

**The Bottom 70 Percent:  
What America's Elite Institutions of Higher Learning Owe to Everyone Else**

**University of Wisconsin-Madison  
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On May 29, 1453, the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II stood with an army of 300,000 men before the walls of Constantinople. Built by the emperor Theodosius, the fortifications had stood, un-breached, for a thousand years. But on that day the sultan's janissaries and artillery proved too much for the small band of defenders occupying the last remnant of Byzantium and the ancient Roman Empire. The sultan rode on a white horse into the city, and into history, which named him "Mehmet the Conqueror."

The sultan soon erected a new palace in Constantinople, overlooking the Sea of Marmara and the mouth of the Bosphorous River that divides the European and Asian continents. The complex of buildings included gardens and throne rooms, a treasury for the empire's riches and a harem for sultan's concubines. But that wasn't all. The sultan knew that while firepower was needed to claim the new seat of the realm, brainpower was needed to keep it--scientists and administrators to run the engines of commerce and government that maintained his far-flung lands. Without them, the empire would weaken and the day would inevitably come when another would-be conqueror arrived at the city walls.

It's often said that higher education as we know it began in Europe in the middle of the last millennium. But the Ottoman system of higher learning in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century in some ways bears more resemblance to the American system today. Unlike their European antagonists, the Ottomans weren't debilitated by theories of race-based intellectual superiority or hereditary rule by the "well-born." Every year, emissaries from the capital would fan out into the Balkans, travelling through remote towns and villages to select the most intellectually and physically promising Christian boys. Those chosen were brought to the center of the empire, where they spent years being tested and trained.

Some became soldiers, leaders in the imperial army. Others became builders and engineers. And a select few—the best of the best—were allowed through the gates of the sultan's palace, where they studied and conversed in a library built near the throne room, an elegant gray building with silk curtains, long couches, and windows of stained glass. It was as close to a pure meritocracy as anything that could be found, and it worked: Of the 36 men after the conquest who became Grand Vizier, second only to the sultan himself, 34 rose up through the system. As one historian said of those who made their way from the hinterlands to the center of higher learning through the force of their intellect and will, "Theirs was pride of the most splendid and forgivable sort; for they were fitted to rule."<sup>1</sup>

How different is our present system of higher education, really? We, too, reject the notion of higher education and government power reserved for the children of nobility. We also

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<sup>1</sup> Jason Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizons: A History of the Ottoman Empire*, 1998.

believe that all students, no matter where or to whom they were born, should have a chance to be judged on their virtues, to gain educational opportunity if their talents and accomplishments merit the chance. And we, too, like to build grand libraries and edifices of higher learning in our capitals—places just like this one, proud institutions where scholars mix with students selected for their potential. Students just like you.

But of course the parallels only go so far. In 1900, when the University of Wisconsin-Madison banded together with a handful of other elite institutions like Harvard, Stanford, Chicago and Yale to form the Association of American Universities, only 238,000 students were enrolled in degree-granting institutions in the United States, three-tenths of one percent of the population. Today enrollment is eighteen million, six percent of all Americans, a 20-fold increase in percentage terms.

Where did all of those students go? Some came to places like this—public flagship universities grew to unprecedented sizes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But most of those new students enrolled in new institutions. Since 1900, the AAU has grown from 15 to 60 members. Over 3,000 new postsecondary institutions sprang up in America at the same time, most to meet vastly increasing demand. The move to universal high school in the first part of the century combined with the unsteady but nevertheless historic emancipation of women and people of color to create waves of new collegians. The trend accelerated with the return of G.I.s after World War II. And the nation responded, building whole systems of regional public universities and, in the 1960s and 1970s, community colleges. De-industrialization drove up the wage premium for higher learning, further stoking demand. Today, nearly four in five high school graduates go to college somewhere.

Americans tend to feel pretty good about this. And we should, our higher education system is wonderful in many ways. But, as is too often the case, our pride tends to blind us to our failures and compromises, to the way severe economic inequality is mirrored in our public institutions—including, sadly, our institutions of higher education. Historically, college was reserved for a select few—only to white men at first, and for the most part only to those of economic means. In the years since, we've built our higher education system from the top down, extending opportunity to successively wider swathes of the population. But the resources given to those newly brought into the fold have never matched those who were there from the beginning.

Take Wisconsin. Every year, colleges and universities report how much money they spend to the federal government. This campus, Madison, spends far more money per student than other branches of the University of Wisconsin system, places like Oshkosh and Green Bay. Of course, Madison is a research university, a very good one, and research is expensive. So let's set all that research aside and look only at spending on what the National Center for Education Statistics classifies as "instruction, academic support, and student services." Examined that way, spending at all of the other branch campuses is about the same, roughly \$8,500 per student. Here in Madison, it's more than twice as much.

So here's my question: why are you so expensive to educate? Why do you deserve so much more? After all, you're supposed to be the smart ones. On average, you got the best preparation, you went to the better high schools, you're more likely to come from a well-off family and less likely to come from a poor one. You're *good* at learning. You can do a lot of it on your own. Maybe it should take less money to help you reach your educational goals. It's not at all clear to me why it takes so much more. And Wisconsin is very typical in this regard. Run the numbers for another state university system and they usually come out the same way.

The answer, I think, has very little to do with concepts like cost. Rather, you were here first, and you're the best. When people look at resource allocation numbers for our K–12 schools and see massive inequality, two-to-one spending ratios and the like, they call it injustice and file massive lawsuits. When they see the same numbers for higher education, they call it meritocracy, and a job well done. When Americans think about higher education, whether it be in politics, science, arts, or literature, they like the idea of providing the most resources to those who are "fitted to rule."

And when we look at our two-year colleges, the story is much the same. We built them to be practical, local, and responsive to the needs of the economy and the community. Those are good things. But we also built them to be cheap, inexpensive ways to get a lot of people into college—particularly in the southern and western states that have seen the greatest population growth over the last half-century, and lack an infrastructure of private institutions. Many of the community colleges built in the '60 and '70s are starting to crumble, or are well on their way. And let's face it, they didn't exactly go all-out building graceful lawns and soaring buildings back then. Community and technical colleges tend to exhibit functional architecture—reflecting, perhaps, the way our society sees the people within them.

There's also a strong strain of American individualism that runs through our higher education system—to the point where "system" is arguably not the right word at all. Rather, we have a collection of relatively autonomous institutions competing with one another and acting in their own self-interest. Which has many benefits—the overall wealth and diversity of American colleges are unmatched. But it comes at a cost. The broad and growing income inequality in our society has seen in recent years has been reflected in our colleges and universities—the rich have gotten much richer, and everyone else is just trying to hold on.

Self-interest can also be the enemy of cooperation. Take credit transfer. We're a mobile society and most students earn credit from multiple higher education institutions during their undergraduate careers. Many students transfer, generally with the expectation that credits earned at one institution will be good elsewhere. Often, this is a total lie. Colleges routinely reject foreign credits for arbitrary or inscrutable reasons—even for courses that, let's be honest, are pretty much the same everywhere.

Autonomous institutions also tend to be very interested in accumulating money. The cost of college has skyrocketed in recent decades, growing faster than inflation, family

income—even health care. To some extent this has been made necessary by cutbacks in public funds. But it's also because colleges are status-seekers who want to spend their way to prominence. And while students are being asked to pay a growing share of the bill, they're seeing little in return. From 2000 to 2005, per-student tuition and fee revenue at public research universities grew by 34 percent, after inflation. At the same time, spending per student on instruction and academic support *declined*.<sup>2</sup>

All of these things matter. For the disproportionately well-off students who attend reasonably selective public and private institutions—roughly, the top 30 percent—life is good. Their colleges are well-resourced and so are they. They'll most likely graduate and go onto the substantial rewards society offers to those with a college degree.

For everyone else—the bottom 70 percent—the story is quite different. These are students never featured in each year's breathless news coverage of the college admissions rat race. Students who are more likely to be low-income, part-time, first-generation, working parents, immigrants, people of color. Students who have the biggest educational needs—and yet, we systematically funnel them into institutions with the fewest resources. Crumbling colleges where the promise of mobility is a mirage.

Many those students don't graduate, don't learn much, and are, increasingly, saddled with debt. There is little margin for error in the modern economy. For the students in the bottom 70 percent, the difference between getting a diploma and not getting one is *everything*, the threshold between one kind of life and another. And yet when we talk and think and write about higher education, we often act as if those students aren't even there.

So I would suggest that even now, nearly a decade into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have only partially made the transition from old ways of thinking. The library within the palace in Constantinople was a beautiful place. It still is; you can visit it today, although the palace has become a museum and the city is named Istanbul. But like all palaces, the sultan's complex had very high walls. And for every student who by luck and pluck made it through the gate, tens of thousands stood outside, struggling to feed their families, to survive on the empire's many battlefields, or to scrape out a living in the countryside beyond. Even the elite students themselves were still slaves of the sultan, subject to his whim and absolute rule.

That's the way things were in the great civilizations of the past. Today, we expect more. People shouldn't have to trade servitude for higher education—not to a ruler, not to a banker, not to anyone. And the time has come to stop thinking of our higher education institutions like so many palaces, isolated and magnificent, focused on keeping the undeserving away.

To students, I say: show solidarity with your peers, those who aren't allowed to attend an institution with the history and resources of this one. This is a generation of young women and men with an acute awareness of social responsibility, people who feel

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<sup>2</sup> Jane V. Wellman et al, *Trends in College Spending*, The Delta Project on Postsecondary Costs, 2009.

obligations to fellow citizens across the globe. But some of those who need your help the most are closer to home than you realize.

To colleges and universities, I say: be generous to the newer and less wealthy institutions that came after you. Be open to their students, be mindful of their needs. And be creative when it comes to gauging the potential of great institutions of higher learning to spread the knowledge they create. Technology has changed the dynamics of teaching and information exchange profoundly. People don't have to come here—beautiful though it is—to be part of your community any longer. There are students, or potential students, all over the world who could benefit from your vast stores of insight and expertise. The marginal cost of education at a distance is declining, I would argue, even as the need increases. How many students could you serve—really? How many of them are you serving today?

These aren't optional conversations. Empires rise, but they also fall. They become decadent and complacent and they make the fatal human mistake of believing that that present days of comfort will just *go on* like they always have. Higher education in America is at risk—of being privatized and marginalized, of pricing itself into irrelevance, or at the very least into an existence that is dramatically worse than what we all enjoy today.

Universities like this one, those that are most respected, most influential, will need to be uncommonly generous in the years ahead—with respect to funding, to transfer, to how many students it can serve. Only by subordinating some of their self-interest—only by adopting a kind of "post-palatial" way of thinking—and embracing the interests of *all* institutions, and the students within them, and the students who aren't in an institution at all—will America's elite institutions be able to live up to the historic ideals that have done so much to make us the nation we are today.