

Contrast Essay

The Pursuit of Excellence

Attention-grabbing
opener

Sometime around the seventh grade, many American students are introduced to the tale of ten blind men inspecting an elephant. When each blind man reaches different conclusions about the creature, the students are invited to consider whether truth is absolute or lies in the eye of the beholder. College professors and administrators might want to remember that fable when they take the measure of American higher education. Many of them, who tend to see only what they stand to lose, perceive the beast as wounded, suffering from the shocks of rising costs, dwindling resources and life-draining cutbacks. However, foreigners who compare America's universities with their own often reach very different conclusions about the nature of the beast.

Thesis sentence
indicating pattern

First point
of comparison

If sheer numbers provide any proof, America's universities and colleges are the envy of the world. For all their abiding troubles, the United States' 3,500 institutions were flooded with 407,530 students from 193 different countries last year. Asia led the way, with 39,600 students from China and 36,610 from Japan, followed by India and Canada. Many of the foreigners entered graduate and undergraduate programs in roughly equal numbers.

In contrast, most European and Asian universities provide an elite service to a small and privileged clientele. While fully 60% of all U.S. high school graduates attend college at some point in their life, just 30% of the comparable German population, 28% of the French, 20% of the British and 37% of the Japanese proceed beyond high school. German students who survive the *Abitur* or Britons who pass their A levels may still not qualify for a top university at home but find American universities far more welcoming. Some U.S. schools acknowledge the rigor of European secondary training and will give up to a year's credit to foreigners who have passed their high school exams.

"The egalitarian conception that everyone has a right to an education appropriate to his potential is a highly democratic and compassionate standard," says Marvin Bressler, professor of sociology and education specialist at Princeton University. True, not all U.S. collegians can match the performance of their foreign counterparts, but American institutions do offer students from rich and poor families alike the chance to realize their full potential. "America educates so many more people at university that one can't expect all those who go to be either as well informed or intelligent as the much narrower band who go to English universities," says Briton Christopher Ricks, professor of English at Boston University. Having instructed at Cambridge, Rick knows that teaching T. S. Eliot to British

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undergraduates is an easier task. Yet he finds teaching at B.U. very rewarding. "I'm not against elitism," he says, "but I happen to like having people who are more eager to learn."

Second point
of comparison

The democratic impulse to reach out to so many first took seed after World War II, when the G.I. bill made funding for higher education available to all returning soldiers. As universities expanded to handle the sudden influx, they developed the flexibility that has become one of the hallmarks of American higher learning. "In the U.S. there is a system of infinite chances," says Diane Ravitch, assistant secretary of education. "At 35, you can decide to go back to college, upgrade your education, change your profession." While Americans take such flexibility for granted, foreigners do not. To French students, who are commonly expected at age 16 to select both a university and a specific course of study, the American practice of jumping not only from department to department but also from school to school seems a luxury. Japanese students find it all but impossible to transfer credits from one school to another. Thus students who initially enter a junior college and subsequently decide to earn a bachelor's degree must head overseas.

Third point
of comparison

Many are attracted not only to the academic programs at a particular U.S. college but also to the larger community, which affords the chance to soak up the surrounding culture. Few foreign universities put much emphasis on the cozy communal life that characterizes American campuses from clubs and sports teams to student publications and theatrical societies. "The campus and the American university have become identical in people's minds," says Brown University President Vartan Gregorian. "In America it is assumed that a student's daily life is as important as his learning experience."

Foreign students also come in search of choices. America's menu of options—research universities, state institutions, private liberal-arts schools, community colleges, religious institutions, military academies—is unrivaled. "In Europe," says history professor Jonathan Steinberg, who has taught at both Harvard and Cambridge, "there is one system, and that is it." While students overseas usually must demonstrate expertise in a single field, whether law or philosophy or chemistry, most American universities insist that students sample natural and social sciences, languages and literature before choosing a field of concentration.

Fourth point
of comparison

Such opposing philosophies grow out of different traditions and power structures. In Europe and Japan, universities are answerable only to a ministry of education, which sets academic standards and distributes money. While

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centralization ensures that all students are equipped with roughly the same resources and perform at roughly the same level, it also discourages experimentation. "When they make mistakes, they make big ones," says Robert Rosenzweig, president of the Association of American Universities. "They set a system in wrong directions, and it's like steering a supertanker."

U.S. colleges, on the other hand, are so responsive to cultural currents that they are often on the cutting edge of social change. Such sensitivity—some might argue hypersensitivity—to the culture around them reflects the broad array of constituencies to which college administrators must answer. The board of trustees, composed of community and national leaders, serves as a referee between the institutional culture and the surrounding community, alumni and corporate donors who often earmark monies for specific expenditures, student bodies that demand a voice in university life, legislators who apportion government funds, and an often feisty faculty.

Smaller colleges are particularly attractive to foreign students because they are likely to offer direct contact with professors. "We have one of the few systems in the world where students are actually expected to go to class," says Rosenzweig. With the exception of Britain, where much of the teaching takes place in one-on-one tutorials, European students rarely come into direct contact with professors until they reach graduate-level studies. Even lectures are optional in Europe, since students are graded solely on examinations, with no eye to class attendance or participation.

Conclusion (analysis of body paragraphs)

As can be seen, it is the source of the two systems' funding that determines their decidedly different defining characteristics. In some respects, the independent spirit of the American university that foreigners admire comes down to dollars and cents. All U.S. colleges, private and public alike, must fight vigorously to stay alive. They compete not only for students but also for faculty and research grants. Such competition, though draining and distracting, can stimulate creativity and force administrators to remain attentive to student needs. "U.S. students pay for their education," says Ulrich Littmann, head of the German Fulbright Commission, "and demand a commensurate value for what they – or their parents – pay." In contrast, most universities abroad have state funding, but that luxury has a steep price: universities have less opportunity to develop distinctive personalities and define their own missions.