



Entry into the American University System

By **Alan Haas**, President of Educational Futures, A Member of the Independent Educational Consultants Association



The objective of this article is to inform the reader about this rather complex and comprehensive subject. We will attempt to do this briefly and meaningfully.

THE LEGACY AND THE EVOLUTION

First, it should be acknowledged that, among many good things, the US college/university system was inherited from the UK. Over time, it has evolved into a vast number of institutions serving all students who wish to continue their education beyond secondary school to a higher level, either academically or vocationally. Institutions vary in quality in order to serve appropriate populations. Top students enter top universities. There are excellent options for good students and also places for more modest students at community colleges that orient the curriculum toward more practical, applied learning.

Historically, the American university system evolved in two distinct directions: the private ones for the privileged and the 'land grant' institutions for the common man. The former was imported from the UK and includes such schools as Harvard, College of William and Mary, Princeton, Stanford and other notables. The latter evolved out of a need for farmers and tradesmen to learn practical skills and knowledge to do their job. The land grant system offered free education to residents of each state, and the private ones were fee-based.

THE VAST TERTIARY SYSTEM

Today, one witnesses a sea of over 3000 four year institutions of 'higher learning' and many thousands more junior college, community colleges, vocational schools and trade schools. For this purpose, we will describe the private system, although some of the finest universities in the world are part of the public arena. These include the state universities of Michigan, California, Virginia, North Carolina, Illinois and others. Among the private colleges and universities (this is a distinction without a difference, as 'colleges' offer only the undergraduate bachelor's degree; whereas 'universities' offer bachelors, master's and doctoral degrees), some are world famous and consistently rank among the top universities in the world. These include University of Chicago (with the highest number of affiliated Nobel laureates in Economics), Yale, Columbia, New York University and many more. The 'Ivy League' is a moniker that often characterises the top colleges; however, it is an athletic league of eight schools, and there are many more colleges in the top group, including Georgetown, Duke, Tufts, Boston College, Vanderbilt, Emory, Washington University in St. Louis and Northwestern.

THE DIVERSE SECONDARY SYSTEM

It is important to say a word about the secondary schools which feed the universities. Uniquely, and amazingly, in our opinion, responsibility for public education from primary through secondary is completely decentralised, and each town, village, community and city in the USA designs, develops, builds and staffs them through local property taxes. This is also true for other public services such as governance, fire, police, etc. As there is a vast difference in the ability of the local authority to tax property, given the equally vast differences in wealth from community to community, the quality of the local primary and secondary schools varies greatly. This is the reason for the need for a standardised entrance examination to

assess readiness of students coming out of this incredibly diverse system of public education. Thus, the emergence in the 1950s of two national examinations, the SAT and the ACT, that serve to screen ability and potential, primarily in the use of the English language and command of basic concepts in mathematics, for university level studies.

CONSIDERATIONS AND PERSPECTIVE

As a result, selectivity varies with quality, and the more selective colleges/universities require stronger academic credentials from the secondary school and higher test results from these national examinations. As such, it could be said that entrance to American higher education is largely a merit system: the stronger the qualifications, the better one's chances of admission to an academically demanding college. The good news is that there are myriad opportunities at all levels of demonstrated ability, and that makes the system exceedingly democratic and attractive to students from around the world.

For example, over 700,000 international students are currently studying in the USA. About 40 per cent of these are engaged at the undergraduate level, with the majority working toward advanced degrees or in special programmes such as English-as-a-Second Language. As expected, the leading sources are China (157,000), India (104,000), South Korea (73,000), Canada (27,000), Taiwan (24,000), Saudi Arabia (23,000) and Japan (21,000). Given the historically high quality of European universities, fewer students from these countries are studying in the USA. Nevertheless, relatively high numbers come from the UK (8,900), Germany (9,500) and France (7,700). [Source: Open Doors, 2011]

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

For companies wishing to set up operations in the USA or transfer employees, there is good news and no so good news. First, as mentioned above, free education is provided for all primary and secondary school students, and low cost tertiary education is available in all states. The caveat is that quality varies directly with residence. This is the main difference between urban and suburban areas. The wealthy suburban communities with high tax rates on personal property and residences generally have the higher quality schools, so a determining factor in locating a business or an office or employees is the availability of quality schools. For example it would make sense to locate a business or factory in a low cost urban community for overhead reasons and enable employees to live in nearby suburban communities with quality schools. This is possible, as each community, side by side, is responsible for building and operating its own schools. So, there are urban areas with easy access to public transportation, commercial properties and other amenities that are surrounded by suburban communities with fine school systems through the secondary level. As such, the simple key to location comes down to real estate values, which are readily available to all in a Google search by community.

ENTERING THE TERTIARY SYSTEM

The challenge comes at the tertiary or university level, as competition from around the world for the top colleges and universities is very keen. In some cases, admissions rates are under 10 per cent in general and even less for international students, all of whom are heading for the same narrow aperture leading to the dozen well-known institutions. Alas, they are missing the 50-60 other colleges and universities that offer high quality academic opportunities. Many of them are smaller colleges with greater





access to small classes, close contact with professors, myriad opportunities for research and engagement both on campus and in the local community. Graduates of these smaller 'liberal arts' colleges are the most sought-after candidates for graduate schools of Law, Medicine and Business.

THE LIBERAL ARTS APPROACH

Let me say a brief word here about the 'liberal arts' experience that characterises the American approach to higher education and is often misunderstood. The term is a misnomer! It really means 'broad-based education.' Contrary to almost every other country in the world, students at American universities do not apply for a specific course such as Biology, Philosophy or Economics and confine their entire undergraduate experience to that one subject and related ones. In fact, one cannot concentrate on one subject (or major) until one satisfies 'core' requirements in the four principle areas of inquiry: Mathematics/Science, Foreign Language, Social Sciences and Humanities. These requirements generally take up most of the first three semesters, and the students choose their 'major' only after exploring these other areas. In the process, they gain a basic understanding of how different disciplines relate and integrate and acquire important skills and knowledge required to become a continuous learner, which is necessary in a rapidly changing world.

In the words of Michael Roth, President of Wesleyan University, one of the leading liberal arts colleges in America:

"Education isn't just an object that you use to get started in a career; education is a catalytic resource that continues to energise and shape your life. Education enhances your ability to develop new skills and capacities for connectivity that allow you to solve problems and seize opportunities... We should have confidence, as my parents did, that a broadly based, liberal education will help our young people lead lives of creative productivity, lives in which they can make meaning from and contribute to the world around them." (May 2011 for CNN)

MONEY MATTERS

Despite the perceived advantages of acquiring a diverse, accessible, flexible and respected tertiary education in the USA, the major deterrent is cost. This is a lengthy topic, so I will summarise the essentials.

1. The state universities (public) are very inexpensive for residents of the state but considerably more expensive for non-residents and international students. The difference is \$15-20,000 per annum. For American students, large amounts of 'financial aid' are available, both from the US Government and the host institution. Financial aid is based on need and comes in the form of scholarship grant (bursary), long-term loan and work study (campus job). In theory, no one is excluded from obtaining a college/university degree for reasons of affordability. In addition, some public universities offer 'merit aid' without application or consideration of need to strong or accomplished students. For example, athletes can receive full scholarships
2. The private universities are independent of the government at all levels and therefore must charge 'tuition' for the education on offer. This varies considerably from state to state and institution in the range of \$30,000 to \$45,000 per annum. The good news with many private schools is that large amounts of financial aid are available to all, including international students. Again, in theory, no student is excluded from attaining a degree based upon ability to pay the fees. However, since total budgets including tuition, fees, room and board, books, incidentals, travel, etc. is rapidly approaching \$70,000 per annum, it takes a lot of family planning and sacrifice to meet this level, just as it takes the colleges to meet each student's needs fully. As a result, there is often a gap between the total cost and the financial aid award that the family would have to fill. Again, this varies from place to place, but a general statement would be that students and/or families could be burdened with loans of \$10,000 or more per year to be paid back with comfortable terms over many years

KEY FACTORS

Readers who are considering sending their children to the USA need to be aware of certain key factors, among others:

1. Thinking ahead is important, as colleges will want to see

the totality of an applicant's record for the final four years of secondary school. In the case of UK, the results of GCSE, AS and A-level examinations will be the primary basis. For other schools, international and Continental, the year end grades will be relevant

2. The quality and content of the student's academic programme will be considered. Generally, it is expected that English Language and Mathematics will be studied throughout, and a solid selection of AS/A-Level subjects is expected. The IB (International Baccalaureate) is increasingly recognised as the most challenging and comprehensive secondary school programme and is the quickest ticket to favourable consideration for university admission, other things being equal
3. As mentioned, most colleges and universities require either the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) or the ACT (American College Test). This is where most students are caught in a bind. Alert students are taking this test for practice starting at the beginning of the penultimate year and often prepare extensively during the summer holidays. Despite claims to the contrary, the SAT/ACT scores are an important factor as they are a key determinant of the institution's place on the rankings that come out annually in The Times, Business Week, Forbes and electronically by USNWR, which started the rankings race in the USA 20 years ago
4. Support from a student's teachers can make the difference at the most selective colleges that accept less than 20 per cent of the applicants. For the USA, these letters come in the form of letters, not snippets, as with the UCAS system in the UK
5. American colleges are active campuses with hundreds of extracurricular activities, including extensive athletic programmes at all levels of interest and competency, many pre-professional clubs, myriad opportunities to develop hobbies and co-curricular interests, internship opportunities and, not the least, a commitment to service beyond the walls and even beyond the borders. Students should demonstrate that they will become actively engaged once on campus

IN SUMMARY

This sounds like a lot, but let me summarise the key steps:

1. Start early and learn a lot by visiting college web sites and myriad other resources such as collegeboard.com, unigo.com, and collegecountdown.com/store/fiske-interactive-online.html
2. Become informed about the standardised test (SAT/ACT) and register on line [collegeboard.com and act.org] to take these tests early for practice. The use of specialised tutors is on the rise
3. Stress to your children that decisions made and priorities chosen today can influence future opportunities and avoid regrets. (It may be best to have a third party do this!)
4. Encourage your children to get engaged in their school and community, commit in depth to a few, and leave the activity, whether it is sports, debate, publication or musical, better than when they found it, ideally demonstrating leadership along the way
5. Use summer holidays constructively to step out of their comfort zone, expand perspective, increase self-understanding and develop confidence. A passive consumer life as a student does not do this effectively

The good news is that there is room for everyone, regardless of ability or talent or interests. What is required is motivation, maturity, self-discipline and responsibility. It is a major, life determining decision and a large investment of time and financial resources, so students should take it seriously. Those who do will benefit enormously from the endless learning opportunities, internships, activities and network for life.

Information on personalised assistance with the rather demanding process can be found through the Independent Educational Consultants Association [www.IECAonline.com]. The author also welcomes inquiries and will be pleased to respond to questions. Educational Futures is a well-established educational advisory service that originated in Geneva, Switzerland in 1985. Alan Haas, President, has worked with thousands of students from around the world wishing to enter North American universities. Information on Educational Futures can be found at www.educationalfutures.com.

