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## State Spending on Public Higher Education: Do the Educational Histories of Legislators Matter?

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## State Spending on Public Higher Education: Do the Educational Histories of Legislators Matter?

### INTRODUCTION:

In the current political climate of education financing, public institutions are often the targets of budget cuts. This erosion of the financial backing occurs alongside an expansion of higher education. Over 21 million students are currently enrolled in higher education. Fully 15 million of these students are enrolled at public institutions (U.S. Depart. of Educ. 2011).

Higher education financing is complex, in part because these institutions draw on funds from both the public and private spheres. Further, within the public sphere higher education is financed at both the state and federal levels. Since the 1980s federal financing of higher education has eroded substantially. Federal funds are increasingly diverted from the school as the point of receipt to the student through financial aid packages, often in the form of loans. This system has two main outcomes, one, there is less money at the institutional level from the federal government and two, the burden of financing education shifts increasingly to the student (Ehrenberg 2006). Combined, these shifts compel schools to rely more heavily on other funding sources—namely, private and state funds. State commitments to public higher education have been on the decline, vary widely from state to state and are determined in part by unique political environments (Ehrenberg 2006; McLendon, Hearn and Mokher 2009).

This research investigates one component of this political realm. Based on research suggesting that policy-makers' personal characteristics (e.g. gender, race, religious status) affect policy outcomes, this work investigates the extent to which legislators' educational backgrounds matter for public higher education spending (Washington 2008). *Do states with a larger percentage of legislators with a public higher education degree spend more on public higher education than do other legislatures, all other things equal?* Previous exploratory research based on a cross-sectional dataset provides initial evidence of this relationship, but further work is needed to fully appreciate the role of this particular mechanism because data collected at only one point in time cannot demonstrate stability (Thiele, Shorette and Bohlzental 2012).

To address this gap, this author will use a robust time-series dataset of the educational backgrounds of state legislators. *Currently, there are 7,383 state legislators.* In 2005, I compiled the first wave of this database, accessing and coding the educational backgrounds of 6,517 state legislators. This fall 2014, I am guiding the collection of the second wave of data using this 2013 grant award. Following this data collection, I will guide the coding of the over seven thousand data points. The near ten-year gap in time will allow for a longitudinal analysis which will investigate more fully *whether legislatures composed of a larger portion of legislators who attend state college and universities invest more generously in public higher education,*

*all things equal, compared to legislatures with a smaller proportion of publically educated legislators.* Findings from this research will impact theories of representation, evaluating the extent to which legislators advocate for spending based on their own demographic profiles.

The implications of this work are two-fold. Firstly, understanding how legislators' backgrounds affect their behavior in office is important. Secondly, this work is particularly relevant at a public state institution, which is well situated to take advantage of this information to work with sympathetic policy makers. Given the current climate of public higher education, which is increasingly under financial constraints, this information may aid in progressing the mission of the public institution.

#### TIMELINE OF PROJECT

Once the independent variable of interest is coded, several things will occur with these results. **1)** I will calculate the percentage of legislators in each state with a high school only degree, those with a public higher education degree and finally, those with an in-state public higher education degree (each of these variations of the independent variable will be considered in final models). **2)** I will ascertain the gender composition of the legislatures. **3)** I will collect data on other control variables, such as state's budgets, the number of private schools institutions by state, state spending on elementary and secondary education and the adult population with a post-secondary degree, as well as the dependent variable of interest, state spending on higher education. Once completed, **4)** I will merge this dataset with the first wave dataset, culminating in a robust dataset with information on all the variables at two points in time. During the next stage, **5)** I will develop and hone my models. If my hypothesis is correct, ***I will find a positive correlation both for the percent of legislators in each state legislature having a public higher education degree and state spending on higher education and as well as the percent of legislators in each state legislature having an in-state public higher education degree and state spending on higher education.***

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