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## 5 Lessons America Can Learn From Asia About Higher Education

*By Kishore Mahbubani*

U.S. Senator Lamar Alexander, a former president of the University of Tennessee, recently warned that "As with the auto industry in the 1960s, there are signs of peril within American higher education. In some ways, many colleges and universities are stuck in the past." His warning reminded me of a conversation I had with a Harvard University professor who had visited Japan in the 1980s. He was astonished by how advanced Toyota's manufacturing processes had become. On his return to America, he spoke with a vice president at General Motors and warned him about Toyota's competitiveness. The man replied: "Yes, I know. But if I tell the board of GM that Toyota is getting better, I will lose my job, and GM will not change."

This story explains why GM is in such trouble now. (Paradoxically, 20 years later, Toyota has made the same mistakes as GM.) And it holds lessons for American colleges, even though they are global leaders today.

Unquestionably the great American universities—for example, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and Yale—stand heads and shoulders above the competition around the world. Yet their enrollment makes up only a fraction of total higher-education enrollment in the United States. And while many American universities have been standing still, their Asian counterparts have surged ahead. With more than 20 million students, China has, since 2005, overtaken America as the world's largest higher-education sector.

The time has come for American higher education to think the unthinkable: that it can learn lessons from Asia. In fact, university leaders and policy makers should consider the following five recommendations:

**1) Recognize the central role that higher education plays in a country's economic health.** A World Bank report has observed, "The success of East Asian economies in building huge stocks of human capital and in utilizing this capital for national development could be explained in terms of a 'national obsession' with education." In China in 1995, only 5 percent of 18- to 22-year-olds had access to higher education, but by 2007 the proportion had increased to 23 percent. That same period saw the continued rapid growth of the Chinese economy. In 1995 China's gross domestic product was \$728-billion; by 2007 it had grown to \$3.251-trillion.

The expansion of higher education has not been the sole or main reason for China's spectacular growth, but it has made a major contribution. The World Bank report concluded: "Economic miracles do not happen out of the blue; they are based on education miracles."

**2) Develop a national higher-education policy.** America has always taken a laissez-faire approach to higher education—in many ways, with excellent results. But it may wish to consider whether new competition justifies a new approach.

China may soon outpace the United States not only in the number of university graduates it produces, but also in the world-class universities it creates. From 1995 to 2000, levels of the Chinese government invested about \$20-billion in select universities to improve their facilities and curricula. In the following years, 38 of those universities received additional money. For example, two top institutions, Peking University and Tsinghua University, each received \$225-million from 1999 to 2003.

Meanwhile, many universities in China were given more freedom to recruit students and open new programs. They were encouraged to establish connections with top foreign universities and institutes by organizing international conferences, attracting world-renowned scholars, and founding joint-degree or cooperative-research programs. Moreover, the Chinese government began a series of programs to attract and nurture scholars. For example, from 1998 to 2006, through the Changjiang Scholars Program of the Ministry of Education, about 800 professors, more than 90 percent of whom had international work or study experience, were recruited to Chinese higher-education institutions.

India, too, understands the crucial role of higher education to an emerging power. By 2012, India aims to increase its enrollment by five percentage points. The government has also authorized the establishment of several dozen universities, including 14 based on world-class standards. A glance at the leading faculty members of great American universities reveals a remarkable number of Indian names: Jagdish Bhagwati (Columbia), C.K. Prahalad and Ashutosh Varshney (University of Michigan), Tarun Khanna (Harvard). Many have advised India on how to create great universities. It should not come as a surprise, then, if India produces the next wave of leading institutions, in a decade or two.

A study by Goldman Sachs has forecast that by 2050, the world's four largest economies will be those of China, India, America, and Japan. It made this prediction without factoring in China's and India's plans to significantly expand higher education. If such countries surge ahead with national education strategies, can the United States afford not to have one?

**3) Don't assume that America has all the answers.** The latest *Times Higher Education* ranking still does not have a single Asian institution among the top 20 universities in the world. But as Yale's president, Richard C. Levin, noted recently, "The list of the world's top 20 universities is likely to change in the years ahead; the National University of Singapore, to name one, is within striking distance, and China's Peking and Tsinghua Universities will get there soon."

Further, in making comparisons with Asian universities, Americans should look at all institutions, not just the most selective. For example, only 33 percent of the freshmen who enter the University of Massachusetts at Boston graduate within six years; less than 41 percent graduate from the University of Montana; and 44 percent from the University of New Mexico. Indicators compiled by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development have shown that in the United States, just over 50 percent of those who enter traditional college programs go on to complete them, compared with 83 percent in Korea and 91 percent in Japan.

An important cultural factor will help the success of Chinese universities: a deep hunger for education in China and in many other Asian societies. When that hunger is combined with the explosive growth of new universities, we should not be surprised to see spectacular results.

**4) Study Asian universities to see what has succeeded and why.** For example, my university, the National University of Singapore, has exposed its students to global competition by setting up overseas colleges in many corners of the world: Bangalore, Beijing, California's Silicon Valley, Shanghai, and Stockholm. Instead of traditional classroom learning, the students are placed in positions with innovative start-ups, working alongside and sharing the same challenges, struggles, and excitements as a real-life entrepreneur. And they have to do all this outside their cultural comfort zones. Singapore itself is very cosmopolitan, with much cultural diversity.

By contrast, many American students continue to be educated in relatively monocultural environments. James B. Hunt, a former governor of North Carolina, has warned: "Our students are trapped in a kind of educational isolationism, which may have suited the industrial age but leaves students desperately underprepared for the demands of the 21st-century global economy." He urges American colleges to integrate more knowledge of world history, languages, and international affairs into their curricula. Other people have made similar observations, like Morley Safer, of CBS's *60 Minutes*, who said: "As diverse as America has become, it remains remarkably inward-looking. Without an educational and media establishment that takes on the responsibility of teaching and informing and respecting the riches of foreign cultures, this country could become a paranoid and parochial suburb of a vital global village."

**5) Seek new partnerships with Asian higher education institutions.** The National University of Singapore has established global partnerships with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in the Singapore-MIT Alliance; with the Johns Hopkins University, in the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music-Peabody Institute collaboration; with Duke University, in the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School; and with Harvard's Kennedy School, in the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, among others. Yet few American universities have taken the initiative of reaching out to their Asian counterparts. Instead they have waited for Asian universities to approach them, often expecting those institutions to come as supplicants rather than equal partners.

Meanwhile, opportunities for collaboration abound, not only in the humanities and social sciences, but also in the hard sciences—where cultural and ethnic differences are beginning to matter. For example, the National University of Singapore has become a center of medical research because of observations that some common diseases—lung cancer, obesity, and stroke, to name a few—behave differently among Caucasians than among Asians. The same can also be said about several important drugs. In helping to elucidate the causes and implications, Western medical researchers are making important advances by cooperating with researchers in leading Asian universities.

American college leaders should prepare themselves psychologically for a world in which a key success factor will be partnerships with Asian universities. The good news is that Asian institutions welcome such new partnerships.

Beyond these recommended institutional responses, the United States government may also wish to commission a national study of American universities. It may well reveal that the top institutions remain far ahead of the pack. But it may also show that the brain gain that has resulted from so many doctorates' being conferred on non-Americans who remain in the United States after graduation could become a brain drain,

as those students increasingly choose to return to their home countries. American society may discover itself short of crucial, high-level brainpower.

It is time for American higher education to begin conceiving of the possibility of real global competition from Asia. That may now seem almost inconceivable. But as the recent rapid rise of Asian universities suggests, what may once have been inconceivable can quickly become a reality.

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