

Transcription for

THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 13: EQUITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY

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EP. 13: EQUITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY

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VOICE: This episode is sponsored by the ECMC Foundation, which supports building a postsecondary education system that works for all learners through its grant making focus areas of college success and career readiness.

PAUL FAIN: Hello, welcome to another episode of The Key with IHE, a podcast focused on the pandemic and its impact on lower-income students. I'm Paul Fain, the host and news editor at Inside Higher Ed. For this episode we look at the inequities the pandemic has further exposed and accelerated in higher education, particularly for Black, Latino, and low-income students We also discuss federal policies and incentives that might help close those equity gaps.

To help us grasp the scope of the challenge, I spoke with Michelle Asha Cooper, president of the Institute for Higher Education Policy, a nonpartisan research and policy group that works on student access and completion issues. Cooper talked with us about why higher ed needs to change and how.

MICHELLE COOPER: We've got to recognize that these policies have privilege embedded in them. And if we want to see change, we've got to be willing to give up some of that privilege that we have held dear to our hearts and our families, things like legacy admissions, for example, really has no place within a contemporary higher education enterprise.

PAUL FAIN: We also spoke with Kim Cook, the executive director of the National College Attainment Network, which has been analyzing federal data that suggests lower-income students may leave higher education. Cook talked about doubling the max Pell Grant award and other federal policies she'd like to see.

Finally, for this episode I was joined by co-host Madeline St. Amour, reporter at IHE, who covers nontraditional students. Let's get to the conversation.

So I am here speaking with Michelle Asha Cooper from IHEP. Michelle, thanks for doing this.

MICHELLE COOPER: Thank you for having me.

PAUL FAIN: I'm also joined by Madeline St. Amour in our shop. But let's get right into this. So obviously an unusual time in society, a lot of urgency around systemic racism and higher education not being exempt from that. I don't want to try to characterize it anymore, but I'd love to hear from you, how significant is this moment in your opinion and where does IHEP fit into the puzzle?

MICHELLE COOPER: Well, this is a really important moment for all of us. You know, while we do not yet know the full impact of COVID-19, we know that is having a tremendous impact on higher education and it is also having a tremendous impact on the students who faced tremendous needs prior to the pandemic, and also the institutions that serve them. I think this is a real moment to really double down our efforts on being equity-minded and serving these students and these institutions well, really looking at the need of what our students from low-income populations need, what our students who are Black students, African American students, Latinx students, Asian-Pacific islanders from low-income families, really thinking about what is it that they need to be successful, not just as they move through higher education, but as they move through life beyond higher education, and what is the institutional responsibility to deliver on that promise. Because what we know is that institutions do matter. It matters quite a bit. And now is the time for institutions to really live out their mission and do what's right for our students.

PAUL FAIN: So I know IHEP has long been focused on college affordability access and completion. Could you describe on your view of this that scope of the problem as it existed before and what we're facing

now obviously with the brunt of the pandemic's economic and other pain really falling to Black and Latino, and low-income groups?

MICHELLE COOPER: Yeah, so what we knew is that before the pandemic there was tremendous need. And now what we are finding is for many students and their families the stakes now feel even higher than they did before. You know, they have reduced financial resources. There's heightened anxiety. There's been a change instruction, and now people are looking at college and really trying to figure out, is this degree, is this certificate, is going to college really going to put me on that path to a better and a more sustainable life?

And that's a really important question. People are rightly concerned and the current crisis has really just amplified how important it is to make sure that colleges are return on investment and that it actually puts students on a path to good jobs and upward mobility.

But the challenge is, what we know is that, although college still remains a wise investment for many, and for many students, higher education is going to be one of the biggest investments that they're ever going to make over the course of their lifetime, and the benefits of having a college degree still outweighs not having one. But what we know is that opportunity, access, and value are not equitably distributed. Some colleges and universities promote value, and they are engines of social mobility, but there are not enough of them and that are doing this consistently well. And so this is a real important time for institutional leaders, policy leaders, to be working in conjunction to make sure that what we do moving forward is actually going to be better than what we did yesterday.

PAUL FAIN: To your point of skepticism about the investment, making the investment in higher education, there's some ominous signs of low-income Black and Latino prospective students being less likely to enroll going forward. You know, Education Trust, NCAN, and other groups putting out some data that suggests that we could see a bit of an exodus. How much of a system's change to you think traditional higher ed needs to have to give folks more certainty that it is worth the investment?

MICHELLE COOPER: Well, I think that a couple of different things have to happen.

We have to first, within higher education, realize that we've got to do better. And I'm thinking that the first change has to be mindset change and a behavior change. We've got to realize that we've not been serving enough students well, and that it is our responsibility to serve them better. And it actually makes

no sense to me that there are students who go to college, graduate, and they end up worse off than when they went, primarily because of how much we charge and the impact of student loan debt.

We find this to be especially true with African American students. We see that even for those who graduate, the impact of student loan debt is so huge and it has long-lasting impacts, that they spend their lives trying to dig out of student loan debt, that they don't have that serious leg up in the economy and in the job market that they envisioned. And we've got to fix that problem. That's a travesty.

The other thing we have to do is really make sure that, even though we are delivering on instruction in a way that makes the most sense. You know, we've all moved this... The pandemic has caused everyone to make this shift online instruction, and in many cases, online instruction was already growing before the virus, but now it's intensified. And what we've seen is that, you know, we can't think that we can just go back to yesterday. We can't just reopen our campuses and do what we did yesterday in terms of teaching and learning, and think that it's going to all be better. Because it won't. We've got to really think hard about how to make it better.

There are policies like transfer. So many students who started at a community college think they're going to transfer to a four-year institution, and data consistently shows us that that doesn't happen. We've got to strengthen that pathway to make sure that that's a reality for more students.

And the last thing I'll say is, there's so many policies that we hold near and dear to our hearts, whether that's policy at any of these various levels, but we've got to recognize that these policies have privilege embedded in them. And if we want to see change, we've got to be willing to give up some of that privilege that we have held dear to our hearts and our families, things like legacy admissions, for example, really has no place within a contemporary higher education enterprise. Like we've got to really think about how do we dismantle these things that we just love that just don't serve students or society very well.

PAUL FAIN: Madeline, anything that you want to jump in on?

MADELINE ST. AMOUR: You know, I think a lot of people would agree with everything you just said and I think it makes sense. I'm just sort of curious like, is now the turning point where major change and major movement happens on those issues, because they are...you know, they're things that have been discussed more and more in recent months and years, but they have been researched and talked about

for a while, so how optimistic are you that things will actually change and we won't just go back to like some kind of normal where everyone hopes we forget about all these issues?

MICHELLE COOPER: Madeline, what I'll say to that is that I'm really hopeful that this moment will catalyze real change. I see it as an opportunity to address deep-seeded inequities in our higher education system, inequities that have been driven by centuries of discrimination. And even though I'm definitely a glass half-full kind of girl, I am also a realist. And I recognize we need more than people putting [UNCLEAR] that say that they believe that this is a time of change and that they believe that Black lives matter for there to be something of real value that comes from this effort.

People are really going to need to think differently about the policies and practices that govern our system, and look at them through an equity lens to really figure out what is the impact on students of color, what is the impact on low-income students. They're going to have to eliminate policies and practices that favor the wealthy over the poor. They're going to have to think differently about wrap-around services that support student's success. You're looking at, you know, how do we serve students who are not what we call traditional. I actually call these students the "new traditional"--adult learners and people who are returning to college. And we've got to regain our moral compass.

And I'm not certain we've done all those things quite yet. I'm encouraged by what I see happening right now, but we have to realize somebody might have to make some concessions in what has benefitted them in order for us to be able to see some change. And that's harder for people to do. I think it's easier to say the words and harder to do the things.

But I'm going to be working hard to do my part and really hoping that other people will join us at IHEP in our effort to push forward policies and solutions that really do prioritize the needs of today's students.

PAUL FAIN: I'm glad you brought up legacy admissions and the concept that for true change and economic mobility, it does require some letting go of privilege by groups who've benefitted from it.

Turning to policy briefly, you know, what are some of the deferral or other government incentives that could most help shake things up, whether it be, you know, you mentioned you work on second chance Pell, Pell Grants more broadly, what are some of the policies you're watching most closely in the next year?

MICHELLE COOPER: Sure, I'll tell you sort of like the top five things that I'm watching and would love to see some movement and traction on.

The first is definitely around issues of affordability, recognizing that we should fully fund the Pell Grant. We should index it to inflation. We should protect the Pell Grant reserve fund, and we should make sure that these grants are available to individuals who are being educated while incarcerated. Pell Grants has a long history in our society of having been a real game changer for some many students, giving them that financial leg up. So many of us wouldn't be where we are today without Pell Grants. I think it's important that we make sure that this financial aid continues for some time to come. I think right now the big issue is really around making sure that these emergency aid resources are targeting the students with the greatest financial need and the institutions that serve them.

I think another big issue that we need to focus on right now is looking at the issue of broadband access. You know, when the pandemic came, we all shifted to working remotely pretty much over night, but what we did not necessarily take into consideration was, was that something that everybody could do? The very question of whether or not we can learn online makes the assumption that everyone can get online in the first place. And I've spoken to many people who had trouble accessing online education, people who live in rural communities. I even had a conversation with a community college president who told me that some of her faculty don't have broadband access. So think about what that means for educating students. So we got to think about broadband and opening that up to more Americans.

And then I want to say we really have to look at this issue about higher education's responsibility in closing and tackling the racial wealth gap. As long as college costs remain what they are and students are forced to take out student loans, we will continue to perpetuate a system of haves and have-nots by forcing more and more students to take out loans to pay the cost of college. Student debt is increasing, and the expected return on investment for a four-year college degree certainly is positive, it's not as strong as it was, and for African American students even with a college degree, we still struggle financially. So this is a big issue and when that's very personal to me.

MADÉLINE ST. AMOUR: I guess on the only other thing I would ask would be, you know, when it comes to student loans, like how do you see, what do you think is the best solution to solve that problem, especially given the wealthiest Black students still have a higher loan default rate than the poorest white students. And so like, how to you solve, how do you flip that so that higher ed works for Black students, and like why is it working so poorly?

MICHELLE COOPER: So, you know, oftentimes when we talk about college affordability, we talk about fixes on the backend, things like student loans, things like need-based grant aid. I actually think the cost, like the price tag, like what students are actually being told that they have to pay... We have to really think about what are the cost drivers, and especially within the context of COVID, like really figuring out how do we make sure that the costs are aligned to what students should and could afford to pay. I think if we can fix that problem, that goes a pretty long way to fixing the student loan problem, by making the cost far more reasonable. And I don't think that we talk about that responsibility that is really a big piece of the financing structure that institutions and states fear.

And I'm really, really worried that right now within the context of this pandemic, that states are going to disinvest in higher education. And when they disinvest in higher education, we know what happens. The cost of college doesn't go down. The cost of college is then borne on the students and their families, and they have to dig deeper into their pockets to pay. And when you have people who don't have deep pockets to pay, but they still believe in the value of an education, they're then digging into money they don't have by being forced to take out student loans to pay these costs. We've got to fix that problem.

And I really think that, you know, this is a moment when the federal government, the state governments, need to really work together to figure out before this train gets too far down the track, how do we come together to stabilize the higher education budgets so that we don't see a repeat of what typically happens during times of financial crisis or recessions, which is that higher ed gets cut, students have to pay, and opportunity for economic security and mobility flies out the window.

PAUL FAIN: Well, Michelle, I appreciate you sharing your thoughts and your time with us today, and I hope we can keep in touch in these coming months.

MICHELLE COOPER: Thank you. I've enjoyed it. Thank you so much.

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I'm speaking with Kim Cook. How you doing, Kim?

KIM COOK: Doing well, thanks.

PAUL FAIN: Thanks for chatting with us on a Friday morning.

KIM COOK: My pleasure.

PAUL FAIN: Obviously, a lot urgency right now around equity in postsecondary education. You all at the National College Attainment Network have been working on these issues for a while. Could you talk a little bit about what your focus is and what it has been?

KIM COOK: Sure. Our focus at NCAN is to close the equity gap in postsecondary attainment. And to unpack that a little bit, it's important to understand that low-income students are 29 percent less likely to enroll in postsecondary education after high school. In fact, only 35 percent of low-income high school students obtain a postsecondary credential by age 26 compared to a stunning 72 percent of their higher income peers. Our member programs, community-based organizations, school districts, high ed institutions across the country, who work directly with students and their families to help them take the steps, have the understanding, knowledge, background, and advocacy for our students to help close that gap.

PAUL FAIN: So this spring amid all the turmoil in higher education and in society more broadly, we at Inside Higher Ed have been watching closely the numbers that you and Bill DeBaun and your shop have been about FAFSA completion and renewal. Can you talk about where that stands right now, which we've seen so far?

KIM COOK: Sure. This has certainly been a tough end of season for FAFSA completion for both high school seniors, and we have new data available on renewal FAFSAs as well. We post all this data for anyone who like to check out their state or district, or even high school on our "Form Your Future"

FAFSA Tracker online.

But to give you some high-level information, overall as of June 12th, FAFSA filing is down 3.2 percent compared to this point last year. That's significant in that it represents about 400,000 students. When you unpack that with an equity lens, it's also disturbing that Pell eligible students, those students with the lowest income who qualify for the federal government's need-based grant called the Pell Grant are down even more, at 4.7. So the students who need the money the most to go to college are even less likely to be applying for federal student aid. That also unlocks state and institutional aid.

FAFSA is a powerful indicator of postsecondary enrollment for the fall, so this is really a number to watch when we're asking questions about what will the fall look like, who can go, who's not going. Our member programs have had a lot of calls and conversations with their students, particularly about how changes in income as a result of COVID and the economic downturn are affecting students' choices and decisions about going to college this fall. We are adamant that students need to stay on track to attend college, even if that means a change, perhaps going to an institution closer to your home, perhaps attending a community college for affordability reasons, but supporting those change and trying to help support our students to stay on track.

PAUL FAIN: I obviously can think about a lot of reasons why you might have fewer students from Black, Latino, low-income backgrounds filling out these forms. We know that those populations have taken the brunt of the pandemic's impacts, whether it be job in hour, job and pay loss, family responsibilities... As you look at these numbers, they're definitely alarming. We've talked before just about uncertainty itself. Can you talk a little bit about the fact that that might be driving some of this?

KIM COOK: Absolutely. You know, our students. who are often and mostly the first in their family to attend college, are already taking a gigantic leap of faith to go this new path. And it's because they believe in the power of this path to change not only their lives but the trajectory likely of their families and their families to come. Everything about this journey is uncertain to many of our students.

And when you layer on additional uncertainty of questions about is it worth it? What will it look like? And quite frankly, will I be safe? Will I have the tools? You know, we heard from many of our students who had to pivot to virtual learning to end their senior year of high school, they struggled with an ability to have available devices and available internet access, and thinking about paying thousands of dollars to do that again for college, it creates a lot of uncertainty.

We've been talking to our students about how to best support them, where they can find access to technology, where they can find access to Wi-Fi, and really continuing to say that this may have become more of an uphill battle, more of a leap of faith, but it is ever more important, particularly because we know after economic downturns, most of the new jobs created will require a postsecondary degree.

So this requires some long-term thinking, which is hard. All of us are dealing with uncertainty, but we really need to think a lot about the level of uncertainty, particular that a first-generation college student who's already taking a gigantic leap of faith here is having added on to those decisions.

PAUL FAIN: To respond to that, you know, obviously, I get people's skepticism about investing in a college degree right now amid a difficult job market, but it's pretty clear that actually earning that credential, not taking on debt to not complete, still with probably be the best way to navigate even economic uncertainty like this, correct?

KIM COOK: The best and probably inadequate comparison we have is the 2008 recession, which was different in many ways but still the overarching message that came out of that recession is that employment and good employment went to those with postsecondary credentials. That is a long-term game, that is asking you to take on uncertainty, to power through uncertainty, to take on debt, and, you know, again, to really take this leap for a long-term thinking.

That's why I think students having advisers and supports to help make decisions and to help share information and data is so critical. And one of the pieces where members of NCAN in our programs in communities continue to work with students, particularly over the summer, to help battle what we call "summer melt," and some have added the phrase "pandemic melt" on to that as well, with all credit to Representative Shalala, who I think was first I heard to coin that. The decisions and the barriers and the life that happens that has fueled summer melt in the past now pales in comparison to the factors that are contributing to the summer battle to keep students on track to enroll in the fall.

PAUL FAIN: So let's turn to federal incentives and policies. You know, it's hard to read what's going to happen in Washington for sure, but it does feel like there's a bit more urgency and maybe a growing consensus among folks who watch these issues closely that some increasing of the max Pell award is a policy priority. I gather that is for NCAN as well.

KIM COOK: It certainly is. When anyone has asked us what, pre-COVID, doubling the Pell Grant was a policy priority for NCAN, but now as we talk about COVID response or economic recession, down fall response, doubling the Pell Grant Award is at the top of our list. This is a firm way to direct students, to direct dollars to students who need the most and uses an infrastructure that's already in place with the federal government and understood by institutions that have to disburse that aid. We're heartened that the CARES Act did include \$14 billion of emergency aid for students. So that tells us that there is an appetite to help students, and that when we're facing a crisis, the federal government can and should respond to that.

PAUL FAIN: I know NCAN's done a lot of work to lay out the scope of the affordability challenge that underserved students face. I think for a lot of folks, it's still a bit more than maybe they realize, myself included. Can you just talk a little bit about what sort of challenge they do face?

KIM COOK: NCAN is now in its third year of what we call the "growing gap" research, which looks at affordability, and asks the question, how many of the public four-year and two-year institutions would be affordable to a student who was receiving a Pell Grant, average state aid, some work-study, and had summer earnings and expected family contributions. So for those who follow carefully, that is the full package of effort from a student, and a student who took advantage of all the grant aid that's available to them.

Unfortunately, we found that only 25 percent of public four-year are affordable to students with that funding, and only about 50 percent of two-years are affordable to students with that funding. So we have a long way to go, which is why we are focusing back on that doubling the Pell Grant to restore its purchasing power to its original power, which was about 75 percent of cost [UNCLEAR]. We'd like to get that... Obviously, we'd love to get it back to 75 or higher, but our policy goal now is to reach about the 50 percent mark of the cost of attendance to help straddle that affordability gap.

PAUL FAIN: Kim, running out of time here. As always, appreciate you helping us understand these issues, but giving us numbers and tracking data in live time in ways that help us deal with an unusual time.

KIM COOK: Thank you. The numbers aren't always what we'd like to see, but they're certainly motivating to the importance of our work ahead, so I appreciate you showing those and helping us get the message out.

PAUL FAIN: Thanks, Kim. Keep in touch.

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That's it for this episode of The Key. Thanks very much for listening. We're taking a break next week but The Key will be back on July 14th. And I hope you will join us then.

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