

Trends in American and German Higher Education

Edited by Robert McC. Adams

Trends in American and German Higher Education, the report of a study supported by grants from the German-American Academic Council (GAAC) to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy, was published by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in February of 2002. Edited by Robert McC. Adams, of the University of California, San Diego, and including essays by Adams, Roger L. Geiger of Pennsylvania State University, and by Jürgen Enders, Barbara M. Kehm, and Uwe Schimank, three German scholars, this report examines the current conditions of the research university systems in the United States and Germany, providing valuable information to educators, researchers, students, administrators, and others interested in the enterprise of higher education. Taking into account differences in population size and the political climates and national traditions of the two countries' educational systems, the report presents an overview and analysis of problems currently facing higher education and research in each country, their similarities, as well as differences. Originally designed as a background for an extensive comparative study of German and American systems, because of the termination of the GAAC this report stands alone. It may, however, provide an informative resource for consideration of possible directions for the changes that are already taking place in the two countries.

In the United States, the higher education system functions without significant centrally established standards or direction. It is composed of some 3,000 public (mostly funded by states) and private institutions, which are governed for the most part by self-perpetuating boards of trustees in the case of private institutions or regents and trustees in the case of public institutions. The report addresses the trend in the United States toward increased privatization, and the continued focus on maintaining and increasing the level of

excellence and competitiveness of elite, standard-setting institutions, rather than on assuring common, minimal standards of quality or opportunity as is the case in Germany. Both public and private universities meet their needs to varying degrees with public funds, as well as through increased tuition and private fund-raising. Roger L. Geiger in his essay “Differentiation, Hierarchy, and Diversity: An Overview of Higher Education in the United States” discusses the multiple functions performed by American universities, the hierarchy of institutions within the system, and the relationship between an institution and the clientele or communities it serves. These are reflected in the shifting balance between research, teaching, and undergraduate education, the increasing emphasis on marketing and on the ranking or prestige of an institution, and the critical issue of diversity as it applies to the clientele of a university. Privatization, the process of change toward greater dependence on private actors and resources, and away from dependence on government, is examined in detail in his second essay, “The American University at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century: Signposts on the Path to Privatization.” Here Geiger discusses the nature and character of universities in the age of privatization, the major characteristics and dynamics of the private and public sectors of higher education and their respective claims on social resources, and provides an analysis of academic research as seen from both a national and the universities’ perspective.

In contrast to the United States, Germany’s system is based on widely available, government-funded higher education, and a prevailing ethic of equality of opportunity rather than differentiation. It is more centralized and largely homogeneous, and internal decision-making power is largely vested in university faculties. Jürgen Enders, Barbara Kehm, and Uwe Schimank provide a problem-oriented description of the German system, and lay the framework for a comparison with the American system in their essay “Structures and Problems of Research in German Higher Education: An Overview and an Agenda for Further Studies.” The authors examine the effects on research of swelling enrollments at a

time of increasing financial constraints, a growing concern about the quality of teaching, changes in student training and career trajectories, and the tendency (greater than in the United States) to shift research to institutes outside the universities. They also analyze structures of and actors in regulation, patterns of control of higher education in Germany, and the growing concern inside and outside higher education that the traditional leadership structure may block the search for necessary reforms.

This report provides a substantial base for any continuing examination of the trends in American and German higher education and research, and as such may prove to be an invaluable resource in considering the challenges to and opportunities for change in the years to come. In Adams' concluding words:

“Perhaps the major conclusion to be drawn from a comparative exercise like the present one is that there is no single, optimal path, nor perhaps even any single, long-term goal, toward which different institutional systems that somehow must embrace higher education and research are inexorably converging. But then, we hope, wisdom may be found instead in compelling illustrations of the multiplicity of possible patterns and the visions, influences, compromises, and conditions that have led them not just in these two countries but in others as well.” (p. 18)