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THE KEY: INSIDE HIGHER ED

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DOUG LEDERMAN:

Terry Hartle has had a ringside seat to just about every important higher education policy conversation for three decades. Is it possible that he can help us make sense of the current politics and policymaking environment? Hello, and welcome to The Key, Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, Editor and Co-Founder of Inside Higher Ed, and host of The Key. Thanks for taking the time to listen today. Terry Hartle retired last fall after 30 years as the Chief Government and Public Affairs Officer at the American Council on Education, the Higher Education Association that tries to present a coherent front in advocating and yes, lobbying for higher education. He took on that role after serving as a top aide to Senator Ted Kennedy. So, in total, he spent pretty much a lifetime at the epicenter of the higher ed policy world. In today's conversation, Terry talks about the partisanship and inertia that afflicts today's politics, the prospects for overcoming those circumstances in ways that help students in colleges and his biggest successes and regrets among other topics.

Before we begin, here's a word about a new editorial offering from Inside Higher Ed.

SPEAKER:

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DOUG LEDERMAN:

Now on to today's discussion. Terry, welcome to The Key, and thanks for being here.

TERRY HARTLE:

Thanks for having me, Doug. Great to be talking to you.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

I guess I'm gonna start by asking you to take a little bit of a retrospective and over your years paying attention to higher education, politics, and policymaking from numerous angles, what has changed the most in terms of the expectations and perceptions that politicians and policymakers, and I think they are different sometimes have regarding America's colleges and universities, and following from that, what are the implications of those changes for the institutions and their employees and their students?

TERRY HARTLE:

Sure. Well, I should start by noting that while I am still a senior fellow at ACE, I am not under any circumstances speaking for ACE these days. So, what you're gonna get is essentially Terry Hartle unplugged. These are just my reactions, as you said, based on a fairly long time in the middle of the public policy world for higher education. Looking back on the number of years I've been here and how public policy has changed, the first thing that occurs to me is just the vast expansion of the federal role in higher education and scientific research. When I got to ACE, federal government was spending about \$5 billion a year on the Pell Grant program. Today, we're spending 25 or \$30 billion on Pell Grants. When I arrived, it was 14 or \$15 billion in student loans. Today, it's almost \$100 billion a year in student loans. Student loans aren't made by banks anymore. They're made by the federal government. VA benefits, when I arrived, was less than \$600 million a year. Today, it's over 12 billion.

And research funding was somewhere in the vicinity of 10 billion. I think when I got here, it's over \$50 billion going to colleges and universities today. So, we're looking at an increase in federal support somewhere between 25 and \$30 billion 30 years ago, and 175 or \$180 billion today. With that money has come much higher expectations, much higher requirements. And frankly, it creates much greater dependency for institutions on decisions that are made in Washington. So, I think the first thing I would say is just that the federal government is a vastly bigger presence in American higher education than it used to be. The second thing I would say is that when I got here, higher education had been largely bipartisan on Capitol Hill. Congress had recently passed the higher education amendments in 1992. I think there were three or four no votes in the house. I don't think there were any nay votes in the Senate. That wouldn't happen today, simply because everything is much more partisan in Washington than it used to be.

Higher education has become a frontline in the culture wars, whether we like it or not, and we don't like it. People care what we do and say, and teach and study on our campuses. And there's some people who think that we ought to be more careful in what we think and study and teach and want to invoke laws or want to use the power of the state to guide the directions that we are going. Now, obviously, when I got here, Americans were very optimistic about the future of the country. The US had just apparently won the Cold War, trust in American institutions was generally pretty high across the board. That is not the situation the US finds itself in today. Trust in institutions has fallen across the board. The good news for higher education is that compared to other institutions, other parts of society, the public still has a relatively high degree of trust in colleges and universities. But the bad news is that the level of trust is much lower than it was a generation ago.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Terry, there's a lot to unpack there. The increased federal financial investment has obviously come with a lot more strings attached, and a lot of people in higher education like the increased investment, but not so much, the greater expectations. Are those proportional today? Are the federal expectations...? I'm not

sure the right word. Are they reasonable or fair, given the government's greater skin in the game? Or are they just what they are?

TERRY HARTLE:

I think they're what they are. If the federal government puts a lot more money into higher education, it is only reasonable and appropriate to expect that more regulation and oversight will follow. I think what the federal government doesn't often do as well as they could is think about how to design, how to design that oversight so that it addresses the public concerns clearly and unambiguously, but doesn't create such a nightmare of problems for people to comply with it. Lemme use an example outside the institutional sphere. We've seen Congress occasionally write laws that are so complicated, they can't be implemented. And we saw this with many of the existing legislative provisions about loan forgiveness and cancellation provisions. There are about ten of them in the Higher Education Act. Many of them simply couldn't be implemented because they were written in such a convoluted, complex way. The Department of Education couldn't make sense of them. The same thing happens with federal regulations.

The Department of Education occasionally does things in extraordinarily complicated ways that make it virtually impossible for campuses to comply because they don't necessarily know what the rules are. And one example here would be reporting on money that campuses get from foreign corporation, governments or individuals, the so-called section 117 requirements. We've been pleading with the Department of Education for five years to publish regulations to make clear that people know exactly how they're supposed to answer the legislative demand for information. Department hasn't moved in this direction. Department hasn't published anything to help colleges and universities comply. This was a law that was written in 1986. And when Congress put it in place, the assumption of the department was simply that this is pretty straightforward, nobody's gonna need too much information about how to comply. But over a generation, the financial arrangements between colleges and universities and foreign governments and individuals have become far more complicated.

And there are lots of questions that campuses need some answers to if we want to do this right. I think we can see that across the board in much of federal higher education policy. It's probably, it is inevitable to a certain extent, but we make it much worse than it has to be.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

The point about partisanship, and I frequently test myself as somebody who's been around for decades trying to figure out if I'm engaging in recency bias. A year ago, I thought about doing an episode of the podcast about whether the politicization we were seeing particularly at the state level, but I guess the lack of partisanship at the federal level as well was worse than it had ever been. And to me, it was still sort of a question back then. I've sort of have answered the question. I think that it is different. But I remember Bill Bennett, that some of these issues are not brand new, obviously. And I guess I'm curious, again, with your sort of long view is, is do you think we are at sort of an unprecedented level of, be it the culture war stuff or the inclination of politicians and policymakers to delve into sort of all aspects and just not to agree? Do you think it's worse than it's been?

TERRY HARTLE:

Yes, I think it's worse than it's been. There is an enormous level of tension and polarization within America's civic culture that is reflected in the public's attitudes and public policies towards colleges and universities. And one level, this is because people believe what happens on college campuses is

important, what gets taught and studied matters. And therefore, people want to make sure that what is taught and studied is done in a way that is consistent with their worldview. I mentioned a while back that most of the reauthorizations of the Higher Education Act up until recent times passed both House and Senate with almost no dissenting votes. A political controversy in federal higher education policy just didn't exist when it came time to do legislation, even when the federal government was doing things like putting cohort default rates in place, or imposing campus crime reporting requirements or graduation rate requirements. There just wasn't a lot of controversy about it. Today, we've reached a point where the federal government can't begin to reauthorize the Higher Education Act because things are so controversial, they can't even get started.

We used to reauthorize the Higher Education Act every five or six years. Last time, we were authorized, it was 2008. It is increasingly obsolete. And I think the challenges that it presents, because we haven't been able to reauthorize it or just gonna get worse as time goes by. So, yeah, I think things are worse now than we have seen in our lifetime. But Doug, you and I are old enough to remember the end of the Cold War. And there really was an era of good feelings, I think, that lasted for much of the 1990s, the likes of which we haven't seen since then, certainly not since the fallout from September 11th attacks on the United States. But if we go back further in history, we have seen periods when higher education has also been very controversial. The Depression, Republicans used to ask each other, how does one get to Washington, DC? And the answer to the question was, you go to Harvard and turn left. Americans have long since seen higher education as being left of center. Certainly, higher education was in the front pages of the newspaper in the 1950s with the McCarthy investigations into communist influence in public organizations, including colleges and universities.

Many college university faculty members were hauled up on Capitol Hill to testify about their views. We saw the controversy about Robert Oppenheimer and his security clearance, you know, whether you liked what he did at the Manhattan Project or not. He obviously was a very distinguished research leader, and yet he found himself caught up in the middle of that. Certainly, in the '60s with the campus protest over civil rights in Vietnam, colleges and universities were certainly a flashpoint. We saw Ronald Reagan run for governor in California pledging to fire the president of the University of California if he was elected, which of course he did. Now, that sort of stuff sounds like it's almost ripped from today's headlines, but we didn't hear much about that, say, between 1970 and 2020. So, I think these things go in cycles, and we are in a particularly challenging, difficult cycle for campuses to manage at the present time.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

What could you envision swinging the pendulum back? Can it be swung back? I'm curious if you have a vision for what that might look like.

TERRY HARTLE:

Do I have a vision for what it might look like? No. Could it swing back? Yes, because it has swung back in the past. Sometimes the cause of the challenge goes away. The war in Vietnam ends, and we went through a period when college and university campuses were incredibly quiet. So, what changes things now don't know. And sometimes you think a major national crisis would perhaps reset America civic culture, but we went through the pandemic and that does not seem to have been the case. I think what we've concluded where we are is that really since the 2020 election, it's become clear that elections and control of the government can turn out a small number of votes and a small number of places, which raises the stakes on political control and political elections appealing to the party's base getting out the

vote, and then responding to the mandate that you believe you have been given. I think that's just a different world we're living in now than what we saw in the 1980s and 1990s.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

You touched on the public perception. Do you have an opinion on whether the politicians' views drive the public attitudes? Or is it more so the reverse? A lot of politicians purport to be carrying out the views of the public they're elected to represent, but the public often seems to be influenced more these days by what their leaders tell them than the other way around. Do you have thoughts on that?

TERRY HARTLE:

Yeah, I think that that's, I think that's very much the case. I think politicians are increasingly attuned to trying to move the discussion in directions that their sort of political leanings want them to move it. And obviously, social media allows a single incident, a single controversy to become a matter of great public visibility and importance in a way that really wouldn't have happened 25 years ago because local news would've largely contained it. So, I think a lot of what we're seeing is social media and whether it's people on social media who are identifying something and highlighting it and continuing to call attention to it, and thereby political officials pick it up, or whether it's political officials identifying something and shooting it out, and social media simply grabbing onto it, I don't know. But I think the issue here is that social media, so amplifies voices and steers public debate and discussions, that that's really more at issue than politicians or the public.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

We have seen public confidence in higher education decline, as you noted before. Which of the prevailing public impressions were you the most for colleges and universities, which keep you awake or kept you awake the most, at least when you were working full-time

TERRY HARTLE:

(LAUGHTER) Well, I would say, I would say a couple. First, there's no question, but that the public thinks the value of higher education has declined. And I think that that's pretty ruinous to higher education, simply because college and university or post-secondary education of any type can be expensive. And if the public thinks the value has declined, they won't pursue it. The fact of the matter is that the economic return to a post-secondary education remains very high. The benefits to going to college significantly outweigh the benefits not going to college on any measure of social wellness that demographers can devise. College graduates are much better off over their lifetimes on average than people who don't go to college. Does everyone who go to college is, are there guarantees of success? No, of course not. There never have been. But I think the public's view that somehow the value is declining is a serious challenge for colleges and universities. And I think a lot of institutions, particularly institutions that are always conscious of their enrollment, worry a great deal about demonstrating value to the public.

Value is something that happens over a lifetime. It's not easily quantifiable in the first year or two after leaving school. But I think that's a problem. I think the second thing that worries me is a belief that colleges and universities are so ideologically set in their orientation that they are hostile to certain parts of American society. Any number of Republicans on Capitol Hill have said to me, your institutions don't do anything for my constituents. By that, I don't agree with it, but it's what they believe. And I think the idea that higher education really only serves one part of the political spectrum or is only interested in one set of views, is potentially very, very damaging. Interestingly, the data we've done in the past on public support for higher education finds that support among Democrats has actually gone up

considerably and support among Republicans and independents has fallen. I particularly worry about the independents because they're sort of in the middle of the political spectrum.

And if that's what they believe, I think that's very problematic.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

I want to shift a little bit to talk about your favorite subject. You know, I'm kidding. That's not your favorite subject, but I have seen you characterized and maybe caricatured as the architect of this higher education lobby that a lot of people in the think tanks and other people sort of like to talk about it. And I guess I'm curious as the mastermind behind that lobby, do you think that the sort of influence of this idea of a higher ed lobby is exaggerated? I'm curious essentially to how effective you think you and your colleagues have been.

TERRY HARTLE:

I've always been enormously amused by it. It's a compliment to have people think that higher education is an absolute advocacy machine that simply turns a switch and gets everything it wants to happen. But nobody who is a part of that alleged machine believes that. In fact, it's a source of some amusement to many of the people who do higher education advocacy to realize how much power some people think we have. And look, higher education does not have a PAC, it does not do campaign contributions. We don't do issue advertising. Higher education doesn't endorse candidates. I can't think of another large segment in America that tries to influence public policy without any of those relatively modern political tools. Even in the elementary secondary education arena, you see, for example, the teacher unions that have PACs and endorse candidates and are actively involved. Higher education doesn't do any of those things. All higher education has is a pretty good capacity to get all parts of the higher education community on the same page as it approaches public policy issues.

And it has a pretty good number of reasonably influential constituents. Now, mind you, those constituents aren't always easy to engage and they don't want to be engaged very often. So, you can only go to them once or twice a year for some help. But I think the strength of the higher education community really is finding a common ground that is good for all institutions and all students, and talking about it from that perspective and getting campus officials engaged. And it's not as easy. There's no college or university president in the country that's sitting around waiting for a phone call from the head of ACE or government relations head at ACE asking them to do x or y or z. Is it possible to do it? Sure. But it's a lot harder than people realize. The fact of the matter is, it's flattering to have people think how strong higher education is, but nobody who's close to the work that I do in the organizations I deal with really buys that.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

You mentioned sort of relative alignment between the various players and sectors in higher education. But I've certainly, over the years, seen times when there's tension. And I'm curious if that has been a challenge. We see tensions generally occur and rise when dollars tighten up, and we seem to be probably entering a period where that might be the case. So, but in general, do you think there is sort of more alignment between the various parties in higher education, the various types of institutions and their interests than there is disagreement?

TERRY HARTLE:

Well, I think that's really the central question for the higher education community in public policy is, can

they find enough common ground that everybody is seeking the same thing from public policymakers? Success depends on having everybody on the same page. When we don't get everybody on the same page, now things are out of our hands. We've simply taken ourselves out of the public policy process. If you're a congressional staffer or a Department of Education official and you're hearing one thing from one part of the higher education committee, another thing from another part and a third part from other people, you really don't know what to think. And basically, that frees you up to do whatever makes the most sense to you. Higher education for its public policy success in Washington depends first and foremost on getting everyone on the same page of the hymnal singing in the same tune. When we do that, our chances of success are certainly not guaranteed, but they're a lot better than we don't find ourselves in that position.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

What would you characterize as your greatest success and then your greatest failure or regret from your 30 years overseeing this powerful lobby?

TERRY HARTLE:

Yes, this advocacy machine. Successes, I would say... The first thing I would say is I think that I was overall pretty successful in getting the community on the same page most of the time. And when we weren't on the same page, we were generally pretty good at not shooting at each other. We sometimes would agree to disagree, but we would agree to do it without attacking the other side. We would simply be pushing whatever point of view people have. Obviously, when the higher education community split, that pretty much takes ACE out of the mix. So, it's just sort of everybody else for themselves. How they fight it out becomes an important consideration. I think specifically the \$78 billion that the federal government provided in COVID relief funds to institutions and students, it was by no means guaranteed that the federal government would provide a substantial amount of money to colleges and universities. There's enormous amount of internal controversy and pushing and pulling about how such money ought to be divided if money was provided.

And eventually, we got there. And the money that the federal government provided clearly stabilized colleges and universities in an extraordinarily challenging time so that we can come out of the pandemic and institutions can pretty much pick up where they left off. But again, that wasn't guaranteed. And there were a lot of difficult even angry conversations about how to structure money going to colleges, universities, but basically in the form of institutional aid, which is not something we do very much. Regrets, I continue to be disappointed that we haven't made more progress in boosting the maximum Pell Grant to try and make public higher education two-year and four-year tuition free for the lowest income students. Now, obviously, the Biden administration is very committed to this. We've made some progress in recent years. But the fact of the matter is, we still have an awful long way to go and is now that we've sort of seen as a recurrence of concern about federal spending levels, I think there's a reason to be worried about whether we'll continue to make progress.

The Pell Grant is the foundation of federal aid to college students. It is the best step we have to try to equalize college opportunity for it to be successful. It needs to cover at least the tuition costs at public colleges, universities. And it's a long way before we get there. Second regret is the mind numbing complexity of the Federal Student aid programs. This makes it impossible for students and families to see what their options will be and what their obligations will be. We have, I think, a dozen student loan repayment options at the present time. No wonder people are confused about what they have to do to

repay student loans. We've seen some things happen at the margin that have the possibility to help, for example, the effort to simplify the FAFSA that is underway, that's taking a little longer than anybody wanted before we can actually see a simplified FAFSA. It's obviously a step in the right direction. A number of the associations are working on an effort to try and provide more consumer friendly and transparent information and student aid award letters that would be very valuable.

But it's a modest incremental step. To really address some of the growing problems in the federal student aid programs, we need to reauthorize the Higher Education Act. And that would probably be my third regret that we have not reauthorized the Higher Education Act now in about 16 years and no immediate chance apparently of getting it reauthorized. It's such a major piece of legislation. It is so complicated that it's very hard to get any agreement on how to proceed. You need some level of bipartisan compromise to move forward on the higher education reauthorization. We have seen both House Democrats and House Republicans pass legislation in committee, but not be able to bring it up on the floor of the House. We've seen Lamar Alexander and Patty Murray, two very experienced senior legislators who wanted to get stuff done, find themselves unable to find enough compromise that they could take a bill to their committee for consideration. In that environment, the chance for significant rethinking, reorienting, clarifying, simplifying, streamlining federal financial aid seems to me a distant dream.

And I think that dramatically undermines the goal of helping low income first generation students participate in post-secondary education.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

What do you think politicians and policymakers sort of understand least well about American higher education and vice versa, not to choose sides? What do you think sort of rank and file higher education faculty members and administrators understand least well about the role and performance of policymakers and politicians? And what are the biggest problems, assuming there's some gaps in those understandings, what are the biggest the consequences of that, those gaps?

TERRY HARTLE:

One of the biggest jobs that the person in my previous position has is essentially to explain colleges and universities to government officials and to explain government officials to colleges and universities. And after many years of doing this, it seems to me that this is really a case as CP Snow would've said of two worlds. Policymakers underestimate the complexity and diversity of the higher education enterprise. Most policymakers went to traditional campuses where they were residential students, not all. And every year, we have more students who went in a different mechanism, but most went as traditional students. So, their mindset for thinking about higher education is their own experience or possibly the experience of their kids, the vast majority of whom will also have gone to traditional colleges and universities. So, they can start from that perspective and not have a good grasp of the fact that the vast majority of college students don't look like that. And the sort of simple, straightforward solution that they think two challenges we face may not work equally well for all parts of the enterprise.

And even when the challenges they want to address need to be addressed, getting them to understand why there are no simple answers, no straightforward solutions that are gonna work equally well for all types of students and schools can be a challenge. I think for colleges and universities, I think most people in higher education overestimate the extent to which rational arguments and data work. I think an awful lot of people on college campuses just think, if we find the right words to explain what we're doing and



why we're doing it, surely people will agree with us. It's often very hard for people who are doing important noble work to believe or to realize that other people may not quite see things as they do. It doesn't matter if you're an emergency room doctor or if you're a professor of higher education. It's just very hard to understand that people might be coming from very different perspectives, have a very different outlook on the world, and might not respond to the arguments that you think make perfect sense.

Explaining colleges to government officials is one thing. Explaining government officials to college officials is actually the harder part of the task.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

We just heard from Terry Hartle, now a senior fellow at the American Council on Education. After wrapping up 30 years leading the higher ed association's government relations and advocacy efforts, I had some faint hope that Terry would make me feel more optimistic about the state of the politics around higher education or the prospects for updating our federal policy to better reflect the reality of today's students. But that was probably too big and ask for any mere mortal. I was particularly struck by Terry's view that explaining the perspective of politicians and policymakers to the people of higher education was arguably tougher than translating higher education to those who work in government. We obviously need politicians and policymakers to put themselves in the shoes of college administrators and faculty members a bit more. But it's also incumbent on college administrators and faculty members to spend a bit more time trying to understand where their peers in government are coming from too.

That's just a thought. That's all for this week's episode of The Key. I'll be back next week with a conversation about the mental health of our young people. I'm Doug Lederman. And until next time, stay well and stay safe. (MUSIC PLAYS)