

INTRODUCTION



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

*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 H-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>.

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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, or 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 their 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 2020.¹ Germany and France have recently appropriated special funds to develop universities of international distinction. China has been expanding its universities and enlarging their student population at astounding rates, while making remarkable strides in increasing the number of scientists and published research papers.²

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.³

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

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

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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 then what I only came to appreciate much later. If I can offer something useful to those whose opportunity to serve still lies before them, this book will have been well worth writing.