

## From Tradition to Diversity: Educational Transition of American Higher Education

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**Abstract:** The United States is extremely diverse in the racial and ethnic backgrounds of its citizens, which include whites, blacks, Native Americans, Alaskans, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics. Such a diverse combination of different racial populations makes the characteristics of accessibility and diversity in American higher education important. The necessity of educating such a vast and diverse population in a climate of competing social demands on limited public resources presents the United States with serious challenges. This paper discusses and analyzes educational transition, innovation and future development in American Higher Education.

**Key words:** Higher Education; Educational Innovation; Educational Transition

### 1. Introduction

In recent decades, American higher education has been transformed by demographic, economic, and social changes. Today, American institutions of higher education therefore face the challenge of preparing students to live and work in an increasingly diverse society in which cultural knowledge and understanding are more important than ever before. To meet this challenge, the higher education institutions must educate students from all segments of society and provide accessible educational opportunities to them. Reviewing the history of American higher education shows educational opportunities have not always been equal; there are many historical factors in the discrimination of students in race, color, religion, and gender. As federal and state laws were made to assure access to education of the middle class, the mission of higher education had to be changed. The mission is now to prepare a broader spectrum of citizens for interaction in an increasingly diverse, global, information and technology-rich world.

### 2. Characteristics of Traditional Colleges and Universities in USA

The specialization of types of higher education and of its students makes higher education different from most other organizations.

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Universities have been supported by a small portion of society that was interested in knowledge development, research, and aspiration to maintain or gain entrance to higher social classes. The vision of universities was influenced strongly in the U.S, when land grants were made to create public universities, rather than society having primarily private institutions supported by the benevolent rich. When the public universities were formed, they were to promote the further development of an educated middle class in the U.S. Society demands universities and their faculty supply knowledge and expertise directly to students to prepare them for many different, complex leadership roles in a diverse society (Church, 1971).

University faculty need to seek new knowledge and to train students not merely to imitate their teachers but to understand general principles of practice so that students can improve upon the methods of their predecessors. “Academic freedom” is very important to university professors to teach students new ideas and contribute their research results to improve society.

Community colleges offer general or foundation studies, pre-university courses, technical and vocational programs, and cultural and social education; their goals and functions emphasize occupationally related studies, and they are also expected to supply properly trained workers for the nation’s business and industry (Cohen, 1971).

Community college students seek preparation for jobs or low-cost access to pre-university study or are adults who want culturally and socially relevant recurrent education. Their faculty only need to teach students, and do not need to do research or scholarly publication, and faculty follow standard curriculum in teaching.

The difference between higher education and normal organization is that, usually, the education industry is for non-profit. Besides, the organization development is very different from business industry; especially, their clienteles are different.

Different societal demands created different higher education institutions which have their own missions and functions to serve various types of students. Colleges and universities play different roles in higher education which make them different from most all other organizations. It is good to maintain the diversity in higher education institutions, educators cannot tell students which one is the better choice; it is all depends on students’ preferences, learning motivations and career goals. All higher education can do is to make sure they all make the best contribution to the society.

### **3. Innovation of American Higher Education**

Race and gender discrimination are main issues in American history, and they also affect the accessibility of American higher education greatly. “The white/black relationship shapes American history and sensibility retains an unresolved centrality even as...” (Lowe, Jr., 1999:4). There is almost an unseen “color line” between black/white, and it seems that it never could be crossed until now. In the past, only white males had the right to access higher education. The educational attainment of different ethnic and racial groups in the United States varies substantially. In the past, because of racial discrimination, whites used to complete higher education more often than blacks did. White people think that black people are poor, foolish, and they do not want to live or go to school with them. Males think females are weak, and are always lower than males. This situation has become better after two main equal-opportunity actions, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Affirmative Action of 1965.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is the most important and significant statute in employment discrimination, which is inhibiting an employee on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, or national origin.

Sherman, Bohlander and Snell (1998) mentioned the law protects not only the employees but also supervisors and managers in all HR activities, including hiring, training, promotion, pay, employee benefits, and other conditions of employment. This has been very important for black people, because it provides equal access and opportunities for them in employment and contracting and more stable incomes to improve their lives and to go into higher education.

In the other way, the Civil Rights Act also helped females get equal opportunities in work environments, especially where they were inhibited based on pregnancy. This act not only made equal education opportunities for female students but also helps many women who missed the chance for regular education by allowing them to go back to school, since they now have self-finance ability. Females are half of the population in the world; the equal education opportunity for them improves not only human capital but also the balance of society.

Affirmative action was created to redress the under-representation of certain groups in employment within and outside academics. Affirmative action in the 1960s and 1970s was based on the belief that talented people were being excluded from academe because of racial and sexual prejudice. Black people have suffered disproportionately from poverty, crime, unemployment, and inferior primary and secondary education. This act has two main ways it helps black students, admission policies and financial aid. On the other hand, “the largest gains of this action have been made by woman whose representation on faculty grew from 23 percent in 1970 to 40 percent in 1995” (Cohen, 1998:300).

#### **4. Educational Equity**

Socioeconomic status discrimination is the other big limit in equal-education opportunities. Accessibility and diversity should work together; if academe wants to increase diversity, it needs to increase accessibility. Even though opportunity is provided equally for everyone to access higher education, it still cannot be successful without financial and other support; the question would be “Who pays for it?” To increase the diversity on campus, programs need to be made accessible to different populations, such as to low-income students. To assist students’ financial problem, there are two actions, as shown American history, as follows:

(1) Middle-Income Student Assistance Act of 1978: Guaranteed aid to the neediest students and extended the numbers of grants and loans (BEOG, Supplementary Opportunity Grants, College Work-Study, and Guaranteed Student Loans) to middle-income students. (American Educators’ Encyclopedia, 1991:670)

(2) Title IX of 1972: Well-know title of the Education Amendment. It states: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program receiving federal financial assistance” (American Educators’ Encyclopedia, 1991:575).

These two laws are very good examples to prove that accessibility and diversity need to work together; without adjusting admission policies and other financial support, the goal of equal-educational opportunities and diversity cannot be achieved. If American higher education can achieve a diverse learning environment, it will make students understand different cultures and help move toward the goal of creating peace.

#### **5. Technology in Education**

During last few decades, technology innovation and development have significantly impacted the higher educational system. Since advanced technologies have been successfully applied in education, distance education

seems to be the major educational trend for all higher educational institutions to develop in the next decades. Distance education increases student population, extends programs and institutional developments, and increases financial profits. In fact, after most major higher institutions such as state or top universities have been successful in developing their distance education systems, the institutions such as small colleges or regional institutions that do not develop distance education, might face challenges and threats of losing their educational markets and competitive abilities in the future. Local students might be attracted and choose distance education programs provided by famous and large institutions such as the University of Phoenix, UCLA, SUNY, or the UT system instead of choosing small or regional institutions. Through diversity distance education modes such as correspondence learning, two-way video and audio systems, and e-learning, distance learning practice the educational vision of education to all and provide equal educational access and opportunity to all learners.

## 6. Conclusion

Diversity in educational system and learning environment allows more learners to access higher education; this makes education become more accessible and reachable.

Education is no longer traditional full-time students only; part-time students can still enjoy learning through diversity educational system and distance education, education for all is not just a vision; it is in practice now.

Education was a symbol of power and privilege for over hundred years, but following the democratic, economic and technological development, education is not a privilege anymore; it crossed the race, gender, age, location, time, and finance barriers. Educational resources and opportunities is very accessible, flexible and diverse to everyone anywhere. American Higher Educational development and process is a good example for viewing educational policy, educational innovation, and educational transition for higher educational development.

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