

Folbre, N. (2010). *Saving State U: Why We Must Fix Public Higher Education*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Review by Ken Martin

Nancy Folbre is professor of economics at the University of Massachusetts. In her book *Saving State U*, she provides an insightful overview of the history of support and funding for public higher education, with special attention to the period following the creation of the land-grant university system in 1862 through the Morrill Act. She also details the many political and economic factors that have influenced higher education funding and support since then. Folbre notes the role that public higher education has played in addressing and solving societal problems. Still, she is concerned with what she describes as an inefficient and unfair system that partially subsidizes higher education in the United States. Folbre presents a rationale for fixing or saving public higher education and offers ideas for financially supporting it.

Folbre argues that a commitment to low-cost public education helps to maintain a social contract that is especially important for equal opportunity. However, national trends, brought about by recent changes in the political environment, have resulted in an extended period of reduced support for public higher education accompanied by a deterioration in the quality of undergraduate programs. The reduced support is a result of inefficient public spending and tax cuts. These factors have combined to negatively impact the funds available for public higher education.

Folbre equates taxpayer funding of higher education and other social programs (e.g., Social Security and Medicare) to intergenerational transfers that contribute to the public good. From her perspective, public higher education contributes to the vision of the commons where community resources are owned and shared in common by public and private interests. In the early years of public higher education, following passage of the Morrill Act and halfway into the 20th century, state universities enrolled students who would not have been able to afford college by keeping tuition and fees low, in contrast to the higher costs of private institutions. Public funding and support was strong, and was further bolstered by the GI Bill for veterans. Passed into law in 1944, the legislation provided GIs with tuition reimbursements and stipends while attending college.

In the 1980s, public opinion turned against public funding for deficit spending and social programs, including public higher education. By 2005, state and local expenditures for public colleges and universities, when adjusted for inflation, were at the lowest levels in 25 years. According to Folbre, factors leading to this turn in public opinion were tax cuts for the wealthy, more taxpayer dollars going to prisons, and the financing directed toward supporting two wars. Folbre suggests that this led to greater economic and cultural segregation, which was manifested in private schools and gated communities. In addition, the emergence of anti-tax groups, changes in the global economy, and corporate mobility all contributed to reduced tax revenues at all levels of government. As a consequence, the United States no longer provides the majority of the world's highest educated labor force. The U.S.'s share of the world's doctorates produced has declined from 50% to less than 20%.

Today, public higher education faces new challenges and competition from for-profit universities and on-line education options. In response, public universities are increasingly relying on research grants and contracts, out-of-state students' tuition payments, and salary savings from employing more adjunct and part-time instructors than tenure-track faculty.

The reader will note that throughout the book, Folbre references the public good aspects of higher education. A college degree, for instance, equates to economic security in terms of employment and income. With the rising costs of higher education and increasingly stringent admissions standards, a college degree is becoming unattainable for many middle- and lower-income Americans, a restriction that will lead to a widening gap in socioeconomic inequality over time. Folbre makes the key point that public higher education produces more than diplomas. Higher education develops capabilities that students can deploy as citizens, friends, parents, and partners. She notes that taxpayers pay for K-12 education and partially subsidize higher education in return for contributions to the public good. However, Folbre does not connect these contributions to more recent efforts of universities to contribute to the public good through outreach and engagement.

Folbre presents a readable account of the history of the development of public higher education in the United States and the factors influencing the funding and support for public universities over the last 150 years. What is missing, for those interested in the future support and financial solvency of public higher education, are ideas on how university-community engagement helps solve problems facing communities and society. A discussion thread linking the

importance of outreach and engagement to the opportunities provided by public higher education would have provided the reader with insights on arguing the case for accessible and affordable public higher education. Many colleges and universities support university-community engagement for the service-learning opportunities it can offer students. The increasing popularity of higher education outreach and engagement may change the perception of public higher education from public revenue burden to worthwhile public investment supporting the concept of the “common good.”

About the Reviewer

Ken Martin is chair of the Department of Extension and associate director of programs at The Ohio State University. He earned his bachelor’s degree from Eastern Mennonite College, and both his master’s degree and Ph.D. from The Pennsylvania State University. Martin’s research and publications have focused on various rural development topics, including health care, economic development, policy, local government finance, and leadership.

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