

<제3부 논문>

## Undergraduate Education in the United States: An Economist's View

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### I. Introduction

It is very difficult to describe the characteristics of undergraduate education in the United States in absolute terms. To highlight the distinguishing characteristics of the American system of undergraduate education, it would be helpful to spell out the differences between it and those of other countries. In its early stages, the American educational system must have shared a lot of common characteristics with those in the European countries upon whose model its basic structure was built. It was through a long period's evolutionary process that the American educational system came to acquire its unique characteristics. Therefore, the distinguishing characteristics of undergraduate education in the States can be highlighted more vividly if they are presented in comparative and historical terms.

Unfortunately, however, my knowledge of the educational systems in European countries is too limited to be engaged in a serious comparative analysis. I do not have much knowledge about the current state of undergraduate education in European countries, let alone the history of its evolutionary processes. You must understand that I am just an economist, not an educational specialist nor historian, who happens to be drawn to this subject without appropriate preparation.

The only educational system I know well is that of Korea, and therefore my evaluation of undergraduate education in the States must be strongly influenced by this fact. In other words, I would tend to rely on the comparison with undergraduate education in Korea, explicitly or implicitly, to figure out the distinguishing characteristics of undergraduate education in the United States. In actuality, that is exactly what I did when I prepared this report. It is still very difficult for me to figure out the differences between the two,

since the Korean educational system was originally built after the American model and therefore there are much more similarities than differences.

Besides, my knowledge about undergraduate education in the States itself is very limited. I did my graduate studies in the States and taught at a couple of American universities, but my eight and half years of experiences at American universities are too short to give me a good understanding of the "nitty-gritty" of undergraduate education in the States. I had an opportunity to visit several American universities and talk with various kinds of officials over there last June, but that did not make me an expert on undergraduate education in the States. What I am going to present today is no more than my personal impression of undergraduate education in the States, while at the same time begging your generous understanding about this point.

## II. Background Statistics about Higher Education in the U.S.

There was a time when formal education was the perquisite of a privileged few. A system of comprehensive education, accessible to all, does not have that long of a history. Thanks to the enlightened leadership of founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson, the United States succeeded in establishing a system of comprehensive education where opportunities are open to the all the population, well ahead of their European counterparts. As a result, people in the States have enjoyed ample opportunities to receive higher education for quite a while.

<Table 1> Highest tertiary enrollment

Rank	Country	Proportion of enrollment	Rank	Country	Proportion of enrollment
1	Canada	62.2	11	Belgium	32.7
2	United States	59.6	12	Netherlands	32.4
3	Uruguay	47.2	13	Germany	32.1
4	Argentina	40.8	14	Spain	31.5
5	Finland	40.1	15	Sweden	31.2
6	South Korea	37.7	16	Austria	30.5
7	New Zealand	36.4	17	Denmark	30.5
8	Norway	35.0	18	Japan	30.1
9	France	34.5	19	Ecuador	29.3
10	Israel	34.1	20	Australia	28.8

Source: The Economist, *Pocket World in Figures*; 1993 Edition.

As we can see in Table 1, the number of people enrolled in post-secondary education as percentage of relevant age group in the States is second highest in the world. Only Canada is ahead of the U.S. and only by a few percentage points. The enrollment ratios in other countries are far below, which means that post-secondary education is still a kind of luxury in these countries. The enrollment ratio of 59.6% implies that, in the U.S., roughly 2 out of 3 high school graduates would be enrolling in some form of post-secondary education.

The total number of enrollment in undergraduate programs at the nation's 3,632 colleges and universities as of 1994 was 12,540,000 as we can see in Table 2. There are as many as 1,586 private 4-year institutions, while the number of public 4-year institutions is merely 604. But the total number of enrollment at public institutions is almost twice as large as that of private institutions, which means that public institutions usually have much larger student bodies.<sup>1)</sup> Adding 4-year and 2-year institutions together, public institutions accounts for 90% of total enrollment. We know from this that the public sector bears the major burden of higher education in the States.

As for the composition of enrolled students, we can find a couple of interesting points. The first point of interest is that there are more women than men at American colleges and universities (The ratio of female students in 1994 is 55.0%). In many countries, it is customary that men enjoy more educational opportunities, and the imbalance is far more striking in case of higher education. We can observe that, in these countries, the portion of female students gets smaller and smaller as the level of education goes up, eventually leading to a greatly unbalanced sexual composition at the college level. But the situation is

<Table 2> Colleges and Universities in the United States

Classification		Number	Enrollment
Public	4-year	604	5,902,213
	2-year	1,201	5,485,512
Private	4-year	1,586	2,865,769
	2-year	421	237,732
Total		6,737	14,491,226

Source: *The Almanac of Higher Education: 1995*.

1) It should be noted that the breakdown of enrollment by the type of institution shown at Table 2 includes graduate students as well as undergraduate students.

just the other way around in the States. It would be difficult to say that discrimination against women is totally wiped out in the American society, but we can say there is no discrimination on the basis of sex in terms of educational opportunities to say the least.<sup>2)</sup>

The second point of interest is that the ratio of full-time students is only 56.3% of total enrollees, which means that nearly half of American university students are part-time students. Part time students tend to be much older than full-time students on average, as one can see in Table 3. Due to the presence of these part-time students, the average age of American college students is somewhat high. At least, it is much higher than the average age of Korea's college students. In addition, we can see that the distribution of age is quite dispersed.

According to 1995 edition of *The Almanac of Higher Education*, the average costs including tuition and fees at a public 4-year institutions amount to \$8,990 (for resident) while the corresponding figure is \$18,784 for private 4-year institutions. Table 4 shows the

<Table 3> College Enrollment by Age of Students, Fall 1992

	Undergraduate				
	All	2-year		4-year	
		Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
15 to 17	1.4%	2.9%	0.3%	2.3%	0.0%
18 and 19	20.6	37.8	8.9	30.8	4.7
20 and 21	20.9	23.9	12.8	33.8	8.7
22 to 24	17.9	13.0	14.4	19.4	18.4
25 to 29	13.0	7.2	18.3	5.9	20.4
30 to 34	9.2	6.6	15.2	3.1	16.6
35 to 39	6.5	4.2	11.9	2.1	9.6
40 to 44	5.1	2.4	8.1	1.4	10.8
45 to 49	2.8	1.1	4.8	0.7	4.9
50 to 54	1.2	0.0	2.7	0.2	2.6
55 to 59	0.7	0.2	0.7	0.2	1.7
60 to 64	0.3	0.1	0.9	0.0	0.9
65 and older	0.3	0.3	0.8	0.0	0.8
Number of students	14,035,000	2,205,000	2,034,000	5,858,000	1,546,000

Source: *The Almanac of Higher Education: 1995*.

2) There could still be subtle forms of discrimination against women even in terms of educational opportunities that cannot be reflected in statistical numbers.

breakdown of average college costs. Most Americans perceive that the cost of college rises much faster than both income and inflation, and that perception is mostly true.

Every year *U.S. News & World Reports* calculates cost-of-college index by measuring how many days a typical middle-class wage earner must work to pay for a year's education at America's colleges and universities and the result of calculation is presented in terms of Tuition Freedom Day. The Tuition Freedom Day is defined to be the date when the typical breadwinner has worked long enough to pay a year's worth of college bills. In 1990, the Tuition Freedom Day was April 20 and February 9 for private and public colleges respectively. The Tuition Freedom Day in 1995 is pushed forward to May 12 and February 20 for each category, which means that college bills rose much faster than the average wage earner's income during that time.

No one can say that this burden is not a problem for the middle class American families. But relatively generous provision of financial supports from various sources significantly lightens the burden of low-income families who send their children to colleges. As one can see in Table 5, as much as 56.4% of full-time students received some kind of financial aid

<Table 4> Average College Costs, 1994-95

(4-year colleges)

	Public colleges (Resident)	Private colleges (Resident)
Tuition and fees	\$2,686	\$11,709
Books and supplies	578	585
Room and board	3,826	4,976
Transportation	592	523
Other	1,308	991
Total	\$8,990	\$18,784

Source: *The Almanac of Higher Education: 1995*.

<Table 5> Proportion of Undergraduate Receiving Financial Aid, Fall 1989 (Full-time students)

	Any aid	Federal	State	Institutional	Other
Public	48.3%	34.8%	19.1%	15.9%	9.0%
Private, non-profit	70.4	49.4	30.6	49.7	14.7
Private, for-profit	87.0	82.1	12.2	18.2	5.0
Total	56.4%	41.9%	21.1%	23.6%	9.9%

Source: *The Almanac of Higher Education: 1995*.

in the Fall of 1989. Some private universities with rich resources adopt the so-called 'need blind' admissions policy, which means that admissions are given solely on the basis of applicants' academic qualities, not on the basis of financial situations. These universities thereby keep their doors wide open to everybody who is academically qualified regardless of one's financial conditions.

With such abundant supply of financial aids, some high school graduates from poor families still cannot attend college because of various reasons. For one, some may choose to get a job because he or she should support his or her family. Except for a few exceptional cases, however, being poor does not seem to pose any serious problem for getting college education in the States. That may be one of the reasons that the ratio of enrollment in higher education is unusually high in the U.S.

### III. Consumer Oriented Education in the United States

The most distinguishing characteristic of college education in the U.S. is, in my opinion, its strong consumer oriented nature. Needless to say, students are the consumers of education services offered at colleges and universities. But they are quite different from consumers who buy goods and services at ordinary marketplaces. When you go to the market to buy something, you are a sovereign; you have every right to demand whichever quality for a commodity you are going to buy. And if you are not totally satisfied with the quality of a commodity, you can simply walk away from it.

But education market usually does not work in such a way. Although students are paying customers of educational services, their scope of choice is basically limited by what the suppliers, namely colleges and universities, offer to them. In some cases, they are force-fed to the extent that they should strictly follow the guidelines set by the school. I am not arguing that such a characteristic of education markets is undesirable and therefore requires revolutionary reform. I am just emphasizing that there is such an inherent characteristic in educational markets.

Educational services differ from ordinary commodities in that they are offered by somebody who knows more than the ones who buy them. Knowledge, wisdom and good behaviors can never be bought, even though students pay tuition to learn them. Hence it is the suppliers of educational services who determine their contents. Nevertheless, colleges and universities cannot ignore completely what students want about the education they

get. The extent to which students' opinions are taken into account in determining curricula or other things may differ from school to school. My impression is that American colleges and universities in general are much more responsive to students' voices than Korean universities.

What seems to be the most important reason that makes American schools so responsive is the fierce competition among many schools. Since there are so many colleges and universities in the States, students have a very large degree of freedom to choose a school which suit their tastes and needs.<sup>3)</sup> In other words, they can always vote with their feet whenever they do not like a school's program. It would be very difficult for any school to survive without trying very hard to accommodate students' voices in this competitive environment.

Unlike their Korean counterparts who hardly leave their schools unless kicked out, American college students leave their schools without hesitation if they do not like them for whichever reasons. Since there could be so many reasons for leaving, colleges should try very hard to keep their students happy. It is customary that freshman retention rate and graduation rate are considered very important in evaluating the quality of undergraduate programs. I do not know how much picky American students are compared to students in other countries. But I can say with confidence that they are in general a great deal more difficult to please than Korean students. I believe that college education in the States naturally obtains the characteristic of a buyer's market due to this nature of students.

We can see that, at most American colleges and universities, many courses come and go over a span of several years depending upon how students find them. But I am not saying American schools lack educational philosophy and simply try to cater to students' demands. On the contrary, the programs they offer are usually well balanced and of very high quality. I think America's schools have done a very good job in accommodating students' demands without compromising basic principles of education.

The system of student evaluation of courses that almost all schools adopt also demonstrates the consumer oriented nature of America's schools. Although this system has its own limits, it can be an effective way to communicate between professors and students.<sup>4)</sup> It can also work as a means of exerting pressure on professors not to neglect

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3) As one can see in Table 2, there are as many as 3,652 colleges and universities in the United States in 1994.

their duty of teaching. By adopting the system of student evaluation, American schools acknowledge that students have a right to voice their opinions as consumers of educational services. Such a system may not be unique to universities in the States, but similar systems operated in other countries' universities are not so well established or systematic as that of American universities.

Colleges and universities in the States provide many institutionalized channels through which students can communicate their dissatisfaction to schools no matter what it is. As a result, the rights of students are well protected at America's schools. Perhaps such a characteristic reflects the atmosphere of the American society in general which puts much emphasis on individual's rights. In any event, the principle of consumer sovereignty is evident in this area, too.

#### **IV. Diversity in Educational Programs**

The second distinguishing characteristic of undergraduate education in the United States is the diversity in educational programs. At one extreme, there are undergraduate programs which are highly demanding and competitive. And there are also undergraduate programs which offer relatively easy-going courses to those who are not that bright at the other extreme. And there are all sorts of different programs in the middle. Some school emphasizes liberal education, while the other emphasizes vocational education. Some school has very good engineering programs, while the other has strong business programs. Such examples of diversity are almost infinite.

We can find a great deal of diversity even within the same university system. For example, large state university systems such as University of Wisconsin or State University of New York have a variety of undergraduate programs under its umbrella. Some campuses of such state university systems are very much research oriented and undergraduate programs are strongly influenced by this nature. At the same time, there are campuses which specialize in liberal education of undergraduate students without any graduate program. Some state university systems have 2-year community colleges as well as 4-year colleges and universities. Thus students can choose one from a wide variety of

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4) As long as students are fair and reasonable in evaluating courses, their inputs would be very helpful for professors to improve the quality of courses. In fact, however, students' evaluations could in some cases be affected by evaluator's personal prejudices or gripes.



educational programs that exist within the same university system. I think it would be difficult to find similar examples in other countries.

Of course, universities of other countries also have some degree of diversity in their undergraduate programs. Compared to the diverse nature of undergraduate programs in the States, however, undergraduate programs in other countries look almost monotonic. First of all, there are not many countries which have as many colleges and universities as the United States. Diversity in programs is possible only when there are a number of schools. With only a handful of schools, there is an inherent limit in pursuing diversity in programs.

The greatest beneficiaries of such diversity in programs are without a doubt students who have large degree of freedom in choosing schools that fit their tastes and needs. In such circumstances, anybody can find a right place for him or her regardless of his or her ability, preferences or career goal. Once a student enters a college of his or her choice, he or she can choose one among various ways of completing the program. In case of a bright student who cannot be satisfied with the ordinary courses, for example, he or she can take honor courses for more of a challenge. Many universities have honors programs for high achievers, thus giving them opportunities to finish their program in a challenging way.

On the other hand, some students who are ill prepared can benefit from specially designed programs such as remedial courses and tutoring system. These programs are working as some kind of safety net for slow achievers. The underlying assumption for these programs is that slow achievers would turn out to be successful students if enough time and proper assistance are given. And we can find in these programs an educational philosophy that once a school admits a student it has the full responsibility to help him or her go through with the whole undergraduate program. I think this philosophy is characteristic of America's colleges and universities, although I would not say it is unique to them.

But such programs are now drawing heavy fire from those who think that they are too wasteful. In fact, it is very costly for a school to operate these kinds of programs. Some taxpayers think that it is wasteful that public colleges spend their tax money for that purpose. And parents who send their children to private colleges feel that such programs are responsible for a rapid increase in tuition. Such a sentiment is in line with the general tendency of increasing conservatism that one can find in the American society these days. It has been reported that a number of schools are under strong pressure to scrap remedial

courses.

In any event, no other country can match the United States in the diversity of its colleges and universities. Combined with excellence in their quality, such diversity of American schools works as a strong magnet which draws a number of foreign students to them. There are so many foreign students on the campuses of America's colleges and universities these days that they almost look like international schools. At Columbia University, for example, foreign students account for as many as 18.1% of the total enrollment.<sup>5)</sup> It is not an exaggeration to say that the United States is the undisputed world leader in the area of college education. Like it or not, foreign students studying in the States now will be playing important roles all over the world.

## V. Some Problems of Undergraduate Education in the United States

For all their virtues and strengths, colleges and universities in the United States are by no means problem-free. The most serious of all would be the fact that undergraduate education is so much accessible to all that even those who are hopelessly ill-prepared or ill-suited for higher education go to colleges these days. As I said before, schools try to help such students through remedial courses or tutoring system, but their efforts are not always successful. The upshot is too many college students who cannot write or read properly.

A recent issue of the *U.S. News & World Reports* reports a very bad news about the current state of college education in the States. According to a study carried out by the Educational Testing Service, the report says, only 39% of graduates of 4-year colleges who participate in the survey of literateness could read and interpret a relatively simple bus timetable. And only 35% could write a brief letter explaining a credit card billing error. Of course, it is unfair to put the blame entirely on undergraduate education. In a sense, America's colleges are just inheriting the troubles of deteriorating primary and secondary schools. It would be ridiculous to expect that professors at colleges start all over again from teaching them how to read and write.

But America's colleges cannot avoid the criticism that they spit out a whole bunch of

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5) Among America's colleges and universities, Columbia university has the highest proportion of enrollment by foreign students in 1993-94. In terms of the number of enrollment, Boston university is the leader with 4,547(15.9%) foreign students.

ignorant people into the society. It would be a great challenge for them to teach ill-prepared students such basics as reading or writing without compromising the principles of academicism. Anyway it is a pure waste of time to deliver a lecture on Aristotle and Plato to those who can barely read popular magazines. By the way, I must hasten to say that this kind of problem need not be unique to America's colleges. It is hard to believe that the situation under which Korea's colleges are is much better. Nobody has done any serious study about the literateness of college graduates in Korea as yet. Judging from my casual observation, it is very likely that a very shocking news might be waiting for the Koreans.

Some people point out that professors at America's colleges do not pay enough attention to undergraduate teaching. It is not that they are lazy. Nobody can criticize them for being lazy, since they are reputed to be very hard-working. In many instances, however, their energy is devoted disproportionately to research and graduate teaching, not undergraduate education. Under the stressful situation of 'publish or perish,' nobody would be willing to spend a lot of time developing new course materials for undergraduate courses or talking with undergraduate students. The present incentive structure give a clear signal that anybody who does not devote enough time to reasearch will be ruthlessly punished. A professor who is very poor at undergraduate teaching but has a lot of publication can get tenure, pay increases and everything. But the reputation for being a good teacher is of no help whatsoever.

This problem is known to be more serious at academically prestigious schools. We hear many stories about students who are lured to a certain school by big names in its faculty, but find to their great disappointment that it is their apprentices who are actually teaching them. Administrators who are well aware of this problem try to encourage more interest in undergraduate teaching by giving some incentives. But such incentives are in general too weak to override the present incentive structure under which professors' academic quality is almost unidimensionally measured by the number of publications.

Some people argue that professors must be good researchers first of all to be good teachers. Certainly there is some truth in this argument. Professors at the forefront of research can impart their enthusiasm to students in their classes. On the other hand, lectures given by those who are out of touch with current streams of research could be very boring. But good researchers can be good teachers only if they devote enough time and energy to teaching. Unfortunately, that is not always the case and the reconciliation

between research and teaching remains a difficult problem.

Undergraduate education in the United States faces another kind of problem when people ask whether going to college is really worth it. The easy accessibility of higher education in the States results in a generally overeducated society. These days, it is not unusual that college graduates work at jobs for which high school diplomas are sufficient. Every year far more college graduates pour into the employment market than there are jobs available. As a result, anywhere from 30% to 44% of recent college graduates have fallen into unenviable situations of unemployment or underemployment.

America's colleges and universities must be hard pressed to convince people that it is worthwhile to go to college. It is true that most people go to college in search of knowledge, enlightenment and self-development. At the same time, it is also hard to deny that the expectation of better jobs and higher pay plays an important role in the decision to go to college. Otherwise, it would have been difficult for them to decide to go through two or four more years of hard work without remuneration. As we can see in Table 6, as many as 82.1% of freshmen listed the prospect of better jobs as the very important reason to go to college.

Now that it is clear that such an expectation cannot be realized for many of college graduates, the belief that going to college is worth it would surely be weakened substantially. The number of high school graduates who decide to go to college might

<Table 6> Attitudes and Characteristics of Freshmen (Fall 1993) ; Reasons noted as very important in deciding to go to college

Reason	Proportion
Parents wanted me to go.....	34.6%
Could not find job.....	9.3
To get away from home.....	17.8
To be able to get a better job.....	82.1
To gain a general education and appreciation of ideas.....	65.3
To improve reading and study skills.....	42.6
Nothing better to do.....	3.2
To become a more cultured person.....	42.6
To be able to make more money.....	3.2
To learn more about things that interest me.....	42.6
To prepare for graduate or professional school.....	75.1
A mentor or role model encouraged me to go.....	15.0

Source: *The Almanac of Higher Education: 1995*.

shrink drastically in the future if the present situation persists. There is a possibility that many of America's colleges and universities are forced to recruit a large number of foreign students just in order to survive, although it is the worst possible scenario.

## VI. Summary and Concluding Remarks

Few people would disagree that America's college and universities as a whole are the best in the world in their scholastic excellence and devotion to students. No doubt, they are the envy of the world. The fact that the campuses of America's schools are flooded by foreign students testifies the strong attraction of American college education. It should be noted that foreign students studying in the States are not limited to those who are from developing countries. A sizable proportion of them are from developed countries such as Japan and EU countries.

What I think is the most characteristic of undergraduate education in the States would be its strong consumer orientedness. Compared to colleges and universities in other countries, American schools seem to be much more conscious of what students want. It is hard to believe that such a difference is due to different value systems or philosophy of professors and administrators. That is, it is quite unpalatable that America's schools are more conscious of students' wants just because their professors and administrator espouses more democratic educational philosophy than their counterparts in other countries. What is a more convincing interpretation seems to be that that difference in the degree of competitive pressure is responsible for such a difference. In other words, America's schools are in a sense forced to have such an attitude because they are under far stronger competitive pressure.

The second characteristic of undergraduate education in the States, that is, diversity in its programs, is closely related to its consumer orientedness. America's schools have come up with a rich diversity of programs to meet the diverse demands of students. There are many schools which can satisfy students who go to college with ambitions of becoming scholars. At the same time, there are also many schools which are appropriate to those who are just interested in getting good jobs after graduation. American students can enjoy a luxury of choosing from a whole variety of undergraduate program depending upon each individual's tastes and needs. In fact, they usually shop around a lot to find out a school of their choice. The dynamic nature one can find in America's schools seems to be related to

this active search activities of students.

I must emphasize that my compliments for America's colleges and universities are only in relative terms. In absolute terms, there are many things to be desired about them. Nothing is perfect in our lives. Besides, rapidly changing technology and ensuing changes in social atmosphere exert an insurmountable pressure of reform on them. Of course, there was also such a pressure in the past, but its intensity was obviously much weaker. Compared to a steady pace of progress in technology and social atmosphere in the past, the pace of changes we are facing now is much more rapid and unpredictable. Accordingly, the burden laid on colleges and universities to reform themselves have gotten much heavier.

In this age of multimedia, every aspect of college education will go through abrupt changes. For example, even the century-long tradition of classroom teaching with blackboards is likely to be replaced by new teaching methods in near future. Any school which fails to respond to this demand for reform adequately will not survive. If many of America's schools fail to reform themselves, they will lose the position of the world's leader in college education they enjoy now. America's colleges and universities are now entering a new age of extreme uncertainty. Therein lies a great challenge as well as a danger that America's colleges and universities have to cope with.

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