

What are we getting from higher education?

Squeezing the Ivory Tower

The larger purpose of higher education is to broaden both the minds and the skills of students. But with college sticker prices reaching new stratospheric highs, the question remains: Is the Ivory Tower achieving these goals?

At a Cato Institute Conference held in November, a number of national experts gathered to examine how well our higher education system is working. One key topic that emerged was how to assess the productivity of faculty members, including the groundbreaking—and highly controversial—efforts recently undertaken in Texas.

Richard Vedder, founder of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity, and author of a provocative report that uncovers astounding levels of inefficiency at the University of Texas (UT), defended his analysis. He responded to various criticisms of his data, noting that they “had a very modest, almost no effect, on the conclusions.” Vedder emphasized that the purpose of the report was to bring productivity into the higher education debate, not to disparage UT or other postsecondary institutions.

Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, focused on a somewhat different aspect of the debate. “While I think measuring faculty output is probably a good thing, it will never be allowed to carry meaningful consequences if most funding for education comes from third parties,” he said. The burden of financing postsecondary education, McCluskey noted, “has grown ever heavier” on the backs of taxpaying citizens. “We need to change that before we can expect anything else to really improve,” he said.

In his keynote address, Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, president emeritus of George Washington University, presented his vision for making postsecondary institutions more accountable. As it stands, he argued, colleges are beholden to an array of external influences—noting, for example, that “the most influential person in higher education” is likely Robert Morse, director of data and research for *U.S. News & World Report*. “To an unsound degree,” Trachtenberg said, “universities too often allow themselves to be pushed around by the rankings.” He concluded with his “modest proposals” for reforming the system, which included lowering the number of administrative staff by 20 percent and increasing faculty productivity.

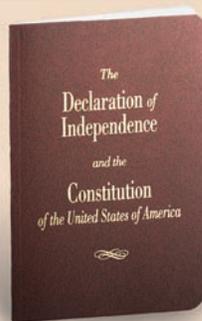
In the end, the conference sparked thought-provoking—and sometimes heated—discussions, and ultimately brought innovative policy proposals to the table. “They were an attempt to bring a more results-oriented, student-friendly focus to education,” entrepreneur Jeff Sandefer said of his reforms, known as the Seven Solutions. “Now, they’ve gotten a life of their own.” ■



Stephen Joel Trachtenberg

Cato News Notes

THE LAW OF THE LAND



“Forget about BlackBerrys and American-flag lapel pins. The hottest accessory on Capitol Hill is the pocket-sized copy of the Constitution,” *Roll Call* declared last year. This handsome publication has long been the Cato Institute’s most popular, with more than 5 million copies distributed to date.

But the reach of this “diminutive document” extends far beyond the halls of Congress. “Aside from the millions of copies of the Constitution it has distributed,” they continue, “the think tank has also printed 12,000 copies of a Spanish translation of the Constitution and 8,000 copies of an Arabic translation.”

JOHN MUELLER JOINS CATO

John Mueller, a leading scholar in the fields of political science, international relations, and national security, has joined the Cato Institute as a senior fellow. As the Woody Hayes Chair of National Security Studies at Ohio State University, Mueller has focused in particular on how policymakers inflate national security threats at home and abroad.

“John has taken on the conventional wisdom in the national security arena with a rare combination of accessible, breezy prose and meticulous cost-benefit analysis,” said Christopher A. Preble, vice president of defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

His newest book, *Terror, Security, and Money*—which he presented at a recent Cato forum with coauthor Mark G. Stewart—examines whether the gains in security over the past decade were worth the funds expended. At the Institute, Mueller will continue his work on the subjects of security, defense, and U.S. foreign policy.

HENTOFF AND ALL THAT JAZZ



Cato senior fellow Nat Hentoff is best known in the policy world as one of the leading defenders of the First Amendment and civil liberties. But he also has a long career as a writer about jazz. For his latest book, *At the Jazz Band Ball: Sixty Years on the Jazz Scene*, published by the University of California Press, Hentoff has just received

the Deems Taylor Award from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP). As it happens, Deems Taylor was the father of Joan Kennedy Taylor, author of the Cato book *Reclaiming the Mainstream: Individualist Feminism Rediscovered*. Hentoff and Joan Kennedy Taylor were both commentators on the Cato Institute’s Byline radio series in the 1980s.