

# AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION, LEADERSHIP, AND POLICY

CRITICAL ISSUES AND  
THE PUBLIC GOOD

**PENNY A. PASQUE**

FOREWORD BY EDWARD P. ST. JOHN  
AND LESLEY A. REX



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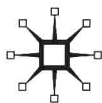
Critical Issues and the Public Good

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AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION,  
LEADERSHIP, AND POLICY

*To the next generation of college students including Cassie,  
Maggie, Brooke, Leo, Annabella, Lively, and baby Natalie.*

## FOREWORD

It is rare that a recent PhD is able to write a book that has something profound to say to the higher education community and its leadership, but in *American Higher Education, Leadership and Policy: Critical Issues and the Public Good*, Penny Pasque exceeds this high standard of contribution. Dr. Pasque has written a book that confronts and critiques the tacit assumptions of educational leaders who dominate the conversations that occur behind closed doors.

The United States is suddenly more diverse than before and, finally, has a president who represents this diversity. President Obama shows the potential for bridging the great gap between discourses controlled by the powerful and the voices that emerge from the experiences of people within the communities, schools, and colleges that make up this diverse democracy.

In her research, Dr. Pasque had access to the private conversations of high-level leaders as they discussed their images of the public good in relation to the current trajectory of higher education in this nation. Clashing images of the public good dominated these conversations, just as they have dominated the literature and public policy over the past thirty years. At best, the espoused notions that divide the public discourse are feeble attempts to reconcile the neoliberal rationales of individual gain with the need for broader access and increased funding. What becomes clear in Dr. Pasque's text is that voices of women and people of color have been systematically quieted in debates on the definitions of public good and strategies to achieve it.

The clash between the two camps of conventional values becomes evident in this outstanding book. The older notions echo through the halls of Congress and dominate the air waves, but these loud voices are no more important than deeply held concerns about inequality among diverse citizens who have been silenced for so long.

It takes powerful research to break through entrenched notions and systems of ideas and values about public good and who can speak for it. The investigation that undergirds Dr. Pasque's arguments meets that criterion. Her study takes its power from established social

science methods, while trailblazing a novel approach to designing and conducting research in higher education. She focuses on discourse—local dialogues and the societal values and beliefs that animate them. She fine-tunes her conceptual lenses to bring into view race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class in the discourse practices of heavily invested higher education gatekeepers. And, as though stopping time and holding their discourses under a microscope, she dissects their consequential meanings, laying open a view that the public has rarely been able to access, let alone scrutinize.

Through Critical Discourse Analysis, the study peers into the social identities performed and created and the values enacted and reified in the dialogues. We see not only that talk matters but also *how* it matters and to whom. By transcribing the talk that so often flies unexamined across meeting rooms, the renderings supplant the domineering influences of time and space. Moments become permanently fixed so that analytical interpretations can reveal why they matter. Dr. Pasque illuminates why talk matters during moments of reflection on what is meant by *education for the public good*. More importantly, the remarkable strength of her analysis is in the way she connects dozens, scores, hundreds of moments to illustrate how during important dialogues people and their ideas are positioned into and out of power. We are shown how having one's say is a fraught and consequential event for those with less institutional authority and their important agendas.

So how can discourse analysis, coupled with open critical reflection on the definition of the public good, help us to overcome the conflicted condition of higher education policy in the United States? As Dr. Pasque's book eloquently argues, the voices of those who have been left out must be heard, as they are the basis for informing the redefinition of the public good and how we might achieve it. It is no longer tolerable, nor economically wise, to leave people out who don't fit molds of the wealthy and powerful. The strategies used to fund and guide higher education for three decades—privatizing public colleges by emphasizing benefits to those who can pay or borrow—must be reconstructed, just as educational leaders and policymakers must take time to listen to others in the room.

We may have a new president who inspires many of us to take fresh stances on critical issues, but we still need to listen more before we throw these ideas into the discursive space of public and private meetings that shape public policy. Indeed, the president himself runs into clashes between neoliberals and neoconservatives—the dialectic of the powerful—as he attempts to create new discourses on the future

of the economy, health care, and education. As the shouting out at public forums on health care so boldly demonstrated, it is not easy to broaden the conversation, to get past old and worn out images of what works and what should not be tried. It is time for fresh thinking. Dr. Pasque's concepts of discourse illuminate possible new approaches to studying tactics used by those who attempt to change the policy conversation and public policy.

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## Introduction to the Contemporary Context

The relationships between higher education and society are changing in the twenty-first century. Changes are taking place in terms of who pays for college, who gains access to college, and the universities' role in the global marketplace. For example, there have been decreases in public support for higher education (KRC Consulting, 2002; McMahon, 2009; Porter, 2002) and in state funding for public colleges and universities (Brandl & Holdsworth, 2003; Cage, 1991; Hansen, 2004), at a time when state and federal policies have linked higher education to the market in order to create jobs and increase economic viability (Bok, 2003; Jafee, 2000; Slaughter & Rhoades, 1996, 2004).

Recent national and global economic changes have caused ripple effects beyond Wall Street and Main Street; the ramifications have reached what I term Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevards across urban areas and College Avenues from coast to coast. Paul Krugman (2009), recipient of the 2008 Nobel Prize in economics, characterizes the situation this way:

I'm tempted to say that the crisis is like nothing we've ever seen before. But it might be more accurate to say that it's like everything we've seen before, all at once: a bursting real estate bubble comparable to what happened in Japan at the end of the 1980s; a wave of bank runs comparable to those in the early 1930s (albeit mainly involving the shadow banking system rather than conventional banks); a liquidity trap in the United States, again reminiscent of Japan; and, most recently, a disruption of international capital flows and a wave of currency crises all too reminiscent of what happened to Asia in the late 1990s. (p. 165–166)

These “all at once” effects on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and College Avenue are less of a focus in the mainstream media, but the

crisis has nonetheless impacted the daily lives of people across the United States. The economic issues are forcing many students, potential students, and parents to weight their academic options in ways like never before as articles with titles such as “Why Don’t Colleges Cut Costs, Tuition?” (Erb, 2009) and “What Is a Masters Degree Worth?” (Taylor et al., 2009) flood local newspapers across the country.

Although some crises have improved since 2008 and 2009, the ramifications of the economic downturn on College Avenue remain and include the reduction of endowments, furloughs, the rising costs of college, students’ ability to pay, cancelation of student-centered co-curricular programs, and the struggle for survival of the local college town gift shop, to name a few. This shift, however, began prior to the recent economic changes and is reflected in an increase in the commercialization of higher education and academic capitalism (Bok, 2003; Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Kerr, 1963/2001; Kezar, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 1996) during an era of conservative modernization (Apple, 2006). Public institutions are mirroring aspects of for-profit online institutions, dining halls often moonlight as catering businesses, summer camps are stuffed in residence halls, and faculty compete increasingly for external dollars tied to market-related research (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). In conjunction with these pressures, educational equity issues have been devalued in policy discourse in order to focus on economic worth and rationalize public funding for higher education (St. John, 2007; St. John & Hu, 2006).

Moreover, recent state budget cutbacks, “along with the declining share of state funding devoted to higher education, suggest that state colleges and universities have reason to be concerned about the reliability of government support” (Lee & Cleary, 2004, p. 34) and this concern grows with each budget cycle as higher education allocations will continue to decrease throughout the next decade (Jones, 2002). As Zemsky (2005) points out,

State governments...have consistently used market forces to solve their own short-term budgetary shortfalls by driving up the prices that publicly owned colleges and universities charge. This result occurs every time the business cycle reduces state revenues and forces state governments to choose between reducing state services and increasing state taxes. What the governor and legislature rediscover at that moment is that prisoners don’t pay rent, Medicaid recipients can’t pay much for health care, and public schools can’t charge tuition. But, thankfully, publicly funded colleges can. (p. 279)

Such influences put incredible pressure on college and university leaders for economic survival and on state legislators to create policies that increase the number of high school graduates, improve college access, and promote graduation from college in order to increase states' "education capital" and economic development. States have decreased financial support for public colleges and universities as they have expanded demands for accountability (Tierney, 2006a). This "accountability triangle" includes state priorities, academic concerns, and market forces (Burke, 2005). Some argue that each point of the triangle holds a contradictory position, where reductive accountability from the state focuses on centralization and control whereas autonomy maintains academic freedom, but others argue the constructs are negotiable (Dee, 2006).

In addition to this financial retrenchment and political directive, disparities regarding who has access to college remain. For example, Carnevale and Fry (2001) found that in 1997, nearly 80 percent of high school graduates from high-income families went directly on to higher education, while only 50 percent of high school graduates from low-income families went on to higher education. In the same year they found that 46 percent of college-age white high school graduates were enrolled in college, whereas only 39 percent of African American and 36 percent of Latina/o high school graduates were enrolled in college. However, these statistics speak nothing of the high school graduation rates for students of the same populations, where, in 2000, 77 percent of African Americans in the 18–24 age group completed high school and only 59.6 percent of Latina/os completed high school (American Council on Education [ACE], 2002). In light of these statistics, approximately 39 percent of 77 percent of all 18–24-year-old African Americans (30 percent total) and 36 percent of 59.6 percent of all 18–24-year-old Latina/os (21 percent total) were enrolled in postsecondary education<sup>1</sup>—a much smaller proportion than any one statistic reveals alone.

US statistics reported by the Pathways to College Network (2004) are just as compelling. They state that by their late twenties more than one-third of whites have at least a bachelor's degree but only 18 percent of African Americans and 10 percent of Latina/os have attained degrees. These statistics may change dramatically over the next 15 years when 1–2 million additional young adults will be seeking access to higher education and a large proportion of the potential students in this group will be students of color from low-income families (Carnevale & Fry, 2001), albeit which institutions of postsecondary education they would have access to is not always fully addressed



and may continue to perpetuate current inequities (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Hurtado & Wathington, 2001).

Further, a perceptual gap continues to exist between students across race which has a direct impact on academic and life decisions. When comparing student perceptions of their academic performance, the importance of obtaining a high GPA declines over the college years for all ethnic groups (Sidanusw, Levan, van Laar, & Sears, 2008). In addition, discounting academic feedback and disidentification from academics increases significantly for all students, particularly for African American students. There is also a higher level of doubt about individual academic performance in African American and Latina/o students than in white students. Moreover, access to college by people from middle- and lower-income families has been sharply reduced in recent years (McMahon, 2009).

To address such concerns about college access, the government has taken a number of national initiatives such as President Obama's American Graduation Initiative (2009), which focuses on community colleges and has set goals such as redirecting \$12 billion for community colleges over the next 10 years, increasing the number of students from 5 to 10 million by 2020, instilling policies and processes that make it easier to transfer (a lesson learned from the Bologna Agreement), modernizing facilities, and establishing more online classes. More pointedly, support structures and barriers that influence access to higher education continue to shift. This shift has led contemporary theorists, practitioners, and legislators to attempt to understand higher education's current role in contemporary society and how higher education may help to increase access to college during a time of economic change as well as address the world's problems: higher education and the public good.

Friedman (2008) sums up the world's problems:

It is getting hot, flat, and crowded. That is, global warming, the stunning rise of the middle classes all over the world and rapid population growth have converged in a way that could make our planet dangerously unstable. In particular, the convergence of hot, flat and crowded is tightening energy supplies, intensifying the extinction of plants and animals, deepening energy poverty, strengthening petro-dictatorship, and accelerating climate change. How we address these interwoven global trends will determine a lot about the quality of life on earth in the twenty-first century. (p. 5)

I take the position that higher education needs to play an instrumental role in researching and addressing myriad issues facing the