

A Tale of Two Solutions to the College Affordability Crisis

Dissertation Abstract

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In recent decades college degrees have become both more necessary and less affordable, resulting in a growing crisis of college affordability. This study examines two very different and prominent approaches to this crisis. One approach entails the provision of “merit-based” aid – that is, aid based on students’ academic achievement and not based on students’ economic circumstances. The other entails the provision of “free-college” or “free-tuition” – that is, aid available to all and based neither on academic achievement, nor on economic circumstances. Both approaches have become hugely popular, are subject to large literatures, and have been widely implemented across the nation. However, while these two approaches appear to be clear opposites, it is unclear how they actually differ in what they seek to achieve, their underlying values and assumptions, who they serve or do not serve, and with what degree of success.

My objective is to utilize a sociological theoretical perspective to examine and compare the 1.) context and genesis, 2.) the goals, values, methods and 3.) the consequences, of the above two college-aid approaches. I do so by focusing on two states, Georgia and Tennessee, that were the first in the U.S to implement statewide examples, respectively, of the merit-based and free tuition models of college-aid. In my study, their programs serve as side-by-side case studies of the two approaches to college financial aid. My study utilizes and analyzes both qualitative and quantitative data drawn from a variety of source materials. This includes content analyses of archival materials – newspaper articles from major regional newspapers and video recordings from Tennessee General Assembly legislative sessions and committee meetings regarding the creation of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship. In addition, I assemble and interpret descriptive quantitative data, from national and state databases, on trends in associated outcomes, such as college enrollment, college tuition, state expenditures on financial aid, students receiving aid, and student debt.