

DEREK BOK

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HIGHER  
EDUCATION  
IN  
AMERICA

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TO CAMERON AND NICHOLAS AND ERIK AND ANNIKA

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# HIGHER EDUCATION IN AMERICA

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# INTRODUCTION

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In the modern world, colleges and universities have assumed an importance far beyond their role in earlier times. They are now the country's chief supplier of three ingredients essential to national progress—new discoveries in science, technology, and other fields of inquiry; expert knowledge of the kind essential to the work of most important institutions; and well-trained adults with the skills required to practice the professions, manage a wide variety of organizations, and perform an increasing proportion of the more demanding jobs in an advanced, technologically sophisticated economy.\* In addition, they help to strengthen our democracy by educating its future leaders, preparing students to be active, knowledgeable citizens, and offering informed critiques of government programs and policies. Not least, they supply the knowledge and ideas that create new industries, protect us from disease, preserve and enrich our culture, and inform us about our history, our environment, our society, and ourselves.

Because of the essential role that colleges and universities play, almost everyone has a stake in having them perform well. By several measures, they have succeeded handsomely. In a recent ranking compiled by a group of Chinese scholars, all but three of the twenty highest-rated universities in the world were located in the United States.† More than half of all Nobel laureates in science and economics since World War II did their most important work while serving on faculties in this country. Our colleges and graduate schools have long been the destination of choice for students around the world who have the chance to study outside their own country. Because of these achievements, more and more nations are adapting their systems of higher education to conform more closely to our model.

The worldwide respect accorded to American higher education should be a source of satisfaction to many people, not least to those who work in the academy. Ironically, however, this newfound prominence has brought many problems in its wake. No longer are colleges and universities left to function more or less as they please. As they have grown in size and importance, they have attracted closer scrutiny from each of the constituencies affected by their performance. State legislators want to know what taxpayers and parents are getting for all the money spent on public higher education. Politicians and media commentators pay attention to what colleges are teaching and to the ideas of professors on matters of public concern. Employers ask whether the students graduating from our colleges and professional schools are well enough trained for the jobs they are hired to do. Communities take an increasing interest in what universities are contributing to the local economy and wonder whether they should pay more taxes to the cities and towns in which they sit.

This added attention has produced a bumper crop of complaints. Whatever the world may think about the quality of American colleges and universities, the public here at home is far from satisfied. Parents feel that tuitions are too high and that too little is done to hold down costs. Their children struggle to repay the loans incurred to pay for their college education. Legislators complain of waste and inefficiency, of low graduation rates, of a reluctance to be held accountable for performance. Employers grumble that far too many graduates cannot

write clearly, think analytically, work collaboratively, deal with other people effectively, and observe proper ethical standards. Conservatives charge that faculties display a marked liberal bias, while critics on the left insist that universities are too beholden to corporate interests. Meanwhile, editorial writers chastise college presidents for lacking a vision for the institutions or a clear voice of wisdom on issues of national concern.

It is tempting to make light of these criticisms and point to the unequaled global stature of American higher education as proof of the excellence of our colleges and universities. Yet it would be a mistake to make too much of this reputation. The impressive global rankings of American universities reflect the accomplishments of only a handful of institutions, and even the high regard in which the latter are held is largely due to the excellence of their research rather than the quality of education they provide.\* No one yet has managed to measure how well our professors teach or how much our students learn, let alone compare the results with those of other nations.

It is also likely that our impressive standing in the world owes less to the success of our own system than it does to the weakness of foreign universities, which were long overregulated, underfinanced, and neglected by their governments until their importance to the economy was finally recognized late in the twentieth century. In recent years, however, member states in the European Union have agreed to invest more heavily in higher education and have resolved, collectively, to lead the world in scientific research by 2020.<sup>1</sup> Germany and France have recently appropriated special funds to develop universities of international distinction. China has been expanding its universities and enlarging their student populations at astounding rates, while making remarkable strides in increasing the number of scientists and published research papers.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, the ambitious plans of these nations may not be realized within the time frame set by their leaders. It takes much longer than most public officials think to bring about major academic reform, let alone build great universities and produce outstanding research, and far more than money is required. Still, it would be unwise to take the preeminence of our universities for granted. Like nations, academic institutions can start to decline at the very time their status in the world stands highest.

One can already detect warning signs that such a fate could eventually overtake American higher education. For generations, our colleges enrolled and graduated a much higher proportion of young people than any other nation in the world. In the past thirty years, however, as other parts of the globe have made the transition to mass higher education, a growing number of countries have surpassed us on both counts. Our attractiveness to students abroad may also be on the wane. Although America still attracts the largest number of overseas students, our share has dropped sharply in the last decade, and many nations now enroll much higher proportions of foreign students than the United States.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the growing challenges from overseas, our colleges and universities are facing major changes that are transforming the environment in which they function. Technological advances have brought new methods of teaching and research. Improvements in communication, most notably the Internet, have vastly expanded the potential student audience to include people of all ages in all areas of the world. New providers, notably for-profit universities and online organizations, have created alternative models for delivering instruction that are starting to make inroads on the work of traditional colleges and

universities. Growing numbers of working adults, first-generation students, and graduates of troubled urban high schools are seeking college degrees, creating added problems for those who teach them. Meanwhile, young Americans attending college need a better education than ever before now that many jobs they are accustomed to holding in fields such as accounting, computer programming, and corporate research can be outsourced overseas to college graduates willing to work for much lower salaries.

The challenges facing American higher education give rise to several questions. How vigorously are our universities responding to their emerging problems and opportunities? Which of the many criticisms of their activities are truly valid and which are unfounded or highly exaggerated? What can our colleges do to improve their performance and how can such reforms be best brought about?

In addressing these questions, I will try to take a comprehensive view of American higher education and examine not merely undergraduate studies but graduate and professional training too; not education *or* research but both together; not simply PhD-granting universities but two- and four-year colleges along with for-profit providers as well. One caveat, however, is in order. Although I will discuss the role of government at various points, my principal aim in writing this study is to consider what colleges and universities can do to improve themselves, rather than to argue about what others should do to help them thrive.

By attempting such a comprehensive study, I hope to offer something of interest to all of the various audiences with a stake in the performance of higher education—policy-makers, academic leaders, faculty members, trustees, even students and parents. I have a special concern for readers who have chosen to enter that particular vineyard known as “academic administration.” Like so many others who have ventured down this path, I had no opportunity to study higher education in detail before finding myself consumed by its demands. Only after my active service ended did I find the time to read deeply about the subject that had already filled my life for a quarter of a century. Having done so, I often look back with some chagrin, realizing how differently I might have acted had I understood the what I only came to appreciate much later. If I can offer something useful to those who have the opportunity to serve still lies before them, this book will have been well worth writing.

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\* According to the National Governors Association, “the driving force behind the 21st century economy is knowledge, and developing human capital is the best way to ensure prosperity.” National Governors Association (2001), Policy Position R44, Postsecondary Education Policy, <http://www.nga.org>. Similarly, economists rank additional investment in education and research as a top priority among federal policies to increase long-term economic growth. See, e.g., Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, *The Race between Education and Technology* (2008).

† Jonathan R. Cole, *The Great American University: Its Role to Preeminence, Its Indispensable National Role, Why It Must Be Protected* (2009), p. 515. Not all world rankings treat American universities quite so kindly, perhaps because they are not based as heavily on research as the Chinese compilation but attempt to give considerable weight to the quality of education. The 2011–12 Times Higher Education World University rankings, for example, published by the British magazine *Times Higher Education*, gives US universities only fourteen of the top twenty places. <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2011-2012/top-400.html>.

\* The so-called CQ World University Rankings do attempt to take the quality of education into account. Interestingly, the rankings (for 2011–12) place only thirteen American universities in the top twenty and even fewer—just seven of one hundred universities—in the next thirty. <http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2011>.

# THE CONTEXT

# FOREWORD (I)

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There is more than one way to organize a study of higher education. One can proceed, as this book does, by discussing each of the most important functions of colleges and universities—undergraduate education, professional training, and research. One can also follow the example of David Riesman and Christopher Jencks in their influential 1960s volume—*The Academic Revolution*—and arrange the material by types of institution: liberal arts colleges, research universities, religiously affiliated institutions, and the like.<sup>1</sup> There are doubtless other plausible ways to divide the pie.

Whatever method one chooses, it is helpful to begin with an overview of the system in which our colleges and universities function—the different kinds of institutions that exist, their purposes and goals, the influence that governments exert on their behavior, and the way they are organized and governed. Such information has a bearing on what one can reasonably expect universities to accomplish, the strengths and weaknesses they possess, and the prospects for bringing about any needed reforms.

Providing such an overview is the aim of the initial section of this book. The first chapter analyzes the nature of our higher education system—the principal types of institutions it contains, the extent to which they are controlled or influenced by government, the way in which they interact with one another, and how they are financed. In order to bring out key points about our system, its main features are compared with those of other advanced industrial nations. Not surprisingly, the characteristics that make our colleges and universities distinctive do much to explain why they have managed to achieve such an enviable reputation around the world. At the same time, these same characteristics harbor tensions and vulnerabilities that could lead to problems and limit what higher education can accomplish.

The second chapter in this sequence considers the purposes that shape the behavior of colleges and universities. Not all of these institutions share the same ends, although each is engaged in one way or another with teaching students. Some colleges pursue a single goal, while most universities have several. Where multiple goals exist, they may conflict with each other or complement one another. How wisely individual colleges and universities select their aims and what kinds of programs they create in order to achieve them have a lot to do with how effectively they perform, and how well the system as a whole meets the full range of needs that society expects it to serve.

[Chapter 2](#) also considers the tendency for universities to grow continuously and eventually strain the capacity of academic leaders to oversee and guide the organization. Such a process may be inevitable for an institution with so many opportunities to serve and so many inventive individuals who perceive the possibilities and try to make the most of them. Yet some kinds of growth are needless and ill-advised. The discussion in this chapter tries to identify them and suggest the difference between prudent and unwise expansion.

The third and final chapter in this section describes how individual colleges and universities are typically governed—who within them exercises influence and authority and how the distribution of power affects the way in which they behave. Some critics have warned that

defects in the current system of governance are weakening universities to a degree that seriously interferes with their ability to adapt to changing needs and opportunities. Such a charge warrants close attention. Whether or not it is correct, one must understand university governance in order to recognize who is responsible for any problems that occur and whose support will be needed to bring about desirable reform.

Rounding out this initial section is a brief afterword to introduce the values that affect how a college or university carries out its work. These values include various rights and privileges such as academic freedom, that are widely considered essential to effective teaching and research. Also included are responsibilities long recognized by the academic profession, some of which belong to professors and others to those who occupy leadership positions in colleges and universities. These norms, sometimes codified but often not, define the shared ends and means that bring some order to what could otherwise become an inchoate collection of independent teachers and scholars.

Academic values also affect the efforts of campus leaders to maintain and improve the universities. Proposed reforms that offend these values often meet resistance from the faculty and ultimately fail. What is less understood is that academic values can also be a powerful force for constructive change, since faculties will usually experience discomfort and agree to reforms once they are persuaded that existing practices conflict with the principles and responsibilities that help define their professional identity and shape the aspirations that give meaning to their lives.



# THE AMERICAN SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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AMERICA'S INITIAL VENTURE in the realm of higher learning gave no hint of future accomplishments. Nor could the handful of young men who arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1638 to enter the nation's first college have had the faintest idea of what the future had in store for American universities. Before the year was out, the head of the tiny institution, Nathaniel Eaton, had been charged with assault for beating a tutor almost to death, while his wife stood accused of serving too little beer to the students and adulterating their food. Master Eaton was eventually dismissed and promptly fled, allegedly taking much of the endowment with him, whereupon the college shut down for an entire academic year.<sup>1</sup>

From these modest beginnings, higher education in the United States has grown to become a vast enterprise comprising some 4,500 different colleges and universities, more than 20 million students, 1.4 million faculty members, and aggregate annual expenditures exceeding 400 billion dollars. Within this system are schools ranging from tiny colleges numbering a few hundred students to huge universities with enrollments exceeding 50,000. For descriptive purposes, however, the system can be broken down into several kinds of institutions, each with its own distinctive aims and characteristics.

### RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES

Within this category one finds renowned centers of learning such as Columbia, Yale, and Princeton that were founded before the American Revolution; a substantial number of flagship public universities dating back to the nineteenth century; a handful of private institutions, such as Chicago, Stanford, and Cornell, created through the generosity of wealthy industrialists following the Civil War; and a few newcomers like Brandeis and the University of California, San Diego, that were begun after World War II.

Although there are only approximately two hundred research universities, they account for a large majority of the PhDs awarded, most of the degrees granted in law and medicine, and more than a quarter of all the students in the entire system.<sup>2</sup> The most prominent—say the top sixty or so—dominate the national and international rankings, award at least half of the PhDs, and receive the greater part of the billions of dollars spent each year by the federal government on academic research. They have the largest budgets, the biggest endowments, the best professional schools, and the most extensive libraries. Most of their colleges accept less than half of the students who apply for admission. A few are extremely selective, turning away several applicants for every one they admit.

### COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES

There are more than seven hundred so-called comprehensive universities offering a wide



variety of professional master's and doctoral programs while also carrying on at least a modest amount of research.<sup>3</sup> Many are public and have large undergraduate enrollments. Their student bodies are diverse, with higher percentages of commuters, ethnic minorities, part-time students, and adults over thirty years of age than one would normally find attending a major research university. They are rarely very selective in their admission policies. Instead, they typically accept most of those who apply, and their students tend to have significantly lower high school grade-point averages and college admission test scores than those enrolled in the research universities.

Many comprehensives evolved from technical colleges or from normal schools that trained teachers for the public schools. Now that they have grown in size and have mounted a wide variety of vocationally oriented degree programs, they have sometimes struggled to define their distinctive mission. A few have managed to become research universities. Many more that are located in cities have identified themselves as "metropolitan universities," with special responsibilities to serve the needs of their surrounding urban area. As such, they concentrate on offering programs to match the employment opportunities in their city and its environs. Much of their research is oriented toward the practical problems of local employers, government agencies, and community organizations. In addition, they frequently offer a variety of special services for local public schools, community colleges, small businesses, and other entities that can benefit from their expertise and technical assistance.

#### FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES

A very different group are the almost one thousand, mainly private, nonprofit colleges. Some are more than two hundred years old and were begun under the sponsorship of a religious denomination. They tend to be much smaller than research or comprehensive universities, often enrolling fewer than two thousand students. A century ago, most of these colleges would have concentrated primarily or even exclusively on the liberal arts. As more and more young people have come to college to prepare for a career, private colleges have found it necessary to offer vocational programs in order to attract enough students to survive. Only a minority still award less than half of their undergraduate degrees to liberal arts majors, and no more than twenty-five are exclusively devoted to this form of education.

A few private colleges, such as Amherst and Williams, attract outstanding students and offer an education of the highest quality. With more applicants than they can accept and substantial endowments contributed by grateful alumni, they are highly successful and financially secure. Once one moves beyond these fortunate few, however, the situation changes dramatically. Most of the remaining private colleges are hard-pressed to compete for undergraduates with state-subsidized public universities that charge much lower tuition. Many constantly struggle to balance the books, and scores of them over the past fifty years have had to give up the fight and close their doors.<sup>5</sup>

#### COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Beyond universities and private four-year colleges are more than one thousand two-year

nonprofit community colleges.<sup>6</sup> All but approximately eighty-five are public, supported by state and local funds. Together, they account for almost 40 percent of all undergraduate enrollments.

The community college movement began early in the twentieth century chiefly as a means to accommodate students who wanted a BA degree but needed a lower-cost school close to home that they could attend for two years before transferring to a four-year college. Although many community colleges had long offered job training as well as liberal arts programs, it was only after World War II that vocational education began to attract a majority of the students enrolled. By now, in addition to liberal arts courses, most community colleges offer a wide variety of vocational degree programs along with shorter courses, often developed in cooperation with nearby employers, that train students for specific jobs.

In contrast to the faculties of four-year institutions, only a small minority of those teaching in community colleges are PhDs. In earlier decades, many of their instructors came to them from high school teaching. Increasing numbers now come from industry, bringing practical skills they can teach to students in vocational programs. Most of these instructors are on part-time and either hold other jobs of a different kind or piece together several part-time teaching assignments at different educational institutions.

Community colleges have enjoyed a boom over the past several decades. From 1963 to 2006, their enrollments grew by 740 percent compared with approximately 200 percent growth for four-year colleges. Together, community colleges currently enroll over seven million students attending for credit. In keeping with the American ideal of opportunity for all, they offer a chance at a college education to many people who might not otherwise enroll. In doing so, they attract students who, if anything, are even more diverse in age, ethnicity, and ambition than those of the typical metropolitan university. Sixty percent of students who enroll attend part-time, and 80 percent have full- or part-time jobs. Forty-five percent are minorities and 42 percent are first-generation college students. Many arrive lacking basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics and are required to take remedial courses and complete them successfully before they can begin taking regular classes for credit.

There is a continuing debate over whether community colleges increase or diminish the number of students who eventually earn a BA degree. For some, the chance to enroll in a nearby, inexpensive community college undoubtedly makes it possible to begin undergraduate studies and then move on to a four-year college and earn a BA degree. Yet graduation rates are low, even when one takes account of the academic background of those who enter. Many students who could have qualified for a four-year college but elected to start their postsecondary education in a community college never transfer, often because they receive inadequate counseling, or are turned off by indifferently taught courses, or are diverted into vocational classes that do not qualify for credit at a four-year college. In all, only some 20–25 percent of those who enroll in a community college eventually transfer to a four-year institution, many fewer than the two-thirds or more who claim an intention to do so when they enter.<sup>7</sup> Whether more students would have enrolled in a four-year college and earned a degree had community colleges not existed is a question hotly debated but still unresolved.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the several categories mentioned above lies a large and growing for-profit sector composed of more than thirteen hundred schools. Roughly half of these give college degrees, the rest are two-year colleges or institutions that grant certificates signifying completion of a training program for a specific occupation such as cosmetology or the culinary arts.<sup>9</sup> For-profits chiefly offer vocational instruction, especially for older students seeking to prepare themselves for higher-paying jobs. Collectively, they award approximately 10 percent of all college degrees.

While most for-profits are small proprietary schools, a few are huge, with tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of students. The largest fifteen alone enroll almost 6 percent of all students in the entire for-profit sector. With branches in a number of states and even overseas, these mega-universities have constituted the fastest-growing segment in the entire higher education system, both in traditional face-to-face classes and in online instruction.\* Over the past two years, however, enrollments at these institutions have leveled off or declined following “a steady drumroll of negative publicity about the sector’s recruiting abuses, low graduation rates and high default rates [on student loans].”<sup>10</sup>

Unlike public universities and most private, nonprofit institutions, for-profits rely almost entirely on tuition payments as a source of revenue. Since the vast majority of their students have modest incomes, they are heavily subsidized by Pell Grants and educational loans from the federal government. In 2008–9, although for-profits accounted for less than 10 percent of total undergraduate enrollments, their students were awarded 24 percent of all Pell Grants and 26 percent of federally guaranteed loans while incurring larger debts than nonprofit students.<sup>11</sup>

For-profit universities rarely compete directly with liberal arts colleges or research universities. Their typical student is older, part-time, often employed and intent on acquiring the skills to qualify for a higher-paying job. By cutting costs, providing year-round education, renting space, and doing without research, athletics, extracurricular activities, and other nonessential amenities and services, for-profits can charge a tuition well below that of most private nonprofit colleges and still earn a tidy surplus. The best of them offer convenient locations, schedule classes in the evenings and on weekends to accommodate working students, and devote much effort to placing their graduates and keeping their courses closely aligned with opportunities in the job market. They have aggressively pursued online instruction, providing added convenience for working adults who find it difficult to travel to classes. By concentrating on serving the needs of their older, vocationally oriented students as effectively and efficiently as possible, they offer a welcome alternative for many individuals who might otherwise attend a community college or not enroll at all.

Despite these accomplishments, the record of the for-profits is not unblemished. While some of them seem to perform well, others have high dropout rates and limited success in helping students find the jobs for which they have ostensibly been trained. They are extremely aggressive in recruiting students, sometimes spending more on expanding their enrollments than they do on instruction. A few have accepted applicants with very low prospects of graduating or finding a desirable job. A recent investigation by the General Accounting Office found that each of the fifteen for-profits it examined had engaged

deceptive practices or made misleading statements in its effort to enlist as many applicants as possible.<sup>12</sup>

Once enrolled in a for-profit college, many students drop out before completing the studies. Thereafter, they default on their educational loans at a much higher rate than the counterparts in any other type of college. Six years after entering a for-profit institution, students are more likely to be unemployed and out of school than students of similar qualifications who entered not-for-profit institutions. Their average earnings tend to be 8-percent lower.<sup>13</sup> For the federal government, therefore, whose student grants and guaranteed loans provide most of the revenue received by the larger for-profits, this segment of the higher education system represents a mixed blessing.

## THE SPECIAL NATURE OF OUR HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Throughout most of its history, American higher education has differed in several respects from the university systems of other advanced industrial democracies. While the differences have narrowed in recent years, they are still sufficiently important to give our system a special flavor. Much of what is most praiseworthy about higher education in this country (as well as much that is troubling) can be linked in one way or another to these distinctive characteristics.

### DIVERSITY OF INSTITUTIONS

America's colleges and universities are unusually numerous and diverse. Most of them are private, although collectively they enroll only 20 percent of all students. Some institutions are tiny, numbering only a few hundred students, while others are very large, with enrollments of fifty thousand or more. Some have very limited resources while others have huge budgets and multibillion-dollar endowments. Many are stand-alone colleges, but others are much larger universities containing a wide variety of graduate and professional schools. A few colleges (about 10 percent) are truly selective in the sense that they attract a much larger number of applicants than they can admit. The rest accept at least a majority, and many take virtually all those who apply. Some private colleges and universities are connected with religious denominations but most are not. The vast majority are coeducational, but a handful enroll only women. Still others are almost exclusively attended by black students or Native Americans. More than one thousand specialize in a single field of study such as business, the arts, or allied health professions, while others offer scores of different programs. Within such a varied array, almost any student can find a college that caters to a particular special interest, such as the performing arts, or foreign languages, or conservative religious values.

Highly selective colleges, such as Princeton, Stanford, or Amherst, offer a more intense, all-encompassing experience for their students than one normally finds in other countries. Most undergraduates in these institutions live and eat their meals in residences on campus. They can participate in a bewildering variety of extracurricular activities sponsored by the college—athletic teams, orchestras, campus newspapers, political clubs, community service activities, and countless others. They can become active in campus government and play at least an advisory role in matters of curriculum and student life. Their residence halls are

fraternities and sororities organize dances, parties, and other social activities. Student affairs offices arrange a wide array of public lectures, concerts, dramatic productions, and intramural athletics. In short, these colleges create a vast smorgasbord of activities, academic and extracurricular, with which to fill most of the waking hours of their students' lives. In doing so, they offer an experience very different from that provided in most other countries where universities do little more than offer instruction, leaving students to organize their extracurricular lives as they see fit.

Although the residential college just described represents most people's image of undergraduate life in America, less than 20 percent of students actually share this experience today. The vast majority of colleges, including almost all community colleges, rarely house a substantial fraction of their undergraduates or play nearly as active a role as a residential campus in organizing undergraduates' social and extracurricular lives. Instead, students typically commute from home or live in apartments in the surrounding community. They tend to work longer hours at outside jobs, and many of them attend only part-time and take more than four years to complete their studies. A majority pursue vocational majors and go to work immediately after they graduate instead of spending additional years in professional school.

More than most other countries, the United States is a nation of second (or third or fourth) chances. Students who do poorly in high school can still find colleges to enter and eventually earn a BA degree. Students who drop out of college can enter another institution at a later point in their lives on a full- or part-time basis. They can even pursue a degree online without quitting their job or changing their place of residence. At present, more than 40 percent of all undergraduates in this country are over the age of twenty-four, and close to 40 percent study part-time.

In contrast to the tradition in Europe, most Americans entering the so-called learned professions, notably law and medicine, do not begin their professional education until they have completed college. The same is true of students who hope to become professors, although most of these will have majored as undergraduates in the same discipline in which they eventually plan to receive their PhD. Even vocational majors must usually take at least one year of coursework designed to give them a broad foundation of learning. While the contrast with European practice is real, it is not quite as great as it might seem, since some of the breadth that American students receive in college is incorporated into professional studies in Europe, and some is provided by the secondary schools, which tend to keep students longer and cover more ground than most high schools in the United States.

## THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

American colleges and universities have been subject to less government supervision and control than their counterparts in most other nations. In some countries, such as France and Germany, virtually all institutions of higher education are officially treated as agencies of the state. Their professors are formally classified as civil servants, and their budgets and administrative operations have been subject to detailed government oversight. Throughout Europe, universities continue to receive almost all of their funding from the government, although policy-makers in most of these nations are now taking steps to encourage



institutions to seek other sources of support as well.

Because our higher education system has a large private sector along with a federal system in which much funding and oversight of universities is provided by the states, it is harder to create a coherent and effective national policy for higher education than is the case in most other countries. The federal government does have power to institute a national research policy, since state governments give little support of this kind to universities. Even here, however, the ability to effectuate a unitary policy is complicated by the fact that several federal departments and agencies distribute their own research money (not to mention the funds provided for research by industry and foundations). Whether the lack of a strong national policy is considered a help or a hindrance depends very much on one's attitude toward government.

Of course, American colleges and universities are hardly free from government influence. As in every country, they are subject to general legislation, such as laws forbidding the use of drugs or prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, religion, age, gender, and sexual orientation. As universities have become more expensive and more important to the public, their activities have been subjected to increasing regulation. A few state legislatures have even passed laws requiring public universities to teach a particular course or prescribing minimum teaching loads for faculty. For the most part, however, state lawmakers have refrained from regulating matters of curriculum or teaching methods.

The federal government is the principal source of research funding and financial aid for students, and officials naturally have an interest in how the funds are used. But financial aid goes directly to students and is seldom accompanied by restrictions on institutional policy. Research support is subject to detailed regulations to provide accountability in the use of the funds and appropriate rules for safety and the protection of human subjects. Nevertheless, most research grants go directly to individual professors based on recommendations by study groups composed of established researchers who typically belong to university faculties. Thus, while the government sets priorities, professors exert much influence over how the funds are spent and which investigators receive support.

Because private colleges and universities rarely receive direct funding from their state legislature, they are usually free of any control by state officials over their budgets or tuitions. Public universities are in a far different position, since they have always received substantial sums from their state legislature or municipality. For several decades, however, these subsidies have been diminishing as a percentage of the operating budgets of state universities. In fact, several leading public universities now obtain a smaller fraction of the total budget from their state than they do from tuition payments or federal research grants. Paradoxically, however, while state funding has dwindled, the same is not necessarily true of state supervision. In response, public universities in several states have sought agreements to free themselves, at least partially, from government control in exchange for accepting less direct state support.<sup>14</sup>

## SOURCES OF FUNDING

American colleges and universities, public as well as private, have traditionally been free to seek funds from any source. Public universities have long been allowed to charge students

tuition, a practice only recently introduced in Europe on a more modest scale. As a result, households contribute more to the total expenditures of American colleges and universities than they do in any other country. By successfully drawing on multiple sources of support, our higher education system is one of the few that receives a majority of its financing (51 percent) from private sources. Through vigorous pursuit of their various sources of support, American colleges and universities enjoy the highest levels of funding of any system in the world.<sup>15</sup> Counting all forms of support, expenditures on higher education in this country amount to 2.4 percent of national income, roughly twice the average level for members of the European Union.\*

The prominent role of America's private universities and the long tradition of seeking funds from nongovernmental sources have helped to create larger differences in size, wealth, and reputation than one would normally find in other countries. Thanks to generous donors, a small but growing fraction of American universities have managed to accumulate large endowments that yield a substantial annual income to help defray their operating expenses. At least seventy-five institutions currently boast funds totaling more than one billion dollars, an achievement matched by very few foreign universities. At the same time, however, most American colleges and universities make do with far less money and much lower salaries, smaller libraries, and less impressive facilities.

## COMPETITION

A final distinguishing characteristic of our higher education system is the intensity with which its institutions compete with one another. Their rivalry extends to almost every area of university activity— attracting students, recruiting faculty, raising money, and, most visibly, engaging in intercollegiate sports. The more prominent colleges and universities constantly vie with one another for prestige, aware that the better their reputation, the easier it will be to raise money and attract able students and faculty. Community colleges and metropolitan universities are less inclined to strive for prestige. But they too face increasing pressure from the large for-profit colleges that are recruiting students aggressively. Many small private colleges, in particular, have to struggle constantly to attract enough students away from lower-cost public institutions.

Competition in higher education has long been encouraged in America by the presence of private colleges and universities that vie with one another and with public institutions. After World War II, the rivalry grew much keener as improved transportation enabled colleges to recruit students nationwide, and federal agencies began awarding growing amounts of research funding to university scientists on a competitive basis. The decision by Congress in the 1970s to give financial aid directly to students gave a further boost to competition by enabling more young people to consider distant colleges as well as ones close to home, thus encouraging universities to search more widely for promising applicants.

Competition has increased even further in recent decades because of the appearance of highly publicized rankings that compare the overall quality of hundreds of colleges and graduate and professional schools. These ratings have touched off an intense struggle among institutions to outdo one another in the research reputations of the faculty and the academic qualifications of students. Although the methods used to create the rankings are regular

(and justly) criticized, the results do seem to influence student choices and even private donations, causing colleges to try all the harder to reach a higher rung on the ladder.<sup>16</sup>

## A GROWING CONVERGENCE

The discussion thus far has emphasized the qualities that have long distinguished American universities from their counterparts abroad. In the last twenty-five years, however, higher education systems in most advanced nations have been gradually growing more alike. As research and education have come to be looked upon as vital ingredients of economic growth, countries with highly developed, knowledge-based economies are all being driven by a common desire to strengthen their universities. In doing so, most have been influenced by the success of the American system and have consciously attempted to adopt many of its features.

In an effort to harmonize the educational practices of its member countries and encourage the movement of students from one institution to another, the European Union has recently adopted a structure of degrees—undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral—that roughly resembles our own.<sup>17</sup> To attract more students from other parts of the world, a number of departments and even a few entire universities in Europe and elsewhere are now teaching all or many of their courses in English. Holland has even begun building three-year liberal arts colleges taught in English and modeled on American institutions such as Amherst and Williams.

Many nations have also changed the way they train professors and researchers to resemble more closely the doctoral programs in this country. Funding for research has been increased to come closer to the prevailing levels in America. Several governments, including those of China, South Korea, France, Germany, and even Saudi Arabia, have set out to build “world-class” universities resembling those of the United States.<sup>18</sup>

Having made the transition to mass higher education, European governments, like our own, are struggling to pay the heavy costs of educating ever-larger numbers of students while building a first-rate research capability. In response, their officials have pressed universities to seek outside funding by restricting the amount of money directly appropriated by the state. As in this country, policy-makers have encouraged academic leaders to seek partnerships with industry, create spin-off companies built on university research, and engage in other profit-seeking ventures. Throughout Europe (save in Scandinavia), governments have begun to allow their universities to charge tuition, although the maximum amounts permitted have tended to be well below those commonly charged in the United States. Thus far, their efforts to create new sources of support have produced only limited results; government appropriations still account for 75–85 percent of university budgets throughout most of Europe. In time, however, outside funding is likely to assume a larger role in paying for the mounting costs of higher education.

In an attempt to stimulate improvement, lawmakers in most European countries have begun to introduce more competition into the system through national rankings of universities and competitive bidding for research funding. Many governments have also tried to encourage entrepreneurial vigor by relaxing some regulatory controls over the planning, budgeting, and day-to-day administration of their universities, and giving academic leaders and their professional staffs more authority within their institution. In return, policy-makers



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