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Work-First or Work-Only: Welfare Reform, State Policy, and Access to Postsecondary Education

By

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As a result of the 1996 welfare reform—Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF)—the number of welfare recipients enrolled in postsecondary education has decreased dramatically. The new welfare law also gives states significant discretion to support and even promote postsecondary education for low-income adults; consequently, state policies regarding access vary widely. This study uses qualitative data from three states to examine the sources and consequences of state variation in access to postsecondary education for disadvantaged individuals. Our cross-state comparison shows that competing ideas about welfare, work and the role of education in the lives of welfare recipients help structure and shape political debates, and policy outcomes, in the each of the states. Ideas influenced policies via four key channels: the state human service agency; advocacy organizations; the persistence of the “work-first” idea within implementation processes; and the power of policy “signals” to drive state welfare reform.

Keywords: welfare reform; community colleges; state variation

It is almost a truism among educators, researchers, and policy makers that postsecondary education leads to long-term employment stability and economic self-sufficiency. Yet despite clear empirical evidence about the relationship between education and earnings (Levy and Murnane 1992; Kane and Rouse 1995; Grubb 1999; Meyer and Peterson 1999), the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, otherwise known as welfare reform, explicitly shifted federal welfare policy toward a work-first philosophy, away from the

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human-capital-building approach of prior programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program (Greenberg, Strawn, and Plimpton 2000; Weaver 2000; Gais et al. 2001).

While this new system of welfare provision does not expressly forbid states from allowing welfare recipients to pursue postsecondary education, it does include a number of regulations that discourage states from enrolling recipients in two- and four-year colleges and in degree-granting programs in particular (Greenberg, Strawn, and Plimpton 2000). Under the new federal welfare program—Transitional Aid to Needy Families (TANF)—states receive a block grant designed to provide temporary cash assistance and support to help families move into the workforce quickly. Under TANF, by 2002, states were required to have 50 percent of all families on cash assistance participating in thirty hours per week of work activity, or the states would face fiscal penalties. According to the federal rules, vocational educational training can count toward work requirements, but only for up to twelve months and for no more than 30 percent of the caseload. All recipients are also required to “engage in work” within twenty-four months of receiving cash assistance (Golonka and Matus-Grossman 2001). In short, TANF sends a clear signal to states that workforce attachment is the guiding principle of the new welfare law, with caseload reductions as the ultimate measure of state and local policy success (Gais et al. 2001).¹

As might be expected, the initial evidence suggests that the number of welfare recipients enrolled in various forms of postsecondary education has decreased dramatically since 1996 (Institute for Women’s Policy Research 1998; Jacobs and Shaw 1999). Of the 1.9 million adults in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program in 1995, 136,000, or 16.7 percent, were enrolled in postsecondary education and not working in unsubsidized jobs. While fully comparable data do not exist for the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act,² what evidence there is suggests a notable decline in the number of TANF adults enrolled in postsecondary education programs. Lurie (2001) reported that by 1999, only 6.1 percent of TANF adults were engaged in education or training, and 2001 Department of Health and Human Services data show that, for the 2,273,554 families on TANF who count toward federal work requirements, only 50,103, or about 2 percent, were in vocational education or education related to employment (Administration for Children and Families 2001). At the state level, a seven-state General Accounting Office report found that between 1994 and

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1997, the percentage of welfare recipients enrolled in education and training activities declined in each of the states (General Accounting Office 1998).

The 1996 federal welfare law also gives states significant discretion to support and even promote postsecondary access for low-income adults. States, for instance, have latitude in defining the activities that can count toward work participation and activity requirements. If a recipient participates in a minimum of twenty hours of work, the remainder of work requirements can be filled through “job skills training related directly to employment” (Golonka and Matus-Grossman 2001, 7). While these federal rules govern how states count their overall participation rates, states are free to set different rules for individual recipients (Greenberg, Strawn, and Plimpton 2000). For example, in Pennsylvania, a recipient can count education as filling his or her work requirement for up to thirty-six months. To date, states have had little trouble filling their overall participation rates even when they allow activities that do not count under federal rules. States are also required to spend their own funds on welfare programs (maintenance of effort funds), and these monies are not subject to the restrictions attached to federal TANF dollars.

As a result of the discretion accorded to states under welfare reform, state policies regarding access to postsecondary education for welfare recipients vary widely. As of 2002, thirty states (and the District of Columbia) allowed participation in postsecondary degree programs to count toward work requirements for longer than twelve months. Fourteen of these states allow participation in postsecondary education to completely meet work requirements.³ Five of these states sometimes allow participation in postsecondary education to fulfill the work requirement but may require that it be combined with other work activities.⁴ In eleven states, postsecondary participation by students can fully or partially meet work requirements, but only for up to twelve months. In four states, postsecondary degree programs cannot count toward meeting state work requirements, save the 30 percent of the caseload allowed to participate in vocational education (Center for Law and Social Policy 2002).⁵

Research Questions and Method

The purpose of this study is to better understand the sources and consequences of state variation in access to postsecondary education for welfare recipients and the working poor. In what follows, we compare three states—Massachusetts, Illinois, and Washington—that have responded in different ways to federal welfare reform and thus potentially provide different amounts and kinds of access to postsecondary education (see Table 1):

- In Massachusetts, the TANF program is driven by a strict work-oriented philosophy with few postsecondary options made available to welfare recipients.
- In Illinois, a strong and vocal advocacy community convinced the governor to “stop the clock” on federal time limits for up to thirty-six months for recipients in approved postsecondary degree programs.

TABLE 1
STATE TRANSITIONAL AID TO NEEDY FAMILIES POLICIES TOWARD POSTSECONDARY TRAINING OR EDUCATION

State	A. Can Postsecondary Training or Education Count toward Work Requirement?	B. If Yes to A, under What Conditions?	C. If Yes to A, What Are Time Limits?	D. Does Time Spent in Postsecondary Training or Education Count against Time Limits on Assistance?	E. If Education Is an Allowable Work Activity at All, What Type of Education Is Allowed?	F. Is Transitional Education and Training Assistance Available to Former Transitional Aid to Needy Families Recipients?
Massachusetts	No ^a	—	—	—	—	Yes. If employed. Up to twelve months
Illinois	Yes	May have to be combined with other work activities ^b	Up to thirty-six months ^c	No ^d	Postsecondary degree, vocational training, General Equivalency Diploma, English as a second language—but clock will not always be stopped (see note 3)	Yes

(continued)

TABLE 1 (continued)

State	A. Can Postsecondary Training or Education Count toward Work Requirement?	B. If Yes to A, under What Conditions?	C. If Yes to A, What Are Time Limits?	D. Does Time Spent in Postsecondary Training or Education Count against Time Limits on Assistance?	E. If Education Is an Allowable Work Activity at All, What Type of Education Is Allowed?	F. Is Transitional Education and Training Assistance Available to Former Transitional Aid to Needy Families Recipients?
Washington	Yes	Must be combined with other work activities, with exception for high-demand training	Up to twelve months	Yes	High-wage/high-demand training, preemployment training, vocational training, General Equivalency Diploma, English as a second language, and literacy	Yes, for those with incomes less than 175 percent of poverty line. Tuition assistance available. Must be working twenty hours per week or more

SOURCE: Center for Law and Social Policy (2002), independently gathered information during interviews, and the following state Web sites: Massachusetts, <http://www.state.ma.us/dta/dtatoday/reform/Tanfpdf.pdf> (State Plan Amendment 2000); Illinois, <http://www.state.il.us/agency/dhs/tanfnp.html>, <http://www.state.il.us/agency/dhs/tanfnp.html>, http://www.state.il.us/agency/dhs/wfhand/e_and_t_intro.htm (State Handbook).

a. The work requirement in Massachusetts only applies to 10 percent of the caseload, however. The remaining 90 percent, most of whom are not even subject to time limits, are allowed and encouraged to seek training. About 11 percent of the overall caseload is currently in some form of education/training.

b. If the recipient does not have a high school degree and is in a degree-seeking program (other than General Equivalency Diploma classes), it must be combined with twenty hours of work. Some exceptions may be made for those single parents in postsecondary degree program with GPAs of 2.5 or higher.

c. Recipients may participate in General Equivalency Diploma, Adult Basic Education, and vocational programs for up to twenty-four months without a work requirement.

d. The clock is stopped only for those full-time college students (they must have high school degree already) who are in degree-seeking programs and who have a GPA of 2.5 or better. The clock is not stopped until the GPA is established, that is, for the first semester.

- In Washington, the enabling legislation for TANF was titled Work First and initially sought to limit education and training to low-income workers seeking job advancement subsequent to leaving the welfare rolls.

In this article, we examine how and why TANF policies vary in these three states and how these policy differences affect the type and amount of education and training available to current and former welfare recipients. In particular, we are concerned with the role that ideas—problem definitions, beliefs, and values and causal theories—play in welfare and education policy making in the three states. Do the beliefs and causal theories policy makers and implementing agencies hold about welfare recipients and the role of education and training in their lives play a major role in structuring welfare reform and postsecondary access policies? If so, how do ideas influence state policy in each of the states?

Data for this article come from a six-state study of community colleges and their responses to local, state, and federal policy changes in the training and employment arena. Data were collected at several different levels of analysis using a mixed-methods case study design. As part of this larger study, interviews were conducted in Washington, Illinois, and Massachusetts with a range of state-level policy makers and advocacy organizations involved in welfare policy making and in shaping each state's response to federal welfare reform. We also interviewed individuals responsible for implementing welfare policies on the ground—including caseworkers and community college administrators and program operators. Interview data were supplemented with a comprehensive analysis of relevant policy and program documents.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using Hyperresearch software. Substantive codes were derived both inductively from our research questions and deductively based on issues we found emerging in the data. Coded data were then compared across states to investigate state policy differences.

Theoretical Framework

Traditionally, variations in state policy are accounted for with reference to political or institutional factors (see March and Olson 1995; Hall 1997; Levi 1997; Meyers, Gornick, and Peck 2001). On the political side, some argue for “inherent differences” in states rooted in political culture or ideology, while others point to shorter-term political factors such as the characteristics of key policy coalitions in power at the time of adoption (Levi 1997; McDermott 2001). Institutional perspectives point instead to the role of policy governance, specifically to the power of implementing agencies and the impact of “policy legacies” in shaping policy choices and state responses to the external environment (March and Olson 1995; Hall 1997).

Political and institutional factors are clearly important determinants of policy as reflected in our interview protocols and coding of the interview and documentary data. Like the research of others (Stone 1989; Kingdon 1995; Hall 1997;

McDermott 2001), this article concerns itself particularly with the role ideas play in influencing policy choices. In the social policy arena, prior studies have found a central role for ideas in welfare policy processes. The ideology of maternalism, for example, was crucial to shaping 1935 legislation that established a federal welfare program (Mink 1995). Katz (2001) has identified a set of publicly held ideas about work and citizenship as a key force in redefining the nature of the American welfare state.

The literature also suggests that ideas can work at two distinct levels—in policy development and in implementation—to shape the meaning of state policy for welfare recipients. As Ball (1994) pointed out, policies are “representations” that reflect compromise, ambiguity, and political struggle and are “decoded in complex ways via actors’ interpretations and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context” (p. 16). Policies do not tell implementers—whether state or local—what to do; rather, “they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or outcomes are set” (Ball 1995, 17). State and local policy processes still have significant space for creative responses rooted in the motivations, capacities, and collectively held values and beliefs of policy actors (Lipsky 1974; Lin 2000; Lurie, Meyers, and Riccucci 2001).

One implication of this analysis is that implementation can act in ways that run counter to the official rules of policy. Miller (1991), for example, found that a set of ideas embedded in the Work Incentive Program blaming unemployment on lack of effort by participants was decisive in how the program was delivered at the street level, even to the point of overriding formal policy rulings. A second implication is that implementation will vary greatly across states, organizations, and communities, and this variation will be dictated in large part by the meaning implementers attach to policy based on their own values, beliefs, and policy theories (Lin 2000; Mills and Hyle 2001). These values, beliefs, and theories are in turn shaped by the “terms of political discourse” (Jenson 1988; Hall 1989) that exist within states and the nation at large.

These features of the policy process demand an analytic approach that links ideas, events, and policy formation with implementation. So-called trajectory studies “trace policy formulation, struggle and response from within the state itself through to the various recipients of policy” (Ball 1995, 26) both over time and across space (Bowe and Ball 1992).

In the cases that follow, we describe the policy environment in each state at the time of welfare reform, focusing on the key actors and policy coalitions involved and the extant problem definitions in each state surrounding welfare policy, work, and the role of postsecondary education. We also examine the goals, purposes, and theory of action behind welfare reform in that state along with any changes that occurred in these since the passage of TANF. We examine some preliminary data on policy implementation, focusing on the ways in which implementation amplifies or runs counter to formal policy mandates and incentives. Finally, we examine the outcomes of policy in terms of access to postsecondary education, earnings, or other key indicators.

Massachusetts

Massachusetts's welfare reform legislation preceded the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act and is in many ways more restrictive than the federal legislation. Under the current program, the time limit for receiving welfare is twenty-four months out of every sixty months, compared to the sixty-month lifetime limit required by federal law. Postsecondary education cannot count toward meeting work requirements. On the other hand, those recipients exempt from work requirements—about 75 percent of the caseload—are allowed to enroll in educational programs without working for up to four years. In practice, however, the state has enrolled few recipients in community college training and even fewer in postsecondary degree programs. The newly renamed Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) has strongly embraced the work-first approach, while community colleges and advocacy organizations have played a limited role in welfare reform.

In the early 1990s, Massachusetts's Democratic legislature passed several welfare reform laws that were vetoed by Republican Governor William Weld. The governor then proposed his own more restrictive welfare reform legislation, which was passed by the legislature (Kirby et al. 1997). Some observers credit high-profile evaluations of work-first programs such as Riverside, California's, GAIN program with persuading Democratic legislators to pass Weld's reforms. Massachusetts's current welfare legislation, Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children, was passed in 1995 and implemented beginning in December 1996.

During the 1990s, welfare officials in Massachusetts were concerned that their relatively generous AFDC policies had not worked, since despite a generally good economy, their caseloads were increasing. The mood throughout the department at the time was one of frustration. One administrator told us,

I think that [my job] is more rewarding [since welfare reform]. I think the job prior to welfare reform was somewhat frustrating. . . . We found that in some cases—many, many cases—clients really did everything they could to get off of public assistance. Some clients really resisted that, and it became very, very frustrating for us. As much as we tried, we had difficulty trying to get that client involved with the program.

Another administrator said she felt that recipients “needed a kick in the butt” to get them to go to work. In this atmosphere, the welfare department welcomed Weld's reforms and implemented the new rules in a work-focused manner.

The current two-year time limit means that many more recipients in Massachusetts have reached their time limits than in most states. However, certain categories of recipients are temporarily exempt from the time limits, including those with a child younger than two, disabled recipients, and recipients who are noncitizens without work papers. When the program began, about half the caseload was exempt from the time limits; now about 75 percent are exempt. Recipients can get time-limit extensions in a few circumstances if they are in cooperation with DTA, but not to complete an educational program. Recipients whose youngest child is six

or older are required to be in work activities twenty hours per week. Activities that count toward the work requirement include paid employment, job search, and programs that combine work with basic skills training.

During interviews early in the implementation process, officials at DTA reported that they thought it would be better if all recipients subject to time limits were also subject to some work requirements. And in March 2001, they got the changes they wanted—Republican Governor Paul Cellucci pushed through the legislature changes in the rules so that clients whose youngest child is between two and six (who had been subject to time limits but exempt from participation requirements) are now required to participate in some work or educational activity, though they have no minimum hours requirement (Kaye et al. 2001).

In sum, both official policy and implementation processes have conspired to strongly limit access to postsecondary education for welfare recipients in Massachusetts.

Education programs do not count toward the work requirement, but they do count as participation for those whose youngest child is between two and six years old. DTA provides support services, such as transportation and child care expenses, for education and training programs that are included in a recipient's Employment Development Plan. The main criterion for allowing education in a plan is that the recipient complete the program in less than his or her time limit. However, we were told that, in practice, recipients rarely are told that education is allowed, even when they have substantial amounts of time left and are now subject to the twenty-hour work requirement. Caseworkers are communicating only the work-first message.

The division of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services that administers welfare changed its name from the Department of Public Welfare to the Department of Transitional Assistance in 1996. The name change was intended to symbolize a shift in emphasis from determining eligibility to planning with recipients how they will attain employment while providing transitional support. The changes in welfare require caseworkers to use a more individualized approach in determining how the time limits apply to a particular recipient and setting an Employment Development Plan that can be completed in less than that time limit. This is presented as better, more personalized service than under AFDC, when all clients were informed of a standard set of services (including

training programs and child care assistance). Welfare officials say that welfare reform has worked well in Massachusetts and has promoted the idea that recipients take more responsibility for their lives.

Welfare officials argue that work requirements and time limits are a big improvement over the old AFDC rules because they compel recipients to cooperate with caseworkers. They believe that this is a major reason for the greatly reduced caseloads and that it has pushed poor mothers to be better role models for their children. One respondent from the DTA argued that the new requirements are breaking the cycle of generations of dependency that she had observed during the preceding three decades: "I saw four generations where they had the wrong role model. And so I think that I'm pleased that this gives them what I consider a more appropriate role model." She felt imposing time limits has been a good thing for the recipients' children because they get to see their mothers go out to work. She argued that while it is fine for mothers who have private financial support to stay home, those who do not ought to go to work to be role models for children. Other respondents from DTA claim that time limits and work requirements have made recipients take job search and short-term training opportunities seriously. They credit the dramatic decrease in their caseloads to the work requirement and short time limits.

Welfare officials also connected the changes in welfare to changes in work patterns in society more broadly. They said that middle-class workers do not work at one corporation for their whole careers, and poor mothers should not expect to stay on welfare for a lifetime, nor should they expect to make a career out of their first job. These officials talked about time limits as motivation to take the initiative to get that first job.

While the state's formal policy rules allow substantial latitude and support for education, as of March 2001, less than 10 percent of the caseload was participating in education or training activities.⁶ Those most likely to be in education and training programs were those subject to time limits but not work requirements. While approximately 18 percent of those subject to the time limit but not the work requirement were in education, training, or a combination of activities, fewer than 7 percent of those not subject to the time limits and of those subject to both the time limits and the work requirement were in education, training, or a combination of activities. Less than 2 percent were in college degree programs.⁷

Advocacy organizations have collaborated with the community college sector on efforts to win a larger role for postsecondary education in welfare reform, but with limited success. One major victory for the community colleges came in December of 1998, when the DTA agreed to count internships and work study jobs toward work requirements.

DTA has also worked with some community colleges on a program called Education That Works, designed to provide for the delivery of "intensive, high caliber, short-term academic skills training and employment services [so that] recipients can access employment opportunities that enable them to transition from welfare to successful Employment." Education That Works provides tuition assistance for noncredit course work, and community colleges that participate in this program

are subject to explicit job placement outcome measures. The program requires job placement within four months and pays colleges for enrollment, job placement, and ninety-day retention.

Most of Massachusetts's community colleges have chosen not to participate in Education That Works.⁸ Interviews with various individuals at several Massachusetts community colleges point to the job placement outcomes requirements attached to this funding as the key reason for their nonparticipation. While some argued that the rates DTA was willing to pay were not high enough to operate quality training programs, others objected on principle. As one community college administrator stated, "We're not an employment service. We're an educational institution. I don't think it's appropriate for the state to be subjecting us to such measures."

Local DTA offices have also blunted the impact of Education That Works by limiting referrals. Some community colleges have worked to build links between their Education That Works programs and their part-time General Equivalency Diploma, certificate, and degree programs; DTA, however, has resisted these efforts.

In sum, both official policy and implementation processes have conspired to strongly limit access to postsecondary education for welfare recipients in Massachusetts. Successive governors and the new welfare bureaucracy have strongly embraced the work-first idea and met little effective opposition from advocacy organizations or community colleges. Community colleges themselves have, in some cases, resisted providing short-term, job-oriented programs on ideological grounds, further limiting the enrollment of welfare recipients in the state.⁹

Illinois

Illinois is among those states whose welfare policies allow and enable some welfare recipients to attend community college while at the same time encouraging rapid labor force attachment. Several factors shaped Illinois's unique response to federal reform, including a reorganization of state agencies, the transition to a new governor during implementation, the efforts of a strong advocacy community, and the strength of the state community college system.

As a result, a small proportion of both current and former TANF recipients in Illinois are currently enrolled in both degree- and non-degree-seeking programs at community colleges. Some of these recipients receive supportive funds to help pay for their child care, their transportation, and the cost of books while they are in school. Others work while attending vocational certificate programs.

Prior to the move to TANF with the 1996 federal reform, Illinois had several education programs for welfare recipients, including a Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program known as Project Chance that sent people primarily to adult education classes and a community college-based case management program called Opportunities. These programs were funded by the Illinois Department of Public Aid and were not required nor focused on outcomes. AFDC recipi-

ents were allowed to receive their welfare check and participate or not participate in these programs as they saw fit.¹⁰

But while these programs existed prior to reform, they did not necessarily reflect a strong commitment on the part of state policy makers to postsecondary education for welfare recipients. The Opportunities program enabled the Department of Public Aid to access additional federal matching funds that would have otherwise been inaccessible. Community colleges were happy to participate in the program since it increased their enrollment and funding somewhat and also fulfilled part of their mission to serve the community. Project Chance was reportedly somewhat less popular. According to one advocate,

The sense was it was almost meandering; there was a sense that people could go and stay for a while, and there wasn't any real focus on outcomes. And I think welfare reform was in part a reaction to that type of program in which there was a lot of adult education done and very little of it focused on actual workforce outcomes.

When the advocacy community in Illinois became aware of the mandatory work requirements of the coming federal welfare reform, they lobbied for the inclusion of education and training as a work activity, and they were somewhat successful. Illinois has a sixty-month lifetime limit on benefits. These months do not include those when the recipient is working at least thirty hours per week. Clients must be involved in thirty hours per week to meet the required work participation, but permitted activities include on-the-job training, up to twelve months of vocational education training, job skills training directly related to employment, and up to two years of adult basic education or General Equivalency Diploma classes.

Coinciding with the passage of the legislation in 1997, there was a reorganization of state agencies, and the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) was formed. Whereas AFDC was administered by the Department of Public Aid, the task of administering TANF was given to IDHS, now the largest agency in the state, and headed by Secretary Howard Peters. Peters fully embraced the work-first philosophy of the federal welfare reform. Under his direction, the state legislation that was intended to permit some education activities was interpreted as strictly work-first. Said one advocate,

So although Illinois kept its plan, the same plan on paper, what has happened since is that essentially, very, very few people were allowed into education and training. . . . The prevailing philosophy was get a job, any job, and get it quick.

Peters believed that the goal of TANF was rapid labor force attachment, and this clashed with advocates and the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) who believed that the goal should be economic self-sufficiency and that the best route to that goal was education. One advocate reported that "Howard Peters was single-mindedly driven by work-first and his whole thing was any job is better than no job, and that's what drove everyone there [at IDHS]."

The advocates and ICCB were frustrated with Peters, who seemed to cut them "out of the loop," and they lobbied the Governor's Commission on Women for a

post-implementation policy change to promote education. They were successful. As one of his last acts before leaving office, Governor Jim Edgar issued a decree requiring the time clock on benefits to be stopped for up to thirty-six months to allow for participation in postsecondary education. "Howard Peters never wanted that, never liked it, and I believe never intended to implement it fully," said one advocate.

Beginning in January 1999, the five-year clock could be stopped for a TANF recipient attending "an accredited post-secondary education program full-time" with a cumulative GPA of 2.5 or better. The recipient did not have to meet the work requirement to participate in postsecondary education. However, since for the first semester of school the recipient does not yet have a GPA, he or she does not have to work, but her clock does not stop until the second semester. In addition, the clock resumes during the summer months when the recipient is not in class. The clock can be stopped for up to a lifetime maximum of thirty-six months (Peters 1999).¹¹

One advocate attributed this progressive move in part to the work of advocates who understood that the state wanted to maximize the federal dollars and worked with officials to develop a way to spend the maintenance of effort dollars in a way that would help prevent a return to the rolls. She said,

I think DHS [Department of Human Services] realized that they had the money to do some things that would help buffer them against people moving back onto the rolls. And they didn't want to see people moving back onto the roles,

In other words, postsecondary education was seen as little more than a tool to keep people working.

As a result of the stop-the-clock provision, postsecondary education is currently a formal option for welfare recipients in Illinois. However, a relatively small percentage of recipients in Illinois are actually accessing this education.¹² As of March 2001, approximately 3.5 percent, or 6,500 TANF recipients, were enrolled in some form of postsecondary education (not including Adult Basic Education or General Equivalency Diploma) in Illinois. But only 11 percent of these students were in a program that stopped the clock (general postsecondary or vocational postsecondary degree-seeking education with a GPA of 2.5 or better). The remaining 89 percent did not have their clocks stopped, and most were enrolled in vocational training leading to a certificate but not a degree.

A series of focus groups with Illinois welfare recipients, conducted by DHS in Fall 2001, revealed a desire for DHS to support education and that "all training and schooling should count towards work requirement hours." The recipients also wanted to see class study time counted as well. Some recipients also complained that they had been placed in job training programs for jobs they were not interested in (IDHS 2002).

During the initial implementation of TANF, Illinois operated a welfare-to-work program based at community colleges, known as the Advancing Opportunities (AO) program. AO was a collaborative effort of the ICCB and the IDHS. This pro-

gram began as Opportunities in 1992, prior to TANF, and was revamped in response to TANF and the new work-first philosophy.

Prior to TANF, the focus of Opportunities was on providing AFDC recipients with “comprehensive education, training and counseling” (ICCB brochure n. d.). In response to TANF, the program emphasis was shifted to include a focus on “post-employment support and job upgrading” (ICCB brochure), and the program was renamed Advancing Opportunities. While AO retained its case management model, the training offered was short term and most often occupational or vocational in nature. In addition, funding for AO was based on performance outcomes, so completion and placement became more important to program directors.

A former director of AO at one community college expressed concern about recipients who took advantage of the program immediately after the shift to TANF:

When it started to change, I think students felt like they were being forced into either education or work. And they chose education thinking it was the easier thing to do, and then they found out it wasn't. So there was probably some anger because they were forced to do something.

However, at the time of the interview in spring of 2001, she reported that recipients who want to enroll in AO had to struggle for it. “Now you have to prove to them [caseworkers] that you need training. . . . They have to fight for it.”

AO operated in thirty-six of the forty-eight Illinois community colleges from 1998 to 2001, when Governor George Ryan sacrificed the \$3.4 million program during budget cuts. As of spring 2001, AO was serving 3,900 current and former TANF recipients attending community college. Given that AO was recognized by many as a best practice program, its demise came as a surprise to some. “It does seem like a bit of a surprise to me that they would cut off their only education-focused program,” said one woman at ICCB. According to a letter from the current heads of IDHS and ICCB (Baker and Cipfl 2001), the reduction in TANF case-loads caused the administration to reassess the delivery of training services. “As part of the transition from the Advancing Opportunities program, TANF individuals will be able to access educational programs directly through local community colleges with support services and case management provided by the local DHS offices,” they wrote. This meant a shift in the location of these services from an office located on the community college campus to a DHS office off site, which was mentioned by some as a negative change since the DHS office treated the recipient as a TANF client, not a college student. But colleges will continue to receive a flexible welfare-to-work grant (the total pot of money for the grant is \$3.7 million) to further the goal of ensuring “the welfare population has access to and receives education and training that will help them to succeed.”

However, several representatives of the ICCB expressed concern about the ability of welfare recipients to access postsecondary education, especially after the end of AO. While AO was in operation, members of ICCB felt that “the staff at DHS really [had] an understanding of the value of education. . . . While they had a

work-first policy to implement, they are committed to education and training.” But they expressed concern that the end of AO meant that the administration at IDHS had succumbed to work-first pressures. A staffer at the ICCB noted:

As educators, we truly believe that in order for people to get to their full potential they need skills training and education, not to just be put out in a job. . . . And we see our role as really fundamental to those kinds of improvements in people’s lives. And welfare has taken a work-first philosophy that is just devastating to those outcomes for individuals,

Peters left his position as secretary of IDHS a year into Governor Ryan’s administration, and the politically savvy Linda Renee Baker took over in 2000, continuing much of his agenda. “Linda is a lifelong politician,” one advocate noted. “She understands the need to not totally embrace Howard’s work-first, but she also understands the need not to totally just dump it either.”

*As a result of the discretion accorded to states
under welfare reform, state policies regarding
access to postsecondary education for
welfare recipients vary widely.*

One strong barrier to accessing postsecondary education appears to be IDHS caseworkers. Interviews with ICCB officials, community college representatives, advocates, and even members of IDHS revealed that the formal work-first philosophy is embraced by these street-level workers. One advocate said,

You’ve basically got eligibility clerks that are now trying to do case management and employment, and we’re talking about people who’ve been clerks for twenty-seven years and all of a sudden you want to make them a case manager or employment counselor?

The pro-education, stop-the-clock provision was apparently unpopular with some caseworkers and their supervisors, who failed to inform recipients of these new options. “It’s very difficult, these caseworkers I think really embrace the notion of preaching about getting a job. . . . They did buy in well ideologically speaking, they support the [work-first] philosophy,” said another advocate. He added, “The consistent message they get is caseload reduction, enter employment, and everything else is bullshit.” According to this advocate, the Opportunities program existed as a way to draw additional federal matching dollars available under AFDC, and when

TANF took over, those matching dollars disappeared, and the motivation to maintain Opportunities declined. “The Department of Human Services understood that and made noises from the beginning about pulling Opportunities and the community colleges had gotten used to a pot of money and were pretty good at lobbying,” and thus the program persisted for a while longer. He continued,

But I think the department has started to take the attitude that they’re not going to pay for education anymore to the extent they ever were. They’re not going to pay for hard skills training and education, but they will pay for supports for people to be involved with that.

Another advocate reported hearing from recipients about difficulties in accessing education. “There are a lot of cases of people who said, ‘I want to go to college,’ and their workers say, ‘You can’t; you need to go to work.’” Caseworkers are not informing recipients about the stop-the-clock provision and are focused on reducing caseloads, not sending people to education, according to several advocates.

They were measured by how many people got off the caseload, and they saw going to college as a thirty-six-month delay in getting someone off their caseload. And the overall message coming from the top was, Get people off, get people off, and education didn’t fit in.

Illinois is a clear example of a state where the values, beliefs, and theories of action of key policy makers and administrative agencies have presented both opportunities and barriers to education for welfare recipients. Advocacy organizations and a community college system supportive of postsecondary education for disadvantaged women convinced a governor to stop the clock for recipients and allow them to receive benefits while in school. These groups clearly agree on the goal of promoting economic self-sufficiency through education and together have worked to enable several thousand welfare recipients to attend community college in Illinois. Yet, while the legislation is fairly permissive, implementation of that legislation strayed far from the written provisions. An agency director who believed rapid labor force attachment was the key to moving women off welfare was able to instill the work-first message in the bureaucracy and limit the number of recipients in college.

Washington

Washington’s Work First legislation was passed by the legislature and signed by Governor Gary Locke in April 1997. The law—a collaboration between a Republican legislature and a Democratic governor—followed federal law in mandating a five-year lifetime limit on welfare benefits and requires work as a condition of public assistance. Among those in the state, there is near unanimous consensus that the initial law was “fairly narrow in terms of . . . work-first” and attempted to move away from previous welfare-to-work efforts in the state that focused greater attention on human capital building and skill development. As one interviewee put it,

They (the governor's advisors) concluded that they had to put the labor market test first . . . that it had to be work-first. And they wanted to send that message very aggressively everywhere. To clients, income maintenance workers, social workers, CSOs, advocates and legislators, this is where we're going to go.¹³

To ensure implementation of the new welfare law, the governor created a Work First subcabinet initially made up of representatives from his office, the Department of Human and Social Services (DSHS), the Employment Security Department (ESD), and the Office of Trade and Economic Development to work out the details. The initial implementation followed the tenor of the law. A client would first go to a DSHS case manager where he or she would complete an Individual Responsibility Plan that included a minimum work requirement of twenty hours per week. Then the client was sent to ESD to be placed for mandatory job search for up to twelve weeks. Under the initial interpretation of the law, only after twelve weeks of job search could clients enter postsecondary training of some sort. According to one advocate, case managers were discouraged from even mentioning education options because clients would more likely fail at the job search.

The consensus among advocates and others was that the state's new direction on welfare stemmed from the governor's own values and beliefs as well as the need to reduce public assistance caseloads. "I think he (the governor) believes in the work ethic strongly. . . . And he believes that, by George, you ought to go to work," noted one advocate. Work First was also influenced by reaction to previous welfare policies in the state, most especially the Family Independence Program. The Family Independence Program was an initiative of former governor Booth Gardner that used an aggressive human-capital-building approach to getting clients off of welfare. The consensus among many policy makers in Washington—Democrat and Republican—was that the Family Independence Program was a massive failure that raised caseloads, cost too much money, and created perverse "incentives that make welfare better than a job." This perception was shaped by a devastating Urban Institute evaluation of the program, noted one advocate.

If you talk to a lot of the governors' advisors, they won't mention FIP [the Family Independence Program] necessarily, although they might, from time to time, but they'll say, we tried that in the old days, we tried education and training and it failed.

Yet within the first few months of Work First, there was a push from the governor's office to provide more education and training opportunities within the framework of the law. How and why this happened is a matter of some dispute in the state. According to a representative from the governor's office, from the beginning, the governor's staff recognized that "there was no practical way to expect large numbers of poor families to be able to get ahead unless they were able to build skills." Some advocates recognize that "this may have been the vision" from the start but was buried under the work-first rhetoric. As one advocate put it, "I think he (the governor) really believes in the theory . . . that once people make an effort, that we ought to help them with education and training and child care and so on."

To develop this component of Work First, the governor invited the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) to sit on the subcabinet. The college system office was reticent at first, as was DSHS, reflecting the “clear difference in philosophy” between the two agencies regarding education access for welfare clients. On being included, the SBCTC did a data run and realized that a significant number of its students (around 9 percent) were current or former welfare recipients. As one advocate tells it, “While colleges and the college system were initially resistant to short-term skills training, they eventually realized that Work First wasn’t going away and the only way they could keep their students was to embrace these kinds of programs.” In August of 1997, the subcabinet unveiled a preemployment training (PET) initiative in collaboration with employers in Seattle and Spokane. The vision of the governor’s office and DSHS was that PET would provide training in initial employment skills that would directly lead to employment. Although one senior DSHS staffer admits the training issue was initially raised by advocates and a high-tech business community concerned about skills shortages, DSHS fully supported the notion, as long as there were “assurances of a job at the end of training.” In particular, they saw PET as a way for some of their higher-skilled clients—and former clients—to transition to a better-paying job. The initial contract provided \$7 million to the SBCTC to develop PET programs.

Under the program, the SBCTC awarded colleges competitive subgrants to develop twelve-week, full-time PET modules. The DSHS model of a guaranteed job morphed into a sectoral strategy of industry-specific training and then, only after much back and forth between advocates, employers groups and the subcabinet. In practice, the local colleges run a boutique training operation for employers in key sectors experiencing job growth and skill shortages. Employers make no guarantee to hire PET graduates, which is still a bone of contention for DSHS since some regions have poor placement rates. In 2001, DSHS began to collect systematic data on PET placement rates, with a target goal of 50 percent successful placement (State of Washington, Work First 2001).

PET was the centerpiece of a \$30 million allocation to the SBCTC that also included monies for colleges to (1) redesign programs and services to make it easier for students to access college, (2) provide tuition assistance to employed students, (3) offer workplace and family literacy services, and (4) provide evening and weekend child care for Work First participants attending college. Each of these programs was available broadly to low-wage workers at or under 175 percent of the poverty level. In the first two years of the program, 18,800 students received Work First training at the state’s community colleges, with 3,170 of those students in PET programs specifically (SBCTC 2001). Indeed, since 1997, there has been a general extension of education and training services available to current and former recipients. In the summer of 2000, advocates and the SBCTC successfully lobbied to expand PET from twelve to twenty-two weeks. Just last year, a new high-wage, high-demand PET program was created, allowing up to one year of education in informational technology.

Some advocates are impressed with the evolution of DSHS on education and training while others grumble they have seen no “major movement in terms of education and training opportunities” and DSHS is merely doing what federal law allows (providing twelve months of vocational education toward work requirements) and have steadfastly refused to support stopping the clock for students attending community college full-time. DSHS for its part has made concrete changes in its policies since 1997, most concretely, changing performance reporting to allow PET training to be coded as a form of job search. The governor’s subcabinet has commissioned researchers at the University of Washington to conduct a study of Work First, specifically looking at the impact of various program activities—including PET—on employment and earnings outcomes. Both DSHS and the subcabinet are concerned with the issues of retention and wage progression, particularly for former clients, and have developed the Washington Post-Employment Labor Exchange to provide two years of intensive retention and advancement services for former TANF clients.

*In essence, the shorthand of “work-first”
has become the guiding principle for state
welfare policy and local implementation.*

As the governor’s subcabinet and DSHS evolved their message on education and training, they faced some daunting obstacles at the implementation level, particularly among the local welfare offices. In one sense, this was a predictable consequence of the strong work-first signal initially sent. As one advocate put it,

They said okay, we have to change the culture of the welfare offices. We have to change this whole system from income maintenance to getting people into jobs. The only way we can do that is to send a very simple message: work-first. . . . (One of) the governor’s advisors on Work First, he told me directly . . . he said this department DSHS is capable of doing one thing well, if that. We cannot, we can’t send out multiple messages. . . . We can’t say, But you know, they have to go to work, but they also need soft skills or they need ESL [English as a second language], or they might need short-term training. That was not a message they felt they could impart to the field offices and have them carry that out.

This message was reinforced by the legislation itself, which mandates job search for all clients who cannot be placed. Even though DSHS now counts PET as the equivalent of job search, many case managers require clients to go through twelve weeks of job search before promoting PET. Taken together, these factors have led to an underutilization of PET, to the dismay of one senior DSHS staffer:

Here's where our problem was. When the governor says that clients would take the first available job, we knew that we were gonna send every able-bodied client to job search. . . . We didn't want to say, We will send everybody to job search where they'll take the first available job, but for a small portion of people, determined by us somehow, we'll divert those folks to preemployment training. What we thought was more equitable was to go to job search, and then from job search, every client will have the opportunities to go to preemployment training. . . . Okay, what's wrong with this picture? When you send people to job search, the ones that are most likely to benefit from preemployment training in the economy we've had for the last four years are also most likely to get placed in a job and exit. What is the job of the people running job search? It is to get people a job.

This unintended outcome has left PET both underenrolled and serving a harder-to-serve clientele than was initially envisioned. To address the enrollment problem, DSHS is now keeping data on whether local offices (CSOs) are maximizing their available PET slots. Nevertheless, the challenges in promoting education and training at the CSOs are daunting. For one, case managers still spend around 60 to 75 percent of their time on eligibility determination, despite DSHS efforts to have staff do more client assessment and referrals to PET or other programs as appropriate. DSHS staff repeatedly noted few training opportunities made available for case managers and extreme pressures from offices to reduce caseloads and raise placement rates. Many workers themselves are not convinced of the merits of education for their clients. One observer expressed shock at the "harsh" treatment of clients by DSHS eligibility workers and case managers.

Barriers to education are also present once clients are sent to job search and the ESD office. One job service specialist at ESD reported that she referred "maybe one client every three months" for education and training. The same employee noted there seem to be two kinds of case managers at ESD. "A certain group . . . they're of the philosophy that . . . we're not doing people any favors to be slack on them as far as job search and let the months roll by. . . . They want them to prove they're going to get a job first." The other group of case managers "is more liberal and takes the approach that training is an investment in the future, that if you can upgrade somebody's skills, (and) you can help somebody get a better job . . . it's worth the time and risk." These two sets of case manager beliefs and values are split evenly across the two offices she works in.

These problems were readily admitted to by DSHS, ESD staff, and representatives from the governor's office. Though the state community and technical colleges have raised similar concerns, they—spurred by the system office—have moved aggressively in recent years to collaborate with local DSHS and ESD staff, actively recruit current and former recipients, and reorganize college programs to make them more accessible. This attitude toward PET and short-term training was not there from the beginning. "When (Work First) happened, there was this attitude out there . . . Why should we have to do this when (our current) offerings are already working?" noted a member of the system office. While change was surely driven by the self-interest of earning a greater share of the Work First dollars available through the DSHS contract, many praise the leadership and commitment of the majority of colleges in embracing welfare reform and serving these students.¹⁴

“The colleges . . . didn’t all make that change for some kind of narrow pecuniary interest. . . . I mean they saw (welfare reform) as part of a mission somewhere they’re trying to do.” The governor himself personally thanked colleges for their work with Work First clients in a speech last year to the state trustees association.

For their part, representatives of the governor are both “thrilled” and “surprised” with community colleges and their response to welfare reform. Still, while most colleges have come around, some still refuse to embrace either Work First or short-term workforce training programs. “The jury’s still out,” reported one senior SBCTC staffer.

Advocates too have seen their views evolve over time, some rooted in pragmatism (“it’s not going away”), others in changing beliefs about education for welfare clients. As one well-respected advocate put it,

My sense from the people I’ve talked to, including low-income people, is probably no more than 10 to 15 percent at the most would for a one- or two-year vocational postsecondary education and training program. . . . (Most) just say, Give me a job. . . . That’s all I really want. . . . The reason I am saying that is I think that even if we were to open it up to a higher end, you know two years, four years, I don’t think everyone would take advantage of that. . . . So in my own mind, I think that some of the short-term training does make sense.

Many of the state’s advocacy organizations are now collaborating with local colleges to create more systematic career ladders that link short-term training with jobs with opportunities for advancement and additional educational credentials.

There is limited evidence about the impact these policy developments have had on postsecondary access in Washington State for current and former welfare recipients. What seems clear is that the number of welfare students in the state’s community and technical colleges is beginning to rise again after decreasing each year since 1997. In the 2000-2001 academic year, 21,733 welfare-funded students were enrolled in the state’s community and technical college, an increase of 5,839 students from the previous academic year (SBCTC 2001). While we do not know the breakdown of current clients, former clients, and the working poor, we do know that many of these referred to PET by DSHS are the hardest-to-employ segment of the client population. Although some interviewees suggested that colleges were “creaming” by serving the most skilled of the working poor, the system office claims that many colleges have been good in reaching out to current clients and the hardest to serve through their collaborations with the local DSHS and ESD offices.¹⁵

In summary, it appears a fragile ideological consensus on the role of education for welfare clients and poor adults is emerging in the state. Nevertheless, there are still tensions and unanswered questions. While the SBCTC is happy with evidence of the success of PET, they are uncomfortable with the program’s being measured by its success in getting people off of welfare. DSHS, on the other hand, chides the colleges for poor record keeping and still is concerned about placement rates in some regions of the state. In 2001, the legislature has chimed in with a bill—as in

Illinois—to stop the clock on time limits for recipients in approved postsecondary programs, a bill neither DSHS nor the governor's office supports.

Perhaps what we are really seeing is a truce between philosophically opposed groups facilitated by a surplus of TANF dollars that were made available to support training. It will be interesting to see what develops in Washington as this surplus shrinks and the soft money training dollars slowly recede or even disappear.¹⁶

Comparing the Cases

Through a cross-state analysis, we are able to better understand both the sources and consequences of state variation in allowing access to postsecondary education for welfare recipients and the working poor. Not surprisingly, this article confirms that the discretion afforded by federal welfare reform policies led to significant differences in access policies across the three states. What the article also shows is that different and competing ideas about welfare, work, and the role of education in the lives of welfare recipients help structure and shape political debates, and ultimately policy outcomes, in each of the states. Ideas influence welfare reform policies in the three states through four key sources, or channels: via the state human service agency; via advocacy organizations; through the persistence of the work-first idea within implementation processes; and through the power of policy signals to drive welfare reform at the state level.

A central factor in determining the ways in which welfare reform affects access to education in each of these states is the role of the state human services agency in driving the work-first idea. In two of our three cases, Illinois and Massachusetts, it appears that the welfare department had a far stricter vision of work-first than the state legislation initially provided for. In one extreme case, the secretary of DHS in Illinois appears to have ignored the former governor's stop-the-clock provision and instead promoted his own agenda of rapid labor force attachment as the best solution.

Since the welfare department employs and trains the state employees who work most closely with welfare recipients, the caseworkers, the agency is most capable of setting the tone for implementation in a state. Liberal legislation, when implemented by caseworkers who are instructed to follow a work-first ideology or who believe in it themselves, is no longer liberal in practice. In Washington, it is clear that the actions of case managers followed the tone set by the department they work for. For example, initially, case managers rarely offered education to recipients since DSHS instructed them to focus on work. But over time, DSHS made policy changes allowing for greater access to education and training, and the state community and technical colleges embraced welfare reform. In 2000-2001, the number of Work First-eligible clients enrolled in community colleges increased markedly, after declining for the past four years. Clearly, the degree to which welfare departments embraced the work-first ideology and transmitted it to their case-

workers affected the degree to which welfare recipients were able to access training.

The advocacy community also plays an important role in shaping access policies within a state. The advocates in Washington State were successful in promoting education in welfare recipients in part because they were able to adapt their ideological approach to focus less on traditional postsecondary education than on short-term training linked to a long-term strategy for advancement. It is important to note that not all advocates in Washington have embraced this approach.

In Massachusetts, the advocacy community has been both less vocal and less effective in promoting educational access. Although the formal provisions of the welfare law allow up to four years of postsecondary training, only about 9 percent of the caseload are in education and training activities, and even fewer of those (less than 2 percent) in two-year community college degree programs.

The advocacy community in Illinois strategically targeted their efforts at the Governor's Commission on Women to gain the stop-the-clock provision. Since that time, advocates have actively fought, although sometimes unsuccessfully, to protect the AO program and other welfare-to-work programs in the state that facilitate access to education. Although Illinois advocates have had some success in affecting formal policy, only 3.5 percent of recipients are taking advantage of such training, with fewer than seven hundred students falling under the clock-stopping provision.

Our findings in Illinois—indeed in all three states—speak to the gap between the formal provision of educational access and its reality for clients. Surely, there are many personal and financial reasons current welfare recipients are not enrolling in college (Golonka and Matus-Grossman 2001). Nevertheless, even efforts like those in Illinois and Washington—to actively promote postsecondary access—are challenged by implementation problems, particularly at the level of frontline caseworkers and other street-level bureaucrats, who interpret and make these policies real for recipients on a daily basis. In all three of our states, we saw the beliefs and attitudes of caseworkers and other frontline employees about work and education consistently reinforced the work-first message coming from the welfare bureaucracy and others. Research in other states confirms that “frontline workers generally believe welfare recipients should work” as a precondition for receiving public assistance (Lurie 2001, 2).

The beliefs and values of frontline workers stand as only one barrier to educational access. Caseworkers also operate in an environment with limited opportunities to build their own professional capacities and strong pressures to reduce case loads and get clients into the workforce as a measure of their job performance (Lurie 2001). Efforts to change the culture of the welfare office in places like Massachusetts, Illinois, and Washington have only added to the responsibilities of frontline workers without reducing client loads or subtracting responsibilities such as eligibility determination. Few frontline workers in these three states or nationally have the skills and formal credentials to engage clients about their lives, problems, and barriers to work or career advancement (see also Lurie 2001; Lurie,

Meyers, and Riccucci 2001), making real case management little more than the wishful thinking of welfare policy makers.

Although implementation poses significant barriers to access for current and former welfare recipients, in Washington, we saw that an aggressive community college sector can counter some of the tendencies within the welfare bureaucracy. This requires community colleges and college systems that are committed to serving these students, something we saw in all three states. Our initial evidence also suggests that this commitment necessitates a willingness to partner with the state human services agency around shorter-term training and workforce development. Of our three states, Washington's colleges—and state system office—were most willing to move in this direction, and only after some initial reluctance. This suggests that how colleges and college systems define their educational mission—traditional transfer, vocational education, short-term workforce development, or some combination of these—may dictate how aggressively and successfully they reach out to low-income populations.

One commonality across our three states is the power of federal welfare reform to drive change—both in formal law and in bureaucratic procedures. In each of our states, state human service agencies and other agencies have dramatically changed the ideological signals sent to clients and frontline workers about welfare (Gais et al. 2001, 9). These new signals stress the centrality of work to welfare, the personal responsibility of clients, and the time-limited nature of public assistance. In essence, the shorthand of work-first has become the guiding principle for state welfare policy and local implementation. The challenge states have faced is moving beyond this simple work-first signal to a more complex idea that embraces education and human capital development as a complement to workforce attachment strategies. Even when this message has captured policy makers (Washington, Illinois), implementation processes have remained steadfastly work-first in practice. Whether this is due to beliefs, incentives, inertia, or merely the challenge in implementing a more complex policy idea remains to be seen. To the extent TANF reauthorization seeks to enhance educational access, federal policy makers will have to grapple with these issues.

In summary, ideas work at the level of both formal state policy and local implementation to shape welfare reform outcomes in these three states. The power of ideas, especially in policy implementation, can lead to outcomes that might otherwise be unexpected. In Massachusetts, the efforts of the DTA produced postsecondary access policies significantly more limited than they were within the formal dictates of the law. In Illinois, work-first conceptions were able to significantly weaken the well-intentioned efforts of advocates and the governor to promote college access for welfare recipients. While in Washington, the work-first idea has given way to a greater focus on PET and a fragile new ideological consensus about the role of education among advocates, elected and appointed officials, and community colleges, efforts challenged by the persistence of the work-first idea within the welfare bureaucracy. In all three states, the meaning of welfare reform often overrode its formal policy mechanics (Stein 2001), making liberal policies more restrictive in practice and vice versa.

Conclusion and Next Steps

While educational researchers, especially those in the postsecondary arena, take for granted the importance of education in improving life chances, many are likely unaware of the contrary tendencies built into federal welfare reform. By examining state policy responses to TANF, this article has sought to provide a more fine-grained analysis of the impact of this new world of welfare on postsecondary access for low-income individuals. Such knowledge is crucial, we believe, for higher education researchers concerned with issues of access and degree attainment.

In particular, this article emphasizes the role that public policy ideas, and their influence on policy implementation, play in shaping postsecondary access. The new policy environment around welfare reform has brought with it a new discourse around education and labor market attachment for the clients of welfare programs. Given this fact, it is imperative that researchers look more closely at the access barriers and opportunities created by this new and dynamic ideological environment, along with the policy implementation structures (frontline workers, community colleges) that carry these ideas forward. Can states successfully alter policy signals to successfully promote education for current and former welfare clients? How do implementation-level factors (beliefs and incentives of frontline workers, mission/ideology of community colleges) shape the outcome of these efforts? Although we may be able to wrap our minds more easily around the barriers, future research must not ignore the success stories—those cases where federal-, state-, and institutional-level policies help welfare recipients and the working poor obtain meaningful access to community college degree and certificate programs and ultimately to economic self-sufficiency.

Notes

1. The Department of Health and Human Services reports that in 2000, less than 1 percent of federal Transitional Aid to Needy Families funds were spent on education and training nationwide (Greenberg 2001).

2. Since postsecondary education does not count as a work activity, it is not a reporting category. In other words, because it is not an allowable activity under the rules, the federal government collects no data on it.

3. The states are Arizona, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

4. The states are Alabama, Arkansas, California, Illinois, and North Carolina.

5. Five states—Colorado, Florida, Maryland, New York, and Ohio—allow counties to decide if postsecondary education can help meet work requirements.

6. In March 2001, 92.4 percent of the caseload (more than 38,700 recipients) were either exempt from work requirements and time limits or nonexempt but subject to time limits only. At that time, 9.1 percent of the caseload was participating in “Education & Training” or a “Combination” of types of activities (Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance 2001b). Note that this is the same month the participation requirement went into effect for those subject to the time limit but not the twenty-hour work requirement. The new requirement presumably has increased participation and potentially educational enrollments.

7. Just 702 welfare recipients in Massachusetts were in two-year college programs, and just one recipient was in a four-year college program (Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance 2001a).

8. Ten of the state's fifteen community colleges have participated at some point. Eight initially implemented programs; at this point only five colleges have programs.

9. One possible reason for this is that community colleges in Massachusetts do not have a strong history of providing workforce development training. A recent impetus for change in this area has come from reports by the Boston-based MassINC (2000a, 2000b). Working with MassINC, community colleges were able for the first time to win funding from the state for contract training. Previously, they only received money for their for-credit courses.

10. See Brodtkin (1997) for more details on Job Opportunities and the Basic Skills Training Program in Chicago. Under funding and evaluation pressures, caseworkers pushed the program more in the direction of job search and rapid labor market attachment.

11. The computer system used by caseworkers does not allow them to formally stop the sixty-month counter. Instead, local offices must identify clients who meet the criterion for having their clocks stopped and determine the number of months counted in error. Then they have to send paperwork to a central office to have the counter adjusted.

12. Welfare caseloads in Illinois are down substantially, from 663,000 recipients in January 1996 to 194,000 in March 2001 (for the latest available, see acf.dhhs.gov/news/stats).

13. CSOs are the regional offices of the Department of Human and Social Services in Washington.

14. Or the fear of losing these students otherwise. According to an interviewee, one campus in 1997 found that 33 percent of its students were current welfare recipients.

15. The first outcome analysis from the longitudinal Work First study found that participation in preemployment training had a statistically significant impact on rates of employment and earnings and did significantly better than other Work First activities such as job search and work experience (Klawitter 2001).

16. In June of 2002, funding for Work First training programs was reduced by \$7.5 million, a smaller cut than many expected, given the state's budget woes (www.wa.gov/WORKFIRST/statestaff/WITQandA.htm).

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