

# History of American Higher Education

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PRIMER

# **Overview of Higher Education in the United States**

## **Introduction**

American higher education in the 21st century is complex and diverse. Encompassing all varieties of educational opportunity beyond the secondary level, it includes public and private institutions that award certificates, diplomas, or degrees. Some are proprietary schools, operating for a profit and designed to prepare individuals for a specific career. Other institutions focus on the liberal arts and many of them offer both bachelor's and master's degree programs. True universities tend to have a strong research orientation. Admission and graduation requirements vary; expectations for faculty work and productivity differ, as do institutional commitments to community involvement and service. The system of higher education evident in the United States today emerged over a period of more than 370 years. In very general terms, higher education remained relatively consistent in the 1600s and early 1700s but began to diversify after the American Revolution. Throughout the 1800s, the system expanded significantly in an effort to address the needs of a rapidly developing nation. Still, the impact was limited by the narrow influence, modest number, and small size of most institutions. By the end of the 1800s, the



idea that new knowledge could be discovered which could improve the human condition gained prominence. States became college benefactors; public and privately endowed research universities were founded; and land-grant institutions were established through federal legislation. New populations of students enrolled in a variety of academic programs, some of which were intended to support advancement while others were designed to mold students for the established role and place social custom dictated. Throughout the 20th century, the value of a college degree became apparent as an avenue for both social mobility and economic prosperity. Private and government investment, the advent of college athletics, and the development of a knowledge industry combined to amplify the role and raise the value of postsecondary education. The 21st century promises to impact higher education in new ways that will stretch the boundaries of teaching, learning, research, and service as knowledge expands at a seemingly boundless pace and technology pressures **pedagogy** in ways never before imagined.

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**Pedagogy**

instructional methods used in teaching

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**Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching**

founded by Andrew Carnegie in 1905 and serves as a policy and research center

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**Associate's degree**  
academic degree usually awarded after two years of study or the equivalent

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**For-profit**  
institutions that operate in order to generate a profit

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**Research institutions**  
institutions that conduct research as a primary mission

## Number and Types of Institutions

Before focusing on the historical development of higher education in the United States, it is useful to gain an understanding of its 21st-century organizational structure. One way to do so is to view postsecondary education through the classification system developed by the **Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching**. First outlined in 1970 and published in 1973, the classifications have been revised and updated several times. The current form offers “multiple, parallel classifications” to allow researchers more flexibility and to offer different “lenses” through which to view and understand higher education (Carnegie Foundation, n.d., “Carnegie Classification,” paras. 1-2). The most recent iteration, using data from 2003 and 2004, was published in 2005 and reported 4,391 institutions enrolling over 17.5 million students. Data from Table 1.1 indicate that institutions which primarily offered an **associate's degree** accounted for over 41.4% of all institutions of higher education in the United States and enrolled 39% of all students during the years under review. Of the 1,078 colleges in this category, more than half were **for-profit**. Two hundred eighty-three **research institutions** (6.4% of all) enrolled more

**Table 1.1: 2005 Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education**

	Number of institutions			Total	Share of total number	Total enrollment	Share of total enrollment
	Public	Private non-profit	For-profit				
<b>Associate colleges</b>							
Public rural-serving small	142	0	0	142	3.2%	133,027	0.8%
Public rural-serving medium	311	0	0	311	7.1%	943,701	5.4%
Public rural-serving large	143	0	0	143	3.3%	1,065,099	6.1%
Public suburban-serving single campus	110	0	0	110	2.5%	854,259	4.9%
Public suburban-serving multicampus	100	0	0	100	2.3%	1,051,012	6.0%
Public urban-serving single campus	32	0	0	32	0.7%	275,307	1.6%
Public urban-serving multi-campus	153	0	0	153	3.5%	1,765,870	10.1%
Public special use	14	0	0	14	0.3%	30,220	0.2%
Private nonprofit	0	114	0	114	2.6%	43,961	0.3%
Private for-profit	0	0	531	531	12.1%	272,833	1.6%
Public 2-year under 4-year universities	55	0	0	55	1.3%	134,222	0.8%
Public 4-year primarily associate	18	0	0	18	0.4%	148,416	0.8%
Private nonprofit 4-year primarily associate	0	20	0	20	0.5%	12,052	0.1%
Private for-profit 4-year primarily associate	0	0	71	71	1.6%	48,272	0.3%
<b>Research institutions</b>							
Research universities very high research activity	63	33	0	96	2.2%	2,365,228	13.5%
Research universities high research activity	76	27	0	103	2.3%	1,693,731	9.6%
Doctoral/research universities	28	48	8	84	1.9%	862,687	4.9%
<b>Master's colleges and universities</b>							
Larger programs	166	161	18	345	7.9%	2,798,279	15.9%
Medium programs	69	108	13	190	4.3%	739,648	4.2%

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	Number of institutions				Share of total number	Total enrollment	Share of total enrollment
	Public	Private non-profit	For-profit	Total			
Smaller programs	32	83	13	128	2.9%	349,859	2.0%
<b>Baccalaureate colleges</b>							
Arts and sciences	38	247	2	287	6.5%	527,533	3.0%
Diverse fields	80	263	17	360	8.2%	595,754	3.4%
Baccalaureate/associate colleges	34	31	55	120	2.7%	267,832	1.5%
<b>Special-focus institutions</b>							
Faith related	0	314	0	314	7.2%	101,742	0.6%
Medical schools and medical centers	29	28	0	57	1.3%	90,701	0.5%
Other health professions	5	99	25	129	2.9%	59,634	0.3%
Engineering	1	5	2	8	0.2%	14,259	0.1%
Other technology	1	6	50	57	1.3%	40,160	0.2%
Business and management	0	25	39	64	1.5%	92,222	0.5%
Art/music/design	4	60	42	106	2.4%	128,273	0.7%
Law	5	25	2	32	0.7%	25,683	0.1%
Other	0	32	7	39	0.9%	17,796	0.1%
Tribal colleges	23	9	0	32	0.7%	17,599	0.1%
Not classified	5	7	14	26	0.6%	3,698	-
All institutions	1,737	1,745	909	4,391	100%	17,570,569	100%

Note: This shows the basic Carnegie classification, a time-specific snapshot of institutional attributes based on data from 2002–2003 and 2003–2004. Institutions might be classified differently using a different time frame. The table reflects corrections of data that had been erroneously reported to the Carnegie Foundation. See <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org> for more information. A dash indicates less than 0.1 percent.

Source: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

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#### Master's level institutions

institutions that offer a baccalaureate and some master's degree programs

than 4.9 million students, or 28% of all students. Of these research institutions, almost 60% were public. In total, the 663 **master's level institutions** comprised about 15% of all institutions and enrolled about 22% of all students. The majority (53%) of master's colleges and universities were private, nonprofit institutions. Institutions classified

**Table 1.2: Degrees Awarded by Type of Institution, 2006–2007**

Type of institution	Associate		Bachelor's		Master's		Doctorate		Professional	
	Number	Share of total	Number	Share of total	Number	Share of total	Number	Share of total	Number	Share of total
Public	566,539	78%	975,513	64%	291,971	48%	36,230	60%	36,855	41%
Private nonprofit	43,829	6%	477,805	31%	261,700	43%	22,483	37%	52,746	59%
Private for-profit	117,750	16%	70,774	5%	50,936	8%	1,903	3%	463	1%
All	728,118	100%	1,524,092	100%	604,607	100%	60,616	100%	90,064	100%

Note: Because of rounding, figures may not add up to 100 percent.

Source: U.S. Department of Education

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**Baccalaureate**  
academic degree usually  
associated with a four-year  
undergraduate course of  
study

as **baccalaureate** accounted for 17.4% of all institutions but enrolled only 7.9% of all students. Institutions with a special focus enrolled 3.2% of all students at 864 institutions (19.7% of all). The largest of these were faith related, medical schools/centers, and those that concentrated on art, music, and design.

The largest campus-based institution is Miami Dade College in Florida but the trend toward online education is growing. In fall 2007, the University of Phoenix online campus, with 224,880 students, had the largest enrollment of any institution in the nation (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., “Which Colleges Have”).

Another way to look at higher education in the United States is to consider degree production. Information in Table 1.2 indicates that in 2006–2007, public institutions awarded the largest share of associate's degrees (78%); the largest share of bachelor's degrees (64%); the largest share of master's degrees (48%); and the largest share of doctorates (60%). However, private nonprofit institutions were a close second at the master's level (43%) and outpaced public institutions at the professional level with 59% of

the total awarded. Private for-profit institutions awarded significantly more associate's degrees (117,118) than degrees at any other level.

## Faculty

Historical patterns of educational opportunity and achievement are reflected in the composition of faculty today. As data in Table 1.3 indicate, men account for 127,488 (74%) of the faculty at the highest rank, full professor. Women account for only 45,907 (26%) of full professors but are making steady advances at the ranks of associate professor, where they account for 40% of the total, and assistant professor, where they comprise 47% of the total. Overall, the vast majority (77%) are White.

## Students

The U.S. Census Bureau reported approximately 17.8 million individuals age 14 years and older enrolled in college in 2007. The majority were women, accounting for over 10 million of the total. During the past twenty years, the number of students over 25 years of age has increased and more come from diverse backgrounds yet the majority of college students are in the 18- to 24-year-old range (63%) and the majority (77%) are White. There were 2.47 million Black students and 2.13 million students of Hispanic origin enrolled in 2007, in both cases continuing a trend toward higher levels of enrollment (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, #272). The number of international students studying in the United States has grown significantly. In 1990, there were approximately 391,500 international students and in 2008 there were 624,500, an increase of about 60% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, #270).

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau for 2007 indicate that of the 1,524,092 bachelor's degrees awarded, the greatest number were conferred in business (327,531) followed by social sciences and history (164,183); education (105,641); and health professions and related sciences (101,810) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, #291). At the master's level, the greatest number were awarded in the fields of education (176,572) and business (150,211). At the doctoral level, 60,616 degrees were awarded and the following fields were most popular: health professions and related clinical sciences (8,355); education (8,261); engineering (8,123); bio-



**Table 1.3: Number of Full-Time Faculty Members by Sex, Rank, and Racial and Ethnic Group, Fall 2007**

	Total	American Indian	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White	Race unknown	Nonresident foreign
<b>Rank</b>								
<b>Professor</b>								
All	173,395	528	12,239	5,839	4,128	147,867	1,309	1,485
Men	127,488	344	10,018	3,646	2,874	108,404	973	1,229
Women	45,907	184	2,221	2,193	1,254	39,463	336	256
<b>Associate professor</b>								
All	143,692	604	11,082	7,855	4,714	115,274	1,628	2,535
Men	86,660	312	7,570	4,110	2,768	68,982	1,038	1,880
Women	57,032	292	3,512	3,745	1,946	46,292	590	655
<b>Assistant professor</b>								
All	168,508	679	17,290	10,642	6,329	117,618	3,593	12,357
Men	88,741	298	10,037	4,607	3,265	60,407	1,945	8,182
Women	79,767	381	7,253	6,035	3,064	57,211	1,648	4,175
<b>Instructor</b>								
All	101,429	965	5,225	7,480	5,800	77,609	2,350	2,000
Men	46,599	492	2,463	2,928	2,782	35,795	1,066	1,073
Women	54,830	473	2,762	4,552	3,018	41,814	1,284	927
<b>Lecturer</b>								
All	31,264	151	2,081	1,602	1,492	23,470	661	1,807
Men	14,784	77	956	721	613	11,045	347	1,025
Women	16,480	74	1,125	881	879	12,425	314	782
<b>Other</b>								
All	85,175	413	5,744	4,512	2,512	58,622	2,334	11,038
Men	44,843	196	3,134	1,770	1,166	29,742	1,291	7,544
Women	40,332	217	2,610	2,742	1,346	28,880	1,043	3,494
<b>Total</b>								
All	703,463	3,340	53,661	37,930	24,975	540,460	11,875	31,222
Men	409,115	1,719	34,178	17,782	13,468	314,375	6,660	20,933
Women	294,348	1,621	19,483	20,148	11,507	226,085	5,215	10,289

Note: Totals may differ from figures reported in other tables because of varying survey methodologies. Source: U.S. Department of Education

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logical and biomedical sciences (6,354); psychology (5,153); and physical sciences (4,846) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, #292).

The average annual cost for undergraduate tuition and room and board in 2007–08 was estimated to be \$11,578 at public institutions and \$29,915 at private institutions. In the ten-year period between 1997–98 and 2007–08, these costs rose about 30% at public institutions and 23% at private institutions, after adjusting for inflation (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, n.d., Table 331). At the undergraduate level in 2007–08, 66% of all students received some type of financial aid. The total average (for those who received aid) was \$9,100. Fifty-two percent received grants averaging \$4,900, and 38% took out an average of \$7,100 in student loans. Seven percent received aid through work-study jobs (averaging \$2,400 in wages) and 2% received an average of \$5,400 in veterans' benefits. Four percent of students had parents who took out an average of \$10,800 in Parent PLUS loans (Wei, Berkner, He, Lew, Cominole, & Siegel, 2009, p. 3).

## Alumni

The purpose and value of higher education has been much debated over the years. Some argue that knowledge is valuable in and of itself. Critical thinking and communication skills often credited to higher education are also understood by many to be important qualities for a full and productive life. Others cite increased earning power as an important purpose of higher education. In 2008, the percentage of young adults working full-time for the full year was generally higher for those with higher levels of education. Seventy-two percent of young adults with a bachelor's degree or higher were full-time, full-year workers in 2008, compared with 62% of young adults with a high school diploma or its equivalent. Among young adults employed full-time, full-year, higher levels of education were associated with higher median earnings. This pattern of higher earnings corresponding with higher levels of educational attainment was consistent for each year between 1995 and 2008. Young adults with a bachelor's degree consistently had higher median earnings than those with less education, and this pattern held for male, female, White, Black,



Hispanic, and Asian subgroups. According to the National Center for Education Statistics in 2008:

The median of the earnings of young adults with a bachelor's degree was \$46,000, while the median was \$36,000 for those with an associate's degree, \$30,000 for those with a high school diploma or its equivalent, and \$23,500 for those who did not earn a high school diploma or its equivalent. In other words, in 2008, young adults with a bachelor's degree earned 28 percent more than young adults with an associate's degree, 53 percent more than young adult high school completers, and 96 percent more than young adults who did not earn a high school diploma. In 2008, the median of the earnings of young adults with a master's degree or higher was \$55,000—20 percent more than young adults with a bachelor's degree. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, n.d., "What Is the Average Income")

Institutional alumni who remember their college years fondly or credit their earning potential to their *alma mater* also donate to their former institutions. As a result of their generosity and that of other interested individuals and organizations, institutional endowments have grown at some institutions to astounding levels. The nation's first college, Harvard, reported its endowment in 2009 to be over \$25 billion. Yale University, Stanford University, and Princeton University each reported endowments that year of over \$10 billion (NACUBO and Commonfund Institute, 2010). In 2009, voluntary support for higher education exceeded \$28 billion, the largest percentage of which came from foundations (29.6%), followed by alumni (25.6%), non-alumni individuals (17.9%), and corporations (16.6%); religious and other organizations made up the balance (Council for Aid to Education, 2009, p. 2).

## Conclusion

Postsecondary education in the United States has developed in response to social expectations, economic opportunities, political agendas, global pressures, and national needs. Still, the experience of higher education remains an individual one, reflecting the goals, aspirations, and hopes of individual students throughout its history. While critics might complain that the system is slow to change, others cite its rapid expansion, especially during the 20th century, as evidence of its vitality. The broad overview offered in this primer reflects the historical progression through which



the system of higher education in the United States developed. It is impossible here to fully describe the complexity of this evolution, the numerous individual visionaries, the countless intertwining details, the sidesteps, and the missteps that all contributed to the size and scope of the contemporary enterprise. Although the development is presented as a linear narrative, it is important to understand that no single institution, or even institutional type, arrived at one particular moment in its current form. The faculty of the classical curriculum often thrived side by side with those who were conducting pure or applied research and others who prepared students for the professions. The interested reader is encouraged to review the reference section and seek out additional material, both on general educational history and on details relative to specific institutions, individuals, and movements.

## GLOSSARY

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