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Edward T. Walker
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PART I

Sources

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1 *Grassroots from the top down*

The front stage of public participation

In 2010, a wave of student activism was under way on the campuses of for-profit colleges and universities across the US. Recognizing that new federal rules could effectively make many such institutions close their doors to the diverse non-traditional enrollees that call such schools home, students began to organize to make their case against the new regulations. Called the “gainful employment” rule, regulations proposed by the US Department of Education would cut off the flow of federal student loans and Pell grants to institutions in which a majority of students graduate with higher monthly student loan payments than they could be expected to comfortably repay in their selected profession.¹ Given that student loans are the lifeblood of higher education, many students felt threatened that they would no longer be able to attend their school of choice. Indeed, the way the regulation was written, a logical interpretation for many was not that the Department of Education wanted to reform the *practices of these institutions*, but instead that regulators wanted to take away *students’ access to loans*.

One such student was Dawn Connor of Globe University in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. At the start of 2010, Dawn was just a regular college student, taking night courses to become a veterinary technician, while working during the day at a local shelter spaying and neutering dogs

¹ More specifically, the original rules proposed by the Department of Education in January 2010 would have required that “a majority of [an institution’s] graduates’ annual student loan payments under a 10-year repayment plan must be no more than eight percent of the incomes of those in the lowest quarter of their respective professions”; earnings data would come from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Gorski, 2010). This was later revised such that programs had to meet one of three criteria in order to maintain eligibility for student aid: at least 35 percent of graduates must be successfully repaying their loans, students’ estimated annual loan payments must not exceed 12 percent of projected earnings, or payments must not exceed 30 percent of discretionary income (Lewin, 2012).

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and cats.² She had been active in a variety of leadership roles around the university, including serving as student ambassador for the Veterinary Technology program, president of the Veterinary Technology club, and playing a role in meeting and welcoming new students to campus. She had graduated from high school early, then drifted from one traditional college to another, ultimately changing majors a few times and making progress without earning a degree. Globe University, a for-profit institution with eight branches throughout Wisconsin, Minnesota, and South Dakota, turned out to be a great fit for Connor. Despite the substantial tuition for a vocational degree – the two-year associate’s degree in veterinary technology runs to over \$44,000 plus lab fees and book expenses – the school had the advantage of being located in Connor’s hometown and fit her other priorities. She especially liked that she was able to maintain a conventional job during the day while working toward her degree through night classes.

Catching wind of the Department of Education’s proposed regulations, Dawn was happy to visit Washington to lobby on behalf of students at for-profit institutions in March 2010. She felt so strongly about her institution, in fact, that she became a force in helping to propel a national student campaign against the regulations, through an organization called Students for Academic Choice (SAC). The group, which described itself as an association of “proud students and graduates of private, post-secondary career-oriented institutions,”³ was focused on ensuring “access to a quality education” and recognizing the value that “non-traditional learners” bring to the workforce. More specifically, the organization focused on the fear among many students at for-profit schools that they would lose access to the funding they need to pursue their education.

Only a few months later, SAC had an estimated 150 leaders and was working with a lawyer to gain official nonprofit status. The group was a co-sponsor of a rally in Washington that claimed to have assembled over two thousand students of private sector colleges to voice their opposition to the gainful employment rule.⁴ More significantly, SAC became active in organizing college students across the entire for-profit university system, ultimately assembling some 32,000 signatures on a petition asking that the Department of Education avoid enacting the

² The following builds largely from Gorski (2010).

³ Students for Academic Choice (2012). ⁴ States News Service (2010).

gainful employment rule.⁵ SAC’s petition was framed to suggest that the rules change would harm disadvantaged groups including “single mothers, veterans, and adult students who work full time while attending school.”⁶

After a fierce battle with the Department of Education, groups like Students for Academic Choice could claim some success in reshaping policy. Although the gainful employment rule was approved by the Obama administration in June 2011 – requiring that 35 percent of an institution’s graduates must be repaying their loans – the regulations were much less encompassing than those originally proposed. In earlier draft proposals, the rules would have meant penalties against 16 percent of for-profit institutions, but the final rules were only projected to affect around 5 percent of for-profit institutions,⁷ and schools would have to fail the regulation’s test criteria for three or four consecutive years in order to be penalized.⁸ And although the original rules were set to go into effect with new penalties beginning in 2012, the revised rules made it such that penalties wouldn’t be imposed until three years later.⁹ Students of career colleges and other proprietary institutions would have even more to celebrate in the following months, when a federal district court judge overturned a key component of the regulation.¹⁰

Behind the curtain

How was it that Students for Academic Choice came to be such a forceful player in the effort to fight against the gainful employment rule that was threatening students at for-profit colleges and universities? Conventional approaches to understanding the success of grassroots organizing would have us consider the importance of organization, resources, political opportunities, and the skillful deployment of cultural frames in crafting an advocacy message. When employed in the right combination, grassroots advocacy can be a “weapon of the weak” that allows new groups to have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives.

But to focus only on these factors would cause us to overlook a key factor behind student activism on behalf of the industry: the campaign was orchestrated as part of the for-profit education industry’s

⁵ Field (2010). ⁶ Students for Academic Choice (2011).
⁷ Lichtblau (2011). ⁸ Lewin (2012). ⁹ Lichtblau (2011).
¹⁰ Lewin (2012).

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multimillion-dollar lobbying campaign against the gainful employment rule. Despite its efforts to be seen as an independent, grassroots uprising of concerned students at for-profit colleges, the industry's backing was not far behind. Students for Academic Choice was, in fact, sponsored and supported by the Career College Association (CCA), which is the leading trade association representing for-profit colleges and universities.¹¹ Indeed, as Connor herself acknowledged, the idea to form the organization originated not with the students, but with representatives of for-profit schools.¹² Further, the group was formed at the Career College Association's lobbying day in Washington, and the SAC website and its initial resources were provided by the CCA.¹³ As Connor put it, the trade group served as SAC's "grandfather," which gave the group its start and guidance. In her words, "they kind of got us going. But now they're taking the training wheels off and saying, 'Go for it and let's see what you guys can do.'"¹⁴

As it turns out, Students for Academic Choice was just one out of a veritable archipelago of industry-backed grassroots efforts created by for-profit colleges and universities to fight off the regulation, including the Save Access / Student Choice Coalition, the Coalition for Education Success, Let's Put Students First, and My Education, My Choice. These groups, like many active in contemporary advocacy campaigns, utilized the skills of advocacy professionals in order to both amplify genuine pre-existing concerns among the public and also to persuade and mobilize previously unorganized constituencies. In fact, much of the grassroots organizing done on behalf of for-profit colleges was facilitated with the support of elite lobbyists and public affairs consultants from both sides of the political spectrum, including the LawMedia Group, DCI Group, Global Strategy Group, and Clinton administration lawyer-turned-lobbyist Lanny Davis.¹⁵ These consultants helped build the organizational infrastructure for student activism, helped turn staff

¹¹ CCA has since renamed itself the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities (APSCU).

¹² Gorski (2010). ¹³ Field (2010). ¹⁴ Gorski (2010).

¹⁵ See, respectively, Elk (2010); Malloy (2012); Network Solutions (2012); Thompson and Lipton (2010). Although these firms are listed by name, any firm I interviewed for this book has been given a pseudonym for both the firm and the consultants I spoke with. The first time any firm is mentioned in the book, I state whether the firm's name is a pseudonym; if not marked in the first instance, this is the firm's real name. I describe the book's confidentiality protocol in Appendix 4.2.

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of the for-profit colleges into citizen lobbyists, and offered would-be activists a set of detailed talking points to repeat while suggesting venues where their voices could be heard. In so doing, the consultants themselves were following what has become a well-established set of practices through which elite political operatives facilitate public engagement on behalf of their paying clients.

This is a book about those consultants and the effects their campaigns are having on American democracy.

Today, more and more advocacy is being driven not by the local organizing of autonomous citizens, but by the efforts of paid consultants that organizations like these for-profit colleges hire to help them activate receptive members of the public on their behalf. *Grassroots for Hire* reveals an industry of consultants who work on behalf of companies, powerful interest groups, labor unions, and other organizations to shift public policies in their clients' favor by mobilizing mass participation. Their clients include many of the most powerful multinationals: 40 percent of *Fortune* 500 firms appear as their clients. The reach is vast: the leading campaign by an average consulting firm targets over 750,000 Americans for participation.¹⁶ Their work is lucrative: consultants command hourly rates at (or at times well beyond) \$400 per hour. Their campaigns are consequential: they go beyond the work of traditional lobbyists by showing to legislators and regulators that a client's concerns have motivated and organized constituencies mobilized to support them.

This book attempts to look behind the curtain, so to speak, to examine how much of the "front stage" of public participation has come to be organized "back stage" by public affairs professionals. In Goffman's classic treatment of this distinction in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, the front stage of social action involves performance before an audience, while backstage action removes the audience in order to engage in the complex coordination necessary for a performance to take place.¹⁷ While scholars of social movements and civic engagement have both, in their own ways, examined what is "behind" much collective action – whether in studying organizing structures, resources, political coalitions, or strategic efforts to frame debates –

¹⁶ See Appendix 2.3, Section 3e. ¹⁷ Goffman (1959).

the “backstage” efforts of professionals working on behalf of paying clients has been largely overlooked.¹⁸ These efforts have also been sidelined in the major debates about the modern restructuring of American civic life, which have generally neglected the increasing commercialization of advocacy through paid consulting firms and elite lobbying of the public.¹⁹

Public affairs consultants, sometimes known as “grassroots lobbyists,”²⁰ incentivize citizen participation through a variety of means, often using new information and communications technologies to facilitate the process. Their work goes beyond simple public relations strategies that focus on messaging without encouraging citizen action. Their campaigns may not be entirely replacing traditional forms of grassroots organizing, but they are undoubtedly helping to commercialize citizen advocacy, offering the repertoire of participation originally developed by advocacy organizations and social movements as a professional service in the political marketplace. To the extent that only select citizens are targeted for participation, this form of commercialized advocacy exacerbates participatory inequalities among the citizenry, and may be further decoupling citizen participation from the democratic norms, social networks, and feelings of institutional trust that undergird our civic life. In addition, although many consultants avoid such strategies, some engage in “astroturf” (i.e., fake grassroots) strategies on behalf of their clients through the use of heavy incentives, fraud, or misleading claims about their sponsorship. Their doing so may reduce citizens’ trust not only in the political process but also in advocacy groups more broadly.

¹⁸ Exceptions, mainly in work on corporate public affairs, are Lyon and Maxwell (2004); Lord (2000a, 2000b, 2003); Mezmar and Nigh (1995); Getz (2002); Schuler (2002); Marcus and Irion (1987); Fleisher (2002).

¹⁹ See Walker (2009).

²⁰ These terms may not be considered entirely interchangeable by practitioners. The practice of public affairs includes the management of interactions not only with civic groups, but also with legislatures, administrative agencies, the media, and even the courts, and may not always be, strictly speaking, political in nature (Lerbinger, 2006). The term “grassroots lobbying” casts many of the same practices in a more political light. Because of the considerable overlap between the activities described by these two terms, and because this book also describes some non-lobbying activities by these firms, this book favors the more encompassing term “public affairs consultant” over “grassroots lobbyist.”

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What is at stake, then, is the very means by which we, as a society, connect with one another in order to bring about change on those issues that matter most to us.

The argument: consultants and top-down participation

Cases like the one described above, while striking in many ways, will not surprise long-time scholars of mass mobilization, as theorists from Gramsci to Schumpeter were well aware of the means by which elites mobilize popular participation in order to enhance their standing, promote their agendas, and win contentious disputes.²¹ As Gramsci once argued in his *Prison Notebooks*, “the superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare.”²² Indeed, a mainstay in modern political research is the notion that grassroots lobbying tactics are central to interest groups’ repertoires for gaining influence.²³ Similarly, scholars of social movements recognized a generation ago the tendency toward the professionalization of advocacy,²⁴ which is manifested today in the growing number of “associations without members” such as think tanks, policy institutes, and other largely staff-driven advocacy groups that tend to mobilize members and funds from the top down. Some worry that there has been a growth of advocacy without a corresponding expansion of citizen engagement.²⁵

What *is* new, I will argue, is the extent to which public affairs campaigns are being used to commercialize and further professionalize popular participation, thereby borrowing the repertoire of grassroots mobilization and, in turn, offering this repertoire as a service to organizational clients like corporations, industry associations, government agencies, and even the very advocacy organizations from whom these tactics were learned in the first place.²⁶ As David Meyer and Sidney Tarrow have argued, grassroots advocacy repertoires are employed not only by those excluded from routine channels of political authority, but

²¹ Gramsci (1959); Schumpeter (1942). ²² Gramsci (1971: 235).

²³ Goldstein (1999); Kollman (1998); Caldeira and Wright (1998); Schlozman and Tierney (1986).

²⁴ McCarthy and Zald (1977); Jenkins and Eckert (1986).

²⁵ Skocpol (1999, 2003); Walker, McCarthy, and Baumgartner (2011); Jordan and Maloney (1997).

²⁶ On organizational repertoires, see Clemens (1993, 1997).

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also by elites for their own purposes.²⁷ Repertoires of grassroots participation, originally developed by citizen advocacy organizations, have been adapted into the standard practices of a field of organizations that offer contracted advocacy services on the commercial market to a variety of organized interests.

The growth and institutionalization of the field of public affairs consultants makes possible, then, an increasingly *subsidized public*. Corporations, trade associations, wealthy advocacy organizations, and campaign groups utilize the services of public affairs consultants to lower the costs of participation for targeted activist groups. Organized interests have always sought to facilitate popular participation through offering publics various types of incentives to get involved.²⁸ But new communications technologies, professional practices for popular mobilization, and a changed field of advocacy organizations have combined to make it much easier for elites to recruit citizen activists.

The notion of a subsidized public differs, then, from what communications scholar Philip Howard describes as a public of “managed citizens,”²⁹ in that much of what public affairs consultants do is not so much to exercise strong control over participants, but instead to encourage only select groups of citizens to voice their opinions. Further, grassroots participation consultants often support and augment the activism of many who *would have been active in the policy process to begin with*, such as when they work with existing community-based organizations in order to broaden their issue advocacy coalition. Consultants bring their considerable financial and technical resources to bear in employing innovative methods for targeting and recruiting activists for their client’s cause; the resources, and, to a lesser extent, professionalism that participatory consultants employ is what differentiates them from other types of grassroots advocacy campaigns by, for example, community organizations. Although the work of consultants on behalf of their clients does, at times, meet the definition of “astroturf” (i.e., is heavily incentivized, involves dishonest or fraudulent claims-making, or is less than fully transparent about its patrons), the main effect of consultants’ practices on democracy lies in the selective targeting of citizens for their recruitment requests. As

²⁷ Meyer and Tarrow (1998). ²⁸ Clark and Wilson (1961).

²⁹ Howard (2006).