Federalism, or The Absence of a National Ministry

Few features are more difficult to explain to the foreign observer than the absence of an American ministry of education. Not only do virtually all other countries have one, but in the absence of a federal ministry it is difficult, for example, to account for why degrees are considered essentially the same in all 50 states, or why the federal government can be relatively assured that its financial support is buying about the same thing across states.

The United States does have something called a Department of Education and a cabinet-level officer who appears to be some kind of “minister.” But we do not have a national ministry of education, much less of higher education—not, at least, one with any of the powers and responsibilities associated with that term elsewhere in the world. Our federal government, while immensely important to the funding of students and the support of research, has nothing to do with standards for entry, admission of students, requirements for degrees, qualifications of faculty or their terms and conditions of employment, selection of governing boards or chief executive officers, or anything else about how institutions, public or private, are governed and run.
An Extensive and Bi-Modally Prestigious Private Sector

Not unrelated to the first peculiarly American feature is our extensive and bi-modally elitist private sector. While a well-developed private higher education sector is not unusual in many parts of the world, the bi-modal nature of the selectivity—and thus the prestige—of American private institutions is unique. The most and the least selective and prestigious institutions in the United States are private.

The significance of the U.S. private sector to American (and worldwide) higher education today is due mainly to those private institutions that have attained the pinnacle of selectivity and prestige. The formation of such an elite group is due in large part to the refusal by Congress in the early 19th century to form a national university and then, over the next two centuries, to channel most federal research dollars in support of basic research directly to institutions on an openly competitive, full-cost remuneration basis. In turn, the position of the highly selective private universities and colleges has been maintained by their enormous donated wealth and by the willingness of American parents and students to bear a significant portion of the costs of the higher educational enterprise (which arises in the fourth significant feature, below).

Governance and Ultimate Authority in the Hands of Voluntary Governing Boards

The combination of the peculiarly American mistrust of government and the unique 19th century explosion in the growth of American private colleges, which had earlier borrowed from the Scots and the Dutch the vesting of ultimate governing authority in a part-time, voluntary lay board, resulted in the extension of this lay governing board model to the nation’s emerging public universities—and ultimately even to the 20th century public comprehensive and community colleges. This governance model worked well with and undoubtedly reinforced the absence of a national ministry and accounts for the quite extraordinary autonomy of most state universities from their patron governments. In turn, this model of governance led naturally to American university and college presidents who are substantially more powerful than their European counterpart rectors.

Today, as governments are attempting to divest themselves of the enormous financial burden of their public higher educational systems and embrace neo-liberal economic principles of privatization and institutional autonomy, other countries are becoming increasingly interested in the American governing board model in place of the older ministerial models of state control and the civil service status of the professorate. At the same time, there seems to be little appreciation of the subtleties of a well-run American governing board and, particularly, the imperative that members limit themselves to matters of broad institutional mission, fiscal integrity, and the wise selection and careful monitoring of a chief executive officer. Nor is there an appreciation in most countries considering such a public divestiture of the enormity of the task of fund raising: the years of cultivation of alumni and donors, the favorable tax laws, and the sheer amount of time required to amass an endowment of significant size. A public board can indeed be a wonderful melding of public authority and institutional advocacy—a window, as it were, of public needs to the university and of university needs to the state. But an effective public governing board also needs an almost abnormal sense of restraint and trust in the institution’s management, which is precarious even in America, with its long history of not-for-profit and public-authority governing boards.

Extensive Financial Reliance on Nongovernmental Funding

For a variety of reasons, the American family has become accustomed to bearing the lion’s share of the costs of their children’s higher education. Although the nation’s public colleges and universities were overwhelmingly publicly financed through the 1960s, the enormous added costs stemming from the explosion of numbers in our public institutions, fueled first by the GI Bill and then by the post-war baby boom, were met in substantial part by nongovernmental revenues, i.e., tuition, fees, private philanthropy, and competitive contract research. In spite of the American voter’s disinclination to being taxed and growth-
ing public-sector competition from the demands of health and welfare, basic education, national defense, and corrections, U.S. higher education continues to be relatively well funded.

Meanwhile, in many other parts of the world, the ideological commitment to free higher education (extending to free food and lodging and even at times to pocket money) has placed the entire financial burden of higher education—and in some countries, explosively growing enrollments—on the taxpayers. U.S. taxpayers and politicians may grumble about the costs of their public colleges and universities, but relatively, no one pays less in taxes and gets so much quality higher education as do U.S. citizens.

Responsiveness to the Needs and Interests of the Community and the State

The high level of responsiveness to the needs of government (whether national, state, or local), to business, and to the public (especially to students and their families) on the part of American colleges and universities stems from the combination of peculiarly American institutional features identified above. In particular, institutional dependence on nongovernmental revenue means that serious attention is paid to state and local governments, potential donors, and students and their parents.

The great American public research universities historically have embraced the applied and the practical, not only through the Land Grant and county extension functions, but by catering to the career interests of the undergraduate student body, such as teacher education, engineering, and business in the old days, and business, communications, computer science, and pre-professional preparation today. Furthermore, faculty overwhelmingly devote their time and laboratories to whatever scientific inquiry is supported by the government in the form of direct and indirect cost recoveries.

While some may lament the marketization of our universities and colleges, governments in other countries are working to emulate this American higher educational responsiveness, which they interpret as responsibility. And while some academics—particularly humanists who have tenure and who need only books and a little time rather than grants for their research—may decry this responsiveness, American higher education remains more adequately and probably more securely funded than the universities of any other country.

Modularization of Academic Degree Programs

The marketization of American higher education, its reliance on tuition, and the unusual degree of responsiveness to student career interests and needs are made possible (or perhaps inevitable) by the modularization of academic degree programs. The American degree is awarded primarily based upon the accumulation of credits in an acceptable pattern of general education, major program, and free electives. The significance of this model—as opposed to the essentially examination-based model of degree attainment prevalent in most of Europe and much of the rest of the world—is that one institution’s credits are almost as good as another’s. Competition is heightened and continues after a student’s initial matriculation. If students lose interest, for example, or if an institution appears to have promised more than it can deliver, students can simply take their credits down the road to another institution, which will probably admit them with little or no loss of time or credits.

Separation of Baccalaureate from Graduate and Advanced Professional Studies

Related to the modularization of degrees in American colleges and universities is the viability of the stand-alone baccalaureate institution, coupled with the relegation of
advanced professional study—such as law, medicine, and advanced management studies—to post-baccalaureate study, generally at a university other than the one entered for the first degree. This is completely different from the traditional European university, which has long featured the so-called long first degree and the direct entry of first-year university students into what we would term advanced professional study. Most European universities today are struggling to implement a form of a three- or four-year first degree. The clear and distinct separation of the American baccalaureate from advanced scholarly and professional study has made possible that most unique of all American higher educational institutions: the elite, four-year baccalaureate college. It is only with the assurance that one’s chances of attending medical, law, or graduate school will in no way be diminished—and might well be enhanced—by first attending a four-year college that the elite baccalaureate colleges can continue to attract much of the academic cream of the American high school.

Preoccupation with Accessibility and the “Ever Open Door” to Further Education

The combination of enormous postsecondary education capacity, financial assistance, abundant part-time employment possibilities, and a great range of entry standards means that nearly any young person in America—even one whose parents are unable to assist financially at all, but who has at least a modicum of interest, aptitude, and willingness to assume some indebtedness—can find a place at a college. Furthermore, academically failing at one institution does not preclude admission to another, which likely will accept all or most of the credits the student has already earned. These repeated chances keep alive the possibility of attaining a degree—an opportunity that would have died long before in most other countries.

Similarly, the loss of interest or failure in one academic specialization does not stop one from trying another area of study, or still another. Nowhere else in the world can a 25-year-old with a baccalaureate in English and history decide she wants to be a physician and have a chance at entering medical school. Finally, the concern on the part of most colleges and universities for ethnic and racial diversity is so strong that young persons from an “underrepresented minority” background are often courted with preferences in both admissions standards and financial assistance. In short, American higher education is uniquely preoccupied with accessibility and opportunity.

Virtually all countries prize equality of opportunity. For most, this means entry via objective entrance examinations, little or no tuition fees, and financial assistance for the costs of student living. Yet in many countries, equality of opportunity is thought to be sufficiently demonstrated by a handful of the very brightest and most academically committed from poor, rural, or ethnic minority families who make it into the university—quite regardless of the gross statistical underrepresentation in virtually all countries of such students. It seems to be mainly American to measure equality of opportunity not by the striking success of the brilliant child of poor or rural parents, but by the more modest success of the poor, rural, minority student who happens to be as average as most of us.

Conclusion

Each of the features cited above can be understood as a product of the unique history of American higher education. And while many of the features and their effects have their skeptics and detractors, they all add up to a huge, decentralized, uneven, and oddly shaped system, or nonsystem, that somehow works quite well. Building a deeper understanding of higher education in other countries as well as our own can enrich and broaden our perspectives on how we might best address the complex issues we face today as we lead our campuses into the future.