

# An overview of US higher education

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## About the author

Dr Nicholas Hillman is a Professor in the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Education, where he also directs the SSTAR Lab. His research focuses on the intersection of access and finance, namely in the areas of student financial aid and state higher education finance. His research employs statistical analysis of large datasets and has been published in the field's top academic journals including *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *American Educational Research Journal* and *Education Finance and Policy*.

Nick's recent book (with Dr Gary Orfield), *Accountability and Opportunity in Higher Education: The Civil Rights Dimension*, was published by Harvard Education Press. His research has been recognized for excellence by the Association for the Study of Higher Education and the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators. He is a faculty affiliate in the Center for Financial Security, La Follette School of Public Affairs and Institute for Research on Poverty.

## Foreword

### **Professor Phil Deans, President and Vice Chancellor of Richmond American University London and Vice President of the Association of American International College and Universities**

The United States is the great higher education outlier. The US higher education system is diverse and complex, with a multitude of institutional types, models and funding arrangements, and flexibility of both content and delivery. US universities consistently dominate the top 10 and top 100 global university rankings, can attract the best academic and administrative talents, and recruit exceptional students from around the world on to their undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. At the same time, it appears to be a system in crisis, with high levels of institutional failure, staggering student debt levels and campuses that appear increasingly polarised and politicised, suffering from both neglect and excessive intervention. US higher education is simultaneously local, rooted in towns and states, and very global, delivered by US international universities and a proliferation of overseas branch campuses. The US recruits more international students than any other country, but they form a smaller proportion of overall student numbers than in any other Anglophone system. There is much the rest of the world can learn from the way US higher education operates, but also plenty to avoid too.

As Nicholas Hillman's excellent HEPI report shows, the diversity of institutions of higher education (IHE) is one of the great strengths of the US system. There are micro-providers, technical and specialist schools, liberal arts colleges and research-intensive behemoths, serving minority, local, national and global audiences. Curricula flexibility and student mobility centred on credit transfer are essential to the system, as is the centrality of institutional mission and vision in determining institutional strategy. For a UK observer, the US system holds echoes of the past (battles over tenure systems) and harbingers of what could be coming (greater inter-institutional student mobility and the transferability of funding that could arise from the Lifelong Learning Entitlement).

Where we can, and perhaps must, learn from the US is the ability of US regulators, especially the regional Education Commissions, to accept,

sustain and support a diversity of providers and provision. When working well, the Commissions assess IHE on the delivery of an institutional mission rather than forcing providers into a one-size-fits-all template determined by the government of the day or historical inertia. The English system, and its regulation, is dominated by the assumption that an 18-year old undergraduate student spends three years studying full time at a large (3,000 full-time equivalent and above) comprehensive institution focusing on one subject. Any institution which tries to be different – through specialisation, or being small, or offering flexible pathways to completion, or teaching adults, or promoting student choice through encouraging incoming and outgoing transfer – risks the wrath of the regulator or the league tables. The US does not offer a template of how to do things, especially regarding student financing or an ever-present risk of donors and patrons influencing institutional autonomy. However, there is still much that can be gained from considering how the US supports and sustains diverse institutions that deliver positive outcomes, from the smallest community college to the best universities in the world.

## **Executive summary**

This paper provides an overview of the US higher education system. It gives readers introductory information about the size, scope and governance model of US higher education. This is a challenging task because higher education in the US is highly decentralized with no single 'system' coordinating all institutions of higher education (IHEs). Instead, 50 states, the federal government and dozens of accreditation agencies create a policy ecosystem that supports both public and private institutions of higher education.

Perhaps the simplest way to describe US higher education is by what it is not. The US has no national university, no national agency overseeing all of higher education, no national policy on what professors can or cannot teach. There are no national price controls establishing how much tuition institutions can charge. And there is no national admissions policy sorting students into institutions.

This paper describes some of these issues. It certainly does not capture everything; rather, its aim is to introduce readers to some of the major policy conversations taking place in the US and whether there could be lessons learned from the US context applied to other national settings. In the following sections, the paper will describe the diversity of institutional types in the US, then it will provide an overview of the roles states and the federal government play in higher education. This is followed by a brief overview of student access, admissions and enrolment to show who participates in higher education. Next is an overview of the student financial aid system with an emphasis on student loan debt and repayment. The paper concludes with a brief summary of the accreditation system and academic affairs to help contextualize how the US goes about quality control and review of its higher education systems.

### **The diversity of higher education in the US**

A useful starting point to understanding US higher education is by differentiating public from private institutions. Many of the nation's oldest and most globally-recognized institutions are private. For example, the eight institutions in the Ivy League are some of the most selective institutions in the country, admitting fewer than 5 per cent of all applicants.<sup>1</sup>

The Ivy League is where many US presidents and senators, along with Fortune 500 business leaders, received their education.<sup>2</sup>

But focusing too much attention on private education and the Ivy League will skew one's view of US higher education. Most students attend *public* IHEs and most public institutions are broadly accessible. The typical public IHE admits nearly all applicants who apply and for good reason: broad access provides students from all walks of life with multiple entry points into higher education.

What differentiates a public institution from a private one in the US? There are many answers to this question, but the simplest relates to governance. Private institutions are governed by their own institutional boards that are independent from state and federal governments. Public institutions are chartered and governed by states. By being part of state government, public institutions receive funding based on state tax revenue. This revenue (called appropriations) helps public institutions keep tuition relatively low. The names of public IHEs typically correspond with their state; for example, the University of Wisconsin has several locations across the state of Wisconsin (for example the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee). Community colleges are always public institutions and their names often reflect the city or region where they are located. For example, Los Angeles, California has several community colleges serving different parts of the metropolitan region (such as East Los Angeles College and Los Angeles City College).

Private institutions do not typically receive state appropriations and, as a result, are easiest to identify based on their tuition. Without state subsidies, private institutions typically charge far higher tuition than public institutions. Within the private sector, there are non-profit and for-profit institutions. Non-profits operate with financial non-distribution constraints, meaning all revenue generated must flow back into the institution.<sup>3</sup> Harvard and Yale are examples of non-profits, where they generate millions of dollars in revenue each year and plough that money back into the institution. Private for-profits, like the University of Phoenix, are businesses that aim to maximize profits and distribute those to shareholders and investors.

Table 1 shows how many public and private institutions operate in the US, along with the total number of students in each sector. An institution's sector is based on: (a) whether the IHE is public, private non-profit or private

for-profit: and (b) the highest level of degrees awarded. A two-year degree programme typically requires 60 credit hours or less and can be completed within two calendar years. Certificates and associate degrees are the most common degree awarded in the two-year sector. A four-year degree programme typically requires 120 credit hours or less and can be completed in four calendar years. Most of these degrees are bachelor's, though four-year institutions often offer master's, doctoral, law and medical degrees as well.

*Table 1 Number of institutions and student enrolments by sector, 2021*

Sector	Number of institutions	Number of students (millions)
Public		
Two-year	826	4.5
Four-year	756	9.1
Total	1,582	13.5
Private non-profit		
Two-year	85	<0.1
Four-year	1,541	4.1
Total	1,626	4.1
Private for-profit		
Two-year	369	0.2
Four-year	322	0.8
Total	691	1.0
Total	3,899	18.7

*Source: US Department of Education Digest of Education Statistics, Tables 303.25 and 317.10.<sup>4</sup>*

Students regularly move back and forth between institutions. For example, a student could begin at a community college (such as a public two-year institution) and earn 30 credits of coursework in one academic year. Then in the following academic year, they could transfer all or some of those credits towards a bachelor's degree programme at a four-year university. This pathway of transferring 'vertically' from a two-year to a four-year IHE is common in the US; one-in-three community college students transfer up to four-year universities.<sup>5</sup> Even within the four-year sector, about one-in-10 students transfer 'horizontally' from one four-year institution to another.<sup>6</sup> In the public sector, states play an important role coordinating

articulation agreements between institutions to help ensure credits earned at one institution will count at another, regardless of whether the transfer is vertical or horizontal.<sup>7</sup>

While Table 1 provides a big picture of the types of institutions operating in the US, there are many more ways to classify institutions. For example, there are small private religiously affiliated colleges, large land-grant universities, public and private law schools, for-profit trade schools, community colleges with transfer missions, medical schools, liberal arts colleges: the list goes on. The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education created the Carnegie Classification system in 1970 to show the vast diversity of institutional missions across the US.<sup>8</sup> This system is still in use today and Appendix A provides a list of the most recent (2021) basic classification scheme to help readers see the wide range of educational missions and markets in the US.

### **The state and federal roles in higher education**

The decentralized nature of higher education in the US is often described as a loosely coupled governance system.<sup>9</sup> In this system, institutions have a degree of autonomy from states and the federal government. At the same time, states and the federal government hold institutions accountable for various outcomes. This loosely coupled system is rooted in history. The US Constitution does not include the word 'education'. As a result, each of the 50 states is (and historically has been) responsible for operating their own educational systems while the federal government's role is limited to specific programmatic and accountability efforts.<sup>10</sup>

#### *State governments*

Since states have the primary responsibility for operating higher education, their role is largely overseeing finances and academic planning. State governments determine how much tuition public institutions can charge, which academic programmes public institutions can offer and how much funding institutions receive each year. For example, the average tuition charged at public four-year IHEs in Vermont is over \$17,000 but less than \$5,000 in Wyoming.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Purdue University (a public four-year university in Indiana) is one of the only public IHEs in the state authorized to award Engineering degrees. States coordinate many parts of public higher education and have little direct control over private IHEs.

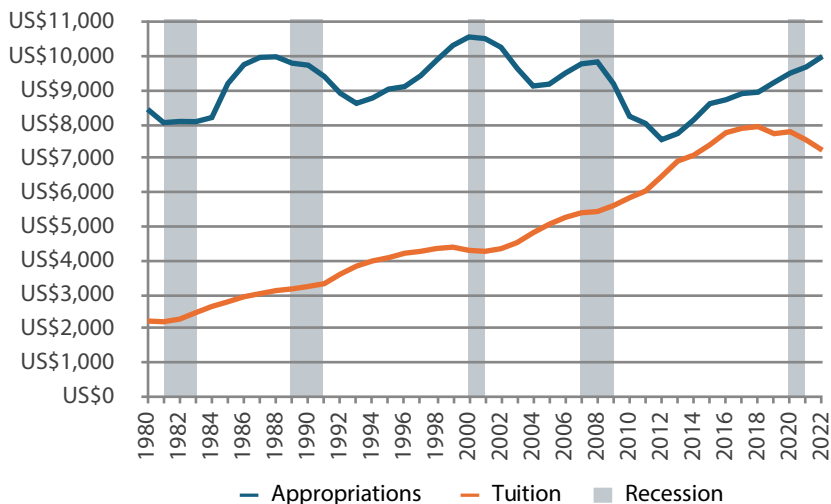


As a result, states play a significant role in coordinating and planning their public systems.<sup>12</sup> Coordination takes many forms. For example, states coordinate articulation agreements to help ensure courses at one institution will count towards a degree programme at another. Without state involvement, institutions might not work together in this way. Similarly, if one institution needs to purchase an expensive software license or other product, the state can bring institutions together to 'buy in bulk' to reach economies of scale. States also experiment with different funding models – in recent years many have used performance-based models to hold institutions accountable for meeting certain performance goals.<sup>13</sup> For example, Tennessee allocates 80 per cent of its state appropriations via formulas based on such measures as the number of credit hours students complete or credentials awarded.<sup>14</sup>

Although every state coordinates and funds higher education differently, all states have similar policy actors: governors, state legislators and state higher education agencies. Governors tend to focus on bigger-picture policy issues affecting the entire state. State legislators represent certain geographic areas of each state, so they often take a more specific approach to higher education by focusing on the public institutions in their geographic region. And higher education agencies often play an intermediary role between each public institution and various elected officials. These agencies are responsible for coordinating and governing public systems in each state.<sup>15</sup>

There are four regional education compacts in the US designed to help states collaborate and share resources: the Midwestern Higher Education Compact; the New England Board of Higher Education; the Southern Regional Education Board; and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.<sup>16</sup> These regional compacts do not set state policies nor do they appropriate funds to IHEs; rather, they conduct policy analysis / research and help states coordinate with one another. States located in each region tend to share common political, economic or demographic concerns. For example, southern states (such as Florida or Texas) may be more conservative than coastal states (such as California or New York) and these differences can affect how states govern and fund their higher education systems.<sup>17</sup>

Figure 1 State appropriations and tuition revenue, inflation-adjusted to 2022 dollars, per full-time equivalent student



Source: State Higher Education Executive Officers, ‘State Higher Education Finance’ data.<sup>18</sup>

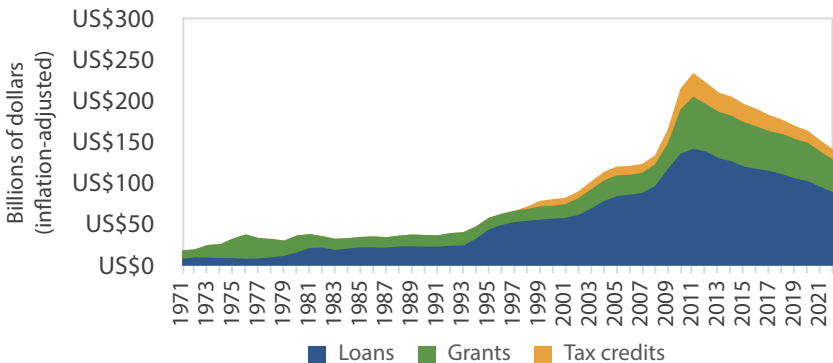
States appropriated over \$120 billion to public IHEs in the 2022 fiscal year. These funds help public IHEs pay the salaries and benefits of their faculty, administrators and staff. Appropriations also help cover basic operating expenses including utilities and classroom / facility maintenance. But appropriations do not cover all expenses, so public IHEs also charge tuition to supplement these public subsidies. In 2022, institutions received approximately \$75 billion in total tuition revenue. Two perennial questions in public higher education are who should pay and how much should they pay – two questions at the heart of almost any finance debate. There is no standard answer, meaning the relationship between what the state pays (via appropriations) and what students pay (via tuition) is constantly in flux. Figure 1 shows this relationship, where states typically reduce appropriations in economic downturns and tuition revenue steadily rises to make up for those lost subsidies. In recent years states have reinvested in public higher education and, as a result, tuition revenue has declined.<sup>19</sup>

## The federal government

The federal government includes the President of the United States, the US Congress, the US Supreme Court and federal agencies like the US Department of Education. The federal role in higher education is distinct from the states and affects all sectors of higher education, not just the public sector.<sup>20</sup> In general, the federal role focuses on three core areas: student financial aid; grants to institutions; and regulation. There are more than these three areas, however, particularly when taking a historical view of higher education.

Historically, the federal government's role in student financial aid has focused on providing grants (which do not need to be repaid) to the nation's lowest-income students.<sup>21</sup> However, as shown in Figure 2, the federal role has steadily shifted towards a loan-based model where the majority of federal financial aid is disbursed to students via loans. In the late 1990s, Congress created various tax credits that allow students (or their parents) to deduct certain higher education expenditures from their taxable income and these programmes have grown in political popularity over time.<sup>22</sup> In total, the federal government provides over \$100 billion annually on financial aid programmes and tax credits. These levels have been falling for the past decade largely because enrolments have been falling, as detailed later.

Figure 2 Total federal student aid awarded each year by aid type, inflation-adjusted (billions)



Source: College Board Trends in Student Aid, Figure SA-1<sup>23</sup>

In addition to student financial aid, the federal government awards grants directly to institutions of higher education. These grants are competitive and institutions must meet certain eligibility criteria to receive funding. States do not typically provide research / programme grants to institutions, so the federal government plays a unique role in this domain. Institutions can apply for federal 'TRIO' grants to help support campus programmes for recruiting and retaining under-represented students.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, institutions the federal government designates as 'Minority Serving Institutions' (or MSIs) can apply for various capacity-building grants to support academic programmes on campus.<sup>25</sup> Examples of MSIs include: Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs).<sup>26</sup> Institutions can also apply for various research grants through the US Department of Education or other federal agencies, such as the National Science Foundation.

Shifting to the federal role in regulating higher education, the Higher Education Act (HEA) is the main federal legislation authorizing and overseeing federal higher education programmes. Other federal laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act or the Civil Rights Act affect institutions of higher education, but this section will focus on the HEA and the US Department of Education. In exchange for participating in any of the student financial aid programmes or competitive grant programmes outlined above, the US Department of Education has regulatory authority to ensure funds are being used in the best interest of taxpayers and students.

The HEA confers regulatory authority to the US Department of Education, which means the Department can create accountability standards and create / enforce rules related to HEA programmes.<sup>27</sup> The gainful employment (GE) rule is a useful example to show how the US Department goes about regulating higher education. The HEA includes language that institutions must meet basic criteria to remain eligible for participating in federal student aid programmes. If an institution has too many students who fail to be gainfully employed after graduation, then the US Department of Education can make the institution ineligible for federal aid.<sup>28</sup> The HEA does not describe exactly how the US Department of Education should go

about this process, so the department is allowed to regulate as they see fit. Under President Trump, the US Department of Education rescinded the GE rules altogether; a few years later, the Biden Administration brought GE rules back.<sup>29</sup> The federal role in regulating higher education is ever-evolving and is, at least in recent years, dependent on the president's policy agenda.

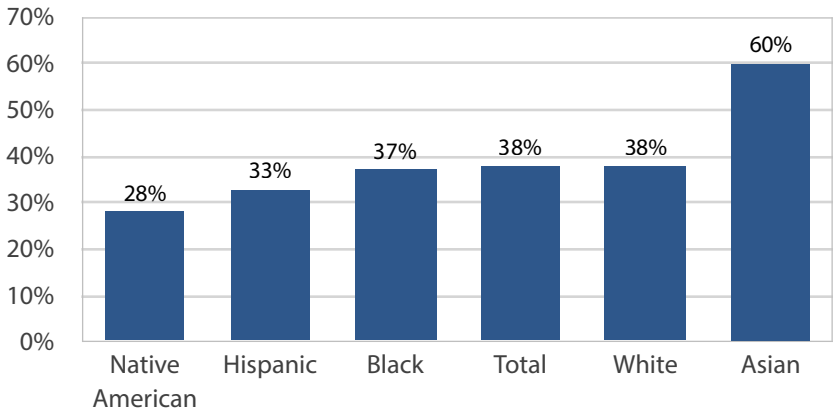
In addition to the legislative branch (Congress) and the executive branch (the President and federal agencies), the judicial branch plays an important role in higher education. When President Biden proposed to cancel student loan debt for millions of borrowers in 2022, states filed a lawsuit claiming this plan would harm their economies.<sup>30</sup> The Supreme Court found the Biden plan to be unconstitutional, which stopped the US Department of Education from pursuing that policy agenda.<sup>31</sup> The Biden Administration is pursuing other forms of cancellation and the Supreme Court is likely to again play a role in determining whether the executive branch has authority to cancel student loan debt.

### **Access, admissions and enrolment trends**

Students have many potential entry points into higher education. The most common is going directly from high school to college. When students graduate from high school (typically in the spring), approximately 60 per cent attend college that same year (typically in the autumn).<sup>32</sup> In 2020, the majority of all undergraduate students entering higher education came directly from high school.<sup>33</sup> However, a significant number of students enter higher education after being away from high school for several years – perhaps for military service, for work or for personal / family reasons. And still others stay out of higher education altogether for various reasons including college being too expensive, not seeing the benefits outweigh the costs, desire to work instead or simply not being interested in college.<sup>34</sup>

Figure 3 shows the share of the US population aged 18 to 24 by race / ethnicity who were enrolled in college in 2021. The six racial / ethnic groups shown in this figure are defined by the US Census Bureau, where the lowest college enrolment rate is 28 per cent among Native American young adults. The highest enrolment rate is among Asian Americans, where 60 per cent of the population attend college.

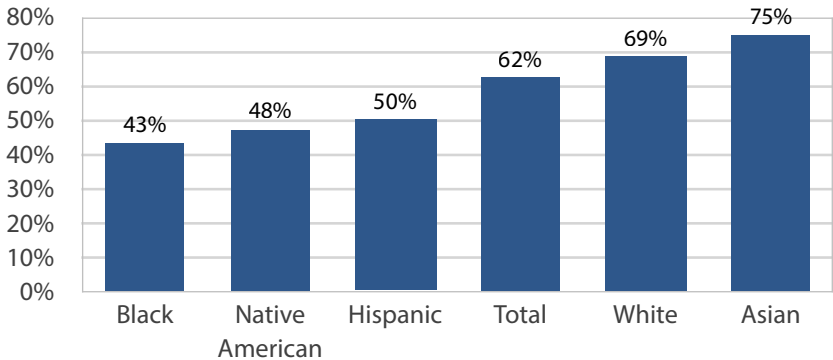
Figure 3 College enrolment rates of 18 to 24-year olds, by race / ethnicity



Source: US Department of Education, *Conditions of Education: College Enrollment Rates, 2023*.<sup>35</sup>

Not shown in Figure 3 are the various kinds of colleges students from each racial / ethnic group attend. In general, students from Native American, Hispanic, Black and Pacific Islander racial / ethnic groups disproportionately attend institutions with the least financial resources.<sup>36</sup> There is a growing research consensus that these resource gaps are a major driver to the gaps in college completion shown in Figure 4.<sup>37</sup>

Figure 4 College completion rates, by race / ethnicity



Source: National Student Clearinghouse, *Completing College: National and State Reports, 2023*.<sup>38</sup>

Because of the strong link between a college's resources and its degree completion rates, state and federal policymakers are interested in ensuring colleges have sufficient resources to serve students well. This is a challenge in a decentralized higher education system, and it is made even more challenging when considering the college application process. There is not one uniform application process all students go through in the US. Students must apply to each individual institution they are interested in attending and, depending on the institution, each application will require different information. For example, institutions may require applicants to submit high-school transcripts showing how well they did in each course. They may also require students to write personal statements, secure multiple letters of recommendation and submit standardized test scores (such as SAT or ACT exams).

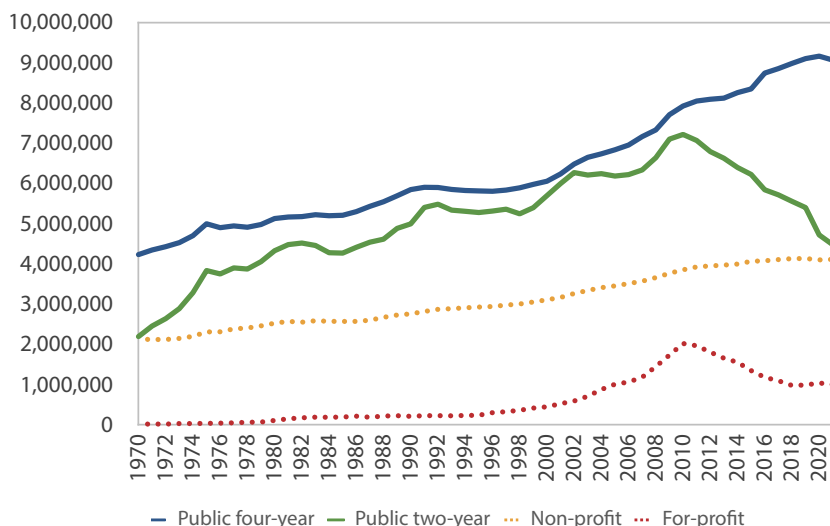
Most institutions admit all (or most) students who apply. In fact, only about half of all institutions practise competitive admissions where a professional staff member at each institution reviews and admits students on a case-by-case basis. And the other half of institutions have open admissions meaning all applicants are admitted.<sup>39</sup> Most students apply to only one or two institutions and, when they enrol in college, they stay relatively close to home (typically within 50 miles).<sup>40</sup> As a result, the idea of a student applying to many institutions or travelling far away from home for college is the exception to the rule.

Perhaps not surprisingly, socio-economic class has a lot to do with these patterns – students with the greatest resources and advantages tend to submit the most applications and travel furthest for college. For example, one study found Ivy League institutions enrol more students from the top 1 per cent of the US income distribution than from the entire bottom 60 per cent.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, public IHEs tend to have broad access missions and serve a more diverse array of students.

Figure 5 shows enrolment trends across the different sectors. The non-profit and public four-year sectors have steadily grown each year, though there are institutions within these two sectors that are struggling with enrolments. But those enrolment declines are not nearly the same magnitude as the decline in the public two-year community college sector

that has steadily fallen since the peak of the Great Recession. In fact, this sector is at lower enrolment levels today than in the 1980s. The for-profit sector represents a boom and bust cycle, where enrolments rapidly surged in the years leading up to the Great Recession, only to fall back down to pre-recession levels.

Figure 5 Total fall enrolment, by sector



Source: US Department of Education Digest of Education Statistics, Table 303.25.<sup>42</sup>

When students go to college, they typically attend public IHEs. Prior to the Great Recession, about the same number of students attended public four-year institutions as they did public two-year institutions. But this has changed in the past decade as fewer students (overall) are participating in higher education. There are many reasons why students opt into – or stay out of – higher education. Ability to pay, bureaucratic hurdles (like submitting applications) and information asymmetries are some commonly-cited reasons why students either never attend or leave before earning a degree.<sup>43</sup>

Additionally, students may leave college because of poor academic performance. The extent of this problem is not known, largely because there



is no national or international standard on measuring academic performance in higher education. Nevertheless, students must maintain satisfactory academic performance to stay enrolled. The most common way of monitoring this performance is with course grades, where faculty members assign letter grades to students based on how well they performed in the course. Table 2 summarizes a typical grading scale, where grades correspond with numeric values that can be standardized into a Grade Point Average (GPA).<sup>44</sup> Students who fail to make satisfactory grades (typically falling below a 2.0 on a 4.0 scale) will not earn their degree and can even lose their financial aid.

*Table 2 Typical grading scale used for measuring academic performance*

Letter grade	Grade points	Numerical grade
A+	4.0	97-100
A	4.0	94-96
A-	3.7	90-93
B+	3.3	87-89
B	3.0	84-86
B-	2.7	80-83
C+	2.3	77-79
C	2.0	74-76
C-	1.7	70-73
D+	1.3	67-69
D	1.0	64-66
D-	0.7	60-63
F	0.0	0-59

### **Tuition and financial aid**

In 2022/23, average tuition and fees for all IHEs was \$14,688.<sup>45</sup> In addition to charging tuition, students must also cover non-tuition expenses like housing, food, books / supplies and transportation. In 2022/23, these non-tuition expenses averaged \$12,985 across all IHEs. These tuition and non-tuition expenses together are called the cost of attendance (COA), which sum to \$27,673. Multiply the annual COA by the number of years enrolled in college and it quickly becomes expensive to pay for college.

Fortunately, few students pay the full COA because of various financial aid programmes available. Additionally, few students pay these average rates because COA varies considerably across the different sectors of higher education. Public institutions typically charge lower tuition than private institutions, and two-year institutions typically charge less than four-year institutions. COA can also vary depending on whether the student lives on-campus in residential housing or off-campus and commutes. COA also depends on whether the student attends a public institution in their home state or goes out-of-state. And public institutions in each state will charge different rates from one another; in-state tuition in Vermont is \$17,593 but \$4,785 in Wyoming.<sup>46</sup> Table 3 uses national averages to show how students face considerably different COAs depending on their situation.

*Table 3 Components of students cost of attendance, 2023/24*

	Tuition & fees	Housing & food	Books & supplies	Transp.	Other	COA
Private non-profit four-year	\$41,540	\$14,650	\$1,250	\$1,100	\$1,880	\$60,420
Public four-year, out-of-state	\$29,150	\$12,770	\$1,250	\$1,290	\$2,270	\$46,730
Public four-year, in-state	\$11,260	\$12,770	\$1,250	\$1,290	\$2,270	\$28,840
Public two-year, commuter	\$3,990	\$9,970	\$1,470	\$1,930	\$2,500	\$19,860

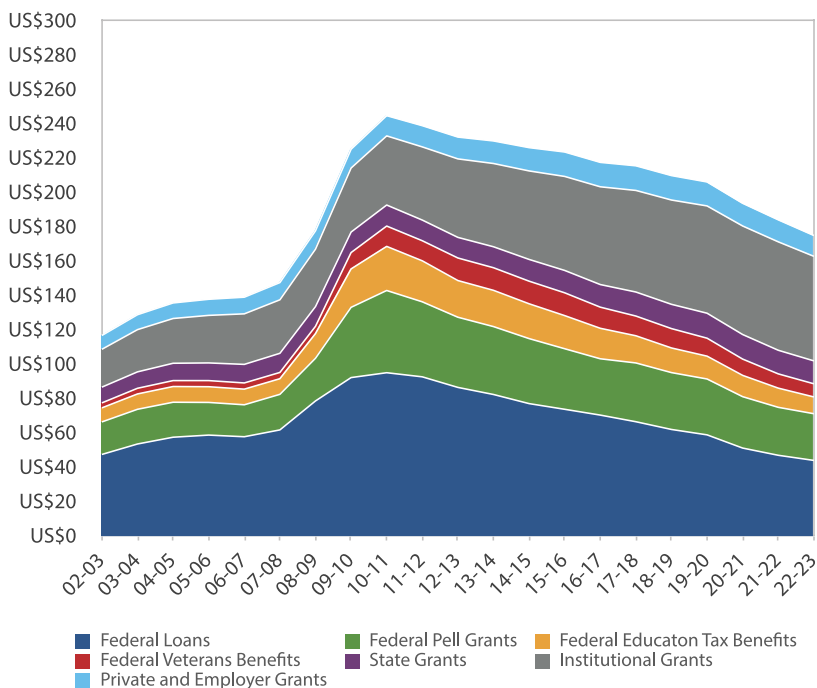
*Source: College Board Trends in Student Pricing, Table CP-1. Note four-year estimates are for students who live on-campus, which is typically more expensive than living off-campus and commuting.<sup>47</sup>*

It is uncommon for students to have enough money to pay the full COA out of pocket, so they turn to financial aid to help cover expenses. To receive financial aid, students must complete the US Department of Education's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The FAFSA collects information on students' and their families' income and assets in order to determine eligibility for various federal aid programmes. Individual colleges and universities, along with states and the federal government use this information to determine which students are eligible for various types of aid.

Figure 6 shows the main sources of aid over time. Notice how large institutional aid is as a standalone category. Many of the nation's private

non-profit four-year institutions (which charge considerably high tuition) often use their endowment funds to provide tuition discounts to students. The vast majority of institutional aid is from private institutions, though a growing number of public institutions are turning towards similar high-tuition, high-aid pricing models.

Figure 6 Total undergraduate aid, adjusted to 2022 dollars (in billions)



Source: College Board Trends in Student Aid, Figure SA-3.<sup>48</sup>

The US tuition and financial aid system is overly complex and families / students have a difficult time knowing how much they will need to pay out-of-pocket, how much tuition will be in any given year and how much aid they will receive. Table 4 shows the ‘net price’ students end up paying out-of-pocket using the most recent national data. Net price is simply the student’s COA minus any grant and scholarship aid they receive from any

source (federal, state, institutional, private and so on). Since grants and scholarships do not need to be repaid, these are discounts to tuition and make college less expensive for students who receive support. The majority of federal aid is needs-based while the majority of institutional aid is not. As a result, students from lower-income families tend to face lower net prices than those from higher-income families. However, the net price as a share of family income can be considerably higher for low-income students. This means even if lower-income students face lower net prices, they still may struggle to have enough resources to pay for college.

*Table 4 Net price (COA minus total grant aid), by sector and family income level*

	Public two-year	Public four-year	Non-profit four-year	For-profit four-year
\$0 to \$30,000	\$5,960	\$8,870	\$19,110	\$22,010
\$30,001 to \$48,000	\$6,730	\$10,220	\$19,240	\$24,030
\$48,001 to \$75,000	\$9,100	\$13,810	\$21,820	\$25,790
\$75,001 to \$110,000	\$11,840	\$18,530	\$25,970	\$26,600
\$110,001 or more	\$12,950	\$21,740	\$34,460	\$26,850
Total	\$7,830	\$13,720	\$26,520	\$22,950

*Source: US Department of Education Digest of Education Statistics, Table 331.30.<sup>49</sup>*

## **Student loan debt and repayment**

Federal student loans are available to both undergraduate and graduate students. In 2022/23, the US Department of Education disbursed \$83.5 billion in federal loans to approximately 7.4 million undergraduate and graduate students.<sup>50</sup> On average, a typical student loan borrower takes out \$11,000 per year; however, this varies considerably by the students' circumstances.<sup>51</sup> For example, the average undergraduate who borrows takes out \$6,500 per year while the average graduate student borrower takes out nearly \$22,000 per year.<sup>52</sup> As a result of graduate students borrowing significantly more than undergraduates, the federal student loan portfolio is steadily shifting toward graduate student debt. In the early 2000s, 30 per cent of all federal loans were awarded to graduate students and today this is closer to 50 per cent.<sup>53</sup>

Within six months of leaving college, regardless of whether the student graduated or dropped out, they must begin repaying their federal student loans. Most borrowers repay via the standard 10-year plan, which is a fixed monthly payment schedule that does not change over time. For example, if a borrower took out \$30,000 in loans, the standard repayment plan would require them to make monthly payments of \$326 for the next 10 years. Due to interest, this borrower would end up repaying a total of \$39,069 in those 10 years.<sup>54</sup>

Borrowers can opt-in to one of four different income-driven repayment (IDR) plans that tie monthly payments to their annual income. These plans cap monthly payments to a percentage of the borrower's income and, in some cases, can even result in a monthly payment of \$0 for the lowest-income borrowers. After a period of 10 to 25 years, the federal government cancels unpaid balances for loans that qualify for cancellation. For example, borrowers can have their balances cancelled after working in a public or non-profit organization for 10 years. Borrowers not employed by public or non-profit organizations can have their debts forgiven after 20 or 25 years. The newest federal IDR plan (the SAVE Plan) will provide forgiveness on a sliding scale, where borrowers who owe less than \$12,000 after 10 years of repayment will have their balances cancelled. Borrowers owing \$13,000 after 11 years would have their balances forgiven, and so on for each additional \$1,000 in debt up to \$21,000.<sup>55</sup>

Regardless of whether a borrower is in a standard or IDR plan, they must actively make payments each month. If a borrower misses a payment, then their loan becomes delinquent. After 90 days of delinquency, the borrower is considered 'severely' delinquent and after 270 days their loan goes into default. There are many negative consequences for defaulting on a student loan. First, the entire unpaid balance of the loan becomes immediately due and the borrower becomes ineligible from using IDR plans. Next, the borrower's credit score will be diminished and the federal government can garnish the borrower's wages or withhold tax refunds until the debt is repaid. And finally, if a borrower stays in default for too long, they will be ineligible to participate in federal student aid programmes and it will become difficult for borrowers to get underwriting for large purchases (for example, for vehicles or houses).<sup>56</sup>

## **Accreditation and academic affairs**

In many respects, institutions of higher education are autonomous from state and federal governments. This is particularly true with respect to accreditation and the tenure system in the US. Accreditation is the process of determining whether an entire institution of higher education – or in some cases, individual academic programmes within the institution – meet acceptable levels of quality. In the US, there are 89 accreditation agencies recognized by either the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) or the US Department of Education. These agencies are independent, non-governmental organizations and they send peer-review teams (typically faculty or administrators from other institutions) to assess whether an institution meets the agency's standards.

Accreditation is voluntary; however, institutions must be accredited to participate in federal student financial aid programmes. As a result, accreditors play a dual role in higher education governance. On the one hand, the accreditation process serves as a marker of quality where institutions or individual programmes must prove they are meeting professional standards. This process can contribute to continuous improvement and be used for academic planning. On the other hand, accreditation serves as a gatekeeper to federal student financial aid. If an institution is accredited by an agency the US Department of Education recognizes (i.e. approves) then the institution can participate in federal student aid programmes.

There is growing concern that accreditors do not hold institutions to high enough standards and, as a result, the US Department of Education is allowing too many low-quality institutions to participate in the federal aid system. For example, the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges & Schools (ACICS) had unusually high failure rates and eventually the US Department of Education withdrew their recognition and the agency closed down.

The tenure system in the US follows a similar peer review standard, where pre-tenure faculty must go through rigorous peer review to be granted tenure. Pre-tenure faculty hold the position of assistant professor. Typically, an assistant professor holds that position for six years and then

applies for tenure status. The tenure review process includes a rigorous peer review from their home academic department, professors in the field and their institution's own review committee. Once awarded tenure, the assistant professor is promoted to associate professor and is given greater responsibility within their academic department and institution. Faculty can then be promoted to full professor after years of distinguished achievement and / or service.

Tenure is an indefinite appointment and tenured faculty are typically only terminated under extraordinary circumstances.<sup>57</sup> For example, if an academic programme closes or the entire institution is no longer financially viable, then tenured faculty might be terminated. But tenure is much more than a job for life; it is a commitment to ensure faculty have sufficient time to commit to riskier, more complex or longer term research agendas. Tenured faculty also teach / mentor students, develop new courses and secure research grants – activities that take significant amounts of time and have high start-up costs that would be inefficient to do on short-term contracts. Most faculty in the US do not have tenure and are hired on a part-time (or adjunct) basis.

## **Conclusion**

The US higher education system is highly decentralized. In many respects, this decentralization creates conditions for states to experiment with innovative policy changes. Decentralization also provides a degree of autonomy to institutions, where each IHE has a distinct academic mission. This decentralization is often credited as one of the main reasons behind the nation's successful transition from elite to mass higher education.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, decentralization is often the cause behind some of the challenges facing higher education today. For example, there are large inequalities in resources where a relatively small share of IHEs (for example Ivy League) have vast amounts of resources while IHEs serving many of the nation's most under-represented students have the least amount of resources.<sup>59</sup>

With greater national coordination, perhaps some of these inequalities could be addressed more directly. Or perhaps they would be even worse. It is impossible to know. Regardless, the purpose of this paper is simply

to present some of the basic features – and tensions – that exist in the US higher education context. The policy environment ultimately shapes educational opportunities and outcomes, but what works in one state (or in one country for that matter) may not work in another. In the US, the federal government plays a limited but important role in regulating the higher education ‘marketplace’ and providing financial aid to students. States play a major role in funding public IHEs and coordinating statewide policy agendas. Accreditors serve as a quality control mechanism to ensure (at least in theory) institutions are adhering to certain standards.

Understanding how these three groups interact – the federal government, states and accreditation agencies – is an important step in understanding the US higher education system. In many respects, the system is overly complicated and creates inefficiencies and inequalities. At the same time, the system can encourage innovation and has been behind many of the nation’s success stories in higher education. This paper does not set out to judge the merits of the US model; rather its aim is to orient readers to the model and its complexities. This information can help researchers and policymakers explore new ideas and understand the US higher education model in a new light. Ultimately, higher education in the US – just like in any country – is shaped by the economic, social and political forces of the day. As those forces change over time, so too will higher education. In a highly decentralized system like the US, these changes will play out differently across states and within sectors and will ultimately affect educational opportunities and outcomes for students.



## Appendix A

### Carnegie Classification of Higher Education, Basic Methodology (2021)

	<b>Classification</b>	<b>n</b>
<b>Two-year</b>	Associate's Colleges: High Transfer-High Traditional	106
	Associate's Colleges: High Transfer-Mixed Traditional/Nontraditional	102
	Associate's Colleges: High Transfer-High Nontraditional	109
	Associate's Colleges: Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical-High Traditional	104
	Associate's Colleges: Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical-Mixed Trad./Nontrad.	97
	Associate's Colleges: Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical-High Nontraditional	115
	Associate's Colleges: High Career & Technical-High Traditional	107
	Associate's Colleges: High Career & Technical-Mixed Traditional/Nontraditional	117
	Associate's Colleges: High Career & Technical-High Nontraditional	89
	Special Focus Two-Year: Health Professions	202
	Special Focus Two-Year: Technical Professions	52
	Special Focus Two-Year: Arts & Design	28
	Special Focus Two-Year: Other Fields	52
	Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges: Associate's Dominant	102
	Tribal Colleges	14
<b>Four-year</b>	Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity	147
	Doctoral Universities: High Research Activity	133
	Doctoral/Professional Universities	187
	Master's Colleges & Universities: Larger Programmes	325
	Master's Colleges & Universities: Medium Programmes	185
	Master's Colleges & Universities: Small Programmes	158
	Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus	222
	Baccalaureate Colleges: Diverse Fields	308
	Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges: Mixed Baccalaureate / Associate's	98
	Special Focus Four-Year: Faith-Related Institutions	245
	Special Focus Four-Year: Medical Schools & Centers	38
	Special Focus Four-Year: Other Health Professions Schools	241
	Special Focus Four-Year: Research Institutions	22
	Special Focus Four-Year: Engineering and Other Technology-Related Schools	12
	Special Focus Four-Year: Business & Management Schools	48
	Special Focus Four-Year: Arts, Music & Design Schools	70
	Special Focus Four-Year: Law Schools	30
Special Focus Four-Year: Other Special Focus Institutions	25	
Tribal Colleges	21	

Note: This list is limited to degree-granting institutions participating in federal aid programmes (n=3,911). Data from US Department of Education Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) institutional characteristics file. 'Traditional' refers to students who are typically enrolled full-time and entered college directly from high school; 'non-traditional' refers to students who are typically enrolled part-time and are older adults.

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