An Overview of Higher Education in the United States: Diversity, Access and the Role of the Marketplace

Abstract
U.S. higher education borrows its structure from both the British undergraduate college and German research university, but its character is profoundly influenced by major philosophical beliefs that shape American public life. During the 20th century, economic and social changes transformed higher education into a primary gateway to the middle-class, and women and minorities made inroads against longstanding exclusion from mainstream higher education. Americans came to view broad access to higher education as a necessary component of the nation’s ideal as a “land of opportunity.” In this regard, U.S. higher education reflects essential elements of the American character: independence, suspicion of government, ambition, inclusiveness, and competitiveness. This publication describes the major characteristics of American higher education and important issues that challenge it, linking back as appropriate to these essential philosophical underpinnings.

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