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EDITORIAL

The Opportunity Connection

Almost unnoticed by the media and the taxpayers of the country, a vital element in the standard of living of the United States and its commitment to fairness is being eroded. Public support of higher education as a percentage of its overall cost is constantly diminishing.

An illustrative example of this drop in funding is occurring in California, once the leader in state-supported, tuition-free higher education. Now the university gets 37% of its operating budget from the state and must make up the rest from tuition fees and alumni support. This contrasts with the situation not so long ago when a student could attend the University of California for fees of less than \$100 per semester. Wisconsin, Illinois, Washington, and other states report similar changes.

Such a decrease in support for higher education seems a poor decision for a body politic which proclaims it wants to help its less advantaged citizens. Former Mayor of Los Angeles Tom Bradley has often stated that he is a sharecropper's son who got his start by attending the University of California at Los Angeles. For those who are disadvantaged because of low income or lack of "connections," a public higher education increases the chance for obtaining good jobs and positions of leadership. For a society that is competing in a global economy, utilization of the resources of its entire citizenry, not a privileged few, is essential. Private universities, with their policies of generous scholarships, play an important role, but the public institution is a mark of the priority a society places on issues that affect its future.

Budget-makers deserve sympathy because eloquent advocates of multitudinous causes besiege them, but the issue of higher education cannot be ignored without serious repercussions. Those who talk in vague generalities about helping minorities should face the reality that the doorway to better jobs and leadership positions is a college education. That does not mean that elementary schools and high schools are unimportant, but simply that society's education responsibility does not stop at grade 12. Moreover, an increasing factor in the higher education package is the community college adult education program with classes scheduled in evening hours, an excellent device for helping the late bloomer and the able individual whose circumstances do not allow him or her to take time out from a paying job to go to college full time.

Total state support for higher education has been increasing: from \$28 billion in the 35 most populous states in 1984–1985 to \$40 billion in those states in 1993–1994. This is a good increase in absolute terms, but it is less impressive when the ravages of inflation and population increases are considered. The cry of "elitism" is sometimes raised against higher education, but, if anything, a better higher education system is anti-elitist because it tends to level the playing field between the economically advantaged, whose expectations include college preparation for a professional career, and the less advantaged, for whom a higher education provides the toe hold for a giant step upward.

Higher education is elitist in the sense that the best motivated and the most able are eligible to attend. It is anti-elitist in the sense that it is based on a universal standard of ability and not on an arbitrary requirement of whether or not a student "fits in." Fellowships are available in both public and private colleges, but a low tuition is more inviting for a youth who must face the challenge of a competitive academic atmosphere and, at the same time, answer the question, "where is the money coming from?" A lower tuition with the possibility of working one's way through may seem less daunting than a higher tuition with a relatively small statistical chance of getting a very good fellowship. In any case, the country is better off if its students have both options.

In the global economy of the future, developed nations will not choose to compete by lowering wage rates. They will choose to "go more high tech" rather than less, and that will inevitably raise the entrance requirements for new jobs that are created. Getting the best talent means not only getting the tools of the complex computer age into the brains of incoming workers, but also being sure that access to those tools is available fairly and to all.

In this case there is a symbiotic value in being fair as well as competitive. That value should not be lost in obscurity as we become obsessed with celebrity trials and baseball salaries.

Daniel E. Koshland Jr.