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Why US colleges attract so many foreigners ?

College education is a new subtext of the American dream, no longer a rite of passage for the privileged few, but an educational norm for the many. Scrimping and saving to send one's offspring to college has become a national badge of honor, and for society's upwardly mobile, the campus is the sanctioned port of entry into the middle class.

The numbers are staggering: Each fall, more than 50 per cent of all high-school graduates go on to some form of higher education. Since 1950, the percentage of Americans with four or more years of college has risen from 6 percent to 19 per cent. The latest Census Bureau statistics show that the average college graduate earns one and a half times as much as the average high-school pass-out.

Little wonder then most educators believe that, to paraphrase Ronald Reagan, it is still morning on the college campus. "On balance," says Stephen Trachtenberg, president of the University of Hartford, "more people are getting more education than at any time in the past and that is good for our country."

But is it really? Beneath all the numbers and the Babbittlike boosterism, a nagging set of sometimes contradictory anxieties has begun to surface about the state of higher education in the United States. Last December, for example, an Opinion Research Corporation poll found that while 9 out of 10 adults thought having a college degree was very or somewhat important in getting a job or in advancing one's career, 8 of 10 worried that the rising cost of four years of inflation over the last seven years, was pricing higher education out of the reach of the average American family.

More troubling, however, was the discovery that along with the economic worries, a surprisingly large number of Americans were concerned about whether they and their children were getting their money's worth for their education dollars. The ORC study showed that 21 per cent of those interviewed thought that the overall quality of a college education was generally declining. Only 13 per cent had thought that was the case two years before. And all this was before the publication of Prof. Allan Bloom's devastatingly critical but extraordinarily popular jeremiad about higher education., The Closing of the American Mind. In his book, Bloom faults universities for lacking academic rigor and moral purpose, concluding: "It is difficult to imagine that there is either the wherewithal or the energy within the university to constitute or reconstitute the idea of an educated human being and establish a liberal education again."

Denunciations like this blooming on the campus itself added to an already steady barrage of obloquy fired from Washington at America's colleges and universities by Education Secretary William Bennett. Only a couple of years before, Bennett, had wondered whether it might be a better idea to give his then 10-month-old son $50,000 to start a small business after graduating from high school than send him to Harvard.

It was against this background that US news launched its third biennial survey of American higher education. During the summer, questionnaires were sent to the presidents of 1,329 US colleges and universities, asking them to assess the academic mood and to choose the nation's best and most innovative campuses. A small number of the presidents declined to participate in the survey and wrote to the magazine to say they felt that neither they nor their peers were in a position to judge the academic quality of institutions other than their own. However, more than 760 presidents, nearly 60 per cent, responded. The result: The most comprehensive study of its kind undertaken.

As in previous years, the US News survey was restricted to four-year institutions awarding at least bachelor's degrees and offering liberal-arts programmes as part of their undergraduate education. Excluded from the survey were specialized institutions such as undergraduate schools of business, theology and engineering that award at least half of their degrees in a single field. Finally, two-year colleges and wholly single--purpose institutions such as the US military academies were not included.

The remaining pool of colleges was divided into nine separate categories based on the 1987 classification of institutions of higher education assembled by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in Princeton, N.J. The Carnegie classifications use certain objective data, such as enrollment and degree offerings, to classify schools, primarily for purposes of academic research. The foundation does not make qualitative judgments among the institutions on its several lists.

The presidents participating in