

riages in the United States. The discussion left him aghast. “The whole thing—the idea of [the discipline] getting involved in this!—is just . . . preposterous!” he exclaimed. When I suggested that the discipline might be trying to provide its professional expertise to inform the public debate, he stopped me in midsentence. “No no no!” he nearly shouted. “It was purely political!”

#### RETHINKING SOCIAL COHESION FROM THE BOTTOM UP

The purpose here is not to castigate faculty for their resistance to social cohesion policy, but to identify major cultural barriers to the imposition of policy through external governance. EU social cohesion policy seems quite naïve in its inattention to major stumbling blocks to implementation. From a governance perspective, the top-down approach to social cohesion does not seem likely to succeed beyond its symbolic value. Instead, we must rethink governance from the bottom up.

Immigrant students often suffer from a lack of social capital, the resources provided by connections within social networks. Social capital has been shown to increase attachment to school and have positive impacts on academic achievement. European universities need to increase the baccalaureate attainment of Muslim students, through recruitment and retention efforts; and facilitate the creation of student groups, both social and academic, which will foster community among students. This requires casting aside an official ideology that suppresses group identity by embracing vague affirmations of social diversity and equality.

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Funding for research projects and curricular programs addressing the emerging problems of immigration and integration are another means to improve our awareness of these social challenges and to affirm the importance of these challenges. Prominent scholars should be invited to speak on these issues on campus and in public. Indeed, the Dutch universities are a model for supporting public intellectuals who engage social issues through public debate.

Any one of these suggestions may or may not prove feasible. The idea is to turn the usual thinking about social cohesion upside down, by building social networks among students and faculty that yield social benefits. Effective governance cannot rely upon a heroic model where individuals work valiantly against social norms to move initiatives forward. We need a more prosaic model of governance that supports our social goals.

*Author's note:* This is condensed from an article in *Prospects: The Quarterly Journal of Comparative Education*, vol. 38, to be published later this year. ■

## Participation, Persistence, and Attainment Rates: The US Standing

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After largely ignoring international comparisons for many years, several recent reports in the United States have compared the American performance in higher education to that of other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. These reports have focused mostly on how the United States is slipping when it comes to attainment rates in tertiary education, but they often also raise questions about the country's position with respect to its participation and persistence rates.

#### PARTICIPATION RATES

For decades, participation rates—the proportion of the traditional college age population that enrolls in a tertiary program—has been coin of the realm when it comes to comparing national performance. Martin Trow built his now-famous typology of elite, mass, and universal higher education systems by bracketing their participation rates. Since the United States became a mass system in the 1960s, it has been generally agreed that its participation has ranked among the highest rates in the world. Statistics collected by the US Department of Education indicate that more than two-thirds of spring high school graduates now enroll in a postsecondary education program in the following fall, up from less than one-half as recently as the early 1970s.

But this high US level of tertiary participation is not reflected in the OECD-reported figures because of how US entry rates are defined. The primary OECD method to calculate entry rates divides the number of students enrolled (including international students and older students) by the population of traditional college age, thus tending to overstate entry rates in those countries with large numbers of overseas or older students. That is how New Zealand in some years has had an entry rate of more than 100 percent; its rate in 2005 was 79 percent. The US figure in the same year was 64 percent (ninth

among OECD countries) while the overall OECD average was 54 percent. But in some recent years, the US entry rate was lower than the OECD average, another indication of how this measure of participation may not reflect reality.

#### PERSISTENCE RATES

Another traditional means of comparing OECD countries is persistence rates—the proportion of entering students who complete their programs. Periodic longitudinal surveys of students entering universities in the United States suggest that about half of them receive a degree within six years. For community college students, the degree completion rate in the United States is much lower—certainly less than 20 percent and perhaps less than 10 percent, as many of the students who enroll do not plan to receive a degree. The view is that the United States has tended to be below the average of many other countries in terms of persistence, in part because as one of the first of the mass or universal systems in the world, the United States has adhered to the policy of letting more and more people try higher education and not worrying as much about how many complete their programs.

But as in the case of participation, the way in which OECD collects and reports data on persistence rates may distort comparisons. OECD reports two rates of persistence. One meas-

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urement calculates survival rates by dividing the number of students who receive a degree in one year by the number of students who enroll in the typical year of entrance, allowing for a normal time-to-degree. On this measure, for university students, the United States ranked last among OECD countries, tied with New Zealand at 54 percent. The other OECD-reported measure of persistence—graduation rates—divides the number of graduates in one year by the enrollment of students at the typical age of graduation. The US rate in 2005 was 34 percent, below the OECD average of 36 percent but above that of a number of other countries. Interestingly, on this measure, New Zealand had a rate of 51 percent, near the top of OECD countries. These disparities show why it is not a good idea to look simply at the OECD figures and make a judgment on that basis. A more reasonable conclusion would be that the United States is average to below average when it comes to persistence rates among OECD countries but not at the bottom of the heap.

#### ATTAINMENT RATES

The traditional focus of international comparisons on participation and graduation rates has changed recently, and now attainment rates—the proportion of the adult population with a tertiary degree—have become a primary basis for comparison. This shift in focus on attainment is welcome for several reasons. First, attainment measures both access and success and thus may be superior to rates that measure either access or success separately. Second, attainment rates are measured consistently by most OECD countries as part of their census surveys and thus represent a more legitimate statistic than the proxy measures used for participation and persistence. Third, attainment rates possess the somewhat unique characteristic of allowing trends over time to be examined even though the data are collected as a snapshot. This is achieved by comparing the attainment rates of the younger adult workers to the rates achieved by older workers.

This shift in focus to attainment rates has engendered a growing debate in the United States about where it stands among OECD countries. Several recent reports have made the case that attainment in the United States is falling because the country no longer ranks as high as it once did among OECD countries. These reports then go on to express concern that without a massive change in policy and/or substantial increases in public funding, America will find itself increasingly unable to compete in the global marketplace because other countries will be producing more college graduates.

Attainment in the United States really consists of two stories—one that relates to bachelor's degrees and the other to subbachelor's degrees such as associate's degrees awarded by community colleges. In terms of bachelor's degrees, the United States has ranked at the top of OECD countries for several decades. This continues to be the case; the United States is tied with Norway as having the highest rate among all adult workers (30 percent). But when attainment rates for bachelor's degrees among the youngest workers are compared, several OECD countries now have higher rates as their systems are growing rapidly while the United States has matured and reached an equilibrium point.

The bigger concern regarding attainment in the United States is at the subbachelor's degree level where the United States has traditionally lagged behind many other OECD countries. That continues to be the case with the United States having a 9 percent attainment rate for subbachelor's degree, right around the OECD average. The problem looks worse when bachelor's and subbachelor's degree attainment rates are combined. On this combined measure, the United States now ranks 10th among OECD countries when the youngest group of adult workers is considered.

Much also is made in some of the recent reports that the United States and Germany are the only two OECD countries where the attainment rate for younger workers is the same as or lower than the rate for older workers, suggesting that their attainment rates are declining. But comparing the attainment

rates of younger and older workers can also be deceiving. The fact is that the bachelor's degree attainment rate in the United States has climbed steadily throughout the past several decades. How can this be so if the younger and older workers have the same rate of attainment? The answer is that if the attainment rate is the same for younger and older workers, attainment most likely is rising. The explanation is that the younger workers will have higher rates than today's older workers since as they age additional members of the cohort will attain a degree, thus leading to higher rates.

In sum, the United States continues to have among the highest participation rates among OECD countries, below average rates of completion, among the highest attainment rates for bachelor's degrees, and average to below average attainment rates for subbachelor's degrees. These rankings are not necessarily inconsistent. A high proportion of American high school graduates enroll in tertiary education, many do not complete their degrees; but since so many enroll, attainment is high at least for bachelor's degrees. One key conclusion from this analysis is that a key challenge for the United States is to figure out how to improve the degree completion rate of its community college students. ■

## For-Profit Universities in the Political Economy of Higher Education

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Over the past two decades, higher education research has turned much of its attention to the purpose and effectiveness of various institutional forms of postsecondary education. In the United States, a national system long dominated by non-profit public and private degree-granting institutions has recently had to give some attention to the more prominent for-profit colleges and universities. While they account for only a small percentage of postsecondary enrollments, for-profit institutions—particularly publicly traded higher education corporations such as the University of Phoenix—loom much larger in the political economy of US higher education than their size would lead one to expect. In negotiations over the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, the for-profit universities and their lobbying organizations have played a unique role in shaping policies affecting all higher education institutions.

The emergence of this sector offers important lessons for the future of higher education in the United States and many other countries in which for-profit education is offered or contemplated.

### FOR-PROFITS, MARKETS, AND THE STATE

The neoliberal restructuring programs, in ascendance globally since the 1970s, rely on a simple belief: the role of the state in the production of public and private goods should be reduced in favor of market competition wherever possible. To evaluate the possible impact of neoliberal policies on colleges and universities, scholars have addressed the complex nature of higher education as both a public and private good as well as the traditional state role regarding problematic aspects of the market production of education such as information asymmetry, moral hazard, and underinvestment. The United States has long been a mixed system with a great deal of direct government provision through public nonprofit institutions as well as direct and indirect government subsidies for public nonprofit institutions and indirect subsidies (primarily through student aid and tax policies) to private nonprofit and for-profit institutions. That system has also been highly regulated at the state and federal level.

The political argument for shifting direct subsidies from government provision to a more competitive resource allocation system asserts that essential public interests can be protected through regulations designed to shape market behaviors. It is a powerful claim, one that questions what it is that the country will need to regulate and how effective the regulation will be. While there is some consensus that states need to regulate to ensure the appropriate balance of public and private goods for the continued success of the national postsecondary project, little general agreement exists on the forms of regulation or the nature of that balance. How effectively a marketized higher education system can be regulated is a rarely addressed question in research on higher education. The rise of for-profit degree-granting universities offers insight into the question and points usefully to the need for further inquiry.

### UNIVERSITIES IN THE POLITICAL ARENA

Although they are not often described as such, colleges and universities in the United States and many other national contexts are political institutions. They entail significant public costs and allocate essential public benefits in a process determined by political action. The key issues of resource allocation and regulation for higher education in the United States are served by the adjudication of various demands through state and national political structures. This factor creates powerful incentives for postsecondary institutions to make their interests clear in the political process.

Lobbying represents one of the most effective forms of political action—devoting human and financial resources to raising issues, information, and arguments before legislators and individuals in a position to influence legislation. In the