Perspectives and Practices Related To Higher Education Policy-Making: A Case Study Analysis Of One Legislative Session In Minnesota

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Abstract

Baumgartner and Jones’ (1993) Punctuated Equilibrium Theory was applied to analyze responses from 35 interviews with state legislators, government staff, higher education administrators, policy experts, and students, to determine whether the presence of the 2004 Citizens League report resulted in a substantial shift in higher education funding policy perspectives of stakeholders. Findings, which were divided into primary and secondary influences, depending on whether or not a response was mentioned by more than one-third of the study participants, suggested that personal characteristics of actors both within and outside the immediate policy arena increased the likelihood of successfully influencing the higher education funding policy discussions. Political conservatism and economic scarcity, however, reduced opportunities for policy innovation. The dominant definition of “higher education as a public good” used in policy discussions was also addressed, as well as the cyclical nature of policy-making. The primary higher education funding conflict of the 2005 legislative session, which was whether to support policies that support student access or student choice, was also discussed. Implications for research, policy, and practice were also addressed.
PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES RELATED TO HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY – MAKING: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF ONE LEGISLATIVE SESSION IN MINNESOTA

Introduction

For the past 25 years in the United States, states’ financial commitment to higher education, both through direct institutional investment and in student financial aid, has been declining (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006). Several influences have been indicated as forces contributing to this decline. Some researchers state that reductions in state higher education funding are not an intentional effort of state decision makers to shut out higher education, but is simply a result of economic and demographic necessity, and, therefore, higher education is struggling economically as much as other public goods and services (Callan, 2002; Pusser & Wolcott, 2003). Other researchers point to changes in the United States’ political and cultural landscape to explain shifts in higher education funding (Hovey, 1999; National Education Association Research Center, 2003; Reich, 2000).

While few researchers since Friedman (1962, as cited in Hearn & Anderson, 1995) have argued that students should bear the majority or full burden of financing their postsecondary education, the recent emphasis of the individual benefits obtained by those who have at least a baccalaureate degree may have drawn attention to the debate on whether either individuals or society should pay for the education of people who seek these benefits (Mote, 2004; National Education Association Research Center, 2003; Porter, 2002). Other possible factors affecting this funding decline could include the emerging influence of actors outside the immediate state higher education policy arena (for the purpose of this research, the immediate state higher education policy arena refers to the Governor and the Minnesota State Legislature), the
increasing presence of selected higher education lobbyists and related constituencies, and the comparative aggressiveness of other lobbyists and related organizations, such as Pre-K-12 education and Medicaid (Callan, 2002; Laird, 2002; Pusser & Wolcott, 2003). These influences are not only shaping higher education funding policies, but are also fueling the debate among policy makers regarding the very philosophies on which these policies have been based. Put differently, higher education recently has been treated with increased frequency as a private good, rather than as a public good, as it had been for the last 150 years (Bogue & Aper, 2000; Callan, 2002; Mote, 2004).

While the challenge of adequately funding higher education institutions and students is not new (Hines & Hartmark, 1980; Wallace, 1993), what is new in Minnesota is how complex and adversarial the higher education policy arena seems to have become (McLendon, 2003a). Shifts in the political, economic, and cultural environments combined with changing and emerging actors from within and outside the immediate policy arena to establish potentially explosive conditions for debating higher education funding policies (Poch, March 29, 2004 personal communication), including the election of a Republican governor who promised not to increase taxes in order to address the state’s $4.5 billion deficit (Khoo, 2004) and the subsequent realignment of the Higher Education Services Office (HESO) from a non-partisan financial aid office to the Office of Higher Education (OHE), an advisory agency instructed to counsel the governor on higher education funding policies; the appointment of a new OHE director who was previously the chief lobbyist for the Minnesota Private College Council (MPCC) as a member on the Governor’s cabinet; and the release of a report on the state of higher education in Minnesota by the Citizens League (CL) an established, non-partisan group, as requested by the Governor. Preliminary discussions with selected policy analysts, policy makers, and higher education
administrators suggested that higher education funding, with specific attention to whether higher education should be treated as a public or private good in public policy, would be one of the issues being debated in the 2005 legislative session (Mercer, June 14, 2004 personal communication; Meslow, May 26, 2004 personal communication).

**Statement of Problem and Purpose of Investigation**

The purpose of this qualitative investigation was to examine the nature of influence external constituencies had on the policy agenda and discussion related to higher education as a public or private good in Minnesota. This research sought to crucially examine the specific question: What is the nature of influence external constituencies have on the policy agenda and discussion related to higher education as a public or private good? To answer this question, a series of specific questions were generated based on existing research and preliminary discussions with policy experts and higher education administrators. The first three questions pertained to the perceived effectiveness of external constituencies in getting attention of state policy makers. The final two questions examined participant definitions and perceived conflicts related to higher education as a public or private good.

- **Question 1**: Which individuals, groups, and organizations were most able to get the attention of state policy makers during the 2005 legislative session?

- **Question 2**: How did the individuals, groups, and organizations most effective at influencing agenda-setting and discussion related to higher education funding policy get attention from within the immediate policy arena?

- **Question 3a**: Why did the strategies of some individuals, groups, and organizations succeed at getting attention from within the immediate policy arena?
• **Question 3b:** Why were the strategies of the individuals, groups, and organizations unable to get attention from within the immediate policy arena not successful?

• **Question 4:** What is the current dominant definition of “public good” in regard to higher education most frequently utilized by members of the immediate policy arena?

• **Question 5:** What is the nature of the conflict related to the proposed strategies utilized across external constituencies in order to achieve policy goals?

**Conceptual Framework**

Baumgartner and Jones’ (1993) Theory of Punctuated Equilibrium provided a framework for this investigation. This theory, borrowed from evolutionary biology, was applied to explain sudden changes, or “punctuations,” in the environment. This particular framework was selected for several reasons. Although this framework was initially created as a result of research completed in relation to policy-making dynamics occurring at the federal level, its application to higher education policy research appears to be non-existent (McLendon, 2003b). By applying this particular framework, which draws from political science literature (e.g., Kingdon, 1984; Schattschneider, 1960), it was hoped the outcome of this study would contribute to the higher education policy research which draws on existing work in political science, as suggested by other researchers (McLendon, 2000, 2003b; Ness & Noland, 2003). In addition, this framework emphasizes the importance of outside influences on the policy arena, which seemed to be comparatively lacking in other frameworks considered for this investigation (e.g., Kingdon, 2003). Utilizing Baumgartner and Jones’ (1993) framework to study higher education funding policy agenda-setting and discussion also provided an opportunity to test an existing framework in a new arena, rather than utilizing other frameworks which have been applied extensively by other researchers when studying processes associated with higher education public policy-
making (e.g., Cohen & March, 1974; Gladwell, 2000; Kingdon, 2003). Figure 1 includes a summary of this framework.

**Methodology**

Interviews with polity elites were conducted, consistent with Yin’s (1994) revelatory case study model. All data were coded and analyzed through the use of Microsoft Word and Excel. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve higher education administrators, eight higher education experts (including former college and university presidents, members of the media, former leaders and legislators of state government, and policy analysts), five students, and ten active members of the state legislature or government offices. Table 1 includes a summary of study participants.

While the majority of interviews were performed in person, scheduling conflicts made it impossible to interview all participants in this manner. Eight phone interviews, therefore, were also employed. Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed by a neutral third party for accuracy. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and three hours. The researcher made several attempts, both via email and telephone, to schedule interviews with at least one member of the CL, but no one agreed to participate due to scheduling conflicts. All interviews were semi-structured, to provide interviewees with opportunities to share unique perspectives while also building on common themes (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Interview questions were adapted from Frank Baumgartner’s work regarding policy agenda-setting and discussion (http://polisci.la.psu.edu/faculty/Baumgartner/welcome.htm). Interview questions were ordered from easy to more difficult, and included a combination of broad and subject-specific questions, as well as prompts and open-ended follow up questions, in order to establish and maintain rapport with subjects (Leech, 2002).
Figure 1. Punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993)
### Table 1

**Study participant summary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Role</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Government: Elected</th>
<th>Government: Appointed</th>
<th>Higher Education Administration</th>
<th>Expert</th>
<th>Total in Secondary Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appointed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE Administration</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total in Secondary Role</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although questions were frequently asked in differing orders, depending on the direction each interview took, each question was asked to each participant during the interview, although some participants declined to answer certain questions, either because they did not feel sufficiently knowledgeable to respond, or for other reasons.

Limitations of Study

This investigation is subject to a number of limitations. First, the reliance on subjects to recall policy discussions weeks, and in some cases months, after they occurred may have negatively affected data reliability and validity. While interviews were intended to be scheduled during or just after the 2005 legislative session, researcher and study participant schedules prevented this anticipated schedule from being followed.

Second, while several attempts were made to interview an equal representation of higher education institutions and systems, as well as political parties, those who responded to a request to be interviewed were primarily representative of the Minnesota State College and Universities system, including students and administrators, and legislative members of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) party. Based on communications with respondents, it is possible that those individuals who agreed to participate in the study were frustrated with policy discussions occurring at the time. One interview, for example, lasted three hours, during which the informant lamented for an extended period of time, covering a diversity of topics, including the Governor, his academic and professional workload, and what he perceived to be “skyrocketing” tuition rates. Conversely, it was also possible that those individuals who did not agree to be interviewed were concerned with possible researcher bias, even though objective information was provided to all 125 potential respondents regarding the nature of the study, and all efforts were made to minimize any researcher bias in materials sent to possible informants for consideration. A third
reason that some individuals who were asked to participate in this study did not choose to do so could simply be that they did not have the time. Since the interviews took place between May - September 2005, when legislators returned home and other potential participants went on vacation, it is possible that the timing of this study was less ideal than it could have been. Regardless of why some individuals chose to participate while other individuals did not, results should be considered while keeping in mind who, or what, the respondents were representing.

Fourth, this study provided a snapshot of higher education funding policy discussions that occurred over the course of a single legislative session. While discussions from previous sessions were mentioned during the interviews in the context of influencing 2005 discussions, the focus of this study was on actions that solely occurred within the 2005 session. A longitudinal study may have provided additional insights into the true nature of policy discussions in Minnesota over time.

Results

Participants and responses were divided into two categories: external (who is trying to influence) and internal (who is being influenced). When reviewing the frequency with which common themes emerged during the investigation, the researcher found that most-frequently cited influences on the higher education funding policy arena during the 2005 legislative session were mentioned by 12 or more informants. Themes mentioned by more than one-third (n = 12) of the respondents were, therefore, classified as primary, while themes cited by fewer than one-third (n = 12) of the respondents were classified as secondary for the data analysis of this study.

Quotes used to demonstrate findings are stated verbatim. Information that could be used within these quotes to identify study informants, however, was removed.
Influences on Policy Discussions

The first question asked within this study was: Which individuals, groups, and organizations were most able to get the attention of state policy makers during the 2005 legislative session? Primary influences within the immediate policymaking arena included the Governor and legislative bodies, while the primary influences external to the policymaking arena included college and university presidents and other leaders, the University of Minnesota (UM) and Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) systems, and the Minnesota Career Colleges Association (MCCA). Business leaders, professional lobbyists, the MnSCU faculty unions, and the Taxpayers League of Minnesota were also mentioned. Higher education as a general concept was also cited, although responses to higher education contrasted with the positive views internal and external respondents had regarding overall leadership of the very institutions being criticized.

Attention was also focused on influences external to the policymaking arena. The political and economic environment within Minnesota was perceived as having a constraining influence on higher education funding policy discussions, although some respondents did acknowledge that these constraints forced them to be more creative in order to increase efficiency. Media presence was also discussed as an effective means to focus negative, but not positive, attention as a way to effect policy discussions. The presence of the Citizens League and other reports was also addressed. Findings suggest that these reports have a limited influence on higher education funding policy discussions, particularly when resources are scarce. Some respondents even went so far as to say the act of policymaking is not deliberate, but is simply a reaction to environmental factors:
...We didn't do anything planned. We were just reacting to what was in front of us.

[Legislator 8]

*Individuals, Groups, Organizations, and Systems*

Fiutak (1993) proposed the Individuals, Groups, Organizations, and Systems (IGOS) model to be used when categorizing parties in conflict. According to Fiutak (1993), all conflicting factions can be described as individuals; groups, or a gathering of a varying number of individuals; organizations, or a well-organized, larger group of individuals; or systems. This model was used in this investigation when analyzing the first question regarding who, or what, informants perceived as wielding the greatest amount of influence during the agenda-setting and discussion phases of the 2005 legislative session in relation to higher education funding. The IGOS framework, as proposed by Fiutak (1993), is used to organize the internal and external primary and secondary influences on the higher education policy arena during the 2005 legislative session, as summarized in Table 2.

*How Stakeholders Influenced Decisions*

The nature of how negative or positive attention was gained by decision makers within the higher education funding policy arena during the 2005 legislative session in Minnesota were reported to be rather similar to one another. External constituencies were able to gain both negative and positive attention through personal communications with legislators and through media attention. Findings suggested that it was easier for external influences to gain negative attention than positive attention during the 2005 legislative session. Focus on an issue related to higher education was relatively sudden, and was gained primarily through either the media or negative interactions with decision makers. Positive attention, however, was developed more
Table 2

*Summary of influences on higher education funding policy discussions through application of Individuals, Groups, Organizations, and Systems (IGOS) Model (Fiutak, 1993)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Governor Tim Pawlenty</td>
<td>K-12 Commissioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>State Legislators</td>
<td>Alice Seagren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Groups</td>
<td>Senate and House Higher</td>
<td>State DFL Legislative Caucus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Education Finance Committees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Legislators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td>Minnesota Office of Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>U of M President Robert</td>
<td>Bill Gates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bruininks</td>
<td>Thomas Friedman</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MNSCU Chancellor</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>James McCormick</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MNPCC President David</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Laird</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Groups</td>
<td>Business Community Students</td>
<td>College and university alumni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lobbyists</td>
<td>Parents of Students</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MnSCU Faculty Unions</td>
<td>Higher Education Staff</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Taxpayers League of MN</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizations</td>
<td>U of M System</td>
<td>Private, Non-Profit Institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MnsCU System</td>
<td>General Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MCCA &amp; Other For-Profit</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Proprietary Schools</td>
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<td>Higher Education System</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Systems</td>
<td>Elitism</td>
<td>Political Environment</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Economic Environment</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Policymaking Cycle</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Media</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Citizens League Report</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
gradually, either through regular contacts with decision makers or through the media.

While external constituencies were able to gain both negative and positive attention through the media, subsequent actions of policy makers differed depending on the type of attention received. Negative attention more frequently resulted in some kind of action by policy makers, such as putting forth a proposal to reduce funding, which was not previously on the agenda. By contrast, positive attention through the media only served to avoid negative change.

*Factors Affecting the Success of Influencing the Higher Education Funding Policy Arena*

External constituencies were able to gain attention during the 2005 legislative session through personal communications with legislators and the media. While individuals, groups, organizations, and systems outside the immediate higher education funding policy arena were seeking positive attention for themselves, sometimes the attention focused by state policy makers on an external constituency was negative. One question to ask, therefore, was why some attempts, both deliberate and not, to gain attention from state policy makers, were successful at gaining positive attention, while other attempts were either not successful, or had the opposite effect?

Two primary influences were mentioned: First, the perception of leadership of an individual, group, organization, or system, as expressed in a positive manner as trustworthiness, reliability, and credibility, and in a negative manner as disingenuous, self-serving, or unreliable. Put differently, actors trying to influence higher education funding policy discussions during the 2005 legislative session were more successful when considered by decision makers as trustworthy, reliable, and credible, while those actors considered to be disingenuous, self-serving, or unreliable were more likely to negatively influence decision makers. Some respondents also mentioned the absence of leadership, either within or outside of higher
education, influenced policy discussions, in that decision makers were opting to maintain current policy rather than investigate other policy options.

The second primary influence stated by study participants on higher education policy discussions during the 2005 legislative sessions was resource availability, or lack thereof. While some respondents mentioned that they were overall pleased with how funding discussions went, particularly when compared to the 2003 legislative session, others expressed frustration over either constraints being placed on proposed allocations, or that existing funds were not sufficient to fund higher education when compared to other state priorities, such as Pre-K-12 education and health care.

Secondary influences on higher education funding policy discussions during the 2005 legislative session included an increased visibility of direct funding of higher education and personality and value congruence between parties seeking to influence policy discussions and the decision makers. Some legislators who mentioned the practice of prominent community members opting to fund their own priorities as compared to funding state government through taxation policy expressed frustration by this practice. This practice, therefore, was perceived as a negative influence on higher education funding policy discussions within the policymaking arena. External influences, however, were more successful in helping shape policy discussions if their views matched those of policy decision makers.

*Dominant Definition of “Higher Education as a Public Good”*

The fourth question within this investigation regarding influences on higher education funding policy discussion during the 2005 legislative session pertains to the dominant definition of higher education as a public good, used by actors both within and outside of the policy arena. Prior to the start of this study, it was hypothesized that requests made by emerging external
constituencies, including the Minnesota Private College Council and for-profit higher education institutions, to reallocate a portion of funding from public higher education institutions to portable financial aid to allow for increased student choice have been falling on receptive ears within the Minnesota State Legislature (Meslow, May 26, 2004 personal communication; Rosenstone, July 23, 2004 personal communication). Study participant responses yielded three dominant definitions of “higher education as a public good” used in funding policy discussions during the 2005 legislative session. First, respondents stated that higher education in Minnesota provides the state with educated workers. While some participants emphasized that providing area businesses with educated employees is crucial to maintaining the quality of life “many individuals have come to expect”, according to one policy expert, other individuals expressed concern that higher education advocates may have overemphasized this argument in policy discussions, resulting in some policy makers forgetting other roles higher education institutions serve in society.

Study participants also stated that higher education provides Minnesota with important economic growth. This “economic engine” argument is used by higher education stakeholders when referring to the economic return on investing in both educating the citizenry through increased tax collections and spending, as well as research, which generates grant funds and attracts large business. Some individuals, however, stated that higher education stakeholders may have also been placing too much importance on the economic benefits of higher education to the detriment of other purposes higher education serves, just as some respondents mentioned that too much emphasis on the role higher education plays in providing the state with an educated workforce may have also hurt higher education in policy discussions:
More and more people are seeing higher education as a private good, and, therefore, students should pay for it themselves. This whole idea that the primary beneficiary is the individual and that they are going to make more money and higher education is somewhat responsible for that because we kept talking about ‘Go to college and make more money.’...We sold higher education a lot on the individual good in the 1980s and early 1990s...we said to legislators they'd pay more taxes. It's a good investment. And that's all true, but I think maybe we oversold that private good. [administrator 11]

Third, respondents also mentioned that higher education provides the state with an educated citizenry, which adds to the overall quality of life in Minnesota. Such benefits, including increased voter turnout, civic participation, life expectancy, and health, have been well-documented in the literature, as previously mentioned. To those individuals who mentioned an educated citizenry as the primary public good of higher education, any other benefit is secondary.

Nature of Conflict Regarding Higher Education as a Public Good

The final question posited in this investigation pertains to the nature of the conflict of strategies used by external constituencies trying to influence discussions within the higher education funding policy arena during the 2005 legislative session in Minnesota. It was hypothesized that individuals, groups, organizations, and systems trying to influence these discussions would either advocate for funding policies which promoted student access through funding public institutions, or student choice, through funding portable financial aid, which allows for public funds to be used to pay for higher education at private institutions.

The primary result found was that external influences either sought to influence higher education funding policy discussions by advocating either for student access, through directly
funding public higher education institutions, or for student choice, but funding for additional funding in portable student financial aid. Within this primary conflict, two subconflicts exist in relation to the definition of student access. First, some respondents differed on whether the priority of student access in higher education funding policy discussions should solely refer to public institutions, or whether this policy definition should also include private institutions. A second subconflict exists pertaining to whether study participants consider it an important public policy priority to fund higher education institutions throughout the state, or if funding policies should focus on maximizing resources where the most students are located, which is primarily within the Twin Cities metropolitan area. While some respondents suggested that the most effective way to allocate resources for higher education to achieve this public policy goal was to continue investing in higher education systems (e.g., UM and MnSCU), other participants stated that providing students with increased choice by reallocating existing resources from funding institutions to funding individual student aid would be of greatest benefit to both students and institutions, because doing so would increase competition across all types of higher education institutions competing for resources.

Summary of Results

The results of this study were intended to illustrate whether internal policy discussions regarding higher education funding policy can be effectively influenced by external stakeholders. Findings suggested that establishing trust and credibility with policy makers through regular, accurate, and honest communications contributed to the success some external stakeholders had, including the University of Minnesota President, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System Chancellor, and undergraduate students, in receiving positive attention within the policy
arena. The conservative political and limited economic environments in Minnesota during the 2005 legislative session did not allow policy makers to make substantial positive changes in policy, since some options considered by decision makers (e.g., tax increases) were not up for discussion. Attention, therefore, was focused on undoing some of the perceived damage done to higher education in the 2003 biennium, when the state faced a $4.5 billion shortfall. Negative attention gained, either through direct communication with policy makers or through the media, however, did result in discussions to reduce funding in some cases, particularly in relation to the for-profit higher education sector, consistent with other research (e.g., Pusser & Wolcott, 2003). The most external stakeholders could hope for, given the political and economic environment, therefore, was to maintain current levels of funding by avoiding negative attention and providing policy makers with accurate information on a regular basis over time. The political and economic environment also may have prevented the results of the Citizens League report from wielding any substantial influence on the policy arena.

Findings from this investigation lead to a revision of the Punctuated Equilibrium framework used to guide this study, which will be subsequently discussed. Implications for additional research, policy, and practice will also be presented.

Implications for Research

This investigation was guided by a framework, as developed by Baumgartner and Jones (1993), which is borrowed from political science literature and evolutionary biology to illustrate how substantial policy change occurs within the policy arena. This initial framework describes actors from within and outside the immediate policy arena, and summarizes how policy issues move between the immediate, or subsystem arena, and the macro, or general, arena.

Initial questions suggested by this initial framework pertain to who is involved in
discussions regarding higher education funding policy, both inside and outside the immediate policymaking arena, and how stakeholders are able to gain attention of actors within the immediate higher education funding policy arena. Results suggested a need for a revision of this initial framework. The revised framework contributes to political science, higher education, and conflict study literatures by providing additional understanding of the agenda-setting and discussion process within the policymaking arena.

*Summary of Initial Framework*

The initial framework, as displayed in Figure 1, posited that the policymaking process, including discussions and agenda-setting, occurs primarily within the subsystem arena, which consists solely of a small number of policy elites. Occasionally, however, the act of policymaking moves from the subsystem arena to the macro arena, either through deliberate or unpredictable means. In terms of higher education funding policy, an example of a deliberate move to the macro arena could be the use of the media by stakeholders to call attention to a particular policy issue, while an unpredictable move to the subsystem arena could be an unanticipated scandal regarding inefficient use or abuse of financial aid funding by an institution that received attention from the general public, or a high-level award bestowed on an institution. Consistent attention to policy within the macro arena is not sustainable over long periods of time, so policy change that occurs within this arena tends to be swift. Once change occurs, the policymaking process returns to the subsystem arena, where it is once again controlled by the policy elites.

*Revised Methodological Framework*

Results of this investigation suggested a revised model, which is summarized in Figure 2. While this new framework may initially appear to be very similar to the original model, four
Figure 2. Revised methodological framework

- **INTEREST**
  - Increased interest by engaged and disengaged parties

- **ARENA SHIFT**
  - (unpredictable) or
  - VENUE SHOPPING BY POLICY ENTREPRENEURS (deliberate)

- **INCREASED MEDIA ATTENTION**
  - (positive or negative; deliberate or unintentional)

- **SUBSYSTEM ARENA**
  - Policy elites
  - Few interested parties

- **Environment**
  - Constraints

- **Venue Evolution**

- **MACRO ARENA**
  - Policy elites
  - Mobilization of apathetic
    - Status-quo interests
    - Innovation interests

- **Point of Agenda Formation**

- **Trusted Information Sources**
  - Policy Entrepreneurs

- **Policy Innovations**

- **POLICY MONOPOLIES**
  - (equilibrium)

- **POLICY REFORM**
  - (punctuations)

- **REDUCED ATTENTION**
  - (media, policy entrepreneurs)

- **POLICY RESOLUTION**
additions are worth noting: the inclusion of environmental factors, how negative and positive attention may affect policy, the presence of actors who use their own agendas to maintain the status-quo, and the increased emphasis on actors that move into and out of the policy arena over time.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Much of what has been derived from this investigation pertains to current practices utilized by external stakeholders when trying to influence the direction of higher education funding policy discussions. Interview results suggest several implications for practice, which are divided according to actions with policy makers, actions with the general public, and general, political action. When interacting with members of the immediate higher education funding policy arena, consider: (1) Increasing stability of engagement with policy actors over a longer period of time; (2) maintaining, if not increasing, the level of attention given to key decision makers, particularly in relation to in-person communication; and (3) sharing ideas regarding policy change, and becoming more open to new ideas. It is also advisable to avoid negative media attention whenever possible. Results also suggested that it is important to (1) engage the general public through the media and through community outreach and service; and (2) increase the dialogue with the general public regarding their expectations of higher education in Minnesota, especially since some study participants cited a disconnection between higher education aspirations and public expectations. While the general public is not responsible for setting higher education funding policy, the general public is responsible for electing the Governor and legislators who do influence policy. Citizens with college-aged students also send their children to college, and a perception of elitism, poor student service, or inefficiency may
causes more families to choose to send their sons and daughters elsewhere to pursue higher education.

Higher education stakeholders may also want to consider becoming more engaged in the political process. While study participants provided mixed responses regarding whether or not higher education as an enterprise should become more actively involved in this process through endorsing and campaigning for candidates, as Pre-K-12 education stakeholders do, becoming more involved in this process as a citizen may help elect state leaders with similar views on higher education funding.

Exploring internal and external influences on discussions and agendas related to higher education funding policy is critical (McLendon, 2003a, 2003b; Ness and Noland, 2003). Research findings can contribute to the conflict studies and political science literatures by developing a greater understanding of how the policy-making process is influenced during an era of economic scarcity and political polarization. Second, the results of this investigation are intended to better inform groups and individuals concerned about higher education funding, not just in Minnesota, but elsewhere, of what kinds of arguments and strategies are most helpful at getting positive attention from state policy makers. Third, and most importantly, the results of this study may also be used by any group or individual interested in learning how to become successfully involved in the policy-making process at any level of government. Research has suggested that individuals are less connected to one another than ever before, and, therefore, are less likely to participate in community service or the political process (Putnam, 2000). It is hoped that the results of this research, therefore, will increase the level of engagement in our society by demystifying the political process, so that decisions that affect everyone are made by many, not a few select people.
Directions for Further Research

While this study may provide some insights into what has influenced policy discussions regarding higher education funding in Minnesota during the 2005 legislative session, several ideas for future research are suggested.

First, conducting a longitudinal study of higher education funding policy discussions would provide an even clearer picture of the policymaking arena and its actors as the issues and actors change over time.

Second, utilizing a mixed-methods approach by supplementing interview data with quantitative data regarding specific higher education funding allocations could further substantiate or refute interview responses by matching study participant responses with actual decisions. Comparing the results of this qualitative study with the eventual higher education funding allocations from the 2005 session, for example, may have provided additional context regarding who or what was most successful in influencing policymakers.

Third, a number of respondents asked to discuss other issues not mentioned in the interview protocol, which were not analyzed for this study. Some questions mentioned included the extent online learning will affect higher education funding policy and access in Minnesota, and what higher education will look like in Minnesota in the next ten years, which are issues that the Citizens League report did not address.

Finally, it would be interesting to analyze the information collected during this investigation using a different theoretical lens in order to gain additional insight into higher education funding policy discussion and agenda-setting. One intriguing theoretical lens the researcher was not aware of until after this study was approved, for example, pertains to the use of language used by actors both within and outside the policy arena. Parsons' (2005) findings
suggest that, when external influences use the language of decision makers when trying to advocate a certain position, as has been done in recent years in Minnesota (e.g., “economic engine,” “educated workforce”), the external constituencies lose power within the policy arena. It may be useful, therefore, to apply this framework to a future study regarding whether language used by external actors trying to influence higher education funding policy in Minnesota may be working to their detriment or benefit.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the nature of influence external constituencies have on the policy agenda and discussion related to higher education as a public good in Minnesota during the 2005 legislative session. Interviews occurred with policy elites and experts, higher education students and administrators, legislators and legislative staff, and representatives of the media. Results suggested that, while internal and external stakeholders are in agreement regarding the predominant definition of higher education as a public good currently used in policy is to provide Minnesota with an educated workforce and populace, conflict exists regarding how this belief is to be expressed in policy. While some participants stated it is the government’s responsibility to fund public higher education institutions, other participants stated that student choice should be promoted through allocating additional resources directly to financial aid. No one, however, wishes for policy makers to be in an either/or situation, where a choice must be made to fund either the institutions or individual financial aid, but the current political and economic environment existing within Minnesota leaves policy makers little choice but to explore these options.

In an attempt to try and influence policy discussions, regular, honest communication between external stakeholders and internal policy actors is critical to establish the trust and
credibility needed to effectively operate within elite policy circles and, thereby, influence discussion. Challenges occur, however, when policy actors and stakeholders change, creating a circular pattern of policy consideration and reform. It is difficult for external stakeholders to establish trust and credibility when policy actors change due to election cycles, and staff move on to other positions. This continual change in participants within and outside of the immediate policy arena leaves stakeholders little choice but to continually revisit previous policy recommendations, rather than deliberately move forward. The presence of the Citizens League report, previously thought to serve as a catalyst for discussion regarding higher education reform, fell into this category of credible, yet repetitive, recommendations made to decision makers, which may or may not result in some kind of subsequent policy change.

While the Governor and leadership of Minnesota’s two public higher education systems were most frequently cited as having the most influence on higher education funding policy discussions in the 2005 legislative session, concerns were raised about whether policy discussions were deliberate, or if the discussions were simply reactions to decisions made in previous years. Other concerns were expressed regarding whether or not any actor is showing any true leadership when trying to set higher education funding policy.

The media is frequently used to call attention to various policy issues, including issues from within higher education. Higher education stakeholders are frequently called upon to write letters to the editor or opinion pieces, for example, regarding the importance of higher education, particularly during the legislative session. While media attention, focused on positive occurrences within higher education, informs the public and legislators, this attention does not result in substantial changes in higher education funding policy discussions, although it may be used to bridge perceived gaps between higher education and the general public regarding
expectations and aspirations. Negative attention, however, is more effective at instigating these sorts of conversations, although these conversations are not ones higher education stakeholders necessarily want to have occur.

Both higher education stakeholders and actors from within the immediate policy arena believed they were reacting to the political and economic environments which existed during the 2005 legislative decisions. Changes, therefore, were not expected to occur until these environments change. While active participation of higher education institutions and systems in the political process is not likely to change these environments, increasing engagement of higher education stakeholders during the legislative session, as well as increasing engagement of individuals acting as citizens during political campaigns, for example, are two ways higher education stakeholders may consider to restructure these environments. Until the environment changes, changes in higher education funding policy are unlikely to occur.
References


