

Reflections on the Public-Private Configuration of American Postsecondary Education

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ABSTRACT

From the introduction of the higher learning in 1636 to the present, the evolution of the public-private configuration has been shaped by myriad internal and external forces that, over time, have provided both opportunities and challenges to the American agenda of providing access to and excellence in colleges and universities. Along with tracing the history of the configuration, this article explores three popular myths and invites the reader to (re)interpret its meanings and effects.

Introduction

Looking at the expansive and thriving assortment of colleges and universities in the United States today, one might presume that this configuration is the outcome of some grand design crafted by governmental leaders of past generations. Quite the opposite is the case. The story of the American postsecondary education system is more cacophonous than orchestral. Beginning with the colonial colleges, the higher learning in America has been influenced more by the aspirations of local leaders

and communities than by any form of regional or national coordination, governmental or otherwise. Still, there have been significant external influences that, on balance, have fueled the diversity of the configuration more than they have advanced uniformity.

The public-private configuration of American postsecondary education has been both a contributor to and a product of diverse influences. Shaped by a confluence of individual voices, social forces and jurisprudence throughout the last three and a half centuries, the enduring coexistence of state and non-state postsecondary education has fostered excellence by providing useful tensions and points for reflection and scrutiny. As this story continues to unfold, we must continue to be mindful of the elements of difference and sameness that this public-private configuration has relied upon so that ideas and practices regarding higher learning can be preserved, reconsidered and advanced for future generations.

Emergence of the public-private configuration

Though the early colonial colleges were built in the image of England's Oxford, the funding and governance structures supporting higher learning took on decidedly different forms from the outset. Only loosely united by a delicately organized central government, pre-revolutionary American colonies founded their own colleges as resources for and symbols of their independent identities (e.g., Massachusetts's Harvard College in 1636, Virginia's College of William and Mary in 1693, Connecticut's Collegiate School/Yale in 1701). The remaining six of the "colonial nine" followed over the next seven decades with New Hampshire's Dartmouth College in 1769 completing the esteemed group, with each seeing itself as a principal institution in its own right. The colonial colleges were neither public nor private institutions, at least by today's definitions. The colonial colleges were founded by way of colonial legislation or royal charter, with funds and lands allocated by municipalities and families alike, and directly affiliated with, inspired by, or in spite of organized faith. In the 1780s, the same decade as the establishment of the U.S. as an independent nation, a small number of postsecondary education institutions were founded by the states, but "these first so-called state institutions were more nearly private than public" (Brubacher and Rudy, 1976:145). Thus the public-private dimensions of America's

first institutions of postsecondary education were blurry at best. It was not until the early part of the nineteenth century that the distinction between public and private would be crystallized.

In 1817, the state of New Hampshire attempted to take over the governance and administration of Dartmouth College. The Trustees of Dartmouth College responded by asserting its status as an autonomous corporation (Dartmouth was founded by way of a charter from King George III) which should be free from governmental intrusion. In 1819, the United States Supreme Court ultimately agreed with that assertion and thus set the trajectory for the public-private configuration of American colleges and universities, at least in the legal-bureaucratic sense. According to the historian Frederick Rudolph, “the Dartmouth College decision put on the way toward clarification the distinction between private and public institutions, a distinction that had not been made nor required a half century before. Although serving a public purpose, Dartmouth, said the Court, was essentially an expression of private philanthropy” (1990:210).

This is not to say that institutions not founded through state governmental action (i.e., via a provision in a state constitution or a piece of legislation) have been wholly free from governmental involvement. The norm, however, has persisted in the spirit of the Dartmouth case. Further, the public-private distinction set the course for more far-reaching legal implications. “In addition to these differences in regulatory patterns, the law makes a second and more pervasive distinction between public and private institutions: public institutions and their officers are fully subject to the constraints of the federal Constitution, whereas private institutions and their officers are not” (Kaplin and Lee, 1995:46). Unpacking what this distinction has meant would be a task far too complex in this current undertaking, but it is sufficient to say that while this differential application of Constitutional law has substantially influenced certain elements of organizational and student life at colleges and universities, the core elements of what it means to be an institution of higher learning have not been dismantled due to public or private designations.

The lack of a specific provision for postsecondary education in the U.S. Constitution has certainly been a major factor in the ability of the public-private configuration to flourish. Arguably, the closest the U.S. government has come to being directly responsible for the creation of any college or university was with the Morrill Land Grant Acts of 1862

and 1890. Through granting to the states allotments of federal land, which could in turn be sold for the sake of generating revenue to be directed at establishing state colleges, over 70 postsecondary institutions were created, including several of the nation's most prestigious public universities and university systems (e.g., the University of California system, The Ohio State University, Pennsylvania State University). The land grant colleges played an important role in the evolution of the public-private configuration of American postsecondary education in many ways, not least of which being that they have provided affordable access to higher learning for millions of students throughout the past century.

That the Morrill Acts deferred authority for postsecondary education to the states followed the deeply-rooted spirit of federalism demonstrated throughout American history. Had any of the multiple efforts to establish a national university at the seat of government in Washington, D.C. been successful, particularly in the early years of the country when George Washington and several of his immediate successors supported a "University of the United States", the public-private configuration of American postsecondary education would likely look much different. Though some institutions may lay claim to being at the center of the higher learning universe in the U.S., no college or university—public or private—can legitimately operate with such authority.

Further significant influences in the evolution of the public-private configuration may be attributed to the sheer growth in the number of postsecondary institutions throughout the twentieth century, particularly state universities and community colleges. Given the stage set by the Morrill Acts and a populace developing stronger affinities for more practical forms of study, states withdrew their financial support of the private colleges and their more classical curricula in favor of the secular and utilitarian state colleges and universities. Indeed, by the second quarter of the twentieth century, "the day of public support had ended, the private college had emerged" (Rudolph, 1990:189). Advancing the value of broad access to higher learning first put forth by the state universities, public 2-year community colleges emerged on the American postsecondary landscape in 1901 and grew in number at an unparalleled pace. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/>), by 1910 there were 25 community colleges in the U.S. and by 1960 that number reached 412. Between 1961 and 1970 alone, the number of community colleges more than doubled, and continues to grow to this day. For the public-private configuration

of American postsecondary education, the widespread emergence of state-supported colleges and universities concurrent with an already strong and growing non-state sector gave each something to aspire to and push against as they developed their respective identities.

Finally, one cannot recount the factors involved in the development of the public-private configuration of American postsecondary education without noting the Higher Education Act of 1965, the legislation by the U.S. Congress which included authorization for federal financial aid programs providing grants and guaranteed loans directly to students for use at public or private institutions. Had federal financial aid to students been restricted to either the public or the private sector exclusively (more conceivably the former), the public-private configuration would have been dealt a serious blow. Instead, this governmental action affirmed the value of both institutional types, enhanced the competitiveness of the market, and contributed a great deal to the vitality and strength of the public-private configuration of postsecondary education in the U.S. today.

Contemporary portrait of public and private postsecondary education in the U.S.

To provide an understanding of the public-private configuration of American postsecondary education, it is useful to do so through both descriptive and interpretive means. Describing American postsecondary education *by the numbers* is a helpful way to understand the size, scope and diversity of this collection of institutions. An examination of how these institutions *identify* themselves and how others identify them contributes to a more in depth appreciation of *what they mean* to the individuals and society who are its members and constituents.

By the numbers

According to the most recent publication of the annual *Almanac of Higher Education*, across the 3300-plus non-profit colleges and universities in the U.S., there is a near even split between public and private institutions, with the number of public institutions (1712) slightly outnumbering private institutions (1665). With the exception just over 100 two-

year/sub-baccalaureate institutions, private colleges and universities offer the baccalaureate degree or higher. In contrast, public two-year institutions—a very diverse constellation of institutions offering a wide range of continuing, technical, vocational, college/university transfer, and increasingly, baccalaureate and post-baccalaureate programs—make up the majority (approximately 63%) of postsecondary institutions in the public sector.

Despite being fewer in number than public two-year institutions as well as private four-year institutions, public four-year colleges and universities enroll the greatest number of students. According to the *Almanac*, of the nearly 16 million students enrolled at non-profit institutions of postsecondary education in the U.S., 39 percent attend public four-year colleges and universities and 37 percent attend public two-year institutions. Although there are nearly as many private colleges and universities as there are public, they serve a proportionately fewer number of students with just under 25 percent of the total national enrollment.

In addition to numbers of students and institution types, one other figure is worth noting: \$250 billion. To put it simply, postsecondary education has grown to be a powerful industry in the U.S. with annual funds and revenues across the whole configuration now adding up to over one quarter of a trillion dollars. The operating budgets of several of the nation's largest research universities are over \$1 billion alone, a major factor in the relatively recent phenomenon of college and university presidents being likened more to a chief executive officer of a corporation than a first among equals. Public and private institutions alike contribute to this growing industry, though their sources of funding differ, particularly with respect to state appropriations and student tuition. In the year 2001, for example, state appropriations accounted for approximately 31 percent of public four-year institutions' total funding but less than 1 percent of that of private four-year institutions. In the same year, student tuition and fees accounted for 17 percent of the funding for public four-year institutions and 38 percent for private four-year institutions. Continuing with the comparisons of four-year private and public colleges and universities, the average cost of tuition and fees at public four-year institutions was \$5,132 for public and \$20,082 for private. With other costs of postsecondary education (e.g., food, transportation, books) being relatively constant between public and private institutions, the total cost of attending a public four-year institution is

approximately one-half the cost of attending a private four-year institution.

Identity and Meaning: “Public” and “Private” in Personal and Social Spheres

What does it mean to be educated? This simple and compelling, yet elusive, question has been a driving force of research and inquiry, public deliberation and action, and personal decision making alike for as long as the idea of higher learning has been in existence. Given the current predominance of both public and private institutions of postsecondary education in the U.S., the question of *what it means to be publicly or privately educated* adds a layer of meaning and interpretation which can be both fruitful and vexing. The distinctions between public and private in the U.S. can be found in both social and personal spheres.

If one were to access any comprehensive list or directory of American postsecondary education institutions, it would invariably include an institution’s status as public or private as a distinguishing characteristic. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching produces what is arguably the most recognized classification scheme within the academy. The “Carnegie classification system”, as it is commonly called, is a typology of colleges and universities organized primarily by institutional size and function (e.g., doctorate-granting institutions, master’s colleges and universities, baccalaureate colleges, associate’s colleges). Within each main category, the institutions are then further delineated as public or private. Another influential typology of sorts is published by *U.S. News & World Report*, a weekly newsmagazine which has become notorious for its annual rankings of colleges and universities. If the Carnegie classification system is most popular within the academy, the *U.S. News* “America’s Best Colleges” and “America’s Best Graduate Schools” issues are most popular outside the academy (not to mention of great interest to academics, though their evaluations of the magazine appear to be influenced somewhat by its evaluation of them). *U.S. News* collects information on a variety of indicators of quality (e.g., acceptance rates, average test scores, research funding, peer assessment), builds composite scores, and ranks institutions by overall type (similar to the Carnegie types), specialization, etc., with institutions designated as public or private within each listing.

But what do the differences *mean*? If the distinctions between public

and private postsecondary education had only to do with legal-bureaucratic foundations, the words “public” and “private” wouldn’t be so commonly used. The idea of public and the idea of private and the differences between the ideas matter – to institutions of postsecondary education, their students, and society writ large.

Curiously, and perhaps indicative of a common belief system or stereotypes, several of the *U.S. News* ranking categories include a “top schools” category (inclusive of public and private institutions) and a “top publics” category. Granted, few public institutions crack the magazine’s top tier in the general categories, but this distinction made by *U.S. News* illuminates how “public” and “private” serve as proxies for quality in social spheres. Further, institutions of higher education themselves are not exempt from employing such rhetorical catchphrases. For example, the College of William and Mary and Rutgers, the only two institutions among the “colonial nine” which emerged as public rather than private institutions, embrace their designation as “public ivy” institutions (i.e., elite private education at a public school price).

The meanings of public and private postsecondary education found in the social sphere have a symbiotic relationship with personal spheres. How individuals choose which college or university to attend, if any, and what informs and shapes their personal identities are greatly influenced by perceived differences (assumed or otherwise) between public and private colleges and universities. The values ascribed to postsecondary education as a whole, the range of options considered viable, and institutional type preferences are framed by prospective students’ families and high schools (McDonough, 1997). When students enter the world of work, commonsense understandings of private and public education differences may indelibly impact a person’s trajectory in the world of work. Countless college choice guides filling the self-help shelves of book stores and scattered throughout the World Wide Web alert students to the critical importance of what the name of their school of choice will mean to others.

Myths and Realities in the Public-Private Configuration

How a student’s college choice will affect her/his life chances is just one of the contours of popular and scholarly interest associated with the public-private configuration of American postsecondary education.

Though there are exceptions to every assumption and generalization, the differences between myths and realities are debatable when it comes to their political and personal sway. This final section will briefly examine a few widely held understandings related to the public-private dimensions of American postsecondary education. Our purpose is not to debunk myths or reify realities so much as to identify consistencies and inconsistencies in the contemporary rhetoric.

Myth/Reality #1: The public-private configuration fosters competitiveness and experimentation in college and university organization and practice.

The extent to which innovation has been a hallmark of American postsecondary education is debatable. On the one hand, the overall size and diversity of institutional types (including public and private sectors) is breathtaking and can fairly be viewed as a result of the capacity of the field to respond to various wants and needs. On the other hand, the modes of instruction and basic organizational structures of colleges and universities, public and private, allow for the college experience, as it were, to be shared across multiple generations. As noted previously, it is not uncommon for public institutions to make claims of being like a private institution and, increasingly, private institutions are making claims of their value to the public as a means for soliciting financial support. In this sense, the public-private configuration creates a useful tension. Yet this tension can also provide for stagnation or trepidation. “An innovation in a Ph.D. program, for example, might be rejected from fear that it would hamper the university’s comparative advantage (Veysey, 1970:330).” In the postsecondary education marketplace, both private and public institutions adhere to the same essential norms of what it means to be a college or university.

Myth/Reality #2: The existence of private institutions in addition to public institutions makes postsecondary education cheaper for the government.

An oft-expressed virtue of having such a strong private sector of postsecondary education in the U.S. is the amount of money it saves the government and its taxpayers. “By educating students who, in the absence of this sector, would be enrolled at public expense at state-sup-

ported institutions, they save taxpayers more than \$12 billion annually. They contribute considerably to the quality, diversity, and competition that have kept the United States preeminent in higher education” (Callan, in Levine, 1993:13). The notion that private institutions save taxpayers money is dubious, of course, because it rests upon the assumption that in the absence of private institutions, the gap would be made up by state institutions. One can just as easily imagine a less populated public system of higher education if private institutions had never been established or if they somehow disappeared. Nevertheless—and regardless of any evaluations of preeminence, we should add—the contributions of private postsecondary institutions in the U.S. have been considerable with respect to increased *access* to postsecondary education.

Myth/Reality #3: Public and private colleges and universities make discrepant contributions to the public good of postsecondary education.

A number of references to the “market” of postsecondary education have been made and it deserves special consideration in light of this examination of the public-private configuration of American postsecondary education. Our use of the term has been intended to imply that colleges and universities have always been creatures of the marketplace and as such, the concept is neither positive nor negative. Others have become increasingly concerned, however, with what they see as the dangers of the market vis-à-vis institutions of higher learning:

“Still, embedded in the very idea of the university—not the story-book idea, but the university at its truest and best—are values that the market does not honor: the belief in a community of scholars and not a confederacy of self-seekers; in the idea of openness and not ownership; in the professor as a pursuer of truth and not an entrepreneur; in the student as an acolyte whose preferences are to be formed, not a consumer whose preferences are to be satisfied” (Kirp, 2003:7).

State funding of higher education has declined significantly in recent years, prompting some to make claims related to the decline of postsecondary education as a public good. We revere the diversity of the public-private configuration and are alarmed with the lines blurring. The distinctions have never been clear cut, yet we appear to be approaching

a critical juncture with respect to the evolving balancing act of the public-private configuration in postsecondary education. If our public institutions become more private (or more “privatized,” another phenomenon worth noting) will they cease to be public goods? Have we really not considered private institutions as contributors to the public good? There is much to explore in this emerging dialogue.

Final Note: Opportunities and Challenges in the Public-Private Configuration

Throughout the past 200 years, the public-private configuration of American postsecondary education has provided myriad opportunities and challenges to the ultimate agenda of providing access to and excellence in colleges and universities. As this configuration continues to unfold, we have the continuing challenge and opportunity to (re)interpret its meanings and effects and, in so doing, to enrich contemporary and future scholarly and policy dialogue on the subject.

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ*

Ο σχηματισμός Ιδιωτικού-Δημοσίου στην αμερικανική μεταδευτεροβάθμια εκπαίδευση

Η δομή της ανώτατης εκπαίδευσης στην Αμερική και ο συσχετισμός δημόσιων και ιδιωτικών ιδρυμάτων είναι ταυτόχρονα συντελεστής και αποτέλεσμα ποικίλων επιρροών, κοινωνικών δυνάμεων και νομικών κανόνων, στη διάρκεια των τελευταίων τριακοσίων πενήντα χρόνων.

Ένας από τους κυριότερους παράγοντες που διαμόρφωσαν το σημερινό σχήμα δημόσια – ιδιωτική ανώτατη εκπαίδευση ήταν η έλλειψη συγκεκριμένης πρόβλεψης στο Σύνταγμα των ΗΠΑ. Όταν προέκυψε η ανάγκη διασάφησης του δημόσιου ή ιδιωτικού χαρακτήρα των ιδρυμάτων ανώτατης εκπαίδευσης, το Ανώτατο Δικαστήριο των ΗΠΑ (με αφορμή την υπόθεση του κολεγίου Dartmouth το 1819) αποφάνθηκε ότι τα ιδιωτικά ιδρύματα, ακόμη και όταν υπηρετούν το δημόσιο συμφέρον, δεν υπόκεινται στους περιορισμούς του ομοσπονδιακού συντάγματος, όπως τα δημόσια.

Μια δεύτερη σημαντική παράμετρο στη διαμόρφωση του συστήματος Ανώτατης Εκπαίδευσης αποτέλεσαν οι γνωστοί ως Morrill Land Grant Acts (1862 και 1890), με τους οποίους ομοσπονδιακή γη μοιραζόταν στις πολιτείες, από την πώληση της οποίας θα προέκυπταν πόροι για τη δημιουργία των πολιτειακών κολεγίων. Ιδρύθηκαν τότε περί τα 70 ιδρύματα μεταδευτεροβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης, μεταξύ των οποίων τα πιο γνωστά σήμερα δημόσια πανεπιστήμια και συγκροτήματα πανεπιστημίων. Τα ιδρύματα αυτά παρείχαν οικονομικά προστίτες σπουδές σε σημαντικό μέρος του φοιτητικού πληθυσμού.

Τη σχέση ανάμεσα στα δημόσια και στα ιδιωτικά ανώτατα εκπαιδευτικά ιδρύματα επηρέασαν κατά τον 20ό αιώνα δύο ακόμη παράγοντες. Ο πρώτος αφορά τη διεύρυνση της ανώτατης εκπαίδευσης και τις χρηματοδοτικές προτεραιότητες που τη στήριξαν. Η έμφαση που δόθηκε στη χρηματοδότηση προγραμμάτων με καθαρά πραγματιστικό προσανατολισμό οδήγησε αφενός στην αύξηση του αριθμού των διετών κολεγίων (από 25 το 1910 σε πάνω από 800 το 1970) και αφετέρου στην ανάπτυξη διακριτών επιστημονικών και επαγγελματικών ταυτοτήτων –όσο και ανταγωνιστικού κλίματος– μεταξύ δημόσιων και ιδιωτικών ιδρυμάτων. Ο δεύτερος παράγοντας σχετίζεται με την ψήφιση του Νόμου για την Ανώτατη Εκπαίδευση το 1965. Ο νόμος προέβλεπε την επιχορήγηση φοιτητών και την παροχή σ' αυτούς εγγυημένων από την ομοσπονδιακή κυβέρνηση δανείων προκειμένου να παρα-

* Την ελληνική περίληψη του αγγλικού κειμένου έγραψε ο Ι. Ρουσσάκης.

κολουθήσουν προγράμματα τόσο σε δημόσια όσο και σε ιδιωτικά ανώτατα ιδρύματα. Με τον τρόπο αυτό η κυβέρνηση επιβεβαιώνει τη σημασία που έδινε και στους δύο τομείς και ενίσχυε τον ανταγωνισμό στην εκπαιδευτική αγορά, ισχυροποιώντας τη διμερή δομή της.

Η αποτύπωση της σημερινής κατάστασης στην αμερικανική ανώτατη εκπαίδευση μπορεί να γίνει με δύο τρόπους:

(α) Μέσω των αριθμών: Σήμερα υπάρχουν 1720 δημόσια και 1665 ιδιωτικά μη-κερδοσκοπικά ιδρύματα ανώτατης εκπαίδευσης. Από αυτά, μόνο 100 περίπου από τα ιδιωτικά κολέγια και πανεπιστήμια δεν παρέχουν πρώτο πτυχίο ή ανώτερους τίτλους σπουδών. Αντίθετα, η πλειονότητα (63%) των δημόσιων ιδρυμάτων παρέχει μόνο προγράμματα συνεχιζόμενης, τεχνικής, επαγγελματικής, ενδιάμεσης –μεταξύ κολεγίου και πανεπιστημίου– εκπαίδευσης αλλά και προπτυχιακά προγράμματα. Από το σύνολο των 16 περίπου εκατομμυρίων φοιτητών, ποσοστό 39% είναι εγγεγραμμένο στα δημόσια τετραετή κολέγια και πανεπιστήμια, 37% στα δημόσια διετή κολέγια και λιγότερο από 25% στα ιδιωτικά κολέγια και πανεπιστήμια.

Η μεταδευτεροβάθμια εκπαίδευση στις ΗΠΑ είναι μια ακμάζουσα βιομηχανία με κύκλο εργασιών πάνω από \$250 δισεκατομμύρια. Η δημόσια χρηματοδότηση το 2001 αφορούσε το 31% του προϋπολογισμού των δημόσιων τετραετών ιδρυμάτων και μόνο το 1% των αντίστοιχων ιδιωτικών. Την ίδια χρονιά τα δίδακτρα αφορούσαν ποσοστό 17% και 38% του συνολικού κόστους αντίστοιχα, υπογραμμίζοντας το γεγονός ότι το κόστος σπουδών σε ένα δημόσιο τετραετές ίδρυμα είναι το μισό από αυτό ενός αντίστοιχου ιδιωτικού.

(β) Μέσω της σημασίας που αποδίδουν τα άτομα και η κοινωνία στο δημόσιο και στο ιδιωτικό πανεπιστήμιο: Η σημασία αυτή αποτυπώνεται στους πίνακες κατάταξης των ιδρυμάτων που δημοσιεύονται από διάφορες πηγές. Στην κατηγοριοποίηση, παραδείγματος χάριν, του περιοδικού *U.S. News and World Report* (η οποία είναι πολύ δημοφιλής εκτός των ακαδημαϊκών κύκλων), λίγα δημόσια πανεπιστήμια καταφέρνουν να βρεθούν στις ανώτερες θέσεις της σχετικής λίστας. Η εικόνα που δημιουργεί η κατηγοριοποίηση αυτή είναι ενδεικτική του πώς η διάκριση αυτή ανάμεσα στα «δημόσια» και στα «ιδιωτικά» μπορεί να χρησιμοποιηθεί ως ένδειξη της ποιότητάς τους από την πλευρά της κοινωνίας. Η εικόνα αυτή είναι ιδιαίτερα σημαντική και από την άποψη ότι η κρατούσα αντίληψη θέλει την ανέλιξη ενός ατόμου στο χώρο της εργασίας να εξαρτάται από το όνομα που έχει το πανεπιστήμιο. Είναι αναρίθμητοι οι οδηγοί σπουδών που εφιστούν την προσοχή των υποψηφίων φοιτητών στο πόσο κρίσιμο θέμα για την επαγγελματική αποκατάστασή τους είναι το όνομα της σχολής/ιδρύματος στο οποίο επιλέγουν να φοιτήσουν.

Σε γενικές γραμμές, η συνύπαρξη δημόσιων και ιδιωτικών ιδρυμάτων ανώτατης εκπαίδευσης –παρά τις μεταξύ τους διαφορές και συγκριτικές επιδόσεις– θεωρείται ότι έχει γενικώς ευεργετικά αποτελέσματα για τρεις κυρίως λόγους:

Πρώτον, ενισχύει την ανταγωνιστικότητα και τον πειραματισμό μεταξύ των κολεγίων και των πανεπιστημίων. Ο ανταγωνισμός δημόσιου και ιδιωτικού δρα δημιουργικά, υπό την έννοια ότι δημιουργεί μια «χρήσιμη ένταση» που εντοπίζεται στη συνειδητοποίηση της πιθανότητας απώλειας του συγκριτικού πλεονεκτήματος ενός ιδρύματος.

Δεύτερον, υποστηρίζεται ότι η ύπαρξη ιδιωτικών ιδρυμάτων κάνει τη μεταδευτεροβάθμια εκπαίδευση φθηνότερη για την κυβέρνηση: Η αντίληψη αυτή στηρίζεται στην παραδοχή ότι η απουσία των ιδιωτικών ιδρυμάτων θα είχε ως αποτέλεσμα την κάλυψη του σχετικού κενού από δημόσια ιδρύματα, άρα και αυξημένες δαπάνες από τη μεριά του κράτους. Η αντίληψη αυτή δε φαίνεται όμως να λαμβάνει υπόψη τη δυνατότητα να υπάρχει ένα λιγότερο πολυπληθές σύστημα ανώτατης εκπαίδευσης. Πάντως, αυτό που μπορεί με ασφάλεια να υποστηρίξει κανείς είναι ότι τα ιδιωτικά ιδρύματα έχουν ουσιαστική συνεισφορά στην αύξηση της πρόσβασης στην ανώτατη εκπαίδευση.

Τρίτον, ορισμένοι θεωρούν ότι τα δημόσια και τα ιδιωτικά κολέγια και πανεπιστήμια έχουν διαφοροποιημένη συνεισφορά στο δημόσιο αγαθό της μεταδευτεροβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης. Υπό την έννοια αυτή, πολλοί υποστηρίζουν ότι η μείωση της δημόσιας χρηματοδότησης της ανώτατης εκπαίδευσης συνδέεται με την παρακμή της μεταδευτεροβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης ως δημόσιου αγαθού. Όμως αν τα δημόσια ιδρύματα γίνουν περισσότερο «ιδιωτικά», θα πάψει το προσφερόμενο αγαθό να είναι δημόσιο; Δε θεωρούμε ότι τα ιδιωτικά ιδρύματα συνεισφέρουν κι αυτά στο κοινό καλό; Υπάρχουν πολλά παρόμοια ζητήματα που πρέπει να διερευνηθούν στον επικείμενο διάλογο.