

SEM Q REVIEW

Higher Education and Public Policy, Third Edition: Reframing Strategies for Preparation, Access, and College Success

N. J. DAUN-BARNETT AND E. P. ST. JOHN. 2024. 308 PP. NY: ROUTLEDGE.

Reviewed by Hannah Rounds

How does a nation develop educational policy when its central founding document—the Constitution—does not reference education at all? Nathan J. Daun-Barnett and Edward P. St. John return to this foundational gap in their third edition of *Higher Education and Public Policy: Reframing Strategies for Preparation, Access, and College Success* (2025). Here, they trace this constitutional omission to the country’s earliest governing structures, emphasizing how the 10th Amendment—granting powers not delegated to the federal government to the states and people—positioned education as the responsibility of local communities. Daun-Barnett and St. John illustrate how these early foundations continue to shape contemporary debates about preparation, access, and student success, forming the basis for the policy frameworks explored throughout the book.

The text includes twelve chapters organized into two sections. Part I, *Reframing Higher Education Policy*, offers a six-chapter overview of how U.S. higher education policy emerged and evolved. Part II, *State Cases*, uses Chapters 7–11 to examine the educational foundations

of five states—California, Minnesota, Indiana, Florida, and North Carolina—each selected for its distinct political history and policy trajectory.

While the authors clearly advocate for equity, they do not “argue for specific policies or actions” (12). Instead, they situate these states within broader global pressures and governmental challenges, using comparison to illuminate divergent policy paths. Engaging the reader, they explain: “The analytic method across chapters encourages readers to think critically about their assumptions, situated in their lived histories, as they engage in conversations about issues” (12).

Chapter 1 confronts the political tensions shaping contemporary higher education, noting that “colleges and universities are battlegrounds for MAGA vs. DEI,” and that “Global higher education has entered a new period” (1). Drawing on events such as the Israel-Hamas War, COVID-19, and Black Lives Matter protests, the authors illustrate how political polarization now reaches state governments, school boards, and campuses. This reflects the broader principle that “shifts in policy cor-

respond with changing beliefs about society and education and have consequences for learning and attainment outcomes” (12).

To situate these dynamics, Daun-Barrett and St. John zoom out and outline major historical periods in U.S. education. They introduce the formation of core paradigms, belief traditions, and action strategies throughout each, with a call to action. That is, to directly understand today’s policy environment amid political polarization, stakeholders must develop a historical perspective that encompasses scholarship across many tangential fields, in particular law, government, economics, sociology, and history.

Chapter 2 “Public Policy and Higher Education: Global Competitiveness, Political Divisions, and Reframing Strategies” uses the federal role of developing U.S. higher education (*i.e.*, massification models) to make sense of globalization and marketization (42). The legacies of European higher education systems and their impact upon U.S. education are noted, as are landmark decisions (like the Supreme Court’s *Dartmouth* case, 1819), as the early beginnings of U.S. higher education take shape. They describe an “uneasy balance between segregation and expanding opportunity” (27), noting how federal legislation both created segregated systems (24) and later expanded access and desegregation (27). With another reference to the Constitution, this chapter reveals an absence of a social-welfare clause—“Unlike most Constitutions in democratic nations, the U.S. Constitution does not include a social welfare clause that provides a basis for affirmative action in many other countries” (27). Throughout, the authors connect shifts in federal aid, research priorities, and policy debates under multiple presidential administrations to broader global forces and what they call the current “period of New Uncertainty.”

Chapter 3’s examination of evolving data reporting requirements reminds practitioners of the importance of the story that data tells. In “Reframing Policy Matters: Political Ideologies, Policy Studies, and Research Evidence,” the authors assert: “*Old ideologies and rationales don’t disappear; they reappear and transform in academic narratives as part of theories, research, and histories—this recurring cycle evolves in higher education policy as other discourses, es-*

pecially in social and economic upheaval periods” (42). Barnett and St. John trace how political ideologies—from early public-system debates to today’s progressive and MAGA agendas—shape policy preferences across historical periods. They also outline the evolution of education data systems, beginning with federal data collection in 1870 and culminating in IPEDS, “the original cornerstone of the public accountability system” (49). To link policy to educational outcomes, the chapter introduces several analytic models, emphasizing that data-driven policy must be interpreted within its broader ideological and historical contexts.

Chapter 4, “Reframing Preparation: From Pathways to STEM Pipeline and Economic Stratification,” critiques the policy evolution of high school graduation requirements and the rise of STEM within an enrollment-management framework. The authors show how states have shifted from a “college for all” expectation to multiple graduation pathways, even as STEM rigor has intensified. They compare historical patterns of preparation and economic well-being across diploma types—technical/vocational, general education, and advanced science/engineering tracks—and examine the growth of student supports like dual enrollment. The chapter also reviews federal arguments for higher math standards following the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. Yet, despite increased rigor, the authors note that “with the gains in college-prepared high school graduates during the past two decades...we should increase college enrollment rates, a reality that did not materialize” (81).

Chapter 5, “College Access: From Equal Opportunity to Economic Stratification,” examines enrollment patterns using American Community Survey (ACS) data and traces how shifting federal and state financial priorities shape college access (90). The authors review historical enrollment trends across major policy periods—early American foundations, the emergence of competing college systems (1870–1945), Cold War expansion, and the Neoliberal Turn’s “college for all” agenda (1980–2015). They highlight how privileged enrollment pathways were established early and persisted as financial policies influenced student demand, institutional opportunity structures, and access to aid (91).

Financial factors—including rising attendance costs, changes in federal aid (*e.g.*, Pell Grants and loan dependence), and state funding allocations—undergird shifts in student diversity and enrollment by institutional type. Marketing strategies come to the forefront with federal shifts (1976–1982), as strategies shift toward research (university-corporate partnerships), student aid (reduced grants and increased loans), and STEM nationwide trends (increased emphasis on global supply chains vs. local economies) (106).

Chapter 6, “Reframing College Success: Civic Leadership, Economic Uplift, and Financial Wellbeing,” argues that traditional notions of “academic success”—especially completion rates used to justify public investment—are no longer adequate in “the chaos of the current period” (111). This chaos—shaped by political extremism, social divisiveness, and long-standing neo-liberal priorities—has eroded opportunities and complicated earlier assumptions linking higher education to both social mobility and economic growth. The authors situate these shifts historically, noting that from 1776–1976, education was broadly tied to civic uplift and national economic expansion, a trajectory disrupted by Reagan-era emphases on market efficiency. They trace how regional histories, racial tensions—including segregated systems “as an artifact of silence about racism” (116) and political stressors—have continually reframed higher education’s public purposes. As federal investment grew after WWII, students increasingly came to be framed in terms of “financial returns on investment” (116), a trend reinforced by later economic and political upheavals. Ultimately, Daun-Barnett and St. John argue that higher education’s traditional mission—teaching, research, and service—must be expanded to emphasize civic leadership, economic uplift, and graduates’ financial well-being (125–129), especially given today’s increasingly complex “pathways to success” (130).

With the end of Chapter 6 emerges Part II, which examines five state policy models: California, Minnesota, Indiana, Florida, and North Carolina. This section offers contemporary case studies that showcase how “the contours of this new period are continuing to take shape” (IX). Note: while the first and second editions

of *Higher Education and Public Policy* focused on Michigan, the third edition’s inclusion of Florida reflects the authors’ interest in states where ideological tensions, political interventions, and structural reforms are reshaping today’s policy interests.

Building on the national political, legislative, and historical contexts developed in Part I, these chapters trace how each state’s higher education system emerged from early community formations, many of which pre-date statehood (as in Minnesota). Each chapter shows how local origins, governance structures, and regional priorities shaped state systems over time. Across these states, a recurring throughline—captured in the authors’ discussion of California—is that “public policies and educational outcomes are complex and interrelated” (144).

Systemic tensions—including political decision-making, financial crises, demographic shifts, and governance changes—influence student enrollment patterns and disparities in distinct ways. For enrollment management professionals, these state-specific case studies demonstrate how different political histories and policy levers shape student opportunity. For example, California’s three-tiered structure (community colleges, state universities, and research universities) illustrates how coordinated systems can support transfer pathways, student mobility, and changing enrollment needs. Collectively, the state cases provide comparative insight into how divergent policy ecosystems shape strategies impacting student outcomes.

Overall, Daun-Barnett and St. John offer an impressively comprehensive and timely examination of U.S. higher education policy. The scope alone is notable: the book spans centuries, policy eras, presidential administrations, and state systems—all the while showcasing data related to shifting student demographics—with a level of detail that far exceeds what any single review can capture. Readers will find that the authors frequently restate key points across chapters, an effective strategy for navigating the dense interplay of legislation, political agendas, and shifting ideologies. The text is deeply informative, and the sheer volume of historical and contemporary policy references makes it a valuable resource. Many readers, however, will find themselves

keeping a search engine open alongside the book; its density and breadth, while strengths, also require frequent external verification.

The text is as current as possible for a 2025 publication date, reflecting policy debates and administrative shifts and providing foundational support for today's present landscape. The authors succeed in presenting a text that feels unusually up to date in a field where policy changes can rapidly render analysis obsolete.

At the same time, several limitations deserve attention. While the authors' persistent use of "MAGA vs. DEI" constructs captures the polarization of contemporary U.S. politics, the binary framing can feel constraining as a policy lens. Practitioners familiar with student development frameworks or other sensemaking theories may find themselves turning to those traditions to expand or complicate the narrative. In addition, the book's strong emphasis on presidential administrations and high-level policy actors may inadvertently understate the roles of students, staff, and faculty in shaping higher education systems. For example, although the

California case briefly acknowledges Berkeley's distinctive shared-governance history and the incorporation of students into governance structures following campus protests, these perspectives remain largely peripheral. While Daun-Barnett and St. John clearly used the book's capacity to its fullest—and how much more detail could they reasonably include?—readers may still look to such moments to retain the human and practitioner-level dimensions that shape policy shifts.

Overall, *Higher Education and Public Policy* is a deeply researched and ambitious text that offers a sweeping account of how higher education policy has developed and transformed. Its timeliness, depth, and comparative case analyses are significant strengths. Although its framing may leave some readers wishing for a more practitioner-centered lens, Daun-Barnett and St. John offer a strong foundation from which such interpretations can emerge; their policy analysis provides essential background knowledge for today's enrollment management professionals.

About the Author



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