Overview

This course examines the relationship between higher education and society in the United States from a sociological perspective. It is appropriate for undergraduates and graduate students interested in what colleges and universities do and what society expects of them. The main objectives are: to acquaint students with critical features of U.S. higher education; to increase student’s understanding of the nature of reform and conflict in colleges and universities; to examine higher education as a site of processes of education and citizenship in the modern world; and to cultivate critical thinking skills about tensions in the design of higher education systems and organizations. Toward those ends, we focus on a mix of empirical research and conceptual developments through rigorous reading and writing assignments.

The course begins with an introduction to the U.S. system as a whole, its structural characteristics, its dramatic expansion in the second half of the 20th century, and its enormous institutional heterogeneity. As part of this introduction, we examine the social charter between higher education and society, the social charter being the implicit understanding of their respective rights and responsibilities. Among other things, colleges and universities of all types expect academic freedom and a certain degree of institutional autonomy. Society in turn expects that higher education will be accessible and affordable for all who seek it, while simultaneously rewarding merit, advancing knowledge, training the workforce, and educating citizens. Moreover, in recent years, there is increased societal pressure on colleges and universities to demonstrate accountability, especially for how they use public funding.

The course is then organized to address three sets of tensions in U.S. higher education.

First, we examine the tensions between egalitarian and meritocratic purposes as they are manifest in diverse campus missions: from colleges with open access, to moderately selective, to elite campuses that pride themselves on having a concentration of talent and resources to provide excellence in teaching and research. We consider how this institutional division of labor within the national system, and the public system design at the state level, function as an effective solution for reconciling competing ideologies in society. Yet the solution is imperfect. One problem is stratification that limits access and student choice.

Second, we analyze the tensions in educational purposes that are manifest in the undergraduate curriculum, focusing on the divergent aims of studying knowledge for its own sake as opposed to its instrumental value. We read about the foundations of liberal education, including pervasive rationales that higher education (especially the university) is responsible for cultivating citizenship. Focusing on a primary arena of curricular reform, we examine changes in general education requirements for undergraduates, exploring how social movements and wider societal pressures have been catalysts for change. We consider contemporary pressures to reflect society’s diversity and multiculturalism, as well as market pressures for practical and vocationally-oriented curricula.

The third set of tensions focuses on the complex nature of authority in colleges and universities: bureaucratic authority embedded in organizational structures, professional authority embodied in faculty as academic professionals, and managerial authority enacted by an administrative cadre that gained momentum during the last quarter of the 20th century. We examine the conditions in which these distinct forces are apt to co-exist in conflict or in harmony as “shared authority.” To illustrate these dynamics, we look at organizational
restructuring, where some academic programs and departments are targeted for elimination or consolidation in times of budget cuts. The tensions in authority become evident as each campus is challenged to identify what knowledge matters most and should be protected, how it should be organized and supported, and what are legitimate decision-making procedures to make these determinations. We also look at the ideological underpinnings of a significant trend in restructuring, how it is anchored in an industry logic that asks academic organizations to function more like businesses and to establish deeper ties with industry.

We conclude the course with a reinterpretation of the social charter between higher education and society. We consider how well higher education is fulfilling its responsibilities and adapting to changing societal expectations for educating citizens and workers. We also examine the extent to which society is fulfilling its responsibilities, in terms of ongoing public investment to sustain higher education’s institutional capacity, to trust professional authority, and to protect campuses for their unique societal functions as places that foster critical thinking and even social dissent.

Readings

Assigned readings are drawn from published literature: for the most part, sociological theory and research on higher education in the United States, and to a lesser degree, philosophical writings on the nature and purposes of higher education in a democratic society.

Required readings are collected as a Course Reader, available from the Stanford Bookstore.

Assignments

1. Readings: Students will complete assigned readings prior to each class and participate in discussions.

2. Students will write two short papers, approximately 5-7 pages each, reflecting on two of the three sets of tensions. The precise focus of the paper is up to each student. Options include characterizing the nature of the tensions, identifying how they are manifest in different institutional settings, or exploring what exacerbates or ameliorates any given tension. Papers should refer to some of the required readings. A student may do three reflection papers, and then choose the two highest grades.

Due dates correspond to approximately one week after a topic has been covered in class.

   Tensions in campus missions and/or public system designs: April 29.
   Tensions in the undergraduate curriculum: May 20.
   Tensions in the nature of authority: June 3.

3. Students will design and complete a field project on one of the tensions as it plays out in the contemporary era. The project can include interviews with students, faculty, administrators, and other relevant stakeholders as a basis for analyzing divergent viewpoints. The product will be a project paper, approximately 10-12 pages. The paper should make clear the goals for the field project, the activities undertaken to address them, and the findings or lessons learned. Students must first submit a two-page proposal that identifies the topic and the project’s proposed activities, and obtain approval from the instructor. Proposal is due by May 6, but it may be submitted before then. Project paper is due June 7.

NOTE: The two reflection papers, the proposal for the field project, and the final project paper should be typed and double-spaced, no smaller than 12 pt. font. Please observe page limits. Hard copy of papers must be submitted by noon of the due dates. Tardy material will result in a lower grade.

Course Evaluation

Grade is based on class participation 20%, 2 short papers 40%, field project proposal and paper 40%.
Weekly Topics & Reading Assignments

Week 1: 4/01/04 Overview and Introduction to the U.S. Higher Education System

We begin by considering the structural foundations of the U.S. higher education system, its institutional heterogeneity and its evolution, especially expansion during post WW II decades. We discuss: differentiation during expansion, massification, how a college degree replaced high school diploma, students’ different pathways as well as simultaneous attendance at multiple institutions, the Carnegie Classification and its functions; and basic distinctions between publics, privates, and for-profits.

Week 2 4/08/04 The Social Charter

In this week, we introduce the idea that higher education is shaped by society – its external environment. We examine the social charter between higher education and society, the social charter being the implicit understanding of their respective rights and responsibilities. We also identify distinct groups of stakeholders in higher education and a range of evidence regarding how they view higher education as a national system.

Required:


Week 3: 4/15/04 First Set of Tensions: Egalitarian vs. Meritocratic Purposes

The first set of tension we consider is between egalitarian and meritocratic purposes as they are manifest in diverse campus missions. Readings explore how egalitarian interests and elite interests are evident in the structure of the national system and the public higher education system in each state. Examining California public higher education as the prototype for state systems, we consider how states attempt to reconcile these divergent interests by establishing an institutional division of labor through mission differentiation. Yet, as California and other states make apparent, differentiation functions as stratification and institutionalizes status hierarchies that are at once local and national. Commonly acknowledged dysfunctions are considered.

Required:


[Week 3 Readings continued on next page]


**Recommended:**


**Week 4: 4/22/04 Who Goes Where? And What Forces Determine It?**

Continuing with our examination of egalitarian and elite interests, we look at mechanisms that undermine the promise of access and reproduce stratification.

**Required:**


**Recommended:**


**Week 5: 4/29/04 Second Set of Tensions: Knowledge for its own sake vs. its utility (part I)**

To examine the divergent aims of studying knowledge for its own sake as opposed to its instrumental value, we read about foundations of liberal education, then the nature of knowledge, and the educational functions of the university. First we look at the Victorian legacy regarding knowledge and liberal education as being the focus of the university intellectual life. Both Newman and Arnold are influential in (even modern-day) considerations regarding what it means to be “learned,” what counts as knowledge, and how that knowledge can best be disseminated. Key questions during their time include: Is the type of knowledge one cultivates through university education the bridge between intellect and virtue, thereby being “vocational” in the sense of
training in how to lead a “good life” (this being in tune with virtue and actualizing “human potential” or “self-creation”)? Or does “the good life” have no place in the university’s scope?

**Required:**


**Recommended:**


**Week 6: 5/06/04 Second Set of Tensions: Knowledge for its own sake vs. its utility (part II)**

This week focuses on modern discussions of Newman and Arnold’s views concerning the aims of university liberal education. Are these views outdated? What aspects of their notions of intellectual excellence perhaps transcend time and place?

**Required:**


**Week 7: 5/13/04 The Undergraduate Curriculum: General education requirements and challenges to Western Civ.**

Through its curriculum and required courses, a university makes apparent what knowledge it espouses as necessary, but not necessarily sufficient, for every “educated” person within its walls. When attitudes change regarding specific bodies of knowledge, the curriculum will often reflect these changes. We examine some major debates regarding the aims and constitution of general education, exploring the evolution of such requirements, various intellectual reactions, and then examine how to think about curricular reform more broadly.
Required:


Recommended:


Week 8: 5/20/04 Third Set of Tensions: The nature of authority and shared governance

We examine the nature of authority in colleges and universities, focusing on the basis for bureaucratic authority embedded in administrative structure, the foundations of faculty’s professional authority, and the nature of managerial authority that gained momentum during the last quarter of the 20th century.

Required:


Recommended:


Week 9: 5/27/04 Academic Restructuring: Pressures for Change and Academic Responses

We consider tensions between bureaucratic and professional authority evident in organizational restructuring: who decides and what are the decision-making procedures for campuses as they identify which academic programs and departments should be eliminated, consolidated, or protected in times of budget cuts? We look at ideological underpinnings of restructuring, its anchor in an industry logic that asks academic organizations to function like businesses.

Required:


Recommended:


Week 10: 6/03/04 The Social Charter Revisited

We conclude the course with a reinterpretation of the social charter between higher education and society. Newman defends liberal education (having no professional end) yet also contends that the practical end of a university is “that of training good members of society.” Arnold sees such an end as a natural consequence of “culture,” but not of any specific civic training. Should civic responsibility be the most important practical goal of the University? Is this the correct arena for such development? We consider how well higher education is fulfilling its diverse responsibilities and adapting to changing societal expectations for educating citizens and workers. We also examine the extent to which society is fulfilling its responsibilities, in terms of ongoing public investment to sustain institutional capacity, trust professional authority, and protect campuses for their unique societal functions as places that, among other functions, foster critical thinking and even social dissent. Finally, we reconsider the social charter, how it may be changing, how would we know, and where is there place for deliberation?

Students report on Field Projects.

[Week 10 Readings continued on next page]
Required:

Newman and Mill revisited


Recommended:
