

The US Higher Education System: A Brief Introduction for International Students and Scholars

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The system of higher education in the United States is complex and not always well understood, even by Americans. Not surprisingly, it can appear incredibly complicated to the international student or scholar—even to one who has studied previously in the United States. The reasons for this complexity are due to a number of features, many of them related, such as:

- the sheer size of the US higher education enterprise, measured both in the number of institutions (more than 4000) and in numbers of full- and part-time students (in 2004 more than 17 million);
- the fact that US higher education (like elementary and secondary education) is under the authority of the 50 states, not of the national (sometimes called the “federal”) government—in spite of the fact that we do indeed have a federal executive agency, the U.S. Department of Education, that is headed by a cabinet-level officer (something like a “minister”);
- the existence of a very significant private non-profit sector that includes both many of the most prestigious and well-known institutions (such as Stanford, Harvard, Yale, and the Universities of Pennsylvania and of Southern California) as well as many of the smallest and least selective colleges and universities; and
- a confusing nomenclature, in which terms like “college” and “university” have multiple and generally imprecise meanings.

This very brief introduction describes some of the essential features of higher education in the United States, and identifies some of those features of our system (some would call it a “non-system”) that are most nearly unique and that therefore may be most frequently misunderstood or not be recognized at all by the visitor from another country.

The Size and Structure of US Higher Education

Higher (or postsecondary) education in the US is large—whether measured in absolute numbers of institutions, enrollments, expenditures, percentage of the Gross Domestic Product consumed, or in the pervasive role it plays in American society and in the “coming of age” of most American youth. For example, there are more than 4200

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degree-granting colleges and universities (including branch campuses), about 1700 of which are public and more than 2300 private, the overwhelming majority of the latter form being private *non-profit*.² Of the degree-granting institutions, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which publishes the most recognized postsecondary institutional classification system, classifies them as follows:³

- 261 *Doctoral/Research Universities* (151 of which award 50 or more doctoral degrees per year in at least 15 separate disciplines and are thereby classified as *Research Extensive*, signifying the most research-oriented and thus generally the most academically-prestigious universities);
- 610 *Masters Colleges and Universities* (sometimes called *comprehensive* colleges and universities, many of the public institutions in this category having had their origins in former teachers colleges);
- 607 *Baccalaureate Colleges* (226 of which emphasize the *Liberal Arts*—that is, history political science, languages, humanities, and the scientific disciplines—rather than vocational or professional specializations—and are mainly but not exclusively *private non-profit* and *academically selective*);
- 1,669 *Associate’s Colleges*, (primarily public community colleges, which offer both short-cycle vocational or professional programs as well as courses that are transferable to a four-year college or university baccalaureate degree); and
- 767 *Specialized Institutions* (e.g. schools of medicine and other health professions, theology, law, engineering and technology, art, music, and design).
- In addition, there are some 4000 non-degree (certificate) institutions that are private *for-profit*, or *proprietary*.

Total headcount enrollment in degree granting higher education in the year 2004 was just over 17 million: about 57 percent of whom were female, 76 percent enrolled in public institutions, and 62 percent projected to be full-time. Approximately 38 percent were in two-year, or associate’s degree, institutions (primarily public community colleges). Reflecting the relatively large size of most (but not all) US institutions, more than 54 percent were attending colleges and universities enrolling more than 10,000 students.⁴

The principal *first degree* in the US is the bachelors degree (sometimes called a baccalaureate), which can be obtained after about four years of full-time study although more and more US student are taking longer, reflecting the propensity and the ease both of attending part-time, and also of “dropping out” for periods of time, frequently then changing institutions and carrying the credits earned to be applied toward the Baccalaureate at the second institution). This considerable variation in the pace of study is made possible by virtue of the US higher education undergraduate degrees (and even

² National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 2005*, Chapter 3, Post Secondary Education: College & University Education. NCES Website December 2006: <http://nces.ed.gov/>

³ Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education 2000 Edition*. Menlo Park, CA: Author, 2001. [See <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/>

⁴ NCES *Digest of Education Statistics: 2005*, Tables 170, 171.

some of the masters degrees) being awarded on the basis of an accumulation of *courses*, or units of study (e.g. the Plays of Shakespeare, or Introductory Microeconomics, or Advanced Cell Biology). Each course represents an amount of work, or a volume of learning, that can be acquired by the average successful student devoting about three hours a week of in-class time (lecture or seminar or a combination of both) as well as approximately double that amount of time outside of class in the library or laboratory or time spent reading and writing at home or in the dormitory, altogether for about 15 weeks. Each course is assigned *credits* reflecting the required number of in-class hours per week and making the standard 15-week course worth either three or four *credits*. In this way, a standard full-time undergraduate load would be four 4-credit or five 3-credit courses for two semesters of approximately 15 weeks each in the eight or nine month academic year. At that pace, the bachelor's degree would be awarded after approximately four years, or eight semesters, or 120+ course credits of academic work.

It is this *course and credit-based system* that makes possible transferring both between institutions (and carrying along the course credits earned) and the common pattern of beginning a baccalaureate degree by first attaining a fully transferable, 60-credit associate degree from a two-year community college. It also makes possible the pattern of attending part-time, as well as "stopping out" for a semester or two or even for many years (as with a woman stopping to raise a family). Similarly, this course and credit system combined with the large number of four-year, highly selective, baccalaureate degree liberal arts colleges makes possible the uniquely American division between *undergraduate* and *graduate* or *advanced professional* programs. In the US, the advanced professional programs such medicine, dental medicine, the other advanced health professions as well as law, and management (i.e., the Masters in Business Administration) are "post-baccalaureate" or "graduate," and are most often taken at a different university than the one at which the baccalaureate was obtained.

Higher education in the US is probably the leader in the world in *advanced education*: that is, at the level of the Ph.D. and the advanced, professional degree. At the same time, undergraduate education (and increasingly certain masters level programs such as teacher education, and business or management) are probably the most accessible and among the *least* selective in the world, with millions of American youth with very little academic preparedness still having a chance (and sometimes three or four chances) at a higher education degree who would not have such a chance in many countries in the world.

Authority and responsibility for US higher Education

Higher education in the United States is the responsibility of the states rather than of the national (or the *federal*) government. Thus, with insignificant exceptions (such as the military service academies and some Native American tribal colleges), public higher education is owned and controlled by the 50 states. The large and significant US private higher education sector, too, is under the legal jurisdiction of the states. Approximately 59 percent of the colleges and universities, enrolling about 20 percent of all students, are private non-profit, among which are most of the most prestigious and academically-

selective colleges and universities, but which also include many of the least selective (essentially “open admissions”) institutions⁵.

The federal Department of Education has three critical functions that apply equally to public and private institutions: (1) the provision of student financial assistance, mainly in the form of need-based grants and federally-guaranteed and slightly subsidized loans that are fully portable to most post-secondary institutions, public and private;⁶ (2) oversight over (but not operating responsibility for) the accreditation of colleges and universities; and (3) the maintenance of an extensive database, including annual surveys of institutional finances, enrollments, and degree programs, as well as longitudinal studies of student interests and college-going behavior. In addition, the federal government assumes financial responsibility for the funding of most basic research. It does this through several federal departments and agencies, especially the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the federal Departments of Defense, Agriculture, and Health and Human Services.

Governance of higher education in the United States

Governance is the process by which institutional and state policies on higher education are established. (Management, on the other hand, constitutes the execution of these policies, or the day-to-day operation of the university.) Governance involves the interplay of two organizational forces: The first of these is *authority*, which is the legally enforceable ability to command and control, as might be possessed in the case of higher education by parliaments, ministers, other high ranking governmental bureaucrats, governing boards (especially in the case of the United States), and delegated to the presidents or chancellors (the terms are interchangeable in the United States) of institutions. The other is *influence*, which is the ability to shape policy and alter the behavior of individuals (and therefore of institutions) less through authority and more through expertise, control of information, proximity (to those in authority), or the ability to persuade.

Authority in US *private* higher education is in the hands of governing boards, usually called “boards of trustees,” composed of men and women of prominence, and frequently possessing sufficient wealth to donate philanthropically to the institution and the social position to influence others to do likewise. They are very often alumni, serving (by law) without compensation because of their interest in, and affection for, the college or university and for the honor that comes from such service.

Authority in US *public* institutions is similarly in the hands of governing boards, rather than ministries (in the US called “state departments of education”). These public governing boards, either directly elected or (more commonly) appointed by the governor and usually approved by the state legislature, represent the public interest as well as the interest of the particular college or university. The public governing board thus represents the needs of the public in general and of the state government to the institution; but it also

⁵ NCES Digest of Education Statistics, Tables 170 and 243.

⁶ Federal student assistance (loans, grants, and tax-assistance) accounted in 2005-06 for about \$94.358 billion, or some 94% of all student financial assistance. College Board, *Trends in Financial Aid 2006*, Table 2, p. 7.

represents the needs of the institution to the government—most importantly for an adequate share of public revenues.

A governing board's most important responsibility is to appoint (usually with significant input from the faculty and other constituents such as staff, students, and alumni) a chief executive officer called *president* or *chancellor*, to support, evaluate, and if ever necessary, to remove him or her, and in the meantime to delegate to this officer all executive tasks. A governing board shields the president (who is more often than not appointed from outside of the university) at least somewhat from the faculty. In the case of a public institution, the board similarly shields the president or chancellor from the state government. At the same time, in spite of their limited *authority*, the faculty of a US college or university have very great *influence*, especially over the curriculum, the establishment or disestablishment of programs, the appointment and promotion of their faculty colleagues, academic standards, and over that which is to be researched and how the findings are to be disseminated. The most eminent faculty, particularly at the research-extensive, universities, have additional influence stemming from the great mobility of US faculty: that is, their ability to accept another offer (or to negotiate a better arrangement from their present institution) either for salary, promotion, equipment, or a more prestigious academic setting.

Most US public colleges and universities are parts of multicampus systems: Groups of public institutions, each with its own mission, academic and other programs, and internal policies and procedures. Systems are governed by a single board through a single chief executive *system* officer called either *chancellor* or *president* (whichever term is not used in that system to designate the campus head). The system governing board selects the system head, sets broad system policies, allocates public resources among the constituent institutions (within whatever latitude is allowed by the state), appoints the campus heads (on the recommendation of the system head, and generally with the advice of the faculty and sometimes of a separate campus board with limited authority), and establishes, reaffirms, or alters the missions and programs of the constituent institutions. The separate institutions, then, with their own presidents or chancellors and their own faculty senates and other institutional governing arrangements, hire and promote their own faculty, admit their own students, establish (consistent with system policies) their own programs, standards, and curricula, expand their resources by attracting donations and research contracts, and allocate these resources, together with the revenues from the state and from tuition fees, among the various competing departments and other needs.

Costs, or expenditures, in US higher education

Current “education and general” operating fund expenditures (that is, excluding hospitals, other auxiliary enterprises, and university affiliated federal research and development centers) in 2001 (the most recent year for complete statistics) were more than \$205 billion. This figure includes \$80.9 billion for instruction, \$27 billion for research⁷, close

⁷ In the case of private for-profit institutions, research and public service are lumped together and are both counted in the research category.

to \$10 billion for public service, \$23.6 billion for academic support⁸, \$14.5 billion for student services, \$26.7 billion for institutional support, \$10.9 billion for operation and maintenance of plant, \$8.9 billion for scholarships, and \$2.5 billion for mandatory transfers (NCS Digest of Education Statistics: 2005).⁹

Costs (that is, institutional expenditures) vary enormously: By *institution*, by *sector* (i.e., whether research universities or undergraduate colleges), by *program* (e.g. whether humanities, laboratory science or engineering), and perhaps most of all by *access to revenue* (i.e., size of endowment and annual private gifts, and whether they have the prestige and the market position to charge a very high tuition).

Comparing per student institutional expenditures can be difficult because of heavy expenditures in some institutions on sponsored research, public service, hospitals and clinics, or auxiliary enterprises that have little to do with the costs of educating a student. The US higher education accounting classification *educational and general* excludes most of these highly variable and somewhat extraneous expenses and allows a more valid comparison of the strictly instructional function, at least among reasonably similar institutions. Table 1 shows per-student *educational and general* expenditures by *sector* (four-year college, or university¹⁰) and *control* (public, or private non-profit). The yearly per-student expenditure increases in higher education, as in most "productivity resistant"

Table 1
Per-Student Educational and General Expenditures
By Control and Type 1980-2001
[Constant 2000-01 Dollars]

Year	Public sector		Private Sector (not for profit)		Private Sector (for profit)
	University	4 year	University	4 year	4 year
2000-01	\$21,622		\$24,996		\$9,805
1995-96	\$22,259	\$15,144	\$42,033	\$19,409	NA
1990-91	20,606	13,674	37,225	17,420	NA
1985-86	19,060	13,879	31,576	15,373	NA
1980-81	17,391	12,974	24,040	27,163	NA

Sources: *NCES Condition of Education 1999*, Supplemental Table 40-2; *NCES Digest of Education Statistics: 2005*.

enterprises, are usually a bit above the average economy-wide increases, thus assuring that higher educational costs will also rise in most years at a rate slightly above the rate of inflation--and likewise for tuition.

⁸ In the case of private for-profit institutions, academic support, student services and institutional support are all lumped together and are all counted as academic support.

⁹ *NCES Digest of Education Statistics: 2005*, Tables 342, 346 and 348.

¹⁰ Data disaggregated by sector not available for 2000-01.

Costs of higher education in the US borne by parents and students

Not only are the underlying per-student costs high (albeit highly variable, as noted above) in most US colleges and universities, but the shares borne by parents and students *in both the public as well as the private sectors* (particularly prior to netting out the effects of grants and other forms of price discounting) are also higher than other countries. This is partly attributable to the long tradition of parents paying relatively high tuition fees in the private sector, buttressed by the generally accepted belief (well supported by evidence) that higher education brings considerable private returns, both monetary and non-monetary, to students and parents alike. Also, the very large system of grants and loans, originating from both state and federal government as well as from institutions and other philanthropic sources and totaling over \$134 billion in 2005-06¹¹ makes it possible for colleges and universities, public and private, to have high advertised tuition fees (from \$3000 to \$6000 in the public sector to well above \$20,000 per year in some private institutions) and to still be accessible to students whose families are unable to contribute any money at all to the higher education of their children.

Table 2 shows a range of total expenses that face a student and his or her family before any grants, loans, or other forms of student financial assistance. These expenses are deemed a family, or parental, financial responsibility at least for the traditional-age, "dependent," student through the baccalaureate degree—but only to the limit of what the parents are deemed able to pay by a calculated *Expected Family Contribution*. Thus, these expenses are met through a combination of parental and family contributions, student part-time and summer earnings and student savings, student loans, and state, federal, and institutional grants (non repayable).

Table 2
Average Costs/Expenses Borne by Students and Families,
US Colleges and Universities, 2005-2006.

	Public 4 Year		Public 2 Year	Private
	In-State	Out of State		
Tuition and Required Fees	\$6,000	\$16,000	\$2,300	\$22,220
Other Educational Expenses	950	950	850	935
<i>Subtotal: Educational Expenses</i>	<i>6,950</i>	<i>16,950</i>	<i>3,150</i>	<i>23,155</i>
Room and Board	7,000	7,000	NA	8,200
Transportation and Other Expenses	2,600	880	3,000	2,000
<i>Subtotal: Living Expenses</i>	<i>9,600</i>	<i>7,880</i>	<i>3,000</i>	<i>10,200</i>
Total Expenses Borne by Parents and Students	\$16,550	\$24,830	\$6,150	\$33,355

Source: College Board. (2006). *Trends in College Pricing, 2006*.

¹¹ The College Board, *Trends in Student Aid, 2006*.

From this portrait, the following features are probably the most nearly unique to the US system (or *non*-system) of higher education.

1. Federalism, or the absence of a national ministry. Few features are more difficult to explain to the foreign observer than the absence of an American ministry of education (Johnstone 1993). It is difficult partly because virtually all other countries have one, but also because it is difficult, in the absence of a federal ministry, to account for why the bachelors and the Ph.D. degrees are essentially the same in New York, Wisconsin, and Oregon...or why the Federal government can be relatively assured that its financial assistance is buying about the same thing in California and Florida...and how the level of learning implied by a BA in history may mean very different things for the graduates of different institutions, but that these differences do not vary systematically by state. (They vary, rather, primarily by the institution's highest degree awarded and by its level of selectivity-and therefore by its prestige.)

This absence of a true national ministry is also made more difficult to explain by the fact that most of our congressman, senators, and presidents persist in acting as though higher education were a federal responsibility—reinforced by the fact that we do have something called a US Department of Education and a cabinet level officer who appears to be some kind of "minister." Our federal government is immensely important to the funding of students and the support of research. But the US channels the acknowledged federal *financial* responsibility for research mainly through established universities—both public and private—rather than through national research institutes like the French or the Soviets or even the Germans. The absence of any kind of real ministry of education, more similar to those of so many other countries, is reinforced by what the Federal Office of Education does *not* do: that is, that it has nothing to do with standards for entry or the admission of students, the requirements or the standards for degrees, the qualifications for faculty or anything else about the terms and conditions of their employment, the selection of governing boards or chief executive officers or anything else about how institutions, public or private, are governed and/or run.¹²

2. Our extensive and bi-modally prestigious private sector. That we have an extensive private sector is unusual only to Europeans, and perhaps to citizens of the former Communist world[s]--although even Russia, the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, and the other countries emerging from the former Soviet Union, as well as China, are beginning to experience numerically extensive--although fragile and as yet marginally significant--private institutions of some kind of *postsecondary* nature. But in Latin America, India, and East Asia, private institutions of higher education have long been both extensive and significant--although due more to their function as *demand absorbing* institutions rather than as *models of academic and social prestige*. What is unique to American private institutions of higher education is the bi-modal nature of their selectivity--and thus of their prestige. The most and the least selective and prestigious institutions are private. The most selective and elite are also, almost unavoidably, somewhat socially elite. But the least selective--some of the most accessible and open to

¹² See Trow, Martin (1993) "Federalism in American Higher Education" in Arthur Levine, Ed., *Higher Learning in America 1980-2000*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 39-66; and Johnstone, D. Bruce (1993) "In the Absence of a National Ministry: Unifying and Standardizing Forces in United States Higher Education," *Policy Perspectives*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Section B, The PEW Higher Education Roundtable Program.

the children of the poor--are also private. And although the reach of government into the affairs of these private institutions is limited by tradition and by the Constitutional precedent of the Supreme Court's 1819 Dartmouth College Case, the *publicness* of institutional mission and the *connectedness* of the institution to its surrounding community is virtually the same for the private as for their counterpart public institutions of higher education.¹³

The significance of the US private sector to American (and worldwide) higher education today is due mainly to those private institutions (including both research universities and the distinctively American elite four-year college) that have attained the pinnacle of selectivity and prestige. This significance is due in large part to the absence of any true *national university* and then the decision, over the next two centuries, to channel most federal research dollars in support of basic research directly to institutions, on an openly competitive, full-cost reimbursement basis that was as or more generous to the private universities as to the state-owned public ones. In turn, the position of the highly selective private universities and colleges has been maintained by their enormous donated wealth and by the willingness of American parents and students alike to bear a significant portion of the high and always rising costs of the higher educational enterprise (which arises in the fourth *significant feature*, below).

3. Governance and ultimate authority (in both private and public sectors) in the hands of voluntary, lay governing boards. The combination of the peculiarly American mistrust of government (especially of *centralized* government), and the also peculiarly 19th century American explosion of private colleges, which had earlier borrowed from the Scots and the Dutch the vesting of ultimate governing authority in a part-time, voluntary, lay board, extended this lay governing board model as well to the nation's emerging public (state) universities—and ultimately even to the 20th century public comprehensive and community colleges. Thus, this mode of public governance, while clearly publicly accountable and either publicly elected or more often gubernatorially selected, provides a buffer from government itself (that is, from state governors and state legislatures) and accounts for the quite extraordinary (relative) autonomy of most state universities from their patron governments. In turn, the buffer model of governance would lead naturally to the substantially more powerful American university and college presidents, especially compared to their European counterpart rectors.¹⁴

4. The extensive financial reliance—in both private and public sectors--on non-governmental, or non-tax based funding. Following upon the prevalence of the private, oftentimes sectarian, American college in the life of the middle and upper middle class American family from the middle of the 19th century on, and undoubtedly reinforced by the growing wealth of this American middle class and by the aforementioned absence of a federal university that was in any way equivalent to the greatest of the Continental European universities, the American family became accustomed to bearing the lion's

¹³ See Johnstone, D. Bruce (2002) "Privatization," in JF Forest and Kevin Kinser, Eds. *Higher Education in the United States: An Encyclopedia Vol. Two*. Santa Barbara: ABC-LIO Publishers 2002 Santa Barbara: ABC-LIO Publishers, pp. 487-489.

¹⁴ See Johnstone, D. Bruce (1997) "Academic Leadership in the United States," in Madeleine Greene, ed., *Transforming Higher Education: Views from Leaders Around the World*. Phoenix: Oryx Press / American Council on Education Series on Higher Education, pp. 134-149.

share of the costs of their children's higher education. Thus, although the public colleges and universities were overwhelmingly publicly financed through the 1960s, the enormous added costs stemming from the explosion of numbers in our public institutions, fueled first by the GI Bill and then by the post-war baby boom, was able to be financed in substantial part by *non-governmental revenues*—tuition fees, private philanthropy, and competitive contract research—and to be relatively well-funded in spite of the American voter's disinclination to being taxed and the growing public sector competition from the demands of health and welfare, basic education, national defense, and corrections.

In Europe, on the other hand (with the exception of the UK, The Netherlands, Portugal, and most recently Austria) as well as in the formerly Marxist countries of the former Soviet Union, Eastern and Central Europe, and much of Africa and Asia, the ideological commitment to free higher education (sometimes extending to free or greatly subsidized food and lodging and even at times to pocket money) has placed the entire financial burden of higher education—and in some countries, explosively growing enrollments—on the taxpayers. The US taxpayer and state politicians may grumble about the costs of their public colleges and universities. But no country's taxpayers have it so easy and get so much quality higher education for the relatively few taxpayer dollars, than in the US.

5. The responsiveness (in both private and public sectors) to the needs and interests of the community and the state, including government, business, and the citizenry. "Responsiveness" to the needs of government (whether national, state, or local), business, and to the public (especially to the students and his or her family) seems good and noble, perhaps because its converse or absence—non-responsiveness, or irresponsibility—seems base and ignoble. But the responsiveness of the American college and university—in sharp contrast to the European or even, it would seem, most universities in the formerly Communist (i.e. pre-1990) world—comes not from any peculiarly noble academic inclinations, but from the combination of peculiarly American institutional features already identified and especially to the dependence of all institutions on non-governmental revenue (and thus on serious attention paid to the potential donor, to state and local governments, and to potential students and their parents).

As the American public university grew in the latter part of the 19th century and throughout the 20th century, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake was not enough to generate the necessary funds from state legislatures. So the great American public research universities--institutions as distinguished as the universities of Michigan, Wisconsin, California, Illinois, North Carolina and other top American public research universities together with their state legislative patrons forged a great strategic compromise. The early state flagship universities would enroll large numbers of undergraduates—many of whom would be intellectually or at least academically unequipped for a top European university—and maintain whatever undergraduate standards were to be maintained at all by failing large numbers in the first year or two. They would add football to entertain and make proud the taxpayers of the state. They would embrace the applied and the practical, not only through the Land Grant and county extension functions, but by catering to the career interests of the undergraduate student body, which wanted teacher education, engineering, and business in the old days, and which wants business, communications, computer science, and pre-professional

preparation today. And they would devote their faculty time and laboratories to whatever scientific inquiry was accompanied by direct and indirect cost recoveries.

While some may lament the marketization of our universities and colleges, particularly the ones that remain still the most academically pristine, governments in other countries are trying to get their institutions of higher education to emulate this American higher educational responsiveness, which these governments and many university leaders interpret as the university's responsibility. And while some academics, particularly the humanists who have tenure, and who need only books and a little time, rather than grants, for their research, may also decry the responsiveness and this strategic compromise, American higher education (both public and private) remains more adequately and probably more securely funded than the universities of any other country.

6. *The modularization of academic degree programs.* The marketization of American higher education, the reliance on tuition, and the unusual degree of responsiveness to student career interests and needs, are made possible (or made inevitable) by the modularization of academic degree programs. The American degree is given primarily by the accumulation of credits in some sort of acceptable pattern of general education, major program, and free electives. The significance of this model (as opposed to an essentially examination-based model of degree attainment) is that one institution's credits are almost as good as another's. Competition is heightened, and the competition continues after a student's initial matriculation. If a student loses interest, or if the institution appears to the student to have promised more or better than it can deliver, he or she can simply take those credits down the street to another institution, which will probably admit the student with no loss of time or credits. This feature also serves to undergird another feature of American higher education: the ever-open door to college. It does this by ensuring that academic failure need almost never be absolute or irreversible. A student can almost always take what credits he or she has successfully completed, in spite of academic difficulties and changed minds, and take them to some other institution that will accept all or most of them, thus keeping alive the possibility of attaining a degree--a chance that would have died long before in most other countries.

7. *The baccalaureate divide: The separation of baccalaureate from graduate and advanced professional studies.* Related to the modularization of the degree is the viability of the stand-alone baccalaureate institution, coupled with the relegation of advanced professional study (such as law, medicine, and advanced management studies) to post-baccalaureate study, generally in a university and frequently in an institution other than the one entered for the first degree. This is so unlike the traditional European university, which has long featured the so-called "long first degree" and the direct entry of first year university students into what Americans would reserve for advanced, or post baccalaureate, professional study. Most European universities are struggling at this time to implement a form of a three or four year first degree. It is this easy and almost preferred separation of the American baccalaureate from advanced scholarly and professional study that has maintained that most unique of all American higher educational institutions: the elite, four-year, (generally, but not exclusively private) baccalaureate college. Only with the assurance that one's chances at a medical or law or other advanced degree would in no way be diminished--and might well be enhanced--by first attending "only" a four year college and then having to reapply to a university, likely

in another city or another state, could the elite baccalaureate colleges continue to attract much of the academic cream of the American high school.

The features cited above—that is, the existence of a large and strong private sector, the tradition of cost-sharing, and the modularization of the undergraduate degree programs—combined with what is almost certainly a physical overbuilding of American higher educational capacity—lead inevitably to the intensively competitive nature of American higher education.

8. *The importance accorded to (critics would say the “preoccupation with”) accessibility and the “ever open door” to further education.* The combination of enormous post secondary education capacity, including a postsecondary institution in most states within commuting distance of most of the state's population, a great range of entry standards, including the possibility of admission to a community college or to a non-selective private college with no academic credentials other than a high school diploma, and sufficient financial assistance supplemented by abundant part-time employment possibilities, combine to enable the policy assertion that any young person—even one whose parents are unable to assist financially at all, but who has just a modicum of interest and aptitude and the willingness to assume some indebtedness—can find a place at a college, the credits of which will transfer to a Baccalaureate. Furthermore, the door almost never shuts altogether. Academically failing at one institution does not preclude admission to another, generally less selective and less prestigious, institution. In similar fashion, academic failure or the loss of interest in one academic specialization, generally called a “major” in an American College or university, does not stop one from trying another, or still another. Nowhere else in the world can a 25 year-old with a baccalaureate in English and history decide she wants to be a physician and have a chance at entering Medical school. Similarly, the concern on the part of most colleges and universities for ethnic and racial diversity is so strong that young persons from an “underrepresented minority” background are courted with preferences on both admissions standards and financial assistance. In short, American higher education is preoccupied with accessibility and opportunity.

This feature has its skeptics, cynics, and detractors. The cynics maintain that our preoccupation with access and second chances is little more than a noble “cover” for our need for bodies to generate tuition and enrollment-based state assistance. The skeptics will say that what I have called a “preoccupation” is not real, as revealed by the fact that the results—that is, the awarding of undergraduate degrees, and even more the awarding of graduate and advanced professional degrees, from the most prestigious institutions (the gateways to status and power in American society)—remains highly skewed toward the White and the affluent. Finally the detractors maintain that this preoccupation is misplaced and even wrong--admitting persons who are unable to do the work, and substituting political for academic judgments.

But the difference between the US and most other countries is striking, and sometimes counterintuitive. Virtually all countries prize, and give great lip service to, the equality of opportunity. For most, this means entry via objective, sometimes standardized, entrance examinations, no tuition fees, and financial assistance for the costs of student living. Equality of opportunity is thought to be sufficiently demonstrated by a handful of the very brightest and most academically committed from poor or rural or

ethnic minority families who make it into the university--quite regardless of the gross statistical under-representation in virtually all countries (including those of Socialist and Marxist bents) of poor or rural or ethnically or linguistically minority students. It seems to be mainly America that measures the equality of opportunity not by the striking success of the brilliant child of poor or rural parents, but by the more modest success of the poor or rural or minority student who happens to be as average as most of us.

In many ways, American and other systems and institutions of higher education seem to be converging. Nevertheless, differences will remain, and it is important not only to recognize them but also to understand their contexts—in history and culture. This brief monograph is one observer’s introduction to the US system of higher education. Other American observers, and certainly other students and scholars from other countries, will doubtless see other important differences and similarities. Most importantly, welcome to America and to our colleges and universities, and may your stay, however long, enrich us all.

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