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Means and Ends

Our nation has long been committed to the proposition that education is both a private and a public good: that it benefits the individual by making him a more fully developed human being and by increasing his earning power and that it benefits the country by producing the skills and understanding that make a complex industrial democracy possible.

State and local governments have assumed the task of providing free high school education for all. But in higher education, recognition of public responsibility has not gone so far. Governments at all levels grant tax exemption to private institutions, and both state and local governments support universities and junior colleges at which the students typically pay tuition to cover a part of the educational costs.

The federal government made its first land grants to states for the support of education, including higher education, in 1787, and with the Morrill acts of 1862 and 1890 it greatly enlarged this support. Since then, the federal government has had an increasingly important effect on higher education, through loans to students, fellowships for graduate study (especially in the sciences), and contracts and grants for research and development.

The most important educational policy question for the 1960's is how to meet the coming crisis in higher education. That a crisis is on the way, no one can doubt. The number of students of college age (18 through 21) is increasing, as is the percentage of students who go to college. A study by Alice M. Rivlin, "The Role of the Federal Government in Financing Higher Education" (Brookings Institution, 1961), brings together the figures. In 1960 the number in the college age group was 9.6 million; by 1970 the number will be an estimated 14.6 million. The percentage of the college age group enrolled in college has increased more than ninefold since the turn of the century: 4 percent in 1900; 15 percent in 1940; and 38 percent in 1960. The percentage may rise to 50 in 1970. If it does, the number of students will go from the 3.7 million enrolled in 1960 to 7.6 million in 1970. If adequate facilities are to be constructed and if new faculty members are to be attracted in adequate numbers, costs will have to go up by more than a factor of 2.

How can the crisis be met? One proposal is to raise tuition sharply so that students would pay a larger share of the costs of their education. This would at the same time reduce the percentage of those who could go to college. Those opposed to this solution contend that higher fees would result in social injustice by depriving the economically underprivileged of equal opportunity for higher education and in a loss of potential talent that the country could ill afford from the standpoint either of economic growth or of national survival. Those who hold these views would resolve the debate, as Rivlin does, by urging a larger, but limited federal role: an expansion in the student loan program as carried out under the National Defense Education Act; provision of enough federal scholarships to assure that no bright but impecunious student would be barred from college for economic reasons; provision of federal funds for college buildings; and full payment of overhead costs for government-supported research and development projects.

The merit of these proposals is that they build on what is already in existence and that they neither imperil the freedom of the universities and colleges nor preclude the need for local public and private support.—G.DuS.