

SYSTEM

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The higher education system of the United States is not so much a formal system as it is an informal configuration of varied institutions. The development of the American system has been unique when compared with other national postsecondary educational systems around the world. Unlike most other countries, where higher education systems have largely developed outward from a central, government-supported university, the United States has never had such an institution. Instead, the evolution of the U.S. system has been shaped by many different influences, including state and local needs, demographics, religion, and changing social contexts. As a result, postsecondary institutions in the United States mirror the multifaceted complexities of the broader society in which they are embedded and the diversity of the people they serve. Moreover, American higher education is quite disorderly in structure and function in contrast to many national postsecondary systems and even in sharp contrast to the rationally organized American compulsory primary and secondary education system. Postsecondary institutions and the students they serve are diverse and not easily categorized. This disorder is characterized by a variety of individual institutional goals and missions, types of degrees offered, finance and governance structures, and even curricula, course contents, and instructional methodologies.

In order to understand how this informal and loosely structured "system" of diverse institutions serves the wide-ranging needs of American society, it is necessary to identify some of the main features that define the major types of institutions found in American higher education. In 1983 Robert Birnbaum noted that institutional diversity can be defined across several categories of institutional features. The most useful of these categories include defining differences in terms of the following dimensions of institutional diversity: systemic, structural, constituent, and reputational.

Systemic Diversity

Systemic diversity refers to differences in types of institutions with regard to their size and scope of mission. Starting in the 1970s, there have been many attempts to develop classification systems for categorizing

postsecondary institutions in this manner. The best-known and most well-established classification system was developed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and has come to be known as the "Carnegie Classification." Originally developed by Clark Kerr in 1970, this classification system was designed to serve the research analysis needs of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. The commission "sought to identify categories of colleges and universities that would be relatively homogeneous with respect to the functions of the institutions as well as with respect to characteristics of students and faculty members" (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, p. v). The Carnegie Classification was originally published in 1973 and has been updated several times, most recently in 2000. It is the framework most often used in describing institutional diversity in the United States and is relied upon by researchers and educational leaders to ensure appropriate comparisons between and among colleges and universities.

The current classification divides institutions into six main categories: doctoral/research institutions, master's colleges and universities, baccalaureate colleges, associate's colleges, specialized institutions, and tribal colleges. Within most categories are subcategories. Doctoral/research institutions can be either extensive or intensive and offer a wide range of undergraduate degrees as well as master's and doctoral-level graduate degrees. Extensive doctoral/research institutions award more doctorates in a wider range of fields than do intensive institutions. Master's colleges and universities fall into one of two categories (master's I or II) and typically offer a wide range of undergraduate programs as well as graduate education through the master's degree. Category I master's institutions award more master's degrees in a wider range of disciplines than do their category II peers. Baccalaureate colleges primarily focus on undergraduate education and are divided into three categories: baccalaureate colleges—liberal arts, baccalaureate colleges—general, and baccalaureate/associate's colleges. Liberal arts colleges award at least half of their degrees in liberal arts fields, whereas general colleges award less than half of their degrees in liberal arts fields. Baccalaureate/associate's colleges award both associate and baccalaureate degrees. Colleges and universities identified as specialized institutions in the Carnegie Classification may award degrees ranging from bachelor's to the doctorate, but they award the majority of those degrees in a single field. There are several subcategories of specialized institutions, including theological seminaries and other specialized faith-related institutions, medical schools and centers, other health profession schools, schools of engineering and technology, schools

of business and management, fine arts schools, schools of law, teachers colleges, military institutes, and other types of specialized institutions. Tribal colleges are generally tribally controlled and located on reservations.

While the Carnegie classification system is often used in making qualitative distinctions among institutions, the commission denies that this is the classification's purpose. In his foreword to the 1987 edition of the classification, Ernest Boyer emphasized that the classification "is *not* intended to establish a hierarchy among learning institutions. Rather, the aim is to group institutions according to their shared characteristics, and we oppose the use of the classification as a way of making qualitative distinctions among the separate sectors" (Carnegie Foundation, p. 2). Nevertheless, the process of "institutional drift," in which colleges strive to climb the hierarchy, is well documented in the literature. For example, junior colleges become baccalaureate-granting institutions by grafting another two years onto their programs, while doctoral/research-intensive universities increase funded research activities as they aspire to doctoral/research-extensive status. In the early twenty-first century, the Carnegie Foundation was in the process of reassessing the classification system, rethinking how to characterize similarities and differences among institutions, and allowing multiple classifications of institutions. This work was expected to be concluded in 2005.

While the Carnegie Foundation's system is the most widely used typology in educational research, other classification schemes exist and are usually used for other purposes, such as providing information to prospective students and their families. For example, *U.S. News and World Report* classifies colleges and universities in several typologies. Institutions are divided into categories by whether they tend to serve a national or a regional population and then are rank-sorted into four "tiers." Schools are also ranked according to best departments for a particular major and best financial value.

Although such categorization schemes are useful in a system that includes tremendous institutional variety, such simplification hides the true complexity of the higher education system of the United States. For example, an institution categorized as a "research university" may also have its roots in land-grant legislation, or may be single-sex or religiously affiliated. Other key hidden aspects of institutional identity include the institution's historical roots—whether it began as a land-grant college,

historically black college or university, Hispanic-serving college, tribal college, or religiously affiliated institution. Additionally, there are less apparent dimensions of institutional difference, such as ratios between part-time and full-time students or residential versus commuter students. Athletic division membership is an important facet of institutional identity, as is location (region, urban, rural, suburban). Hence, it is important to pay attention to other aspects of institutional diversity in order to truly understand the nature of the diverse system of American higher education.

Structural Diversity

Structural diversity focuses on the ways in which institutions are organized and controlled. Structural diversity is most often defined in terms of type of institutional control—public or private. Publicly controlled institutions are funded primarily by the government (usually by state governments) and are typically part of a larger state system. Private institutions are primarily funded by nongovernment sources and tend to be independent with their own private governing boards. There are many more private institutions in the United States than there are public colleges and universities, although public higher education has grown significantly since the 1960s.

While there is no national system of higher education, all states have developed some type of public postsecondary educational system. There are a number of ways in which these systems are structured and organized. Public colleges and universities differ both in the ways in which they are governed and in the ways in which they are coordinated as part of a larger state system. All states assign responsibility for operating public colleges and universities to governing boards, and there are three main types of governing board structures: consolidated governance systems, segmental systems, and single-institution boards. Consolidated boards are responsible for all public postsecondary institutions in a particular state, although in some states this may apply only to the four-year institutions. Segmental systems have different governing boards for different types of campuses; in some states this may mean that public research universities are governed by one board, comprehensive state colleges by another board, and community colleges by yet another board. States that use single-institution boards grant governance autonomy to each public campus by allowing each to have its own board. Public boards vary in the degree to which they have formal governance authority and the extent to which they merely coordinate activities across the state's public

postsecondary educational sector without any substantive decision-making powers.

Public institutions within these systems tend to fall into one of three major categories: universities, state colleges, and community colleges. Public universities typically grant a full range of graduate degrees (master's and doctoral), tend to have a strong research emphasis, and typically have large student enrollments. State colleges are typically smaller, may serve a particular region of a state, and usually offer both bachelor's and master's degrees. Community colleges are two-year colleges that provide associate degrees, preparation for transfer to four-year institutions, vocational and technical education and training, and large numbers of continuing education offerings. Some public institutions have been identified as land-grant institutions. Land-grant institutions were first established by the Morrill Act of 1862, which provided federal funds for establishing universities that (1) were open to all types of students (including women, minorities, and low-income students), (2) offered degrees in practical and applied fields such as engineering and agriculture, and (3) shared knowledge with citizens throughout their state.

Private institutions are less easily characterized than are their public counterparts. Private institutions cover the full range of missions and structures found in American higher education. The most prestigious and highly selective institutions, whether they be Ivy League research universities or smaller liberal arts colleges, are private; but so too are the least well-known institutions. In fact, Alexander Astin and Calvin Lee noted in 1972 that there are literally hundreds of small colleges scattered across the United States that can be thought of as "the invisible colleges." These are small, private institutions with limited resources. Some are affiliated with a particular religion; others began life as private junior colleges. One of the key distinctions among private colleges is whether they are religiously affiliated or not. Religious affiliation occurs in many forms. A religious denomination or order directly controls some institutions, whereas others have only nominal relationships with religious bodies or sponsors. There are also increasing numbers of proprietary institutions that tend to award specialized degrees or that engage in alternative modes of educational delivery, such as distance learning.

Constituent Diversity

Institutions also vary by the core constituencies they serve, particularly with regard to the particular types of students served. This type of constituent institutional diversity is manifested in many forms, but some of the most prominent institutions that serve particular types of students are those colleges and universities that provide education primarily for student groups that have been traditionally underserved by the majority of postsecondary institutions. These institutions include historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), tribal colleges, and women's institutions.

HBCUs primarily, although not exclusively, exist to provide postsecondary institutions that primarily serve African-American students. There are currently 109 HBCUs, almost half of which are public. They are concentrated in the southern region of the nation, with a few institutions located in the Northeast and Midwest. HBCUs enroll fewer than 20 percent of African-American undergraduates, yet produce one-third of all African-American bachelor's degrees. HSIs are institutions in which at least one-quarter of the undergraduates are Hispanic. Rapidly growing as a group, there are well more than 100 such institutions in the early twenty-first century. Tribal colleges tend to be controlled by Native American tribes. There are currently twenty of these institutions in the United States. Women's colleges are primarily private and provide postsecondary educational environments that cater specifically to female students. Although there were hundreds of these institutions at one time, that number has dwindled to approximately seventy-five. There are also a handful of male-only institutions scattered across the country. All of these institutions reflect the diversity found in American society and provide the informal system of American higher education with a means of better serving the diverse groups of individuals that constitute a multicultural society. The existence of such diverse institutions has been noted as a particular strength of the American higher education system.

Reputational Diversity

Another key feature of American higher education is reputational diversity. It has been noted that higher education institutions in the United States are extremely stratified. In 1956 David Riesman offered the classic characterization of the importance of hierarchy and stratification in American higher education when he described the system of higher education as a "snakelike" procession in which the tail (composed of institutions lower in the hierarchy) and the body (representing institutions in the middle of the hierarchy) of the snake continually try to

move up and catch the head (those institutions at the top of the hierarchy that serve as a model for other institutions to follow). Reputation appears to depend on a complex set of factors, including undergraduate selectivity and peer evaluations of graduate programs.

Advantages of the U.S. System

While the lack of systemwide structure creates a somewhat incoherent system of higher education in the United States where widespread coordination is virtually impossible, there are many advantages to this noncentralized approach to a national higher education system. The large degree of institutional diversity that has arisen from the decentralized nature of American higher education has generated benefits on three levels: institutional, societal, and systemic. At the institutional level, arguments center on serving students' needs. Diversity in this sense would include variety of student body, institutional size, programs offered, and academic standards. Higher education does not exist in isolation, however. Birnbaum stated that "higher education is intimately connected to, and therefore interacts with, other societal systems" (p. 116). Aside from education and research, institutions of higher education have also long served various political, economic, and social functions. Societal arguments for diversity thus center on issues of social mobility and political interests. From a systems theory perspective, higher education is viewed as an "open system," characterized by diverse inputs and outputs. For example, if colleges and universities in the United States admit students with high levels of racial diversity (input), then the impact on society (output) will be very different from what it would be if the U.S. college student population were more homogeneous. Additionally, diversity in higher education is important because "differentiation of component units ... leads to stability that protects the system itself" (Birnbaum, p. 121). Such systems are able to sense and respond to environmental pressures more quickly and effectively simply because they encompass such extensive variety. In sum, the diverse system of postsecondary institutions in America reflects the diverse composition and needs of the society it serves.

See also: [HISPANIC-SERVING COLLEGES](#); [HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES](#); [LANDGRANT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES](#); [LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES](#); [MILITARY PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM](#); [RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES](#); [SINGLE-SEX INSTITUTIONS](#); [TRIBAL COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES](#).

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