
Edited by ROSS FINNIE, RICHARD E. MUELLER, ARTHUR SWEETMAN and ALEX USHER. Kingston and Montreal: School of Public Policy, Queen’s University and McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008. Pp. viii, 374.

This is an interesting and important book for several reasons. First, it is yet another substantial contribution to the burgeoning literature on higher education as a major area of public policy formulation and government expenditure. A decade ago, serious studies of Canadian higher education were rare despite the widely acknowledged societal significance of university education and research. Second, Who Goes?, a study rich in data and its analysis, is an accessible, iconoclastic and important example of serious policy analysis. Unlike many studies of higher education whose focus is the grand debates about the societal role of universities and colleges, it examines the mechanics of Canadian student financial assistance and provides considerable evidence that clarifies several hotly debated policy issues. Finally, the volume breaks new ground and opens new ways of thinking about students, about student financial assistance and about perennial debates about who should, and who does, enjoy the benefits of higher education and at what cost.

The volume is a substantial one. It comprises an editors’ introduction, two major background pieces and eleven essays about access to higher education and related issues. The book urges readers to consider two major issues about higher education – access and persistence. Access refers to well-known debates about the social class distribution and, for example, gender distribution of Canadian university and college students. In other words, who goes? Persistence, a much less studied phenomenon, refers to the progress of students to completion once admitted. In other words, persistence is about who stays and who completes. The editors are adamant that a full picture and effective public policy must pay attention to both access and persistence. Canadian policy debate has been hampered by an excessive, and narrow, discussion of access.

Who Goes? takes dead aim at conventional approaches to student aid policy, which it sees as sterile and myopic. Thinking and policy-making about access focus almost exclusively on the relationship between parental income and access. Persistence is hardly ever studied. Moreover, conventional thinking pays excessive attention to financial barriers and ignores other plausible determinants of access to, and persistence in, higher education. The editors propose a richer approach that stresses more variables, probes the interplay between various forces and urges the consideration of a broad range of hitherto little examined determinants. Who Goes? examines such things as parental education, gender, and performance and motivation in high school.

In advancing a new approach, the authors rely extensively on Statistics Canada’s Youth in Transition data set. These data provide rich and unique insights. They give
policy researchers the capacity to explore students’ progress through time. Equally, they probe a number of important variables including parental education and income, attitudes towards higher education and high school performance. Finally, Youth in Transition data comprise interviews with students themselves and also with their parents and school officials. The Youth in Transition study is a treasure trove for researchers.

As noted, the volume is a substantial one. Accordingly, the following comments stress five interesting themes or conclusions. They are merely suggestive and make no pretense to exhaustiveness. First, many authors stress that parental education ultimately exerts a greater influence on access decisions than parental income, the conventional independent variable. Second, and interestingly, a careful study by David Johnson advances important findings about the impact of changing levels of college and university tuition. He concludes that varying tuitions, in recent years almost always upwards, have very little impact on either student access or persistence. His conclusion adds important insights into the sometimes raging public debate about the impact of tuition increases. Third, an impressive essay by Ross Finnie and Hanqing Theresa Qiu opens new vistas about student persistence. Their analysis notes that Canadian college and university completion rates are mediocre as conventionally measured, that is by examining, on an institutional basis, the numbers who complete programs in tightly specified times. A broader perspective, one that incorporates students who travel “non-traditional pathways,” provides more pleasing results. Non-traditional pathways include switching programs, which is now commonplace, changing institutions and taking time out, often thought off as “dropping out,” but then returning to successful completion.

Fourth, Jorgen Hansen’s excellent essay probes the impact of high school students’ involvement in school and non-school activities, notably working for remuneration, on academic achievement. His results are sobering. He concludes bluntly that “working is never beneficial” and that negative impacts increase with hours worked. A fifth important insight comes from the stimulating essay by Marc Frenette and Klarka Zeman, who probe the now often discussed issue of greater female participation in higher education. Their conclusion, based on Youth in Transition data, is that greater female participation is accounted for primarily by differences in high school marks and to a lesser degree by such things as study habits and parental expectations. As the authors put it, the clue to the gender participation puzzle might well lie in understanding why girls out-perform boys in elementary school and through the secondary school years.

Who Goes? raises many important questions and advances much interesting evidence. It must, however, be understood as an initial exploration of complex issues. As the editors and many authors note, their approach has a major virtue – it highlights the impact of many hitherto neglected forces in access and persistence and goes far beyond simple assumptions about “financial need” as primary impediments. On the other hand and again by admission of many contributors, such breadth of coverage complicates matters greatly. So many variables are now at work that their relative importance and causality become hard to gauge. Finally, as the authors note, such complexity makes policy recommendations harder not easier. As in many important areas of policy, new data and interpretations do not lead obvious policy conclusions. Should tuition be higher or lower in light of David Johnson’s findings? Should
high school students face serious policy obstacles to gaining part-time work? Are Lorne Carmichael and Ross Finnie correct when they argue for more grants for deserving students from lower-income families? How are the financial aid and student advising systems best reformed to take account of the needs of students who pursue non-traditional pathways?

This book merits close scrutiny by decision-makers and students of educational policy-making. Public administrators in general will also find it interesting as an impressive example of careful, “evidence-based” policy analysis. As a final point, a concluding chapter that delineated and analysed explicitly, even if speculatively, the major policy lessons and dilemmas that the rich data suggest, would have further strengthened the volume.

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