Despite the best efforts and intentions of all of the major players involved in federal higher education policy, a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act is unlikely this year. There is simply not enough time left on the congressional calendar, nor is there evidence of substantial consensus on policy direction for a bill to actually work its way to the president’s desk in this, the 50th anniversary of the enactment of the original. In fact, as improbable as reauthorization is in 2015, it is even more so next year—a politically charged presidential election year—or the next, the first year of a new administration.

However, we should not be demoralized or disappointed at the dim prospects of reauthorization this year. An expanded window should energize all of us to push for a radical departure from the incrementalism of the policy course we have followed for decades. After half-a-century, the Higher Education Act needs a major overhaul based on a fresh assessment of where we are as a nation, not a minor tune-up based on custom and habit. Let me explain.

There is no doubt that Lyndon Johnson’s vision of improved opportunity for all Americans radically changed—and improved—both higher education and America in numerous ways. Not only did access to postsecondary education and training vastly increase as a direct result of federal support, higher education mitigated many of the historical inequities in our society. Students who once thought college was beyond their reach—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds—found that the path to a brighter future was not closed. The expansion of opportunity made ours at once a more just and a more productive and prosperous society. But, as with all successful efforts, their early effectiveness may have vested the basic design of the federal programs with a post facto appearance of inevitability. Features that might have been designed differently—or at least devised better—take on the appearance of integral and non-negotiable components that can only be tweaked around the margins. It is fair to say that the successive reauthorizations after 1973 have largely consisted of tactical rearrangements of pre-existing policy provisions. This is not to deny the fact that some of these have been consequential, but it is to observe that the policy-vocabulary for program improvement has been severely limited.

While following a historical path is not, in itself, objectionable, the comfort of the familiar should never overwhelms the need for course-correction in light of changed circumstances. In this connection, the failure of federal policy to address the privatization of the public sector is the single greatest design defect in previous attempts at improving the Higher Education Act. Indeed, all the other marginal policy refinements—innovation, simplification, consumer information, etc.—resemble rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic unless federal policy can be radically overhauled to keep the states at the table. Absent a reversal of the 30-year trend of state disinvestment, the iceberg ahead—escalating and unsustainable college costs—will surely sink the ship. Early evidence of economic impact is already in: some $1.4 trillion in outstanding educational debt, much of it to fill the financial gap between tuition hikes forced by withdrawal of state support and stagnating wages.

When AASCU proposed a detailed Federal-State Matching Grant program nearly two years ago, many dismissed the idea as too radical a shift to be adopted. But not only has the idea taken root in several legislative iterations and become mainstream thinking in higher education policy circles, it is now part and parcel of several higher education proposals by presidential candidates. I strongly believe we have a partnership solution that will keep our institutions what they have always been and forever ought to be: engines of opportunity and gateways of entry into the middle class. The extended window for reauthorization of the higher education financing system, far from being an inconvenience, should be viewed as a great opportunity for us to make our case on behalf of this important policy improvement to Congress. America’s students deserve no less.

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