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# U.S. vs. Europe in higher education

Dr. Aldemaro  
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Letters from Academia

Last week, while in Spain, I had the chance to speak with several higher education officials about how academia compares between Europe and the U.S. As someone who received his undergraduate degree in Europe and his graduate education in the U.S. many years ago, I was very intrigued. And this is what I found out.

When I went to college at the Universitat de Barcelona in Spain, European undergraduate degrees were five years. During those five years, all the subjects that you took were both a year long, and also were all related to your field of study. The advantage that I found in that system was the tremendous depth gained in your field upon graduation. The disadvantage was the length of time it took to graduate. Master's degrees were virtually unknown and a doctorate was something you pursued only if you wanted to enter academia or go into some sort of research career in industry.

Europe has now embraced a shortened time to earn an undergraduate degree, very similar to the U.S. Yet, the difference still remains in terms of the subjects you take in your major. Master's degrees have also become commonplace in Europe. These changes were adopted in The Bologna Process, a treaty signed by 19 countries in 1999. The aim? To reduce the cost of higher ed.

Another important change in Europe is the tendency to teach classes in English, regardless of the location of the university. Originally this was an experiment that began at the graduate level, but now has become extremely popular at the undergraduate level as well. The number of undergraduate

degree programs taught in English in Continental Europe has gone from practically zero in 2009, to about 3,000 today, and all projections point to continued growth of such programs.

These changes reflect the more cosmopolitan nature of European universities where you can find both faculty and students coming from a great deal of different countries due to the establishment of the Schengen Area. This agreement allows people from 26 European countries (representing about 400 million people) to travel without a passport within the area. The area mostly functions as a single country for international travel purposes, with a common visa policy. The area is named after the Schengen Agreement of 1985.

Another major difference is cost. Because it is heavily subsidized by individual governments in Europe, higher education costs range from zero to really low for nationals of those countries and from the European Union. The specific price tag varies by country and its social policies. In Finland, for example, the main objective of its social policies is higher education, and it is made available free to all European Union nationals. In Spain, where the main social policy is universal free health, there is a cost for tuition: a credit hour for a bachelor degree is between 12.50 to 36 euros (U.S. \$15 to 43). Compare these rates to the average cost of a

credit hour at U.S. institutions and the European system is a real bargain.

When compared to European institutions, we lose hands down. According to The College Board, the average yearly tuition cost for a private four-year college in the U.S. is \$32,410. Public four-year colleges are less expensive, averaging \$9,410 a year for in-state students and \$23,890 a year for out-of-state students. Even a U.S. national going to one of these European universities would find them much more affordable than staying in the U.S.

Another major difference (both cultural and financial) between the U.S. and European universities is the concept of dormitories. They are expected on every U.S. college and university campus. In Europe, because most institutions of higher education are located in urban areas, everybody can count on good and affordable public transportation, and therefore do not feel the need to leave their parental homes after high school, or they simply lodge in an apartment building near campus. While students may have to cover their own living costs (and countries like Germany will help with this, too, for students who can't afford it), many will save big on tuition fees.

European universities do not feel compelled to spend millions on amenities that have nothing to do with education, such as athletics, climbing walls, and the like. European students see campuses as places to go to study, not to find a spa-like infrastructure. To a certain extent, the only exception to this rule is the United Kingdom, where students are provided with residence halls, and even cleaning service.

A big difference that I found between

European universities in the 20th century and today is that they have become as obsessed with rankings as are U.S. institutions. Not only study after study have shown that such rankings are essentially meaningless when it comes to the quality of education they provide, but also they can lead to spending a lot of money on things that are not related to education.

For example, in order to be considered among the top 100 schools in the world, an institution needs to have a Nobel Prize winner among its faculty. Because of that, some universities provide large amounts of money to the very few people who might win one, especially in the sciences, which is always a very expensive proposition in terms of lab equipment and staff. The result? They are hiring fewer and fewer tenure-track faculty members who demand a decent salary, and are using more and more temporary faculty to teach classes, which reflects on the quality of education they provide.

European universities have worked to imitate the American system, which is in many ways detrimental to the very purpose of higher education. Yet, that does not mean that we cannot learn from Europeans on other things. That is particularly true in the case of cost. We need to realize that countries that heavily support higher education do it not out of aimless generosity, but because they are investing in their future.

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