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Shaw, Kathleen; Goldrick-Rab, Sara; Mazzeo, Christopher & Jacobs, Jerry. (2006). *Putting Poor People to Work: How the Work-First Idea Eroded College Access for the Poor*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

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Reviewed by Fred Koslowski

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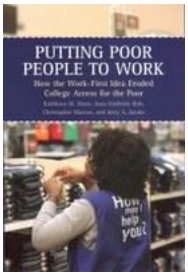
The late 1990s were interesting times to say the least: fourteen children and one teacher were killed by a student at Columbine High School, Y2K hype struck fear in the hearts of many, and the Academy Award winning *English Patient* taught a nation that love triumphs over adversity. It was also a time when the President of the United States did something that the American system of higher education, in particular, would struggle with through to the present day.



In 1996, Democrat Bill Clinton declared that the signing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act would make good on his promise to "end welfare as we know it." A relatively simple idea in theory – though complicated by practice – this and other Federal policies like the Workforce Investment Act were meant to encourage individuals to move more quickly off of Federal Assistance and into paying jobs. Using similar logic, Bill Clinton also famously dissolved Aid to Families with Dependant Children and replaced it with the more restrictive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

Putting Poor People to Work examines the negative effects of these and other "work first" initiatives on the economic and social welfare of poor people, particularly their resultant lack of access to post secondary education.

The significance of *Putting Poor People to Work* is evident given the current states of both the economy and higher education in America. Large state budget deficits, ballooning National and individual debt brought about in part by increased consumption, as well as the growing possibility of a recession, all threaten our citizens access to education and its resultant promise of prosperity. Not surprisingly to those inside academe, the system of higher education struggles with these issues in a somewhat counterintuitive way. For example, as a result of more than sixty years of unprecedented access and affordability to postsecondary education, many institutions – community colleges especially – are over enrolling without appropriate capacity (Vaughan, 2005)

not to mention waging ongoing public battles over academic quality and institutional accountability (Koslowski, 2007).

Putting Poor People to Work's seven chapters are tacitly broken into two parts: Chapters one through four focus on an analysis of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, Chapters five and six construct similar themes via the Workforce Investment Act, with syntheses and implications provided in chapter seven. The research design used is a nested comparative case-study based largely on phone interviews, reviews of public reports and internet sites, complemented by analyses of available post secondary enrollment data, Current Population Surveys, National Household Education Surveys, and others.

Chapter one opens, as most discussions on the topic of modern welfare reform do, with a brief account of Bill Clinton's contradictory public statements on the subject of entitlements and education. The central argument of the work is also noted early and with some frippery:

> Our argument about the far-reaching effects of the work-first idea is three-pronged, and is based on an extensive array of both quantitative and qualitative data collected over the course of four years (2001 to 2005) and across six states (Illinois, Florida, Washington, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island). First, we argue that the ascendance of the work-first ideology challenges a human-capital approach that links economic self-sufficiency with access to high-quality post secondary education. Contemporary policy harbors a contradictory set of notions that discredit education as a viable route out of poverty for the poor, even as it promotes education for the non-poor. Second, as embodied in welfare reform and [the Workforce Investment Act], work-first reduced both the quantity and the quality of education and training available to low-income adults. It did so via a set of policy signals, incentives, and laws that result in policies that are squarely work-first in their implementation, despite variations in formal, official policies at the state level. And third, welfare reform and [the Workforce Investment Act] discouraged community colleges from serving low-income populations, thereby contributing to their more general movement away from serving these populations. (p. 2)

Chapter two functions as the literature review. The search succeeds in identifying themes that will directly support the books theses, as well as ". . . explains the context from which the work-first perspective emerged" (p. 18). Though notable revisionist works such as *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (Katz, 1986) are taken slightly out of context. As well, the literature review includes an array of acts and acronyms common to the study of public policy. For example, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 is one of the many policy artifacts cited early by the author's in order to illustrate that investments in education can reap higher social and economic rewards for both individuals and society. But as the reader will no doubt see; such proofs do not address correspondingly divergent socio-economic themes such as the potentially unrecoverable opportunity cost lost by both society and the individual as income generation and taxes are deferred in favor of further education. Chapter two is also the place where *Putting Poor People to Work* voices a more arrant political tone; characterizing works such as *Wealth and Poverty* (Gilder, 1981) and *Losing Ground* (Murray, 1984) as placing undue influence on early Federal welfare policy. The authors state further that "[t]he liberal perspective emphasized the importance of expanding opportunities for the poor" (p.26) while conservatives were more interested in closing down welfare offices and demonizing the truly needy than curing poverty. In keeping with this theme, *Putting Poor People to Work* also contends that Bill Clinton was overpowered and "outflanked" (p. 29) by the early – largely Republican – attempts to reform Aid to Families with Dependant Children, and that his eventual choice to abolish this program instead, is excusable as it was performed under political duress.

Chapter three of *Putting Poor People to Work* provides quantitative information such as postsecondary education participation and enrollment rates, weighted logistic regressions of college enrollment for selected low-income populations, unemployment figures, and tablature of state-by-state educational allowances. Correlations between these data and the three part thesis proposed in chapter one offers some statistical credibility to the author's claim that:

> . . . welfare reform has reduced the number of individuals who access postsecondary education via welfare. . . The quality of postsecondary education that is available has shifted as well, away from degree-granting programs toward short-term non-degree training. And increasingly, welfare recipients must attend college part-time rather than full-time (p.63).

The authors are cautious to not to say explicitly that correlation equals causation and close the chapter by noting that it appears the above conclusions (reduced participation rates, access, etc.) could be caused by other factors and, in fact, appear to vary by state. This concession is hard won, however, as Chapter four both establishes and substantiates the author's further claim that – like Bill Clinton – even state welfare systems that meaningfully value and provide assistance with education are nonetheless influenced to act to the contrary by the informal power of the Federal work first message.

Chapter five and six turn to the Workforce Investment Act and its particularly injurious effects on access to quality postsecondary education and training for the poor. For example, in chapter five *Putting Poor People to Work* uses Federal Department of Labor reporting data to show that there is a marked drop in funding allocated to serve low-income adults under the Workforce Investment Act. These statements are once again tempered by acknowledged variations by state, and the author's admitted use of data not normally disaggregated. The chapter concludes by stating that overall the Workforce Investment Act has reduced individual access to top-tier services (education and training) for welfare clients while increasing the "superficial and rather ineffective services of job search and résumé-building assistance" (p. 122). Chapter six more specifically focuses on the restrictive nature of the aforementioned tiers of service termed "sequential eligibility". Using interviews with individuals such as community college officials, welfare caseworkers, and training providers to name a few, the author's reiterate the assertion that:

> . . . as [the Workforce Investment Act] is implemented, the dominance of work-first in both formal policy and in the interpretation of this policy by state officials and caseworkers prevents many [Workforce Investment Act] clients from ever setting foot on a college campus. (p. 126)

The final chapter indicates that the trends identified in *Putting Poor People to Work* are likely to continue at the Federal and state levels, community colleges especially will turn away from serving low-income students, and that college access will continue to erode for the poor.

Though not intended to be comprehensive or even handed, *Putting Poor People to Work* is nonetheless a valuable work that deserves a place in the educational policy archives as it identifies a critical intersection between political ideology, public policy, and higher education.

The reader should be mindful, though, that as a work of advocacy, *Putting Poor People to Work* is legitimately and inextricably linked to politics and a political agenda (Creswell, 2003) and, as such, the authors are not necessarily under any obligation to provide evidence or data contrary to their theses.

For example, the relative success and self reported "substantial economic progress" made by welfare recipients under the Work First New Jersey initiative from 1999 to 2003 (Rangarajan, et al., 2005) is not examined. Nor is the well known Work Experience Program which is responsible

for the wholesale reduction in the number of street-bound homeless persons, as well as the continuous increase in the safety of the New York Metropolitan area (Havemann, 1997). Or that a similarly motivated study performed by scholars at the University of Tennessee (Ziegler & Ebert, 2001) found that it took *longer* for those on welfare and receiving state funded assistance with child care, transportation, education, and job training to pass the GED examination – in some cases more than three times longer. Thus it can be argued that there appears to be evidence that a highly capitalized education first or otherwise aggressive assistive environment can result in *increased* individual and group dependency, vulnerability, and poverty. The idea that community colleges are *the* gateway to economic and social mobility for the poor is also similarly ill conceived given the omnipresent struggle of these institutions to gain legitimacy in the face of increasing public pressure for value-added outcomes and declining degree efficacy, as well as the increasing demand (and high wages paid) for alternatively trained and certified craft and trade workers. Much credence can be given, then, to the notion that pushing at-risk individuals toward the lengthy and costly pursuit of a college education and away from quality employment actually perpetuates a monumental and dubious *disservice* to the very people that these institutions are explicitly intended to serve (Koslowski, 2008).

There are many more such paradoxes in the political and social sciences that need to be addressed in future educational research, not the least of which are the effects of continued insistence that people be labeled and treated as victims. Unlike many university researchers and policy analysts, those who work directly with these individuals have a differently informed view of the situation and expend much energy countering the strong message of dependency. Future research in this area should examine the sustainable benefits of removing such labels, treating people equally while recognizing their differences, encouraging self-reliance and autonomy, advocating fair and informed economic choice, and assessing educational outcomes.

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About the Reviewer

Dr. Fred Koslowski is an internationally published author and social scientist studying many of the policy issues raised by *Putting Poor People to Work*. As an educator at a nationally regarded two-year college in suburban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, he has worked with underrepresented and disenfranchised populations for almost a decade.

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