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What Is Higher Education?

By John V. Lombardi June 18, 2007
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Many of us find it challenging to explain the American higher education system to non-academic audiences (and sometimes to academic audiences as

well). The remarkable complexity and range of institutional types, organizations, financing, and governance often defy simple explanations, and global generalizations rarely convey much useful information. If we try to be comprehensive and thorough, people's eyes glaze over quickly. Fortunately, the ACE publishes *A Brief Guide to U.S. Higher Education*, a very useful item now available in its 2007 edition. In about 60 pages, this guide provides a clear, concise, and effective survey of the landscape of America higher education along with a number of tables that offer a perspective on the scope and scale of the enterprise.

The publication not only offers information describing the missions and characteristics of two-year, four-year, and other types of institutions, but gives a good synopsis of the roles of government, the nature of institutional finance, and the purpose of accreditation. The authors provide a good description of the administrative structure of these institutions as well as a clear understanding of the organization of the faculty. The summary of undergraduate studies is effective as the survey of graduate studies helpful. Finally the publication offers a perspective on international students, describes the major higher education organizations, and outlines current public policy issues.

This is all presented in clear prose with a careful effort to make meaningful distinctions on one side and accurate generalizations on the other. This is a publication that should be mandatory reading for all new institutional trustees and members of higher education committees in the various state legislatures. People on blue ribbon committees and commissions might also acquire some useful background from this report.

Although it's a great publication, highly recommended, it has one significant drawback: It sells for \$25 dollars and is not available on line.

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