ABSTRACT

Free College for Whom? The Politics of Policy Design and Implementation

In theory, democratic governments serve as the embodiment of the public, echoing and responding to the voices and needs of its constituency. Public policy, as the foundation of the democratic way of life, holds the potential to carry out the will of the people and effectively address the concerns of constituents. However, in many cases, well-intentioned policy reforms may not accomplish goals and instead exacerbate inequality and degrade the healthy functioning of democratic government. In this dissertation, I argue that the key factor determining whether a policy reform will alleviate or exacerbate societal problems is policy design—and not policy design in the narrow conceptualization by siloed academic literatures within political science, but policy design as it is defined in the holistic framework developed by this dissertation. My dissertation takes a different approach than previous literature by drawing connections across public policy and public administration to investigate the different streams by which policy design influences the effectiveness of the most salient and ubiquitous policy reform in higher education policy—the college promise/free college movement. The central contention of my dissertation is that there are three main pathways through which policy design influences the effectiveness of a policy: political, administrative, and operational. First, I argue that there is a fundamental tension between the most politically advantageous and the most effective policy design, with risk averse policymakers often choosing the former to remain in line with perceptions of fairness among the public. Second, I find that the uneven use of discretionary power by bureaucrats in the implementation of politically motivated policy designs translates to inequities in access to free college programs. Third, I reveal that operational design such as the policy tools and requirements structure who benefits and who loses, which meaningfully impacts whether outcomes are aligned with policy goals.