

In September of 2005, *The Economist* magazine released a survey of higher education¹ declaring that “America’s system of higher education is the best in the world. That is because there is no system.” Three reasons for America’s success were cited: limited involvement of the federal government; a spirit of competition between institutions of higher learning; and the idea that American universities were not afraid to abandon a strictly classical education and be ‘useful’. By contrast, the survey portrayed European higher education as an archaic ‘mess’, citing fundamental problems such as too much state control and the lack of freedom at the disposal of institutions of higher learning to manage their own affairs.

This paper will explore the argument put forth by *The Economist* by presenting higher education in the United States and France. The reason for choosing France is because it represents, in many ways, the archetypical model of centralized, state control. The position which each nation embodies in higher education and in many other aspects of society – centralization versus decentralization, the so-called *French model* versus the *Anglo-Saxon model* – warrants explanation. The idea that the French state is reluctant to embrace liberal reforms, or that the United States worships the free-market has become firmly established in the *culture generale*, and in the way that these two countries often perceive each other in terms of ‘Francophobia’ and ‘anti-Americanism’.

Differences in the systems of higher education in France and the United States far outweigh similarities. Exploring these differences is the purpose of this paper. In doing so, we will hopefully gain a better understanding about the ‘French centralization versus American decentralization’ opposition. The paper will be divided into two distinct parts. The first part will address the historical development of higher education in France and the United States beginning in the period of their respective eighteenth century revolutions and focusing, particularly, on the nineteenth century. It is in the nineteenth century that the

¹ “The brains business: A survey of higher education” *The Economist*. 10 September 2005

foundations of the present systems were established. In order to understand French centralization in higher education, one must consider the continuing influence of Napoleon's Imperial University. Similarly, in order to appreciate the 'non-system' of the United States, as it exists today, one must consider the unique traits of the colonial college and the way in which institutions were founded throughout the nineteenth century, especially with the settlement of the western frontier. From this historical survey, we see that the French and American systems, today, are firmly rooted in the circumstances unique to each nation's history. One begins to sense that the oppositional characteristics of higher education in France and the United States may in fact be related more to the culmination of historical chance than to self-conscious policy-making.

The second part of this paper will concern itself with some of the present characteristics of higher education in France and the United States. This part will be divided into three sections: typology, organization of higher education institutions, and admissions and degree conferment. The first section, typology, will provide a wide-ranging classification of the types of higher education institutions found in the United States and France. Ultimately, two types in each nation will be presented as the most *essential*: private research universities and public research universities in the United States; and public universities and *grandes écoles* in France. The second section - organization of higher education institutions - will present 'case studies' of four institutions corresponding to the categories selected in the typology section: Harvard University and the University of Michigan; and University of Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV) and the Ecole Normale Supérieure. The governing structure and academic organization for each of these institutions will be explained. Finally, in the last part, admissions policies and degree conferment procedures for the four chosen institutions will be summarized.

By presenting 'case studies' of major types of higher education institutions in each nation, we will hopefully reach a deeper understanding about the national systems as a whole. The logic behind this exercise is that institutions of higher education exist within a national context, and by examining the governance,

organization and policies of these institutions, we can uncover something about the wider national system.

The purpose of this paper is not to claim, as *The Economist* might, that the American system is better than the French system. Rather, I hope to give substance to what is meant by the terms, *American system* and *French system*. The focus of this paper, as stated, is on the historical development and the typology, governance, and organization of institutions of higher education in France and the United States. Many topics remain untouched or only briefly mentioned, including specific information about financing of higher education, or differences in teaching and curricula. Nevertheless, I hope that the information and insight provided will encourage others to explore topics of interest related to higher education in these two countries.