesters call for student loan forgiveness, carrying signs that read:

- “I’m a student with \$25,000 in school loans. I am the 99 percent.”
- “I was promised the American Dream, but I am living the American Nightmare.”
- “Prostitution: The only job option available after graduation to afford my student loan debt!”

The Wall Street protesters are bringing a lot of attention to the burden student loan debt places on young Americans. Their stories are now reported often by National Public Radio, in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other major news media outlets. And though it is unclear whether these students’ voices were the impetus for his actions, their sentiments are certainly reflected in President Barack Obama’s new executive actions to relieve student loan debt. The president’s proposal would allow some students to consolidate their loans to achieve a lower interest rate, and it would change the income-based repayment program to give participating students lower monthly payments.¹

Students are quick to speak out against the high cost of tuition and the burden of student loan debt—not to mention the bleak employment situation that faces them upon graduation. And as Occupy Wall Street illustrates, students have tremendous potential to bring these issues to the forefront of the national political arena. But the problems they highlight require complex solutions that take into account the complex interplay of federal and state law as well as higher education institutional practice.

Policymakers, philanthropic foundations, and nonprofit organizations engage in policy debates on a daily basis on these problems, offering a range of long-term solutions to fix our higher education system. And though the impact of these debates would be most felt by students, they are often not a part of these conversations.

The congressional battle over the future of for-profit education is a good example. Many for-profit colleges have been abusing the trust students place in them by misrepresenting the educational services they offer and overcharging for standard educational experiences. As a result, their students end up with high student loan debt and such bleak job prospects that they cannot hope to pay their debts.²

The Department of Education took on the problems evident in the for-profit college sector through its “gainful employment” regulation. The rule requires colleges to show that their students maintain a low debt-to-income ratio and a high student loan repayment rate in order to receive access to federal financial aid programs.³

Lobbyists from for-profit colleges met the gainful employment rule with a multimillion dollar campaign that set about trying to convince legislators that the rule would unnecessarily ruin their colleges and limit access for poor and minority students.⁴ Students could have easily countered the lobbyists’ voices, telling their stories of debt and default and asking the federal government to ensure that colleges live up to the promises they make. But even though national groups that represent students led the charge to support the rule, it was incredibly hard to stir up grassroots student voices in the gainful employment debate.

The Senate was able to procure a few students to testify before Congress about their experiences at for-profit institutions, and television shows like *Dateline* rounded up a few more. But students were not exactly banging down their representatives’ doors or holding mass protests on campus. In fact, the largest showing of students was an astroturfing campaign arranged by the for-profit colleges’ lobbying groups, who paid public relations groups to write form letters for students that they submitted to the Department of Education as comments on the rule. The for-profit colleges also paid alumni such as Tiffany Derry, a *Top Chef* contestant, to speak in support of for-profit education.⁵

A powerful version of the gainful employment rule would have resulted in lower student loans. Increased pressure on for-profit colleges may even result in lower tuition prices, or at least better value for the money. So why don’t students show up to protest the way they do on Wall Street?

Strong student voices in higher education policy could help to ensure that federal, state and institutional policy makers continue to direct their reforms toward the issues that matter most to students, including tuition prices, financial aid, and the quality of the courses they offer. This report looks at the role students typically

play in higher education policy and asks whether there are ways to make students' voices a more powerful part of the higher education policy conversation. It draws from research on student activism, the accounts of students currently engaged in policy work, and examples of recent notable student movements.

This analysis points to several key policy recommendations. Federal and state governments, philanthropic foundations, and nonprofit organizations all have a role to play in building a strong student voice in higher education. *Federal policymakers should take the following actions:*

- Congress and the Department of Education should ensure significant student representation on committees and panels such as the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity, the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education board by including at least two student members, one of whom is elected by a national body that represents student governments, such as the American Student Government Association, and one of whom has demonstrated experience dealing the particular policy issues the committee will discuss
- Congress should enable greater transparency around how colleges spend money by requiring educational institutions to submit more detailed information to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System about their revenues and expenses

State policymakers should:

- Include student representatives, elected by their peers, on state higher education decision-making bodies such as those that set financial aid and university budget priorities as well as those that govern transfer and articulation
- Establish requirements for state universities to involve students in governance on the campus level

Philanthropic foundations should:

- Fund training programs that develop student leaders on higher education policy issues
- Provide support to national and regional organizations that enhance the work of student activists on higher education policy issues

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- Require grantees to communicate their findings with student groups
- Foster stronger student government by organizing a national network of student governments

As these groups work to help students magnify their voice, existing student organizations should:

- Stay in touch with the needs and desires of the students they represent through social media, grassroots organizing, and surveys to ensure that they take up issues that resonate with their fellow students
- Build consensus on the appropriate policy solutions both on campus and off campus by clearly articulating a point of view with assistance from the non-profit groups that support grassroots student action, using student publications and other media to promulgate it, and engaging with fellow students through social media
- Assess their access to power and the available policy levers to determine the most expedient route to being heard—and making change happen

In the pages that follow, this report will detail the reasons why these sets of actions would help bring student voices into the debates about their own future prospects and prosperity, and then present more fully the recommendations outlined above. The reasons to act are clear and compelling.

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