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## **New Book Accuses Education Department's Statistics Center of Errors That Skewed Policy Making**

By DAVID GLENN

Four recent federally financed studies of college attendance and social equality are marred by serious conceptual and statistical errors, several scholars charge in a book published last week. According to those critics, the four studies, which were released from 1997 to 2002, have promoted the false idea that tuition costs are not a major barrier for low-income people who hope to attend college.

"These reports have made errors that kids in basic stat courses learn they shouldn't make," Edward P. St. John, a professor of education at Indiana University at Bloomington and the editor of the book, *Public Policy and College Access: Investigating the Federal and State Roles in Equalizing Postsecondary Opportunity* (AMS Press), said in an interview on Wednesday. "And they've naively led people to believe that if kids just take the right courses in high school, that everybody can go to college."

The authors of the studies in question have vigorously denied the book's assertions. In interviews on Wednesday, they said that Mr. St. John and his co-authors had misunderstood the purpose of their studies, had taken quotations out of context, and had wildly exaggerated the actual impact of the studies on public policy.

"These reports in no way say that financial aid is not important, especially to low-income students," said Laura J. Horn, director of statistical analysis and data design at MPR Associates Inc., a private consulting firm based in Berkeley, Calif. MPR Associates conducted the four studies under contracts with the National Center for Education Statistics, a unit of the U.S. Department of Education. Ms. Horn pointed out that her firm's 1997 report on college access includes an entire chapter on financial-aid issues.

The four studies -- which examined high-school students' access to college, the academic success of first-generation college students, and the dropout rates of Pell Grant recipients -- have been cited in policy debates about how to reduce the college-attendance gap between low-income and high-income families.

One school of thought, associated with Mr. St. John and his co-authors, holds that tuition costs are a major barrier for low-income students, and that increased grants and subsidies should be a central tool in efforts to reduce the gap.

Another camp holds that it is more useful to focus on high-school students' lack of preparation for college. According to that line of argument, if otherwise-qualified low-income high-school students are encouraged to take the SAT or ACT, to choose appropriate high-school courses, and to fill out college applications, they will almost always manage to patch together enough financial aid to enroll in college.

Mr. St. John and his co-authors argue that the four federal studies use statistical models that falsely minimize the impact of tuition and cost barriers. The studies mysteriously chose not to include college cost and financial aid as central explanatory variables, Brian K. Fitzgerald, staff director of the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, said in an interview on Wednesday. The committee reports to Congress on student-aid issues.

"If you're going to look at the effects of finances on college-enrollment decisions, then you've got to include finances in your analysis," said Mr. Fitzgerald, who is a contributor to Mr. St. John's book. "It's that simple."

All parties in this dispute emphasize that the cost-versus-preparation argument is, at some level, a false dichotomy. Indeed, Mr. St. John has recently written several positive evaluations of programs in Indiana and Washington State that combine need-based grants with coaching and preparation services. And Ms. Horn, of MPR Associates, stressed that her firm's reports have never denied the importance of tuition barriers.

But when the time comes for policy makers to design student-aid programs, such nuances are sometimes lost, and distinct "cost" and "preparation" camps do emerge. One such moment came in the late 1990s, when the Clinton administration promoted tuition tax credits, which primarily benefit middle-income families, instead of increasing the maximum level of Pell Grants, which primarily benefit poor families, according to Mr. Fitzgerald.

Mr. Fitzgerald believes that the Clinton administration made a serious error when it chose not to put a priority on Pell Grants, and that the earliest of the four federal studies played "a very significant role" in that decision.

In June 2003, Mr. Fitzgerald organized a conference at Macalester College at which several scholars presented methodological critiques of the federal studies. Two of those critiques -- by Donald E. Heller, an associate professor at Pennsylvania State University's Center for the Study of Higher Education, and William E. Becker, a professor of economics at Indiana -- form the heart of Mr. St. John's new book.

According to Mr. St. John, those two critiques were endorsed by a panel of seven prominent education researchers, including David W. Breneman, dean of the school of education at the University of Virginia, and Bridget Terry Long, an assistant professor of education at Harvard University. (The two critiques are available online in [a document](#) that can be viewed using [Adobe Reader](#), available free.)

Mr. Heller and Mr. Becker's chapters claim to have identified several statistical errors in the federal studies.

One set of alleged problems involves omitted variables. Mr. Heller argues that the federal studies fail to capture the effect of "cost discouragement" on students early in their high-school careers. If a ninth grader believes that her parents will never be able to afford college tuition, for example, she might stop trying to earn decent grades.

She would therefore never show up in the studies' analysis because the studies consider only students who actually apply to college. But the studies, according to Mr. Heller, tend to interpret such students' absence as a function only of a "lack of preparation," without acknowledging that cost anxieties themselves play a causal role.

Mr. Fitzgerald illustrated that point with an analogy. Imagine, he said, a world in which cars were

generally so expensive that low-income people could not afford them. "We could not blame the fact that they don't own cars on the fact that they don't get licenses, don't go to dealerships, don't take test drives, and don't fill out loan applications," he said. To place such "preparation" variables at the center of one's analysis is to miss the central point, Mr. Fitzgerald argued.

"You cannot omit the most important variable in federal higher-education policy," he said. "If you're going to gauge access, then you have to account for finances."

The authors of the reports, however, insist that with the data they had at hand, it would have been impossible for them to make reasonable guesses about the behavior and beliefs of students who never applied to college.

"They're complaining about data that nobody has," said Lutz K. Berkner, a senior research associate at MPR Associates. "They say that we should be able to figure out how much financial aid students who didn't apply to college and didn't apply for financial aid would have gotten if they did. Well, we can't do that. Nobody can do it, although you can make up the numbers, which they have also done."

And it's not certain that cost concerns shape students' academic behavior as early as the eighth or ninth grade, said C. Dennis Carroll, an associate commissioner at the National Center for Education Statistics. "Heller's conjecture about cost discouragement is one of many conjectures about how students choose to prepare and what type of college to attend, if they do," he said. "I suspect that there are a lot of variables that we don't know how to measure well."

Large-scale studies that attempted to deal with such questions, he suggested, would be hugely expensive. "As a statistical agency," he said, "we prefer not to deal with data that we can't collect reliably and in a timely way."

Mr. St. John said that for at least 20 years, federal policy makers have preferred to avoid research questions that would reveal the deficiencies of student-aid programs. "The Department of Education," he said, "fell into the problem that many agencies have, which is that they use their statistics to support a line of policy, rather than providing neutral information to inform public-policy makers."

That charge was firmly denied by Robert Lerner, commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics. "These are descriptive reports," he said in an interview on Wednesday. "All of our data sets are publicly available for anyone who wants to do secondary analysis. Our reports don't make policy prescriptions or endorse policy positions. No NCES report has ever done that."

Mr. Berkner and his colleagues at MPR said that they are puzzled by the critiques, and that they were upset that they had not been invited to attend the Macalester conference at which their work was scrutinized. Mr. Berkner suggested that Mr. St. John's arguments about financial aid are trivially true.

"I don't understand what the point of this whole argument is," he said. "We know what all the conditions for college access are. We know the things that count. Money and financial aid are one. Academic preparation is another. Aspiration is another. Doing the things you need to do to apply are another."

For all his laments about the federal studies, Mr. St. John is reasonably optimistic that financial-aid policies can be improved. "The total system is working pretty darn well," he said. "Access is improving, and taxpayers are spending less per student enrolled. But we need to correct for a serious problem, which is that the system has an inequality embedded in it."

Student aid could become more equitable with no net increase in federal spending, Mr. St. John argued, if certain loan programs were replaced by need-based grants, along with new federal incentives for states to improve college attendance and completion rates for low-income students.

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