

# FIVE THEMES OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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## I. Introduction

During a seminar on the US system of higher education that I gave to university administrators here in Kyrgyzstan, a man of about 60 asked me, "How many hours a week is an American student in class?" I answered that it depends on a number of factors – whether the student is full-time or part-time, a graduate student or an undergraduate, a science student with a lot of labs or a literature student, etc. I ended by saying that how many hours a week a student was in class to a large extent depended upon the student's own choices. The questioner looked at my young interpreter and said, "I don't speak a word of English, but I know you translated that wrong, because that can't be what she said!" His reaction underlines one of the primary differences between the traditional Kyrgyzstani system and the US system of higher education – the relative emphasis on choice is one of the major differences between the two systems.

Many specific details about the US system of higher education often are of interest to educators in Kyrgyzstan – salaries, faculty loads, the elective system, accreditation, and more. However, these details can paint a misleading picture of higher education in the US if they are not viewed in context – if they are not understood as part of the broader culture of US higher education. Therefore, I would like to present an overview of US higher education in terms of five broad themes, five emphases of the US system which are different from the Kyrgyzstani system.

## II. Diversity

One characteristic of higher education in the US, which often is difficult for people from outside the US to understand, is its diversity. Whenever I am asked a question about higher education in the US, my answer usually begins with, "It depends...". There is rarely just one answer about anything regarding higher education in the US. Institutional diversity can be seen in at least five ways, in addition to the obvious kinds of diversity such as diversity in size or in rural, suburban, or urban location.

First, every university or college in the US has a mission statement – a statement about what is its reason for existing. Some institutions focus on the liberal arts – a broad range of humanities, social sciences, and sciences, aimed at preparing students with a flexible set of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Others focus on specific fields – a music conservatory, for example. Still others are designed to meet the educational needs of a specific region. All the other choices a university makes – what kinds of faculty to hire, what kinds of students to admit, what kinds of programs to offer – flow out of its mission statement.

Second, there is wide diversity among the types of institutions in the United States. Just as in Kyrgyzstan there are universities, technicums, and a music conservatory, so too in the US there are many different types of colleges and universities: community colleges, liberal arts colleges, universities which focus on teaching, research universities, and specialized institutes. Also, colleges and universities in the US may be public

or private, and the private institutions may be either secular or religious. In addition, there are colleges and universities which, as part of their mission, emphasize the needs of particular groups of the population: African Americans, Native Americans (sometimes called “American Indians”), or women.

Third, different types of colleges and universities with different missions also offer different curricula. The United States does not have any national curriculum. Each college or university decides on its own curriculum, in response to the needs of its particular students. St. John’s University, for example, focuses on “the Great Books” – students do not choose a specialty; every student follows the same curriculum. Florida Gulf Coast University emphasizes interdisciplinary work – students looking at ecological issues, for example, would consider scientific, economic, and ethical concerns, all in one course. A program in American literature at one university might emphasize twentieth century literature and another might emphasize poetry; one psychology program might emphasize experimental psychology and another behaviorism. Universities and professors have academic freedom – the right to teach what they think is important for students to know. There is no Ministry in the US, which determines what a curriculum should be.

Fourth, faculty at US institutions have diverse roles. Some spend most of their time teaching; others spend a great deal of time on research. Almost all professors in the US spend some time on service – service to the university, service to their profession, or service to the public which needs their particular skills. How professors spend their time varies widely, not only from institution to institution, but also within the same institution.

Fifth, teaching methodologies vary widely. Some professors use the lecture method; others use experiential learning, such as service-learning or internships. Some professors have “writing intensive” classes; others focus on critical thinking skills. Some professors give students learning style inventories; others list the competencies students need to achieve and let the students select their own preferred learning method. Choosing a teaching methodology

again is part of academic freedom for professors in the US

### III. Choice

As might be expected, given all this diversity, choice is another important characteristic of US higher education. Students have lots of choices there are more than 3,000 colleges and universities in the US; choosing which one to attend is a major decision. Students also can choose when to attend – many colleges have classes days, evenings, and weekends, and students usually are not limited to taking classes at just one of these times. “When to attend” can also mean at what point in life a student goes to the university – right after finishing secondary school is not the only time. The average age of a college student in the US is 28 or 29, because many adults attend college, as well as many young people. Students also can choose between classroom education, distance education, or a combination of the two. Plus, they generally choose both a major and a minor (a primary specialty and a secondary specialty – you could major in business and minor in Japanese, for example), and they also have elective courses, both within their major field and outside of it. All of these curricular choices mean that universities must offer students a means of registering for classes – signing up for what they want to take and when they want to take it. Increasingly, students in the US do this by computer or through an automated telephone system. In addition, most colleges and universities in the US have an elaborate system of academic advising, to help students make choices which are right for them. Also, the fact that students with the same major may have taken very different courses, even at the same university, means that a transcript listing all of a student’s courses and grades is much more important than the actual diploma. Doctors and lawyers may post their diplomas on their walls, but most employers in the US want to see a transcript. Students aren’t the only ones with choice. Faculty, too, have choices, both in the content of their courses and in their teaching methodology.

Departments may choose particular emphases, or an institution may decide to accentuate computer skills or Writing across the Curriculum, on a university-wide basis. A student or educator from

Kyrgyzstan should never assume that the policies of one university hold at another university. The faculty, administration, and boards of trustees at different universities make different choices. If you hear someone make a statement like, “Students at American universities are academically dismissed if their grade point average is beneath 1.5,” you can be sure that person doesn’t know a great deal about US higher education. He or she has been to one institution and is assuming that the policies of that institution hold for all institutions in the US. This is simply not the case.

#### **IV. Access**

For better or worse, many universities and colleges in the US think of students as customers - the US is, after all, a market economy. Therefore, colleges and universities tend to do whatever they can to make themselves accessible to students. They adapt to student needs, in so far as is possible without compromising academic integrity, rather than expecting students to adapt to them. As mentioned, classes often are offered during the day, during the evening, and on weekends, and students usually can enroll in any of these classes which they want to — they don’t have to limit themselves to only day classes or only evening classes, for example. One community college in the Detroit area, located near a big factory, has offered classes at 3 am, when workers are getting off their shift at the factory. (Bars in that neighborhood are open at those hours, too!).

Colleges and universities, particular community colleges and universities which try to meet the needs of a particular city or region, often have branch campuses or extension sites – places that bring the education to the students, rather than forcing the student to come to the education. For example, one semester when I was teaching at a community college in New Jersey, every Tuesday evening I drove 37 miles to a local secondary school to teach a writing class. It was inconvenient for me, but it would have been more inconvenient for all of my students to find transportation to the main campus. Another example of a university adapting to students’ needs took place in New York, where lots of people live outside the city and commute in. Many people there also want to improve their business skills. So one

university on Long Island, about an hour’s train ride from New York City, arranged to hold classes on the train. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, for example, you might get on the 7:15 train, go to a reserved car, and take an accounting class on your way in to work. Access to professors also is important at many US colleges and universities – more so at liberal arts colleges and community colleges than at research universities, however, where a student may hear a lecture by a well-known professor, but may find that seminars or discussion sections are taught by graduate students. In many colleges and universities, professors post office hours – regular times each week when they are available for consultation with students. Increasingly, too, professors are putting their e-mail addresses on their syllabi, to assist students in contacting them.

Colleges and universities in the US also often have a number of support services to make it easier for students to attend. Regional universities (those catering to the needs of a specific geographical area) and community colleges, both of which tend to have older students, usually offer child-care services. Registration, as mentioned, often is done by phone or by computer, so students can do it when it’s convenient for them – even if that’s at midnight. US law requires that accommodations are made for physically handicapped students – those who are blind or deaf or in wheelchairs. Many schools also have support services for those who are learning disabled. Learning disabilities take a variety of forms; one of the most common is dyslexia, in which a student has trouble reading, because his or her eyes and brain have trouble distinguishing between, for example, the letters b and d or the letters b and p.

#### **V. Lifelong learning**

As mentioned before, colleges and universities in the US often offer classes on weekends and in the evening, and, on many campuses, adult students are common. Part of the American emphasis on individualism and self-reliance means that people constantly are trying to improve themselves, to move ahead at work, or to explore some new area of interest – classical music or art or computers.

One important area of continuing education is professional and vocational education. As noted above, many people in the US attend classes to update their skills voluntarily. Others continue study because their profession requires it – you want your doctor or pharmacist, for example, to be acquainted with the newest therapies and medicines. In the US, many professions have CEUs – not Central European University, but Continuing Education Units – a measure of how many hours of continuing education and professional updating the profession requires every year for continued licensure.

The American emphasis on the new, the latest, the most up-to-date extends also to college professors. Most colleges and universities in the US have funds in their budgets for professors to attend conferences, to subscribe to professional journals, and, sometimes, to have “release time” – that is, to be “released” from teaching one or more courses, but to still have the same salary. The “release time” is used for new course development or professional updating. Also, many colleges and universities offer sabbaticals – usually one year at half pay or one semester at full pay – so that a professor can have a concentrated period of time available for research, writing, and developing new skills. In addition, the plethora of grants, workshops, and conferences regularly advertised in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and other education journals attests to the American idea that you can’t stand still – that you should always be acquiring new skills, or else you are falling behind. In such a culture, lifelong learning is essential.

## **VI. Minimal Federal Government Control**

As noted above, although the United States does have a Federal Department of Education, that Department has no role in university curriculum design. Every college or university decides its curriculum for itself. The Federal government also does not award diplomas – each university does that by itself, too. The US does have a system of accreditation, of making sure that universities follow broad standards of quality and that they have the resources to carry out their own self-defined missions. However, this system of accreditation is an independent one, *designed and carried out by associations of*

universities. The US government has no role in accreditation.

The US government does provide financial assistance to poor students, and gives that money only to students who are attending accredited colleges and universities. It is important to understand, however, that it is the student who receives financial aid, and not the university. There are no “budget” students in the US in the sense that the government has promised to support a certain number of students at a certain university, based on the student’s academic excellence. It’s up to the student to apply for Federal and other funding (many private scholarship funds exist in the US, too). Direct Federal government support of universities in the US occurs only through grants for specific projects, and never as an operating subsidy. Universities in the US are funded through tuition, sometimes by state governments (if it’s a state university), sometimes by local (county) governments (if it’s a community college), sometimes by a religious organization (if it’s a private, church-affiliated university). Usually a university is funded by a number of sources – but a direct operating subsidy from the US government is never part of the picture.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Colleges and universities in the US differ from colleges and universities in Kyrgyzstan in many specific ways – registration, transcripts, accreditation, financial aid procedures, and more. However, just as the higher education system here grew out of a system of values and beliefs about what it is important for a society to know, so too the higher education system in the US grew out of US culture and its needs and demands. That culture and those demands have led the US system to emphasize diversity, choice, access, lifelong learning, and minimal Federal government control. Anyone interested in reforming Kyrgyzstani higher education to incorporate US practices should understand that US higher education is designed to support certain cultural values. To the extent that Kyrgyzstan wishes to emulate the same values, elements of the US system are appropriate. If Kyrgyzstan has different goals and values, it will need to find *different models*.