Carnegie Perspectives
A different way to think about teaching and learning

A New Set of Lenses for Looking at Colleges and Universities

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Abstract: An in-depth look at the new Carnegie Classifications, including suggestions for its use.

Essay:

Classification is a fundamental human activity. We classify wines as dry, sweet, or full-bodied. We classify cars according to body style, transmission type, size, and more. We classify students and faculty. And yes, we classify colleges and universities. But what can you know about a wine without tasting it? About a car without going on a test drive? About a college without visiting the campus? Not everything, to be sure, but quite a lot—and now more than ever.

The Carnegie Foundation has developed a new set of lenses for viewing American higher education that broadens our ability to describe U.S. colleges and universities. By expanding the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education from a single typology to a set of distinct classifications representing several ways to think about how colleges and universities resemble or differ from one another, the Foundation aims to provide users with greater analytic flexibility, allowing them to choose the classification that is best suited to their needs and questions.

The Carnegie Classification was developed in 1970 to support research on U.S. higher education, and that continues to be its primary purpose. But it has been put to many other uses over the years, leading to expressions of concern over its impact and calls for changes. In addition, higher education itself has become more complex. Between 1970 and 2000, the number of colleges and universities increased from about 2,800 to nearly 4,000. With this growth has come diversification in providers, students, and patterns of enrollment. And yet the 1970 framework remained the predominant way to characterize

similarity and difference among colleges and universities. The single classification was simply inadequate.

Starting in the late 1990s, the Carnegie Foundation decided the time had come to overhaul its classification system. We wanted to identify and remedy blind spots, while providing new, more telling ways to represent the diversity of U.S. higher education. An interim update was issued in 2000, and we then began a serious effort to develop new ways to compare institutions along several dimensions.

We have now released five of six all-inclusive classification schemes, each of which offers a different perspective on institutional similarities and differences. Next month, we will complete the set with a substantially revised version of the original framework (which we now refer to as the "basic" classification). While the basic classification may continue to serve as a key point of reference and analytic tool for many users, we believe the new classifications will add much-needed texture and nuance. As part of these changes, we have developed a Web-based facility for generating standard and customized classification listings and downloads.

The five new classifications are organized around three central questions: 1) What is taught, 2) to whom, and 3) in what setting? By expanding the system in this way, we can take selected attributes that are reflected in only a limited way in the basic framework and delve more deeply. Colleges and universities will no longer be characterized on the basis of a single view of what they do. For example, a research university's "portrait" will capture not only its commitment to graduate education, but also the nature of its undergraduate program, the characteristics of its undergraduates, the relative size of undergraduate and graduate populations, and the absolute size and residential character of the campus. These are all important dimensions of a complex institution, but all but the first are rendered invisible in the basic classification.

The new system will also allow users to examine the points of intersection among the different classifications. Which institutions emphasize professional fields at the doctoral level yet emphasize the arts and sciences in their undergraduate education? Which ones emphasize business programs at the master's level and blend the arts and sciences with occupational/professional training at the undergraduate level?

While the original Classification was intended primarily for use by researchers, we believe that the flexibility offered by multiple categories invites a wider range of uses:

- Researchers can use the new classifications to examine how different student populations are served by different institutional types, or they can use them to understand differences in the lives of students and faculty members.
- Policy makers can use the classifications to ask new questions about institutional diversity and how particular needs are being met.
- Institutional personnel can use the classifications to compose a variety of possible peer groups, as a step toward examining programs and performance relative to comparable institutions.

- Prospective students and their parents might find value in the new classifications, as well. Although other tools exist that are more tailored to their needs, the new classifications include certain features that are not found in college guides (such as the degree of correspondence between undergraduate and graduate education).

There are also important things that colleges and universities do that are not reflected in national data collections. Two new "elective" classifications—based on voluntary participation—will attempt to incorporate information on two areas where institutions have special commitments. The results of a recently-completed pilot project will inform the development of an elective classification for outreach and community engagement. The second elective classification, to be developed in 2006, will focus on how institutions seek to analyze, understand, and improve undergraduate education.

Classifying colleges and universities from a distance—on the basis of national data—can never fully capture their character and complexity, but this framework does more justice to their multifaceted nature. As the simple, mutually exclusive terminology of the traditional classification gives way to a richer multidimensional framework, our conception of institutional similarities and differences will necessarily become more nuanced. We believe the added flexibility, and the responsibility that goes with it, will enhance research and policy development, as well as campus conversations about institutional priorities and distinctiveness.

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