



# The International Comparative Study of Higher Education

*Lessons from the Contemplation of How Others Might See Us*

I count myself among the growing band of scholars, administrators, policy analysts, and academic pundits from all walks who have learned a little about higher education in the rest of the world, and who have become devotees and practitioners of the international comparative study of higher education.

The Ford Policy Forum, by entertaining some international comparative perspectives, joins the American Council on Education and its European counterpart, the European University Association (formed from the former European Rectors Conference and the Confederation of EU Rectors Conferences), as well as many other higher education associations around the world in seeing both fascination and practical value in learning about how other nations and cultures view and manage education beyond the secondary level.

In so doing, we are merely trying to catch up with our academic disciplinary associations that have long since recognized the globalization of scholars and scholarship. My own scholarly organization, the Association for the Study of Higher Education, for example, has long had an international “wing” that is sufficiently active so as to require its own “pre-meeting” in advance of our annual conference.

I first joined this entirely self-appointed and decidedly diverse club of

comparative higher education scholars to help broaden my own perspective on higher education finance—specifically, in an effort to find universal approaches and interesting variations in the ways higher education costs are shared among governments or taxpayers, parents, students, philanthropists, and others. This search has proven to be a rich source of policies and perspectives and has led to the creation of the International Comparative Higher Educational Finance and Accessi-

---

**D. Bruce Johnstone**  
***State University of New York at Buffalo***

bility Project, now in its fourth year, with formal partner centers in China, Russia, and South Africa, as well as an active Web site of papers and data from around the world ([www.gse.buffalo.edu/org/IntHigherEdFinance](http://www.gse.buffalo.edu/org/IntHigherEdFinance)).

Along the way, I have had to broaden my sense of international higher education beyond the mere financial. Although the field is vast and ever moving, defying anything close to mastery, my peering through this dark glass, attempting to understand what the rest of the world does with what we have come to call “higher education” (and what UNESCO and the World Bank calls “tertiary education” or, even more expansively, “post-compulsory education”) has had an unusual reward. I believe I have come to understand the United States’ system of higher educa-

**Few features are more difficult to explain to the foreign observer than the absence of an American ministry of education...most congressman, senators, and White House occupants usually do not fully understand it.**

tion (if the U.S. system can be called a “system”—but that is a topic for another paper) far better from trying to understand other systems and institutions, but even more from attempting to explain to those from other countries what our system is and does, and why. Further, from this latter exercise, I have come to understand (or at least to form an opinion on) those features of American higher education that are most nearly unique, but whose significance may sometimes elude even our appreciation.

The selection of the most importantly unique features of American higher education is an exercise made difficult by the interconnectedness of these features, the circularity of causation, and the thorny task of separating first from second order—or fundamental from derivative—features. But, at the risk of attempting to simplify something that is in fact frightfully complex, I present my candidates for the eight features of American higher education that are the most importantly unique, most difficult to explain to

a foreign scholar or university leader, and possibly most often missed by Americans for their significance in explaining how we got to where we are with higher education in this country:

## **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). Not only do virtually all other countries have one, but in the absence of a federal ministry, it is difficult, for example, to account for why the bachelor’s and the Ph.D. degrees are essentially the same in all 50 states, or why the federal government can be relatively assured that its financial assistance is buying about the same thing across the states. Moreover, although the level of learning implied by a B.A. in history may mean very different things for the graduates of different institutions, these differences do not vary systematically by state, but rather by the institution’s highest degree awarded and its level of selectivity (thereby conveying different levels of prestige).

This absence of a true national ministry is also made more difficult to explain by the fact that most congressman, senators, and White House occupants usually do not fully understand it. Also, we do, after all, have something called a Department of Education and a cabinet level officer who appears to be some kind of “minister.” But we do *not* have a national ministry of education, much less of higher education—not, at least, with any of the powers and responsibilities associated with that term elsewhere in the world. The United States government, while immensely important to the funding of students and the support of research, has nothing to do with standards for entry, admission of students, requirements or standards for degrees, qualifications for faculty (or anything else about the terms and conditions of their employment), selection of governing boards or chief executive officers, or anything else about how institutions, public or private, are governed or run.

The origins of this quirk, this absence of a national ministry, lie in our Colonial and Revolutionary foundations of federalism, enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, which reserves to the states those responsibilities of government

not specifically delegated by the Constitution to the federal government (Trow 1993). This reluctance to assert a federal role in higher education was early reinforced by the firm decision of the U.S. Congress early in the 19th century to *not* form a national university. It was further reinforced over the ensuing two centuries by the peculiarly American suspicion of centralized government, which led to channeling most federally sponsored research—even after such research came to be recognized as a legitimate federal financial responsibility—through established universities rather than through the founding of national research institutes, such as the French, Soviets, or Germans have done.

## **2. Our extensive and bimodally prestigious private sector.**

Not unrelated to the first peculiarly American feature is our extensive and bimodally elitist private sector. That we have an extensive private sector is unusual only to Europeans and perhaps to citizens of the former Communist world—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—yet fragile and thus far marginally significant—private institutions of some kind of postsecondary nature. In Latin America, India, and East Asia, however, 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 bimodal 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 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 precedent set by the 1819 Supreme Court decision asserting the essential privateness of Dartmouth College, the publicness of institutional mission and the

connectedness of the institution to its surrounding community are virtually the same for private as for public institutions of higher education.

The significance of the U.S. private sector to American and worldwide higher education today is due mainly to those private institutions (interestingly, including both research universities and the distinctively American elite four-year college described below) that have attained the pinnacle of selectivity and prestige. This significance—aside from the not unimportant fact that in America the private colleges arrived first—is due in large part to the aforementioned refusal of Congress to form a national university and then, 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 remuneration basis. 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 and 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 to the nation's emerging public state universities—and ultimately even to the 20th-century public comprehensive and community colleges. This governance model fit and undoubtedly reinforced the already noted absence of a national ministry, 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 substantially more powerful American university and college presidents compared to their European counterpart, rectors.

Today, as governments are attempting to divest themselves of the enormous financial burden of their public higher educational systems and likewise embrace the neoliberal economic principles of privatization and institutional autonomy, fascination is growing in other countries with the American governing board model in place of older ministerial models of state control and civil service status of the professorate. At the same time, there seems to be little appreciation of the subtleties of a well-run American governing board and the imperative of the members limiting themselves to matters of broad institutional mission, fiscal integrity, and the wise selection and careful monitoring of a chief executive officer. Nor is there an appreciation in most countries, considering such a public divestiture, of the enormity of the task of fund raising—the years of cultivation, the favorable tax laws, and the sheer amount of time required to amass an endowment of significant size.

A public board can indeed be a wonderful melding of public authority and institutional advocacy—a window, as it were, on public needs to the university and on the university's needs to the state. But an effective public governing board also needs an almost abnormal sense of restraint and of trust in the institution's management, which can be precarious even in America with its long history of not-for-profit and public-authority governing boards. In a nation without such a governing board culture, a board can become just another—and even less accountable—body for politically inspired meddling and corruption.

#### **4. Extensive financial reliance in both the private and public sectors on nongovernmental or 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 mid- 19th century on, and undoubtedly reinforced by the growing wealth of the American middle class and by the aforementioned absence of a federal university equivalent to the greatest of the Continental European universities, the American family became accustomed to bearing the lion's share of the costs of their children's higher education.

Thus, although U.S. 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 postwar baby boom, were met in substantial part by nongovernmental revenues—tuition, fees, private philanthropy, and competitive contract research. In spite of the American voter's disinclination to be taxed and growing public sector competition from the demands of health and welfare, basic education, national defense, and corrections, U.S. higher education continues to be relatively well funded.

On the other hand, in Europe (with the exception of the U.K., the Netherlands, Portugal, and most recently Austria), in the formerly Marxist countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern and Central Europe, and in much of Africa and Asia, the ideological commitment to free higher education (extending to free 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. U.S. taxpayers and politicians may grumble about the costs of their public colleges and universities, but relatively no one pays less in taxes and gets so much quality higher education than do U.S. citizens.

#### **5. High levels of responsiveness in both the 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 the public (especially students and their families) seems good and noble, perhaps because its converse or absence—nonresponsiveness or irresponsibility—seems base and ignoble. But the responsiveness of American colleges and universities—in sharp contrast to European universities or even, it would seem, to most universities in the formerly Communist (i.e., pre-1990) world—comes not from any peculiarly noble institutional or professorial American gene, but from the combination of peculiarly American institutional features already identified. In particular, institu-

**While some may lament the marketization of our universities and colleges... governments in other countries are working to emulate this American higher education responsiveness, which they interpret as responsibility.**

tional dependence on nongovernmental revenue means that serious attention is paid to state and local governments, potential donors, and 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 others—and their state legislative patrons forged a great strategic compromise. The institutions agreed to enroll large numbers of undergraduates—many of whom would be intellectually or at least academically unequipped for a top European university—and to maintain some level of undergraduate standards by flunking out large numbers of students 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, such as through teacher education, engineering, and business in the old days, and business, communications, computer science, and pre-professional preparation today. Furthermore, faculty would overwhelmingly devote their time and laboratories to whatever scientific inquiry was supported by the government in the form of direct and indirect cost recoveries.

While some may lament the marketization of our universities and colleges, particularly the ones that remain the most academically pristine, governments in other countries are working to emulate this American higher education responsiveness, which they interpret as responsibility. And while some academics—particularly humanists who have tenure and who need only books and time rather than grants for their research—may also decry this responsive-

ness and strategic compromise, American higher education remains more adequately and probably more securely funded than the universities of any other country.

## **6. 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 perhaps inevitable) by the modularization of academic degree programs. The American degree is awarded primarily based upon the accumulation of credits in an 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 prevalent in most of Europe and the rest of the world—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 students lose interest, for example, or if an institution appears to have promised more than it can deliver, students can simply take those credits down the road to another institution, which will probably admit them with little or no loss of time or credits. This feature also serves to strengthen another feature of American higher education: the ever-open college door. It does so by ensuring that academic failure need almost never be absolute or irreversible. In spite of academic difficulties and changed minds, students can almost always take the credits they have successfully completed to another 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. Separation of baccalaureate from graduate and advanced professional studies.**

Related to the modularization of degrees in American colleges and universities 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 at a university and frequently at one other than that entered for the first degree. This is completely different from 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 we would consider advanced professional study. Most European universities today are struggling to implement a form of a three- or four-year first degree. The clear and distinct separation of the American baccalaureate from advanced scholarly and professional study has made possible that most unique of all American higher educational institutions: the elite, four-year baccalaureate college. It is only with the assurance that one’s chances of attending medical, law, or graduate school would in no way be diminished—and might well be enhanced—by first attending a four-year college that the elite baccalaureate colleges can continue to attract much of the academic cream of the American high school.

### **8. Preoccupation with accessibility and the “ever open door” to further education.**

The combination of enormous postsecondary education capacity, including in most states a postsecondary institution 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 nonselective private college with no academic credentials other than a high school diploma; and sufficient financial assistance, supplemented by abundant part-time employment possibilities, means that any young person—even one whose parents are unable to assist financially at all, but who has at least a modicum of interest and aptitude and the willingness to assume some indebtedness—can find a place at a college. 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, which likely will accept all or most of the credits the student has already earned. In similar fashion, academic failure or the loss of interest in one academic specialization, generally called a “major” in U.S. colleges and universities, 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, concern on the part of most colleges and universities for ethnic and racial diversity is so strong that applicants from “underrepresented minorities” 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 cynics, skeptics, and detractors. 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. Skeptics point to the fact that 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, detractors maintain that this preoccupation with accessibility is misplaced and even wrong—resulting in the admission of students unable to do the work, a substitution of political for academic judgments.

But the difference between the United States and most other countries is striking and sometimes counterintuitive. Virtually all countries prize and give great lip service to equality of opportunity. For most, this means entry via objective, sometimes standardized entrance examinations, little or no tuition fees, and financial assistance for the costs of student living. Yet in many countries, equality of opportunity is thought to be sufficiently demonstrated by a handful of the very brightest and most academically committed from poor, rural, or ethnic minority families who make it into the university—quite regardless of the gross statistical underrepre-

**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.**

sentation in virtually all countries (including those of Socialist and Marxist bent) of such students. It seems to be mainly America that measures 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 minority student who happens to be as average as most of us.

## Conclusion

Many of the features cited above—the existence of a large and strong private sector, the tradition of cost-sharing, and the modularization of the undergraduate degree program—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.

All of the features can be understood as a product of the unique history of American higher education. And while many features may be criticized for any number of reasons, they all add up to a huge, decentralized, uneven, and oddly shaped system—or nonsystem—that works quite well. But to the observer from another country, especially a country with its own distinguished history of higher education, American higher education can appear frightfully complex, totally unplanned, extravagant, too tolerant of the weak institution and the weak student, overly politicized, and indulgent—even if the observer respects our scholarship and our advanced training. I believe that I can explain and even defend most of these oddities. But the real value of such an exercise is in the greater understanding of these features that otherwise are easily taken for granted. It is when we are forced to see American higher education as others do that I am most convinced of the value of the international comparative study of higher education.

## References

- Johnstone, D. Bruce. 1993. In the absence of a national ministry: Unifying and standardizing forces in United States higher education. *Policy Perspectives* 5(1): Section B.
- Trow, Martin. 1993. Federalism in American higher education. In *Higher Learning in America, 1980-2000*, edited by Arthur Levine. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

## Bibliography

- Altbach, Philip G. 2001. The American academic model in comparative perspective. In *In Defense of American Higher Education*, edited by Philip G. Altbach, Patricia J. Gumpert, and D. Bruce Johnstone. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Johnstone, D. Bruce. 1991. Higher education in the United States in the year 2000. *Prospects* 21(3): 430–42. Reprinted in Zaghoul Morsy and Philip G. Altbach, eds., *Higher Education in International Perspective: Toward the 21st Century* (New York: Advent Books, 1993).
- . 1997. Academic leadership in the United States. In *Transforming Higher Education: Views from Leaders Around the World*, edited by Madeleine Greene. Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx Press.
- . 2002. Privatization. In *Higher Education in the United States: An Encyclopedia*, edited by J.F. Forest and Kevin Kinser. Vol. 2. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO Publishers.
- Trow, Martin. 2001. From mass higher education to universal access. In *In Defense of American Higher Education*, edited by Philip G. Altbach, Patricia J. Gumpert, and D. Bruce Johnstone. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.