The 1947 President's Commission on Higher Education offers insight into higher education policy in the United States. This article reviews and assesses the adoption of its policy recommendations in two key areas: 1) improving college access and equity and 2) expanding the role of community colleges.

The report of the President's Commission on Higher Education ([PCHE], 1947) has been called “prescient” (Reuben & Perkins, 2007, p. 265), “audacious” (Kennedy, 1952, p. vi), and “stirring” (Huntinghurst, 1948/1952, p. 62) as well as “confused, confusing, and contradictory” (Hutchins, 1948/1952, p. 81). Its pages generated debate over philosophy, policy, access, and much more. However, despite the vigorous deliberations that swirled around the report among leading intellectuals of the era, its immediate destiny was to be held in limbo at the federal level because it “had neither the precedent nor the presidential clout to work its way into Congressional subcommittees” (Thelin, 2004, p. 270). Nonetheless, the Truman Commission created, arguably for the first time, a national rhetoric on higher education policy (Hutcheson, 2002). This is not to say that all of the Commission’s recommendations have been adopted to date, but its long-term impact on higher education has been substantial.


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The Journal of Higher Education, Vol. 84, No. 3 (May/June) Copyright © 2013 by The Ohio State University
Though scholars have reviewed the degree to which the report’s recommendations have been implemented in a general sense, or have focused upon its implementation in certain areas (e.g., Hutcheson, 2002; Hutcheson, 2007; Kim & Rury, 2007; Reuben & Perkins, 2007), there is a dearth of comprehensive policy analysis conducted on a recommendation-by-recommendation basis of the degree to which the Commission’s policy vision has been adopted. Our article aims to contribute to the scholarship in this area. The Commission offers us a lens through which we can view and understand the trajectory of U.S. thinking about higher education policy from the end of World War II to the present day. In this article, we describe the Commission’s policy recommendations in two key areas: 1) improving college access and equity and 2) expanding the role of community colleges. For both areas of recommendations, we then analyze how subsequent federal policy initiatives have evolved since the publication of the report. In reviewing this trajectory, we are able to form conclusions about the report’s degree of implementation and potential for future adoption. The use, or non-use, of the report’s policy suggestions has implications for the evolution of U.S. higher education and, given the current financial crisis and the resulting instability and uncertainty facing higher education in both the public and private sectors today, it is especially important that we understand the manner in which this founding policy document has been utilized, adapted, or disregarded.

Access and Equity in American Higher Education

A key recommendation of the Commission with respect to college access was that the college-going rate in the U.S. should double by 1960 (Vol. I, p. 41). The Commission realized, however, that the cost of college, even in 1947, was a barrier to many students. As a result, they argued that the nation was depriving itself of a vast pool of potential leaders and socially competent citizens by allowing access based on economic status to be perpetuated. To move toward a solution to this disparity, in one of its most controversial recommendations that led to accusations of totalitarianism (Farrell, 1949/1952), the Commission suggested that it was time for the federal government to play a more prominent role in higher education and provide a large amount of financial assistance to help level the playing field for access. The Commission’s recommendations about increasing access were also tied to its concern over making public education equally available to all students regardless of their race, creed, sex, or national origin.
The Commission’s View of Access Issues

Much of the Commission’s motives were driven by its finding that access to higher education in the post-World War II era was not equitable. There were also concerns that the capacity of higher education, both in the number of seats in colleges and universities and the location of the institutions themselves, was insufficient to meet growing demand. The Commission was clear that equity in access did not mean that every potential student should receive the same higher education opportunity. It acknowledged that different forms of postsecondary education should be made available, based on the skills, prior training, and capabilities students brought with them. The aim was simply that criteria used for admitting students into colleges and universities should be justifiable and related to the academic program, not used to discriminate.

While acknowledging that students’ preparation for and ability to enroll in higher education was directly related to the quality of their elementary and secondary education, the Commission emphasized that finances were the primary barrier faced by students from lower-income families: “This Commission concludes that the decision as to who shall go to college is at present influenced far too much by economic considerations” (Vol. II, p. 16). It decreed that the only factors that should limit enrollment were the ability and interest of the student.

In contrast to much of the focus of higher education’s role in society today, which is dominated by the economic development imperative of colleges and universities, the Truman Commission emphasized at least as equally—and arguably even more so—the equity arguments for improving college access:

It is the responsibility of the community, at the local, State, and National levels, to guarantee that financial barriers do not prevent any able and otherwise qualified young person from receiving the opportunity for higher education. There must be developed in this country the widespread realization that money expended for education is the wisest and soundest of investments in the national interest. The democratic community cannot tolerate a society based upon education for the well-to-do alone. If college opportunities are restricted to those in the higher income brackets, the way is open to the creation and perpetuation of a class society which has no place in the American way of life. (Vol. II, p. 23)

The language here is quite clear; it evokes the relationship between investments in higher education and economic development. But it also emphasizes the risk to equity and opportunity of continuing a system where the economic status of a student and her family is the critical factor in determining whether or not she goes to college.
Specific Recommendations for Expanding Access

The Truman Commission established specific benchmarks for how rapidly enrollment in higher education should grow at each level. It based its recommendation on the determination that at least 49 percent of the population had “the mental ability to complete 14 years of schooling with a curriculum of general and vocational studies that should lead either to gainful employment or to further study at a more advanced level” (Vol. I, p. 41). In addition, 32 percent of the population was determined to have the talents to be able to attain a baccalaureate degree or advanced degree.

Using these data, the Commission recommended that by 1952 and 1960, enrollments in higher education should grow to a level of at least 3.9 and 4.6 million students, respectively, from a level of 2.4 million in 1947—of which approximately 1 million were veterans returning to college under the G.I. Bill (Vol. I, pp. 25, 43). The 4.6 million students in 1960 should include 2.5 million students in the first two years of postsecondary education, 1.5 million in years 3 and 4 of college, and 600,000 students in graduate programs.

The Commission made a number of recommendations that it foresaw would serve to increase enrollments and help the nation achieve these goals. The major recommendations included:

- Ending discrimination based on race, which at the time was largely defined as “Negro” students who suffered from segregated educational systems in most of the southern states. At the time of the report, although these students represented 10 percent of the population of the country, they comprised only 3.1 percent of enrollments in higher education, of whom 85 percent attended segregated institutions (Vol. II, p. 31);
- Ending religious discrimination, which during the era of the Truman Commission was focused on Jewish students;
- Eliminating “antifeminism” (Vol. II, p. 40), which the Commission noted was largely rooted in graduate and professional education; and
- Eliminating financial barriers through the development of national scholarship (for undergraduate education) and fellowship (for graduate) programs.

The Commission’s recommendations about who should go to college were among its most controversial (Freeland, 1992), and it took more than double the Commission’s desired time frame of the 1960s to achieve having the kind of student enrollments in higher education
envisioned in the report (Kim & Rury, 2007). There are two sources of data on college enrollments during the 1960s: 1) the Office of Education in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (the predecessor to the Department of Education) and 2) the Current Population Survey (CPS), a nationally representative survey conducted by the United States Census Bureau and begun in 1955. The CPS data indicate that in the fall of 1960, enrollments in higher education totaled 3.57 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The Department of Education does not provide enrollment data for the fall of 1960, but the average of fall enrollment figures from 1959 and 1961 was 3.89 million students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010, Table 189).² While the nation did not reach these targets by 1960, accomplishment of these enrollment levels was not far off. The CPS data show enrollments reached 4.6 million by 1964, and the Office of Education data by 1963.

What caused the nation to miss these targets, albeit by only a few years? There are a number of factors that influence enrollments in higher education, so it is impossible to point to a single reason for the shortfall.³ But we can examine progress made on the recommendations noted above which the commission had felt were necessary prerequisites for college enrollment to grow as it recommended.

Ending Racial Discrimination. The Commission’s recommendations on moving to dismantle racial discrimination in the United States were particularly divisive in 1947 America—so much so that four Commission members in the section on racial discrimination inserted a “statement of dissent” (Vol. II, p. 29). This statement included these words in response to the Commission’s recommendation about ending racial segregation in higher education:

But we believe that efforts toward these ends must, in the South, be made within the established patterns of social relationships, which require separate educational institutions for whites and Negroes . . . [A] doctrinaire position which ignores the facts of history and the realities of the present is not one that will contribute constructively to the solution of difficult problems of human relationships. (Vol. II, p. 29)

America in the 1940s was a country that had begun moving towards a tipping point on discrimination. For one, the 1930s was a period of productive litigation against segregation throughout by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP, 2012), which continued to play a major role in the fight for civil rights in the United States. Additionally, the Commission’s report coincided with another publication on civil rights in 1947, which was the report of the Presi-
dent’s Committee on Civil Rights also chartered by Truman. This committee’s report, *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights* (Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, 2012), was explicitly focused on ways to improve and safeguard the civil rights of Americans. Unforeseen by these committees in 1947 was the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which overturned the doctrine of separate but equal public education that had been the law since the Court’s ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). While *Brown* applied to public higher education institutions as well as elementary and secondary schools, the reality is that desegregation of the higher education systems in many of the southern states dragged on for decades as neither the public nor higher education officials were particularly interested in rectifying the status quo. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 during the Johnson Administration, along with aggressive enforcement of both this law and the *Brown* decision as they applied to public higher education during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, helped to provide more opportunities for African American and other racial minority students who historically had been underrepresented in postsecondary education.

Even with these actions, however, minority students still remain underrepresented in college and university enrollments and educational attainment. Figure 1 shows the proportion of high school graduates enrolling in college within a year of graduation by racial group, beginning in 1973, the first year of data available. Between the time of the Commission’s report and 1973, great progress had been made in equalizing educational opportunity for African American students, to the point where their enrollment rate lagged behind that of white students by only six percentage points. Hispanic students attended college in the 1970s at approximately the same rate as white students. Over the ensuing three and a half decades, both African American and Hispanic students lost ground to white students. While the college-going rates of all three groups rose, the gap between white and African American and Hispanic students increased to approximately 14 and 8 percentage points, respectively, in 2007.

Another way of looking at racial progress is to compare the Truman Commission’s proportionality measure that Negroes represented 10 percent of the nation’s population in 1947, but only 3.1 percent of college enrollments. In 2008, African Americans represented 13.5 percent of postsecondary enrollments, the same proportion in which they are represented in the population of the country. So by this measure, they have achieved proportionality in comparison to their status during the
Figure 1. Enrollment Rate of High School Graduates in College, 1973–2007

Note. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2010), Table 201. African American and Hispanic rates are 3-year moving averages, due to smaller sample sizes.
post-World War II era. But this progress has to be considered in light of other measures that show that African American (and Hispanic students as well) are not as likely to graduate from college once enrolled (Carey, 2005).

Ending Religious Discrimination. The Commission noted that “Jewish students, however, do not have equal opportunity with non-Jewish students in the choice of institutions and in certain fields of advanced study” (Vol. II, p. 37). The Commission was responding to what at the time had been well-documented evidence of this discrimination against Jewish students throughout the first half of the 20th century. Even in the most elite private institutions, however, this practice had begun to be abandoned during World War II because of a shortage of applicants. Karabel (2005) showed that the percentage of Jewish students at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton—three of the nation’s most elite institutions—climbed during the war. By the post-World War II era, and in some cases prompted by state laws banning religious discrimination in college admissions, private institutions began to eliminate their practice of asking for students’ religion on applications for admission (Karabel, 2005; Freeland, 1992). These actions, more than the prodding of the Truman Commission, most likely were successful in eliminating systematic discrimination against Jewish students.

Eliminating “Antifeminism.” The Commission indicated that barriers to women existed primarily at the graduate level of postsecondary education. During World War II, women represented a large proportion of the undergraduate population, but veterans returning to college under the G.I. Bill pushed female enrollment down to just 32 percent of the total in 1947 (Vol. II, p. 40).

The enrollment of women in college was no doubt aided by passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which besides prohibiting discrimination based on race, as noted above, also prohibited discrimination based on gender. While not targeted specifically at students in postsecondary educational programs, the Act nonetheless brought to the forefront of society issues of gender discrimination in general. The ability of educational institutions to discriminate against women was statutorily prohibited through passage of Title IX of the Higher Education Act (HEA), included in the 1972 amendments to HEA.

The growing enrollment and success of women in higher education in recent decades has been well documented (see, for example, Karen, 2002). Data from the Department of Education indicate that women represented 57 percent of all college students in 2008, with their pro-
portional enrollment in graduate education even higher, at 59 percent (NCES, 2010, Table 194). These aggregate numbers, however, mask the fact that women remain underrepresented in degrees awarded in key STEM disciplines such as computer science, physical sciences, engineering, and math (NCES, 2010, Table 275).

**Eliminating Financial Barriers.** None of the Truman Commission’s recommendations regarding expanding access to higher education received more attention—and arguably, subsequent policy response—than did that of eliminating the financial barriers to higher education. The quotation from Volume 2 of the report printed earlier—“It is the responsibility of the community, at the local, State, and National levels, to guarantee that financial barriers do not prevent any able and otherwise qualified young person from receiving the opportunity for higher education” (p. 23)—set out the responsibilities for achieving this recommendation.

In the first decade following the issuance of the Truman Commission’s report, the only major federal initiative in providing financial assistance to students was the G.I. Bill. The impact of the G.I. Bill should not be understated (and has been well documented by Greenberg, 1997, and Bennett, 1996, for example), but its benefits were, of course, available only to veterans of World War II. And while the bill has been shown to have played a large role in the increase in college enrollments after the war, there is also evidence that its effects were not equal for all groups, such as black veterans residing in the south (Turner & Bound, 2003).

Beyond the G.I. Bill, the first major federal initiative in funding for students in higher education was the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958, which had a limited impact for students in certain disciplines. Its major value was symbolic. As Mumper (1996) describes, the preamble to the NDEA legislation describes college opportunity and access, in general, as being important to the security of the country. In fact, it was not until eighteen years after the commission’s report, and the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965, that the federal government initiated a broad-based access effort by working to erode cost-based barriers to college (TG Research and Analytical Services, 2005). The structure of the HEA is intrinsically tied to the way in which the role of the federal government in higher education policy was finally defined. Title IV of the HEA clarified the role the federal government would play in higher education. The language in the preamble to Title IV echoed the language of the Truman Commission report that was cited earlier:
As the most extensive of the HEA measures, Title IV began the first widely available program of postsecondary student aid through grants and federally-insured loans. The Educational Opportunity Grants (EOG) were awarded to institutions via the states, with determination of who would receive the grants left in the hands of the higher education institutions. The legislation also created guaranteed student loans that were offered directly to students to be used at the institution of their choice. While the structure of the grant and loan programs was designed to be fairly universal, funding for the EOG program was very constrained, so the impact of the grants on access was minimal.

The 1972 reauthorization of the HEA replaced EOGs with Basic Educational Opportunity Grants (BEOG) that were given directly to the student. Along with this change, a federal evaluation of need was created that moved the assessment of financial need away from institutionally-based criteria to a centralized federal process to make it more equitable and standardized. The BEOGs were very successful, with funding expanding quite rapidly in the early years after their introduction, helping to solidify the federal government’s role in ensuring equity in postsecondary education access (Heller, 2011).

The 1978 HEA reauthorization saw the creation of the Middle Income Student Assistance Act (MISAA), which increased the income limits on BEOG grants and removed income caps entirely on federally subsidized loans, resulting in greatly increased rates of borrowing in the student population. This was a signal that Congress was moving away from the original access goals of the Truman Commission, as well as the HEA, and focusing more on affordability of college for middle- and upper-income students. After the government subsequently rolled back MISAA and limited the loan program due to the massive spike in costs, the 1992 reauthorization enabled borrowing even further with the creation of the
unsubsidized Stafford Loan Program and by increasing the borrowing limits on subsidized Stafford loans (TG Research and Analytical Services, 2005).

Thus, what has emerged and been emphasized over time via the HEA is a form of federal involvement in higher education that emphasizes direct aid to students, with an increasing emphasis on loans over grants. This certainly meets the Commission’s desire for a vastly expanded federal involvement in higher education, especially in providing financial support to students. However, the increasing emphasis on loans is probably not what the Commission would have wanted, given its belief that an increase in loan aid would not serve to actually provide opportunity for students (Vol. II, p. 46). Therefore, although part of the philosophy and actualization of goals may have been achieved, it has not been in the manner that the Commission members likely imagined and comes with an orientation toward loan-based funding that is not in line with their aims.

The introduction of direct lending during the Clinton administration, where the federal government provides the capital for student loans, indicated a philosophical shift back toward a heavier federal role in directly funding higher education. Previously, banks had been the sole providers of capital for student loans, distributing and managing loans that were guaranteed by the federal government (TG Research and Analytical Services, 2005). In March 2010, however, the Obama administration and Congress passed a health care reform bill that included measures to move completely to direct lending, thereby entirely cutting the banks out as intermediaries in the student loan process (Mettler, 2010). In addition to the cost savings direct lending will offer (Mettler, 2010), this transition necessitates a greater level of federal involvement in higher education. While the emphasis here is still on loans, the direct role the federal government will now play in all HEA-affiliated student loans is reminiscent of the Commission’s desire to see the federal government move into direct and consistent support of higher education (Vol. V, p. 54).

The economic crisis that began in 2008 also caused a tremendous influx of federal funding to higher education via the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which can be seen as a further federal commitment to higher education. The act offered billions of dollars’ worth of provisions for higher education, ranging from tuition tax credits to state fiscal stabilization financing intended to provide for facility upgrades and compensate for state-level budget cuts (“Higher Education Receives,” 2010). These funding allocations, along with the move to direct lending, suggest that the Commission’s conception of a heavily
involved federal government is not only entrenched within the national mind but may also be undergoing a renaissance of re-investment.

**Concluding Points**

The Commission’s recommendations on expanding access by eliminating financial, race, sex, and religious barriers were extremely controversial for years after the publication of the report within the higher education community. It took more than double the amount of time Commission members hoped for to see high levels of participation in postsecondary education, with the largest growth in the student population occurring in the 1960s and 1970s supplied particularly by the rise of women and minority students in colleges and universities (Kim & Rury, 2007). A variety of factors led to these new patterns of enrollment, and although the road was not straight or smooth and remains patterned by twists and cracks, it is at minimum evident that higher education in the United States has undergone major and unprecedented changes since the report’s publication in 1947.

Yet it is important to recognize that because the Commission’s recommendations were so very unprecedented, they were also extremely controversial for years after the publication of the report. This was especially true within the higher education community, which vituperatively debated or acrimoniously rejected not only many of the recommendations but also the underlying philosophy of the Commission’s report. Kennedy (1952) concisely noted that the Commission’s views on access were particularly scorned by many in higher education because many leaders at the time saw mass higher education as a pipe dream. America’s youth were, as critics put it bluntly, incompetent and unmotivated, and moving into mass higher education was politically infeasible and financially impossible (Kennedy, 1952). In short, improved access was seen as an absolutely terrible idea by many leaders in higher education.

Additionally, the Commission’s stance on federal involvement in higher education raised an almost unthinkable ruckus within the higher education community. As shown in Volume V of the report, the Commission clearly took a stance by stating: “The time has come for America to develop a sound pattern of continuing Federal support for higher education” (Vol. V, p. 54). Note that the Commission members did not mean to indicate that the federal government would be taking over the higher education system in the country or that such funding and emphasis on higher education should come at the expense of lower levels of education. Nonetheless, the Commission’s perspective on funding was also divisive, controversial, and intensely debated. Indeed, higher education’s standpoint on federal funding, in general, remained ambivalent
for decades after the federal government actually began to take a role in financing higher education.

When the report was published, educators struggled to understand how private and denominational colleges would be impacted by the public focus and whether the program of massive federal aid the Commission recommended would follow lock-step with a system of federal control over higher education (Brubacher & Rudy, 1968). Indeed, one of the primary reasons that the report’s proposals did not gain wide acceptance lay in the Commission’s seeming favoritism toward public higher education (Axt, 1952). Axt (1952), in his analysis of this facet of the Commission’s report, boiled the concern down to a question of whether the federal government should, as part of its public policy, assist private institutions in expanding along with public schools.

Naturally, this belief was not particularly popular with advocates for private and denominational schools. Two examples of the objections raised to this facet of the report come from Farrell (1949/1952) and Hollinshead (1949/1952). Farrell was highly antagonistic, claiming that the aid recommended for public institutions was so overpowering that, if it were implemented, private schools would be so affected that a form of statism would result because only schools receiving federal funding could survive and this, in essence, would constitute totalitarianism. Hollinshead (1949/1952) raised his own impassioned objections to the public-focused funding recommendations, noting that the diversity provided by having different kinds of institutions is vital to the well-being of the country because thought is formed and influenced by competition among doctrines—something that is only possible when there are many different kinds of institutions that offer different conceptions of truth. Indeed, the arguments over how federal financing should occur were sometimes more emotionally fraught than those over the Commission’s recommendations to end segregation (Chintala, 1998).

While these are only two of the plethora of arguments that came out surrounding the Commission’s recommendations regarding federal financing and its relation to public education, they point to how revolutionary the idea of federal support for higher education was at the time, even within the higher education community itself. The debate over public-private financing was inherently entangled with the conception of the role of the federal government. The thought process was that federal involvement, as conceived by the Commission, would result in a functional monopoly of the public sector, and this sector, being utterly beholden to the federal government for its continued existence, would toe the federal line on all issues, at the risk of forsaking academic freedom.
Ultimately, the host of fears expressed by educators about incompetent students, financial bankruptcy, totalitarianism, the demise of private and denominational colleges, and a general federal takeover of higher education proved unfounded—the structure of the HEA ensures that students can take their federal funding where they wish, and general institutional funding from HEA has not been restricted to public institutions (TG Research and Analytical Services, 2005). Nor has expanding access to new student groups caused higher education to fall apart. This is not to imply that American higher education has obtained equity in access or success for all races, sexes, religions, and classes of students—indeed, as the next section will discuss, many of these concerns particularly play out in the community college sector—but it should be acknowledged that the Commission members advocated for drastic, almost unimaginable change that has, at least to what would have been a surprising extent in 1947, occurred.

Expansion of Community Colleges

Any hope of achieving the Commission's recommendations on improving access and exponentially increasing the overall number of students within the system of higher education would have been impossible without a commensurate expansion of higher education to meet the demand the Commission hoped would occur. The arena where the Commission expected this expansion to occur was within the two-year college system (Brubacher & Rudy, 1968). The Commission strongly believed that its other recommendations could not be carried out without a massive expansion in both the number of community colleges and the activities in which such colleges engaged (Vol. I, p. 67). Community colleges were particularly appealing as a means of handling student expansion because two-year colleges could be constructed quickly and were generally viewed as being more cost-effective (Brubacher & Rudy, 1968). In its recommendations for community colleges, the Commission managed to:

- Articulate a new sense of purpose and new functions for these schools,
- Envision radically different tuition structures, and
- Propose ways in which these schools could be planned and designed.

Purpose and Functions of Community Colleges

In conjunction with a general recommendation that the number of community colleges should increase (Vol. II, p. 22), the Commission
crafted a new definition of their purpose, which included reconceptualizing junior colleges as community colleges. It was the Truman Commission that introduced this term into the national higher education lexicon (Hutcheson, 2002), as members felt that the term “junior” did not actually express the purpose these schools were serving—implying instead that students would be moving on to four-year colleges. But one of the principal tasks in which the two-year colleges were engaging was terminal vocational education (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Furthermore, the Commission wanted two-year colleges to be fully integrated into the life of their communities (Vol. III, p. 5), which made the term “community college” more appropriate than “junior college.”

The Commission also imagined a variety of new functions and programs that these schools could offer to meet the total post-high school needs of their communities (Vol. I, p. 67). At a macro level, the Commission felt that community colleges should be primarily public in nature. While members expected that private institutions would extend their offerings to include programs for the 13th and 14th years of schools, they firmly expected that most community colleges would be public undertakings (see, for example, Volume I, p. 67) and that community colleges should be located such that one was within reach of most people within each state (Vol. III, p. 9) without having so many that efficient control became impossible (Vol. III, p. 14).

Based on these suggestions, the picture we develop of the Commission’s conception of community colleges is one of schools that are: 1) primarily local or regional in scope, 2) locally controlled, 3) deliberately organized such that they fit into a statewide system of higher education, and 4) able to serve the interests of the entire state as well as their respective communities.

**Rethinking Tuition and Financing Structures**

The other reason the Commission expected that most of these schools would be public in nature was because the report suggested education to the 14th grade should be tuition free with additional provisions of financial assistance made for students in the 10th through 14th grades who would be unable to continue education without it (Vol. I, p. 37). In other words, the Commission expected that public community colleges would be as free and accessible to students as other parts of the K–12 school system (Vol. III, p. 15). However, in the Commission’s conception of funding structures for the two-year colleges, this free tuition would be accomplished not through federal support but through financing by local communities with supplemental aid provided by the state (Vol. I, p. 67).
Planning and Design

Once a clear path was created for community college financial support, a statewide planning effort was suggested—one dedicated to planning the location and curriculum of colleges within the system being developed (Vol. I, p. 70). This would enable states to avoid costly duplication of efforts while still offering comprehensive vocational training (Vol. III, p. 9). Although the Commission was comfortable allowing states to determine locations for schools and the educational needs of their citizens, it did have some general recommendations about the scope of educational activities in which community colleges should engage. One suggestion was that community colleges take direct responsibility for surveying and monitoring the educational needs of their communities so that programs could be locally adapted to the needs of both general and vocational students (Vol. III, p. 6). In part, this was because the Commission wanted community colleges to be closely articulated with local high schools so that programs at the community college level dovetailed with the senior year of high school to prevent inefficiency and loss of time in the transition to college (Vol. III, p. 12).

In addition to these broad educational directives, the Commission wanted community colleges to stress programs of terminal education, serve as administrative centers of comprehensive adult education programs, and consider how they might offer apprentice training so that older students could engage in alternate periods of attendance at college and compensated work (Vol. III, pp. 9–10). However, this emphasis on terminal and adult education did not mean that the Commission ignored the role of community colleges as preparatory education for the four-year schools. Their expectation was that community colleges would also find ways to meet the needs of students who wanted to continue to a more extended general education or who intended to engage in specialized or professional study elsewhere (Vol. III, p. 10). In fact, the Commission noted that it had no objection to a few community colleges offering four-year programs (Vol. I, p. 67).

Impact on Community Colleges

In its recommendations for two-year colleges, the Truman Commission envisioned a future for these schools that would turn them into a keystone of American higher education (Quigley & Bailey, 2003). Indeed, the Commission’s recommendations about the establishment and encouragement of community colleges have been hailed as the most enduring legacy of the Truman Commission (Forest & Kinser, 2002). However, what Commission members expected of this sector was neither easy nor obvious in the context of higher education in 1947.
At the time of the report, two-year colleges in America, which numbered around 600, were uncertain of their mission and faced an unclear future (Quigley & Bailey, 2003). Junior colleges, in comparison to their university peers, had not had nearly the same amount of time on the higher education stage in 1947. Their development into a recognizable sector was gradual and uncertain, and initial junior colleges were small and cobbled together piecemeal—many had fewer than 75 students, a borrowed faculty, limited facilities, and a curriculum appropriated from nearby state institution (Pedersen, 2000).

Thus, the Commission’s vision for the development of these schools into community colleges was a real departure from their habitus. In spite of this, or perhaps because of the unresolved confusion of their mission and the tenuous nature of their future at the time of the report’s publication (Quigley & Baily, 2003), the Commission’s vision was met with open arms by junior colleges. Leaders of junior colleges were thrilled with the attention of the Commission—by being placed at the crux of higher education’s future, community colleges were offered the public recognition that they had sought for years. Given the feelings of insecurity and marginality that those in the community colleges had experienced from the outset, this was a momentous change (Brubacher & Rudy, 1968). Additionally, the name change stuck. Academics were happy to accept the move away from the negative connotations of the term “junior college” (Brint & Karabel, 1989), and the national rhetoric shifted to incorporate the new phrase (Hutcheson, 2002).

The Commission’s report had a definite impact on other facets of these schools as well. Brubacher and Rudy (1968) argued that the major impact for higher education was not the symbolic name change proposed by the Commission, but a more substantive one of justifying a prodigious increase in the importance of community colleges within the system of American higher education. After the publication of the report, there was general enthusiasm within academia for the expansion of community colleges as a means of increasing educational attainment in the country (Farrell, 1949/1952). More broadly, the Commission’s strong support of community colleges stirred interest within the higher education community about how the possibilities of the reconceptualized institutions might be best achieved (Koos, 1950).

This is not to imply that there was universal support of the Commission’s product. Not only did the community college suggestions of the Commission dovetail with other ongoing debates over the report’s recommendations, but some authors specifically questioned the Commission’s conception of these schools and disagreed strongly with the report’s recommendations for the junior colleges. Hollinshead (1948) felt
that junior colleges tended to conceive of themselves as extensions of secondary education and did not see a justification for the Commission’s sweeping changes. Hutchins (1948/1952), on the other hand, believed the Commission had looked to the expansion of community colleges as a panacea designed to rectify the cost barrier to higher education without really understanding the purpose, organization, or functions of community colleges. Still others expressed concern that decreasing the selectivity of higher education through the expansion of community colleges would result in a watering down of the student body and curriculum (Brubacher & Rudy, 1968).

The Commission’s exhortation to make public education through the 14th year free was particularly controversial and tied into the aforementioned debate over what many in academia saw as a privileging of public education over private that would result in the demise of private colleges (e.g., Farrell, 1949/1952; Hollinshead, 1949/1952). There was also a concern over whether community colleges would begin to constitute competition for four-year schools—a fear the Commission itself addressed in the report, arguing that liberal arts colleges were so well-established in America’s educational conventions that community colleges should not be viewed as a threat (Vol. I, p. 70). Although the Commission members did not see a threat, this competition for students is an actuality for some schools (Breneman & Nelson, 1981), which is logical given that almost half the undergraduate student body is currently enrolled in community colleges rather than four-year institutions (Provasnik & Planty, 2008).

The ultimate trajectory of these schools has been monumental. As of 2006–07, there were 1,045 community colleges in the nation (Provasnik & Planty, 2008), and they have become the most frequently utilized approach to college by students (Quigley & Bailey, 2003). As the number of students enrolling in higher education burgeoned after World War II, community colleges expanded rapidly, managing to spring up at a rate exceeding one per week from 1965 to 1972 (Geiger, 2005). Today, these schools are omnipresent—“there are systems with branches in inner cities and rural districts and with programs in prisons and on military bases” (Cohen & Brawer, 1996, p. 30). Although this expansion occurred almost two decades after the report’s publication, it is strongly reminiscent of the Commission’s suggestions and conception of community colleges as locally oriented and fitting into a state system of higher education.

In addition to overall institutional and enrollment numbers, we can see the importance of these schools in the form of the students they attract. The dramatic achievements seen in the realm of community col-
leges since the report’s publication in 1947 would not have been possible without the vast increase in the number of students entering the higher education system discussed in the previous section. The number and demographic composition of students at community colleges has approached the Commission’s vision. Today, approximately 35 percent of all students in higher education are found within community colleges, which constitutes a 741 percent increase from the number of students enrolled in the system in fall of 1963 (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). The sector is predominantly female, with 59 percent of students falling into this category, and also attracts comparatively large populations of minority students when contrasted with other sectors of higher education. Furthermore, since the 1970s, more than half of students at community colleges have attended on a part-time basis, and the median age at these schools tends to be older than in other sectors—24 years versus 21 years. Students attend these institutions for varied reasons, but 43 percent have reported that their intention was to seek an associate’s degree while 42 percent have stated that they were hoping to obtain job skills (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Thus, not only do community colleges fulfill the Commission’s aim to reduce racial discrimination and antifeminism within higher education, but a significant majority of the students these schools attract are seeking vocational or terminal education, both of which were educational programs the Commission members felt such schools should emphasize (Vol. III, pp. 9–10).

However, while it is possible to paint a rosy picture of the impact community colleges have had on American higher education, it is also critical to understand that access and success are ongoing concerns for these schools. Christie and Hutcheson (2003) found that attending a two-year college is inversely related to factors such as being white, having a high socioeconomic status, having a high GPA, and obtaining a four-year degree, which raises the troubling question of whether the increased rates of postsecondary attendance are simply perpetuating class differences up the educational ladder by siloing less prepared, poorer, non-white students into two-year colleges. Low graduation rates are also a consistent source of concern for community colleges, especially in comparison to four-year schools (Christie & Hutcheson, 2003). One might also argue that these concerning outcomes are not totally out of line with what the Commission envisioned. George Zook, who was the chairman of the Committee, had written a great deal about the junior college sector and his views were commonly known (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Zook felt that the true role of junior colleges was to serve as a sieve. These schools would draw off large numbers of students who would otherwise attend four-year colleges, sift out the minority of stu-
The rapid expansion and diversification of these schools was accomplished more or less without federal assistance. Federal support for community colleges has been slow to develop in general, and today the primary funding of community colleges still comes from the states (Cohen, 2001)—an outcome in line with the Commission’s recommendations. States commissioned studies, wrote master plans, passed legislation, and otherwise worked to build these systems so the major growth of the 1960s could be accomplished (Cohen, 2001).

However, the federal government has participated somewhat in promoting the survival and expansion of community colleges, both explicitly and by proxy through other legislation. Shortly after the publication of the report, the Office of Education made an effort to review the Commission’s recommendations and, at the request of the White House, conducted a detailed analysis of the report as it related to community colleges (Kerr, 1989). Based on this study, the Office of Education concluded that funding should be given to states in order to assist them with the creation of community college systems. However, President Truman was concerned with other educational priorities (Kerr, 1989), and the political climate at the time was such that none of his relatively lackluster attempts to pass educational reform were successful (Chintala, 1998). Ultimately, it was federal legislation like the G.I. Bill, the HEA, and other access-creating policies (covered in the previous section) that enabled students to attend school and thus fill the seats of community colleges. Additionally, the primary means of federal support for community colleges comes via students who receive funding through HEA grants, loans, and work study (Cohen, 2001).

Aside from funding, the most direct impact of HEA amendments upon community colleges identified by Cohen (2001) occurred in 1992 via legislation that established a Community College Liaison Office within the Department of Education and created a Presidential Access Scholarship for two-year students. Other HEA adjustments, such as modifying Pell Grant eligibility to make the grants available to part-time students, impacted community colleges in a less direct manner (Cohen, 2001). Finally, the 2008 reauthorization of the HEA included provisions related to the creation and encouragement of articulation
agreements, such as the establishment of a grant program that provides funding for postsecondary partnerships that support the creation and implementation of these agreements (National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators [NASFAA], 2010).

The federal government has also become involved in community colleges via their curricula, primarily in occupational areas (Cohen, 2001). Vocational programs created and funded at the federal level emphasize the type of education that the Commission believed community colleges should provide (Vol. I, p. 68) and serve as another link between the Commission’s vision and our modern system. For example, Cohen (2001) has noted that community colleges have enjoyed funding from the Vocational Act of 1963 and its subsequent amendments, which provide federal financing for occupational programs. Cohen has also observed that while some community colleges take advantage of programs outside of vocational education, such as the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, these programs are less utilized and provide less funding than federal programs such as Job Training Partnerships, Job Opportunities and Basic Skills, Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness, Worksite Literacy, and Cooperative Education, all of which are focused on vocational education funding. The predominance of these types of curricular funding for community colleges in the federal sphere exemplify the philosophy of community colleges espoused by the Commission.

Additionally, recent federal policy developments indicate that community colleges may be enjoying a resurgence of federal attention. In 2009, President Barack Obama proposed a plan to pump nearly $12 billion into overhauling the community college system (Beam, 2009). This proposal came as part of Obama’s larger goal of returning the United States to having the highest graduation rates in the world, an aim which would partially be achieved by increasing by five million the number of graduates of community colleges within the next decade (Jaschik, 2009). The Commission felt community colleges were going to play a central role in the future of American higher education at the time of the report, and Obama’s proposal, combined with his criticism of a national tendency to place these schools on the back burner (Jaschik, 2009), strongly echoes that emphasis.

While this $12 billion goal has not been achieved, the administration has had success passing some legislation that is financially beneficial to community colleges. Previously we discussed the student-lending overhaul legislation passed in conjunction with health care reform in 2010, and in addition to the general benefits that will accrue to community colleges from the availability of increased Pell Grant funding, they
will benefit directly from a $2 billion allocation for job training (Fuller, 2010). More recently, in September 2011, President Obama proposed a massive $447 billion investment in jobs, of which $5 billion would be allocated to community colleges for building modernization and construction (Gonzalez, 2011).

One area in which the Commission has not seen policy success lies in its tuition recommendations. Although the Commission wanted free education through grade 14 (Vol. I, p. 37), almost all the newly founded schools in the time after the report charged tuition (Cohen & Brawer, 1996). Today’s community college tuition and fees are less than half of those at public four-year institutions and approximately one-tenth of those at private schools (Provasnik & Planty, 2008), but this is not what the Commission imagined.

Aside from tuition, much of the Commission’s vision beyond mere expansion has been realized. First, its redefinition of purpose for these institutions as locally focused within a state system of higher education matches the manner that community colleges developed across the nation in the decades following the report. Second, the number of schools and students in this sector has vastly increased and the schools are still primarily state supported. Third, statewide planning as part of the creation of new colleges and a state system of higher education was realized. Fourth, the emphasis on vocational education via federal funding is well in line with the Commission’s suggestions. Fifth, President Obama’s repeated attempts to enact policy beneficial to community colleges and his ongoing rhetoric in support of these institutions match the aims of the Commission. Even if the additional financial support desired by Obama does not materialize, community colleges may enjoy at least a rhetorical throwback to the heady days after the report’s publication in 1947.

Conclusion

While no legislation has been passed explicitly based on the report (Freeland, 1992), when viewed from the perspective of current times, the Truman Commission’s vision of expanded access, the development of a comprehensive system of community colleges, and a vastly more involved federal government has largely come to pass, though not necessarily in the time or manner the Commission members intended. Through an examination of the Commission’s recommendations on access and community colleges, we can see that regardless of whether the report has been explicitly adopted into legislation and policy, its ide-
als and many of its specific recommendations have been incorporated over time. The dialogue that the Commission created on higher education laid the groundwork for subsequent federal involvement, and recent developments and rhetoric at the federal level point toward a potential return to the Commission’s mentality.

This was a report remarkably ahead of its time. Commission members envisioned a higher education system, and by proxy a nation, that was radically more equitable, supportive, and open to social and intellectual advancement. And, although much of what the Commission’s report suggested was totally unexpected at the time of its production, the surprising fact is that many of its recommendations would also be unthinkable today—not because the report is a throwback to an unrelatable, bygone era but because the report asks so much of us. It asks us to create real, consistent, financially-supported access for many different types of students; to develop much stronger mechanisms for cooperation across and among the various levels of government; and, among other things, to knit higher education more closely into the fabric of our educational systems and communities because it is vital to the nation. The Commission unequivocally believed in the importance of higher education, and one might reasonably ask whether, in the current environment, this kind of vision would appear in a presidential commission. The report’s 1947 plan challenges us even today and, ensnared as the nation is in economic, military, and political woes, it seems unlikely that a modern Commission would attempt such an extensive effort to imagine a different future for higher education.

Predicting the long-term impact and reception of these reports is, of course, difficult. Take, for example, the Spellings Commission report on higher education from 2006, which shares many similarities in its reception with the Truman Commission—its recommendations were widely, often heatedly, debated; it spurred many leaders to discuss the need for major changes to American higher education; and the reactions to it were generally intense due to a fear of government intervention in the system (Ruben, Lewis, & Sandmeyer, 2008). Many, including national higher education associations and leaders in the field, worked to lessen or stall the agenda laid out in the report, and the report’s ultimate impact is unclear (Ruben, Lewis, & Sandmeyer, 2008). This is no less true of the Truman Commission, which received a great deal of initial debate and attention after which little was done or thought of in direct relation to the report.

However, while the transition of report to policy may be ambiguous, and although the vision of such commissions may be controversial or
despised when shared, these reports do provide valuable insight into the way in which our systems evolve (or regress) over time. In this period of institutional and economic uncertainty, it is helpful to remember how far higher education has come, and how far it may yet go, toward achieving the goals of the most idealistic and forward-thinking Commission postsecondary education has encountered. Whether such a Commission will come again is uncertain, and that makes looking at the state of higher education with a broad, imaginative eye all the more important for practitioners and researchers alike. The report of the President’s Commission on Higher Education provides a useful example of what such a vision might include and prompts a level of creativity and progressivism that might otherwise be avoided. Leaders in a difficult era should strive for no less.

Notes

1 Hereafter cited by volume and page number.
2 Neither source provides the distribution of enrollments by level—i.e., lower division, upper division, or graduate.
3 See Goldin and Katz (2007) for a history of postsecondary participation in the country from the late nineteenth century up to the present time.
4 It should be noted that the Commission issued its report seven months before President Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which integrated the military and mandated equal treatment by race (Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, 2010).

References


Higher education receives more than $1.5 billion in stimulus awards. (2010, April 1). *The


Access, Equity, and Community Colleges


Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).


