

EDUCATION WEEK

Should K-12 Schools Be Governed Like Colleges?

Douglas Harris

April 4, 2016

For close observers of U.S. education policy, one thing that stands out is that we govern our K-12 schools very differently from our colleges and universities. Some opponents of traditional K-12 policy also argue that the less-regulated, market-driven system in higher education yields better results. Are they right?

First, let's look at the policy differences: At the college level, a substantial share of funding (including federally backed loans) generally follows the student. Private and pseudo-public independent institutions run the colleges and compete for enrollments and revenue. Some public universities (or university systems) have publicly elected boards that are similar to K-12 school boards, although only some of these are elected and they have (or at least exercise) limited powers beyond setting tuition levels, determining basic university policies, and hiring and firing college presidents.

So, in many ways, our public colleges are like charter schools, our funding for private schools operates like a voucher program, and the overarching system is very much like the "portfolio" model we have in New Orleans. There are similarities between the two sectors as well (such as tenure for educators), but the differences really stand out.

The second prong in the argument is that our more market-driven system of colleges is *better* than our system of public K-12 schools--that it generates better results. I'll take on that argument in the next post.

Finally, combining these first two points, it is argued that the market-oriented governance of colleges is what *causes* the better results. Jason Bedrick of the Cato Institute [made just this argument](#) in our recent back and forth.

There are two big problems with this logic. First, even if our colleges were better, could we really say that the strengths of U.S. higher education are *caused* by the smaller role of government? It's not clear. Cause and effect are always hard to sort out and there are many factors other than policy that affect college performance. For example, the United States as a country has a culture of free inquiry, reinforced by our long history of openness to immigration, which allows us to attract top scholars who have been threatened in their native countries

because of their ethnicity, religion, political views, and scholarly ideas. The U.S. has also had a first-mover advantage; we decided to invest substantial public resources in colleges much earlier in our history than other countries.

To be fair, some of these alternative explanations could also be partly attributed to governance. For example, colleges might be less open to hiring scholars from other countries if politics were allowed to intervene. That said, publicly funded universities governed by elected boards also hire dissident scholars. (I am not aware of research on whether this is more common at private universities.)

Even if we accepted that our colleges are great and that this is because of how colleges are governed, there are some underlying differences between the two sectors that seem to call for different roles for government:

1. *Concern for Equity.* We rely on K-12 education to play an equalizing force in the country, so efforts to increase equity by preventing admission requirements, for example, are more sensible. Equity has never been the main goal of higher education and it's one reason that the extreme hierarchy of colleges has been accepted (though this is fortunately starting to change). The general idea that government should be an equalizing force is widely accepted.
2. *Instilling Values versus Producing Research .* The missions of the two sectors are more different than they seem. While we expect both K-12 schools and colleges to disseminate knowledge, schools are responsible for instilling values in ways that colleges are not, and colleges are expected to *create* knowledge through research and scholarship in ways that schools are not. It's reasonable to argue that democratically elected governments should have a say in instilling values and that governments should be detached from creating knowledge. (To be clear, there is a strong argument for government involvement in subsidizing research production as a public good but this has come with a long struggle to keep politics out of decisions about what specific research and researchers should receive federal support.)

The differences in governance between schooling and higher education are interesting and worth considering, but not straightforward. In the next post, I'll take on the conventional wisdom that our colleges are better and point out some of the likely unintended consequences of governing our schools like our colleges.