

US: The liberal lion's legacy to higher education

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The death of Edward Kennedy on 25 August 2009 represents the end of an era of senatorial lions who sponsored educational reform in the US.

In spite of being born into privilege and position, the nine Kennedy children were instilled with a sense of high moral and social duty. Those active in politics or social causes all came to share a commitment to equal rights.

During nearly five decades as the Democratic senator for Massachusetts, the youngest Kennedy became equated with liberal American educational policy like no other politician of his generation. Indeed, according to Terry W Hartle, a former long-term aide and current senior vice president for government and public affairs at the American Council on Education, "it is hard to imagine education policy without Senator Kennedy's distinctive voice".

His first legislative contribution was the creation of the National Teachers Corps, as part of the Higher Education Act of 1965. Until 1981, the programme awarded incentives for student teachers to work in and offer enrichment to low-income communities in the US. The quasi-evangelical characteristics of this programme were echoed in the Senator's other initiatives on educational reform.

Among these was Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 that banned sex discrimination at publicly funded institutions: with Kennedy's considerable acumen, the law was further reinforced following a Supreme Court overruling in 1988. By ensuring equal funding to male and female college athletes, the legislation demonstrated that women's rights could be guaranteed as the doomed Equal Rights Amendment had also intended.

Kennedy is perhaps best remembered for his pivotal role in realising the direct lending programme for post-secondary students. The scheme was deemed too expensive when it was first proposed in 1978; but by the early 1990s it became seen as a potentially cost-saving alternative to the guaranteed-loan programme. As chairman of the Education Committee, Kennedy adroitly coordinated bipartisan support for the programme when the Higher Education Act was reauthorised in 1992.

During the presidency of George W Bush, Kennedy fought hard to save the federal TRIO programmes that provide post-secondary opportunities to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Later, he played a crucial role in the creation of the Academic Competitiveness Grants and Smart Grants.

With the restoration of Democrat control of Congress in 2006, Kennedy continued to lead the cause of accessible higher education, through reducing interest rates on federal student loans and increasing student aid. He also spearheaded conflict-of-interest regulations that formed the basis of the Higher Education Opportunity Act in 2008.

His critics accused Kennedy of public service *largesse*, characterising him as a "tax and spend" big-government Democrat.

"Senator Kennedy probably really believed he was doing a service for society when he championed more aid for more people, but that required looking past or downplaying the harder-to-see - but very real - costs and waste," explained Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute in Washington DC.

A flipside to this kind of democratic generosity was the occasional reminder of the Kennedy dynasty's oligarchic tendencies. For instance, when he authored important guarantees to an Overlap Group of elite institutions to collaborate in the dispersal of student aid packages as part of the reauthorisation of the Higher Education Act in 1992, the senatorial lion ensured that eight of the 23 institutions came from the state he had represented for 46 years.

Yet, on balance, Kennedy's legacy is assured and he will long be cited as a standard against which other liberal educational reformers in the US will be measured.