

At a time of contentiousness and criticism current practices raise questions: do those who constitute the court of last resort understand the unusual entity with which they have been entrusted? When trustee initiative is necessary and appropriate and when it is not? Have we done enough to prepare trustees for their responsibilities? Are those who make the appointments more concerned about the candidate's ability to read balance sheets than their appreciation of university values? Or do we look primarily at the capacity of potential trustees to make large donations? Or are those who have the power of appointment primarily interested in a candidate's political affiliation?

The same point can be made about faculty. We take great care to examine research credentials and—these days, and this is a major and welcome change—we look more closely at teaching capacities. But do we do anything to prepare faculty to participate productively in shared governance? Both of these tasks will grow in urgency as the American research university—“the envy of the world”—navigates very stormy seas predicted by nearly all observers.

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The Importance of Demographics in Explaining Attainment Patterns

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In the past decade, the issue of how the United States compares to other countries in its attainment rate—the share of adults with a college degree—has become a very prominent issue in American higher education debates. Thus, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has issued a series of reports that indicate the United States has fallen behind many other OECD member countries in its attainment rate, especially among young adults. Concerns about this slippage led President Obama to make increasing degree attainment and completion rates an essential part of his domestic policy agenda. A number of recent reports also have made the related argument that many more millions of college graduates must be produced over the next decade, to allow the American economy to remain globally competitive.

Lost in these expressions of concern, however, is the seemingly contradictory fact that the number of bachelor's and associate degrees awarded in the United States has consistently grown for many decades—including the most recent one—at rates that far exceed the growth in the overall and college-age populations. Since degree holders of a certain age, divided by the relevant age population, determines the attainment rate, that means the US attainment rate has grown consistently over time as well.

How does one make sense of the seeming contradiction that the number of degrees awarded annually and the attainment rate of the adult population in the United States have both grown, even as the country has fallen further behind many global competitors in the share of its population with a postsecondary degree. The simple answer is that the attainment rate in other countries has grown faster than in the United States and thus the relative US ranking has declined, particularly for the youngest group of adults.

But, based on this puzzle, an important answer lies in differences in demographics and the impact that demographic trends can have on the number of college graduates that a country produces and on its higher education attainment rate. What has too often been forgotten or ignored in recent American debates is that the number of college graduates in a country is actually a function of two components: the size of the relevant age group and the share of that group that holds a degree. What is not well understood is that of the two factors; demographic trends can often be a much larger determinant of the total *size* of the college-educated work force than changes over time in the attainment rate.

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The number of bachelor's degrees awarded in the United States has grown much faster than the population, since the end of World War II. As a result, attainment rates for at least a bachelor's degree in the United States have grown consistently over the past half-century for all adult age groups. Even in the most recent decade, the rate for each age group grew by at least 10 percent. In each age group, the attainment rate for those with a bachelor's degree or more has at least tripled since 1960 and at least doubled since 1970. This pattern of sustained growth in attainment is also true over the past two decades for working-age adults holding at least an associate's degree. The time span examined is shorter because the US government has only recorded the numbers of adults holding an associate's degree, since 1990.

The description above, regarding attainment rate trends, contradicts the frequently heard statement that US attainment rates have been flat or stagnant for an ex-

tended period. This mistaken assertion flows from an accurate observation: Attainment rates of the youngest and oldest groups of working adults in the United States are now roughly the same that leads many to conclude that US attainment has not grown over time. But the fact is that the rough equality in attainment rates for the youngest and oldest adult workers has largely been achieved through rapid increases in the attainment rate of the oldest group, rather than any decline or even slowing in the rate for the youngest group of adult workers.

Demographic trends that dictate the size of the population are the other less discussed part of the equation for determining the number of college degree holders. But unlike the attainment rate that has consistently increased, the size of the traditional college age group has varied over time. The number of high school graduates in the United States peaked in the mid-1970s as a result of the baby boom, fell

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until the early 1990s, and then grew again, peaking around 2008–2009. That number is now projected to fall again through 2014–2015 before starting to grow again toward the end of the current decade.

Yet, despite fairly steep declines in the number of high school graduates for several decades, the number of college students and degrees awarded in the United States has consistently grown over the past 50 years. How to explain this? The basic answer is that American higher education has been very successful in increasing the number of students older than the traditional college age. As a result, participation and attainment rates for each adult age group has increased consistently over the past 50 years, as have the numbers of degrees awarded.

THE EXPERIENCE IN HIGH-ATTAINMENT COUNTRIES

Patterns of population growth and attainment rates in the United States, as described above, jointly determine the size of the current and future American labor force, with respect to college graduates. But they do not provide much insight into why the US ranking in attainment-rate charts has slipped so badly when compared to many other OECD

countries. For this, the demographics and attainment rates must be looked for those countries.

Many of the OECD countries have overtaken us on attainment rates, with large declines in their numbers of young adults—due to low-birth rates and patterns of net out-migration. For several countries with the highest attainment rates, such as South Korea and Japan, the number of 15–24 year olds and 25–34 year olds dropped by double-digit percentages between 2000 and 2010. The decline in younger age groups for many other high-attainment countries was similar. Moreover, for many of these countries, especially in Asia, the decline in the numbers of college age youth has been chronic and persists.

This means that many of the countries that now rank higher than the United States on the overall degree attainment of younger adults have accomplished this feat by educating an increasing share of a declining number of younger adults—a fact that could have serious adverse labor market implications for these countries now and down the road. For many of these high attainment countries, the number of young adults with degrees far exceeds the number of those getting ready to retire, which could also greatly add to the unemployment rate of recent college graduates in those countries.

Thus, the recent debates concerning where the United States ranks among OECD countries in attainment have not focused nearly enough on the extent that different demographics have played a role in these attainment trends or on their implications for meeting labor force requirements in the future. ■

Internationalization of Higher Education: Converging or Diverging Trends?

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What is the key finding in the International Association of Universities (IAU) 4th Global Survey?" This is the question that is most frequently asked about the International Association of Universities' latest survey, Internationalization of Higher Education: Growing Expectations,