



Crucial Topics in Foundations of Education: International Perspectives

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Upstairs, Downstairs: Relations between the Tiers of the U.S. System of Higher Education

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The American system of higher education is extraordinarily stratified. This lecture explores the implications of this structure. A key point is that the system's hierarchical structure arose from the bottom up, out of the competition among colleges for students, faculty, resources, and esteem. It was not dictated from above by government fiat.

The result is a system that is both radically unequal – with the different levels offering sharply different programs, opportunities, prestige, and exclusivity – and relatively fluid. Instead of allocating access to the top level of the system using the mechanism employed by most of the rest of the world – a state-administered university matriculation exam – the highly decentralized American system allocates access by means of informal mechanisms that in comparison seem anarchic.

In the absence of one access route, there are many; and in the absence of clear rules for prospective students, there are multiple and conflicting rules of thumb. This structure allows a fair degree of mobility in the system, both for students and faculty; but it also rewards students and faculty who have the cultural and social capital that allows them to negotiate a structure whose elements are relatively opaque to outsiders. The end result is a structure that preserves social advantage while also permitting enough social access to give the system legitimacy.