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Critical Book Review of *Merit Aid and the Politics of Education*

Lower state appropriations and higher tuition are common features of today's higher education landscape. For the past fifteen years, a significant number of state legislatures have responded to these fiscal problems with merit-based financial aid programs. Erik C. Ness's 2008 publication, *Merit Aid and the Politics of Education*, aims to explain how states determine eligibility criteria for merit-based financial aid programs and how three conceptual public policy frameworks inform the eligibility criteria determination process. In his book, Ness advances a number of key themes and major arguments. The strengths and weaknesses of these arguments will be presented and discussed in relation to key themes of higher education.

Before I begin this analysis, I believe it is important to discuss my rationale in choosing this book for a critical review. I work to recruit and admit high achieving high school students for an honors program at a large state university. Merit-based scholarships are an essential tool for recruiting these students. In choosing this book, I hoped to learn about state-run merit-based financial aid programs. This book goes in a different direction than I expected. It focuses on the political processes that led to the adoption of eligibility criteria for three different states' merit-based financial aid programs. Moreover, Ness is primarily interested in understanding and crafting a new theoretical framework for understanding the public policy processes. *Merit Aid and the Politics of Education* is built heavily on political science and public policy concepts, which are new learning areas for me.

Ness's major argument is that a new conceptual public policy framework best describes the political process used to determine scholarship eligibility criteria. The new conceptual framework is built mainly on the multiple stream public policy framework, but also includes key elements of the advocacy coalition and the electoral connection public policy frameworks (all concepts he explains in detail). While this is Ness's major argument, I believe it is less thematically related to the central themes of this course than some of his other major arguments and key findings. As it is his major argument, attention must be paid. The new conceptual public policy framework Ness constructs is complicated, but a few parts have particular relevance for students of higher education. First, if an interested politician takes up the cause of a state-run merit-based student financial aid program and if a policy window opens allowing for the issue to be dealt with, then a higher education policy expert can help shape the discussion and outcome by providing information (Ness, 2008). Ness's new conceptual public policy framework is strong in recognizing the complicated nature of legislation. Additionally, his emphasis on public policy frameworks helped me realize that higher education policy is not shaped solely by higher education administrators, but more so by politicians.

Now that attention has been paid to Ness's major argument concerning public policy frameworks, I will work to examine themes of higher education that he discusses. State-run merit-based financial aid programs now exist in thirteen states, including Michigan. Some of the major reasons they were developed include improving high school academic performance, providing access, keeping strong students in state for their postsecondary education and improving the state's eventual work force (Ness 2008). Some states have been more strongly concerned with one or another of these factors, which led that state to the way it shaped its eligibility criteria. Access to higher education is a key theme of this course. We are exploring

how and why certain peoples have gained access to higher education. Ness explains that most state-run merit-based financial aid programs have eligibility criteria that do not greatly improve access for low-income or minority students (2008). Higher education institutions have usually encouraged the policy-makers to take this issue into account and use the designated financial resources for need-based student financial aid programs, but to no avail. Even while need-based financial aid programs have gone under funded, state governments have created these merit-based financial aid programs (Ness 2008). Higher education institutions have failed in advocating for state-run need-based financial aid programs because they lack long-standing and stable policy coalitions - an issue I will more fully explore in the next section. Accordingly, most states have adopted merit-based financial aid programs with criteria that reward high achieving students, the majority of whom already have access to higher education.

Long-standing and stable policy coalitions do not exist among higher education institutions in the three states Ness examined-New Mexico, West Virginia and Tennessee. Additionally, the higher education systems of some of these states are highly decentralized. As Ness suggests, higher education institutions must do a better job of advocacy coalition-forming and maintaining strong alliances-in order to more forcefully influence politicians. Only then, will higher educations institutions be able to advocate for need-based financial aid programs, and resultantly, more universal student access. In relation to a theme of this course, actors in higher education administration must not only consider organization within an institution, but across institutions. A recent example in Michigan can illustrate this point. Just as institutions in New Mexico, West Virginia and Tennessee loosely banded together once a statewide policy issue was raised so did higher education institutions across Michigan in response to Proposal 2. The policy coalition in Michigan was not strong and did seem to have a clear voice. In other arenas,

Michigan higher education institutions seem to have a relatively strong policy coalition.

Michigan State University, University of Michigan and Wayne State University have been working together in recent years to advocate for more state funding for the research that these three universities do. The origination of these policy coalitions and the possibility for their broadening, continuance, strengthening and increased stability is an area of significant importance.

A reoccurring theme of *Merit Aid and the Politics of Education* is the states' motives for legislating merit-based financial aid programs. For all three states Ness chronicles, the primary motivation is not solely the betterment of the states' youth or higher education, but also the creation of state controlled lotteries. Each state wanted to pass a new lottery or gain state control of a preexisting lottery and attached the merit-based financial aid program to the new lottery generated revenue source. The politicians involved "used the rationale of a public good to assuage the opponents' concern with the proliferation of state-supported gaming" (Ness 2008, 126). Ness does not say that there was no political concern for students and higher education, as each state had one or more very passionate policy actors, but these state-run merit-based financial aid programs would never have been passed unless they were attached to the lotteries, and the state-run lotteries would never have been passed unless they were attached to a higher good, such as state-run merit-based financial aid programs. This concept of passing a relatively economically focused piece of state legislation by tying it to the higher good of education has been seen before in higher education. In relation to the Land Grant Universities, Johnson states "If land grants were not new as a device for educational support, neither were they resorted to for purely educational reasons. Education was often the legitimizing factor, while the real objective

was something else” (1997, 223). Key concurs: [E]conomics was the chief motivation behind the establishment of American land-grant universities” (1996, 199).

A possible weakness of Ness’s book is its narrow focus. Ness chooses three of the thirteen states that have enacted state-run merit-based financial aid programs. In relation to themes of this course, it would be helpful to examine this issue in an international context. Have other countries developed similar programs? What have the public policy frameworks been in those countries? How have higher education institutions been more effective in working with politicians to advance institutional goals? This question may not be relevant because of the very drastic differences between the higher education system of the United State and other countries, but Ness’s narrow scope is worth acknowledging.

While on its’ surface *Merit Aid and the Politics of Education* is primarily an account of public policy, its’ underlying themes relate closely with the themes of higher education. Ness’s primary arguments, findings and policy implications are most helpful for a political scientist, but the subject matter he is dealing with-higher education funding-is most certainly worthwhile reading for students of higher education. By thinking deeply and critically about common themes seen in both state-run merit-based financial aid programs and other elements of the history of higher education, we are able to more fully appreciate the issues and work towards a better future.

Reference List

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