Funding the Future

For centuries, the American dream has prompted millions of immigrants to journey to America for a chance at wealth and freedom. While America appears to be a financially prosperous nation for all, the country has notably held tight to its treasury. The need to stimulate the economy during the Great Depression, however, led to the establishment of many social services, such as welfare and social security. In order to minimize a job crisis with the return of World War II veterans, the federal government established the G.I. Bill to prompt some returning veterans to attend college. Following World War II, America continued to act conservatively in regards to its public funding. The need to improve its space program during the Cold War led to an increase in higher education funding. The trend of increased higher education spending continued during the Civil Rights era as legislation was passed that encouraged people of color and lower income students to attend college. The notion of accessible higher education continues into modern legislation where federal funding continues to sponsor higher education endeavors for students of all backgrounds. Although Americans originally opposed the federal funding of higher education in fear of government control, economic necessity following World War II, political motivations during the Cold War, and social pressures of the Civil Rights era led to the current government sponsorship of higher education.
Fueled by economic concerns, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, also known as the G.I. Bill, into law in 1944 (Khan Academy). With the imminent return of 15 million veterans to the U.S.'s workforce, the G.I. Bill encouraged returning veterans to obtain a degree prior to reentering the workforce (Khan Academy). The amenities of the G.I. Bill for veterans included, “…a year of unemployment pay after their homecoming; guaranties [sic] for loans to purchase homes, businesses, or farms; and tuition and living stipends for college or vocational programs” (Khan Academy). From 1945 to 1956, the G. I. Bill sponsored 2.2 million veterans in college, 3.5 million veterans in technical or vocational school, and 700,000 veterans in agricultural instruction (Khan Academy). While the federal government hoped to avoid an economic catastrophe by encouraging some veterans to focus on their education rather than on job prospects, mainly white men benefited from these new incentives. Although World War II led to an increase in work availability for women, the end of the war forced women out of their newly obtained jobs. Due to the continued segregation of America, people of color also benefitted little from the G.I. Bill.

The presence of white men in higher education was nothing new; however, attending college was a privilege mainly reserved for the elite. For the first time, the G.I. Bill allowed people of more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to attend college. The elite did not welcome the change. In response to the G.I. Bill, the President of the University of Chicago stated, "'Education is not a device for coping with mass unemployment . . . colleges and universities will find themselves converted into educational hobo jungles’” (Khan Academy). While disapproval from the academic community pertaining to an influx of non-elites in higher education emerged, federal funding of higher education was also opposed due to the fear of eventual government control. Across Europe and America in the early 1900s, the term “Ivory
Tower” referred to the secluded nature of art and artistry (Shapin 5). Americans, however, began referring to universities as “Ivory Towers” in the 1930s (14). The term became synonymous with universities because Americans saw higher educational institutions as secluded and removed from society. They believed universities were defective and needed reform (14). During this time, debate arose pertaining to “…whether universities ought to be either detached free spaces or armouries [sic] of ideological opposition to fascism and Nazism…” (14). The federal government’s ability to interfere in the workings of universities through federal funding threatened the independence universities had previously possessed. With the threat of government interference, universities felt that their academic freedom was compromised. The Great Depression led to a shift in American ideology approving the funding of some federal programs, such as Social Security; however, the federal funding of other programs, such as higher education, continued to be opposed. During this period, college was not considered a necessity, it was a privilege.

Following World War II, tensions between former allies, Russia and the U.S., led to the outbreak of the Cold War. During this period of “conflict,” Russia and the U.S. competed over superiority in multiple realms. While Americans felt confident in their technological advancements at the beginning of the Cold War, the surprising launch of the first Earth orbiting satellite, Sputnik, by the Russians in 1957 exposed America’s inferior space program (United States Senate). Concerned that the American educational system was not sponsoring enough scientists and engineers, Congress wanted to increase federal funding to higher education. Prior to Sputnik, Congress had attempted to pass legislation increasing the federal funding of higher education on multiple occasions; however, the bill was always killed in the House. Due to the opposition of increasing federal funding to higher education, legislators had to establish the
National Defense Education Act as a defense bill instead of an educational bill. (United States Senate). The National Defense Education Act of 1958 “…established the legitimacy of federal funding of higher education and made substantial funds available for low-cost student loans, boosting public and private colleges and universities” (United States Senate). The bill’s goal was to sponsor education in science, math, and foreign language fields; however, the bill also improved college libraries and other services for students (United States Senate). Within 10 years, the number of college students rose from 3.6 million to 7.5 million (United States Senate).

Scientific developments such as the creation of the atomic bomb during World War II and the continuation of scientific developments during the Cold War era prompted the outing of scientific research from its “Ivory Tower” (Shapin 19). John von Neumann once stated, “…‘[atomic scientists] are no longer free to carry on research in isolated “Ivory Towers” completely free from the need for accounting for the possible use of their discoveries’” (Shapin 19). While the seclusion of art and theology in “Ivory Towers” could be justifiable because they posed no imminent threat to humanity, the dangers of scientific discoveries led to closer scrutiny of scientific research. Increases in weapons of mass destruction from the end of World War II through the Cold War led to increased scientific accountability. The expansion of federal funds to higher education and more transparency within specific academic fields led to an increased normalization of college. Within a couple decades, an institution that was once reserved for the elites became more accessible to the public. Although Americans still opposed federal funding of higher education, the necessity to beat Russia in the Cold War led to the expansion of federal funding of higher education. America’s pride outweighed its desire to minimize federal interference in the funding of higher education.
Previous increases in federal aid resulted from economic and political motivations; however, social pressures during the 1960s led to the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965. The 1960s consisted of social movements fighting for equality and civil rights as well as a declared War on Poverty by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 increased federal funding for individual students as well as institutions themselves. The act led to more readily available research grants, more federal support for college libraries and technology, more resources and funding for “developing institutions,” such as traditionally African American universities, and easier accessibility to federal aid for all types of students (Pelletier). While the Higher Education Act of 1965 aided students of all backgrounds and races, the legislation specifically targeted people of color. In 1966, 41.8% of African Americans were in poverty, which consisted of 31.1% of all impoverished Americans (Desilver, 2014). In addition, the South, the traditional location of large populations of African Americans, housed 41.1% of all Americans in poverty in 1969 while only 37.3% of all Americans lived in the South (Desilver, 2014). White Americans also faced poverty; however, the number of African Americans in poverty was staggering. Although federal funding increases to higher education was typically opposed, the civil rights movement of the 1960s called for increased federal accountability and protection. In conjunction, President Johnson’s War on Poverty focused on eradicating poverty. His declared war especially targeted people of color, who traditionally face poverty more than individuals of white descent. The increases in federal funding under the Higher Education Act of 1965 closely related to the ideals expressed during this period of social movements.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the notion of an “Ivory Tower” became a negative term that many did not want to be associated with (Shapin 23). This era was a time of advocacy and
community engagement, not a period of seclusion and reservation (23). The Higher Education Act of 1965 and other legislation during the Civil Rights era increased equality between people of color and individuals of white descent.

Federal funding of higher education and other social programs has continued to increase throughout the last few decades. During George W. Bush’s presidency, he enacted several policies impacting higher education funding. One of the most notable legislation, The College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007, increased Pell grants, reduced interest rates on federal subsidized loans, protected borrowers from excessive payments, provided loan forgiveness if the student worked 10 years in public service, and provided more than $500 million to historically minority institutions (American Council on Education). While Americans of previous decades had been more apprehensive toward increasing federal funding of public programs, Americans have recently allowed increases in federal funds to become normalized. In 2016, 75% of the $3.95 trillion federal expenditures went toward human services, such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, education, etc. with the remaining 25% going toward national defense, net interests, and other costs (Desilver, 2017). In comparison, “...less than 1% of [the] GDP during World War II [went toward human services while] federal spending on human services now amounts to 15.5% of [the] GDP” (Desilver, 2017). The 1930s led to an increase in federally funded programs to battle the effects of the Great Depression, but the increased intervention of the federal government eventually decreased in certain sectors, especially education. Americans feared federal intervention because of the possibility of government control. Those fears still exist; however, the presence of the federal government and federal funds in the lives of its citizens has remained.
The political and social pressures over the last few decades has led American society to be seemingly dependent on federal aid in higher education. Increased funding and social pressures has allowed a more diverse group of individuals to attend universities. In modern society, the “Ivory Tower” is no longer a positive fixture, “Today, almost no one has anything good to say about the Ivory Tower and specifically about the university in its supposed Ivory Tower mode” (Shapin 25). Due to federal funding, higher education is no longer a privilege reserved for the wealthy. A college degree is a necessity in most career paths. Federal funding and programs throughout the last century have allowed various nontraditional groups to attend college and obtain a degree. Not only has the normalization of college increased, the diverse groups attending college has more closely represented the American population.

Although legislation has improved college accessibility for many Americans, what led 68% of high school graduates by 2001 to attend college (Carrington)? In the 1940s, college students were from predominately wealthy families who wanted to establish themselves in a specific career path. During this time, college was also utilized as a dating service. While true for both genders, women especially used college as a way to meet potential husbands (Kinzie et al 6). Following the passage of the G.I. Bill, “…the success of veterans, most of whom were nontraditional-age students, shifted public thinking about who should go to college and raised questions about equity and access to postsecondary education” (Kinzie et al 9). With an influx of non-traditional students and a change in public opinion, the 1960s became dubbed the “Golden Age” of American higher education. Rises in college enrollment influenced public opinion to view college as a direct way to a white-collar job and a spot in the middle-class (Kinzie et al 15). A college degree started to become synonymous with individual prosperity and security, prompting more parents to encourage their children to attend college (Kinzie et al 18). Although
there was a decrease in the number of 18-year-olds in the 1980s, the number of 18-year-olds applying to four-year universities increased by 16% from 1980 to 1987. Universities traditionally considered “prestigious” began to receive rapid increases in applications and the rising number of applicants led many students that would have been admitted a few years earlier to be denied (Kinzie et al 29). The notion of success that became attached to a college degree within the last few decades has continued into modern society. Current Americans perpetuate the idea that in order to have a successful life, a college degree must be obtained (Kinzie et al 1).

Throughout the last century, the federal government has slowly begun providing more federal funds to human services and higher education. The threat of economic collapse following the return of World War II veterans to America’s workforce led to the establishment of the G.I. Bill. Political motivations and fear of Russian technological superiority during the Cold War led to the passage of the National Defense Act. Social pressures and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s led to the creation of the Higher Education Act of 1965. Federal funding in education has continued to increase along with federal funds of many other public services. The last century has led to the normalization of college. No longer is a college education only available to the elite and those in their “Ivory Tower.” A college degree has become synonymous with a successful career and life. Although Americans initially feared government control though the distribution of federal aid for higher education, Americans have begun readily accepting the financial support. Americans appear almost dependent on the government funds they had opposed for decades. Money is money after all and Americans do not seem willing to give up government funds anytime soon.
Works Cited


