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THE DIVERSITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE US: ACCESS, ADMISSIONS AND ENROLMENT TRENDS

The article is devoted to the study of the activities of colleges and universities providing professional higher education (two-year and four-year) in the United States of America for the period from 2012 to 2024 academic years according to the statistical distribution of higher education institutions into public, private non-profit and private for-profit. The selectivity of higher education institutions is analyzed using the Barron's Admission Competitiveness Index and the impact of university and college rankings on the educational environment. Financial aid programs for education seekers under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of the United States are considered. The number and percentage distribution of diplomas/certificates issued by higher education institutions in the STEM educational direction in the field of science, technology, engineering and mathematics is analyzed, by race/ethnicity of STEM education applicants in the US from 2012-2013 to 2022-2023 academic years. The relationship between the choice of STEM education by US students from different ethnic groups and the education policy initiatives of President Barack Obama and President Joe Biden from 2007 to 2024 is substantiated. The role of the US government in financial support for students is considered. The ratio between the number of students receiving education in public institutions of higher education in the United States, private non-profit and private for-profit institutions, for the period 1970 to 2024 and for the following 2025-2029 academic years, was analyzed. The socio-cultural and organizational-pedagogical connections between the psychological and physical state of students and the living conditions of the student community were identified. The data presented in the article provide potential applicants to American education, Ukrainian teachers, researchers, and educators with the knowledge to ensure a qualitative understanding of educational issues in the American environment depending on strategies, goals, and identities (cultural or demographic differences, career aspirations, STEM education).

Keywords: higher education, STEM education, college, university, United States of America, Ukraine.

Батюк Л. В. Різноманітність вищої освіти в США: доступ, вступ та тенденції зарахування. Стаття присвячена дослідженню діяльності коледжів та університетів, що надають професійну вищу освіту (дворічну та чотирирічну) у Сполучених Штатах Америки, за період з 2012 по 2024 навчальні роки, відповідно до статистичного розподілу закладів вищої освіти

на державні, приватні некомерційні та приватні комерційні. Добір закладів вищої освіти проаналізовано за допомогою індексу конкурентоспроможності вступу Баррона та впливу рейтингів університетів та коледжів на освітнє середовище. Розглядаються програми фінансової допомоги здобувачам освіти згідно з Розділом IV Закону «Про вищу освіту» Сполучених Штатів. Проаналізовано кількість та відсотковий розподіл дипломів/сертифікатів, виданих закладами вищої освіти за освітнім напрямком STEM у галузі науки, технологій, інженерії та математики, за расовою/етнічною приналежністю здобувачів STEM-освіти у США з 2012-2013 по 2022-2023 навчальні роки. Обґрунтовано зв'язок між вибором студентами США з різних етнічних груп напряму STEM-освіти та ініціативами освітньої політики президента Барака Обами та президента Джо Байдена з 2007 по 2024 рік. Розглянуто роль уряду США у фінансовій підтримці студентів. Проаналізовано співвідношення між кількістю студентів, які отримують освіту в державних закладах вищої освіти США, приватних некомерційних та приватних комерційних закладах освіти, за період 1970 по 2024 рік та за наступні 2025-2029 навчальні роки. Виявлено соціально-культурні та організаційно-педагогічні зв'язки між психологічним та фізичним станом студентів та умовами життя студентської спільноти. Дані, представлені у статті, надають потенційним абітурієнтам американської освіти, українським вчителям, дослідникам та освітянам знання для забезпечення якісного розуміння освітніх питань у американському середовищі залежно від стратегій, цілей та ідентичностей (культурні чи демографічні відмінності, кар'єрні прагнення, STEM-освіта).

Ключові слова: вища освіта, STEM-освіта, коледж, університет, Сполучені Штати Америки, Україна.

Introduction. The future and present prosperity of every nation requires society to ensure that every community and every individual have equal access to sources of opportunity. The main source among the many such sources is higher education. Therefore, it is extremely important that educators, politicians, community leaders, representatives of the media and information systems, education seekers and others are not only outside observers of the changes taking place in the modern educational environment, but also have the opportunity to be participants in this process and have access to timely data and the most important predictors of higher education. In Ukraine, as one of the multiethnic and multicultural countries in the world, society is mastering the ways of harmonious development of the educational environment. In this context, it is quite natural to turn to the problems of educational development in foreign countries, especially the USA (On the signing of the Protocol, 2024). The urgency of a broad study and generalization of the experience of leading countries in the field of implementing the ideas of modern higher education is increasing due to the fact that domestic pedagogy and higher education need to develop and implement optimal policies, theories and practices of education in the

conditions of modern society (Loan Agreement, 2024; Batyuk & Zhernovnykova, 2022). Over the past two decades, the US population has become not only more racially and ethnically diverse, but also more educated, which is largely due to the growth of clear policies of the Federal Government of the country and state governments that seek higher education for their communities at a previously unseen level. In the United States of America, there are more than 200 indicators that relate to how access to diverse educational environments and experiences is obtained, which colleges and universities are most in demand; how rankings affect the choice of a higher education institution; how and why financial support is provided to education seekers; what degrees are awarded by certain educational institutions; which STEM fields are most in demand; how these educational trajectories and their outcomes differ by race and ethnicity of the country's citizens, and so on (Rosenberg, et al., 2018; Leshner, et al., 2018). These data provide a foundation for understanding how the higher education process works for ordinary citizens of the country, from which the U.S. higher education community and its many stakeholders can draw knowledge, raise new questions, and justify what factors still matter in higher education.

One of the mottos of Americans, which expresses their attitude towards education, is the famous saying of Warren Buffett: "The more you learn, the more you earn", which emphasizes the importance of continuous learning and developing skills to increase one's income and improve one's life. This concept assumes that investments in self-education and acquisition of new knowledge directly contribute to professional growth and open up new opportunities for earning money (Lowenstein, 2008). Among foreign countries, the USA is a leader in the study of the theory and practice of higher education, where over several decades a rich theoretical and practical material has been accumulated, which is still insufficiently studied and understood, and is relevant today as never before. The use of relevant foreign scientific and pedagogical experience is extremely necessary, given that the modern process of professional training of students in higher education in Ukraine is accompanied by a certain legislative framework, the introduction of the latest educational technologies and educational areas (STEM education) and various forms of relations between students and employers (On approval of the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in Ukraine for 2022-2032, 2022; On expanding the base, 2024; On the implementation of an innovative educational project, 2024). The analysis of scientific and pedagogical research has shown that among the current problems of training specialists in domestic colleges and universities, one can single out the duplication of bachelor's training in higher education institutions of Ukraine, the loss of certain positions in the training of junior specialists, especially in terms of their practical training and obtaining working professions (Batyuk & Zhernovnykova,

2018). Modernization of the content, methods and forms of modern higher education is impossible to imagine without an in-depth study of foreign experience, which should be accompanied by the justification and development of fundamentally new approaches to the content and quality of educational training, the organization of the educational process, professional and practical training and the issue of graduate employment, updating the regulatory framework for the functioning of the system of training students in modern conditions.

The purpose of the article is to familiarize yourself with the activities of colleges and universities (two-year and four-year) in the USA that provide professional higher education, the principles of ranking higher education institutions in the USA, with changes in the distribution of STEM diplomas/certificates among students over the past decade, with the principles of support for students by the country's government and ways of financing higher education in the USA to implement positive ideas of the American experience in the educational process of higher education in Ukraine.

Methods of research. The achievement of the goal and implementation of the research tasks was facilitated by the use of a complex of research methods: specific-search and logical-synthetic analysis, for collecting, analyzing, comparing, systematizing and summarizing historical, scientific-pedagogical, periodical, methodological, reference literature, and regulatory documentation; system-structural analysis for systematizing scientific facts about higher education and STEM education in the USA; statistical analysis for collecting, processing, and analyzing educational statistics data from the National Center for Educational Sciences in the USA and determining the statistical significance of the results obtained; comparative analysis of individual aspects of the development of higher education and STEM education in the USA; theoretical-generalizing method and interpretation method for formulating and substantiating conclusions based on the results of the research.

Results. The US education system is very diverse, decentralized and divided between the states of the country (Irwin, et al., 2024; U.S. News & World Report, 2024). The first level of higher education, known in the United States of America as basic higher education, includes educational institutions that are divided into three types of educational institutions: 1) public; 2) private non-profit and 3) private for-profit. According to the type of educational institution, each institution receives state and/or non-state material support. Almost all higher education institutions in the US receive money from donations and investments, both private and commercial organizations, and from the provision of education to students; but public educational institutions also always receive support from the government of the home state, which has its own (aboriginal) powers that allow it to act if this does not contradict the US Constitution and the state constitutions. State constitutions, as a rule, are more

detailed than the federal (state) and establish the procedure for organizing state government and protecting the rights of citizens in their own way. Private non-profit higher education institutions do not receive any funding from the state. As a result of differences in funding sources, the cost of education at public educational institutions is usually lower than at private ones, especially for those students who have permanent registration in the territory of a given state. In the third type of educational institutions, known as private for-profit higher education institutions, educational programs are determined by the necessary professional competencies that students want to acquire. Education at such institutions is quite expensive. In the 2023–2024 academic year (Irwin, et al., 2024), there were 3,633 higher education institutions in the United States that were authorized to issue diplomas to students upon graduation. Of these institutions, 2,365 were 4-year institutions offering at least one bachelor's or higher degree program, and 1,268 were 2-year institutions offering associate degrees and certificates in technical fields. The number of 4-year and 2-year institutions varied by institutional control (see Figure 1; Figure 2).

Figures 1 and 2 show data collected from the 50 states and the District of Columbia, United States. Educational institutions that award associate, bachelor's, master's, or higher degrees also participate in federal financial aid programs under Title IV. Financial aid programs under Title IV of the Higher Education Act (Title IV) include federal grants and loans for students in U.S. higher education institutions that were previously administered by the U.S. Department of Education (Hegji, 2024; Federal Role in Education, 2024). The major programs include the Pell Grant, the Federal Supplemental Education Opportunity Grant (FSEOG), the Direct Subsidized/Unsubsidized Loan, and the Direct PLUS/Direct Graduate PLUS Loan.

The number of 4-year institutions was

1) 14 % higher in 2023 than in 2012 for public institutions (769 vs. 674 institutions), with their number increasing throughout the period;

2) 1 % higher in 2023 than in 2012 for private non-profit institutions (1,319 vs. 1,312 institutions), with the number decreasing after a peak in 2017 (1,353 institutions);

3) 61 % lower in 2023 than in 2012 for private for-profit institutions (277 vs. 719 institutions), with the number decreasing over the entire period (Digest of Education Statistics, 2024).

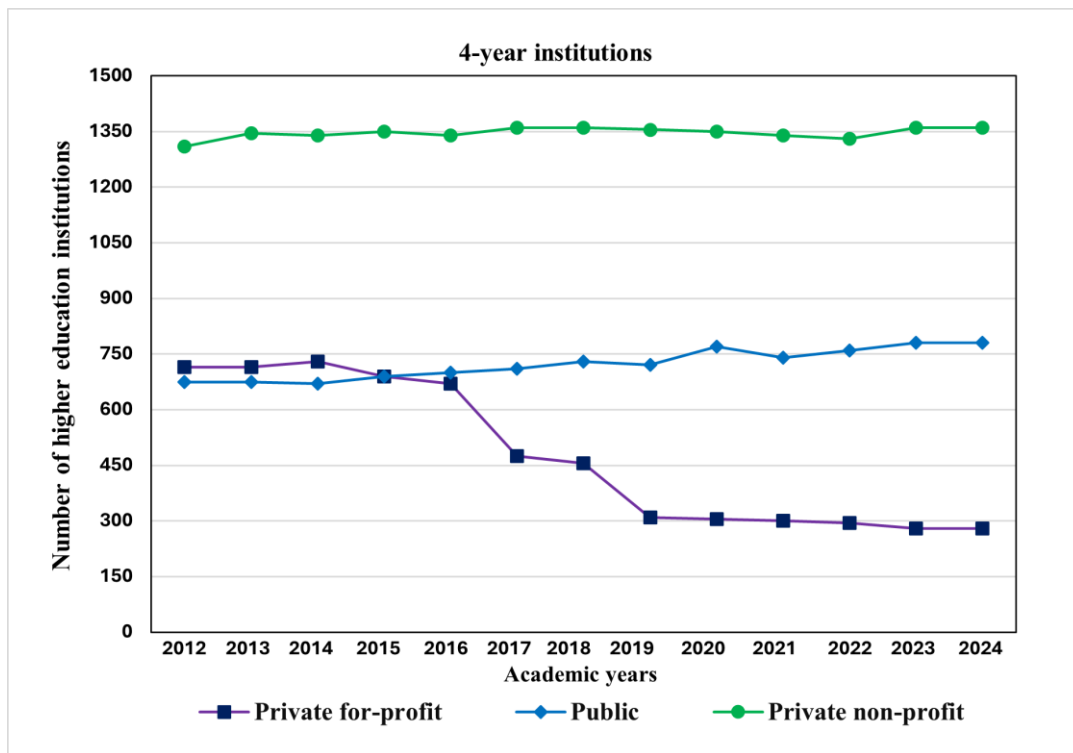


Figure 1. Number of 4-year degree-granting postsecondary institutions USA (by 2012 through 2024 academic years).

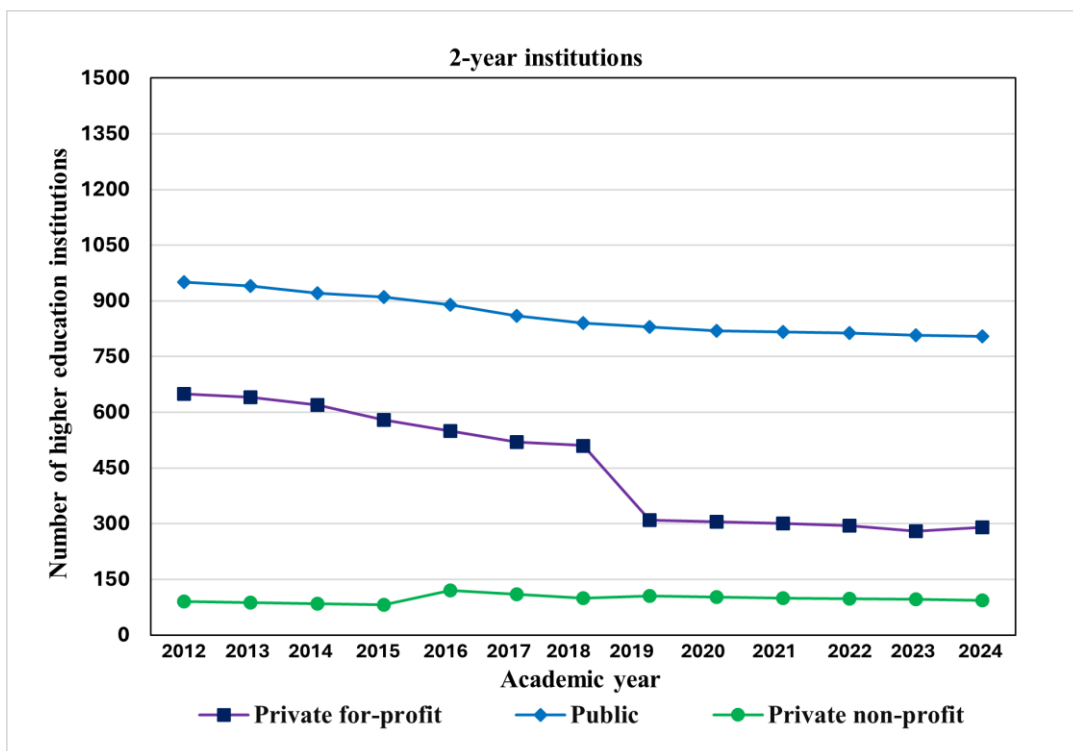


Figure 2. Number of 2-year degree-granting postsecondary institutions USA (by 2012 through 2024 academic years).

Educational institutions can also be divided by the type of educational programs, the duration of study, and the degrees awarded to their graduates. According to the Carnegie classification (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2024), there are three main groups in this direction: community colleges (sometimes called junior colleges), four-year colleges, and universities. Community colleges offer two years of basic higher education (first and second years). A two-year program of study typically requires 60 credit hours or less and can be completed within two calendar years. Certificates and associate degrees are the most common degrees awarded in the two-year sector. A four-year program of study typically requires 120 credit hours or less and can be completed within four calendar years.

On average, from 2014 to 2024, each of these colleges enrolled 5 million students per year. Most community colleges are public educational institutions that are funded by local and/or state funds. They serve two types of students: those who study their first and second years before transferring to a four-year college for their third and fourth years, and those who come to receive education in a one- or two-year vocational training program. Community colleges offer programs in a variety of majors and fields, such as information technology, office work, medical work, police work, automotive service work, and more.

There are significant differences between colleges and universities. One of the main ones is the size of the educational institution. Some colleges have a student population of a few hundred to a few thousand, while some universities have more than 100,000 students on multiple campuses.

Universities tend to have larger campuses than colleges and offer a wider range of degree programs. Colleges offer a greater number of undergraduate and graduate programs. Part of the responsibility of universities is to encourage their faculty and students who are enrolled in the second stage of higher education (master's and doctoral programs) to engage in research. Colleges are primarily focused on basic higher education and are not required to conduct research. Many colleges are essentially liberal arts colleges, which means that they offer courses in subjects such as literature, languages, mathematics, philosophy, sociology, and the humanities. Liberal arts colleges do not usually offer degrees in engineering, business, journalism, pedagogy (teacher education), and many other specific academic disciplines that a student can master at a university. Some colleges train students in one specific specialty, for example, it can be an agricultural or pedagogical college. There are educational institutions of basic higher education that are not called colleges, but also train students in one specific educational direction. Such educational institutions include conservatories, theological seminaries and art

schools. For those who have decided to devote themselves to a military career, the US government offers training in military academies.

In colleges and universities, the academic year lasts about nine months (usually from September to early June or from late August to May). The academic year in colleges is divided into two semesters or three trimesters. The grading system, from highest to lowest, consists of A, B, C, D, F (a failing grade – unsatisfactory). After completing four years of study with appropriate grades and successfully passing the final exam, graduates are awarded a bachelor's degree. Some students can complete their studies earlier than four years if they attend classes in the summer semester.

A second degree of higher education, or full higher education, is offered at most American universities. American universities offer three full (postgraduate) degrees of higher education: a master's degree (Master's degree), a doctorate (Ph.D), and a professional degree (professional degree) (for example, in the field of medicine, law, or engineering). In most educational fields, a master's degree can be obtained after completing one or two years of study and obtaining a bachelor's degree (B.S. and B.A).

Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Bachelor of Science (BS) are different types of first-degree higher education degrees. The BA focuses on the humanities, social sciences, and arts, such as literature, history, and communications, while the BS focuses on the natural sciences, including mathematics, computer science, and engineering. The Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree usually takes a minimum of three years to complete after earning a master's degree. In order to earn a PhD in most fields, students must pass oral and written exams and write a major research paper that will contribute a new branch to the development of the field they are studying. Candidates for a PhD must have communication skills in more than one language. Today, a student can earn a doctorate in more than one hundred fields. The most popular majors at public two-year institutions in 2018-2020 were General studies and other fields (30.6 %), Health care fields (18.9 %), Business and personal and consumer services (13.6 %) and STEM fields (12.0 %) (Espinosa, et al., 2019).

Figures 3 and 4 show the most recent changes in the correlation of the percentage distribution of STEM degrees/certificates awarded to U.S. citizens and permanent residents for the 2012-2013 and 2022-2023 academic years which reflect the educational environment of higher education institutions in the 50 states and the District of Columbia (Digest of Education Statistics, 2024). Data are for higher education institutions participating in Title IV federal financial aid programs and U.S. service academies. The distribution by ethnic origin and race includes the following individuals: Black U.S. citizens include African Americans, Hispanic U.S. citizens include Latinos, and Pacific Islanders who hold U.S. citizenship include Native Hawaiians. Data for students whose race/ethnicity was unknown were proportionally

allocated to these groups based on the reported racial/ethnic distribution by degree level, field of study, and gender (excluding non-resident students).

The data in Figures 3 and 4 include the following STEM fields of study: 1) biological and biomedical sciences; 2) computer and information sciences; 3) engineering and engineering technology; 4) mathematics and statistics; 4) physical sciences and science technology. The number of degrees is limited to institutions of higher education, depending on the institution's accreditation, classified in the fall following the reporting year. The small number of institutions that were counted, that is, institutions that could have awarded associate degrees to students in the previous year but that are not currently awarding degrees, were not included in the results presented. The number of certificates includes institutions with both higher education and without it.

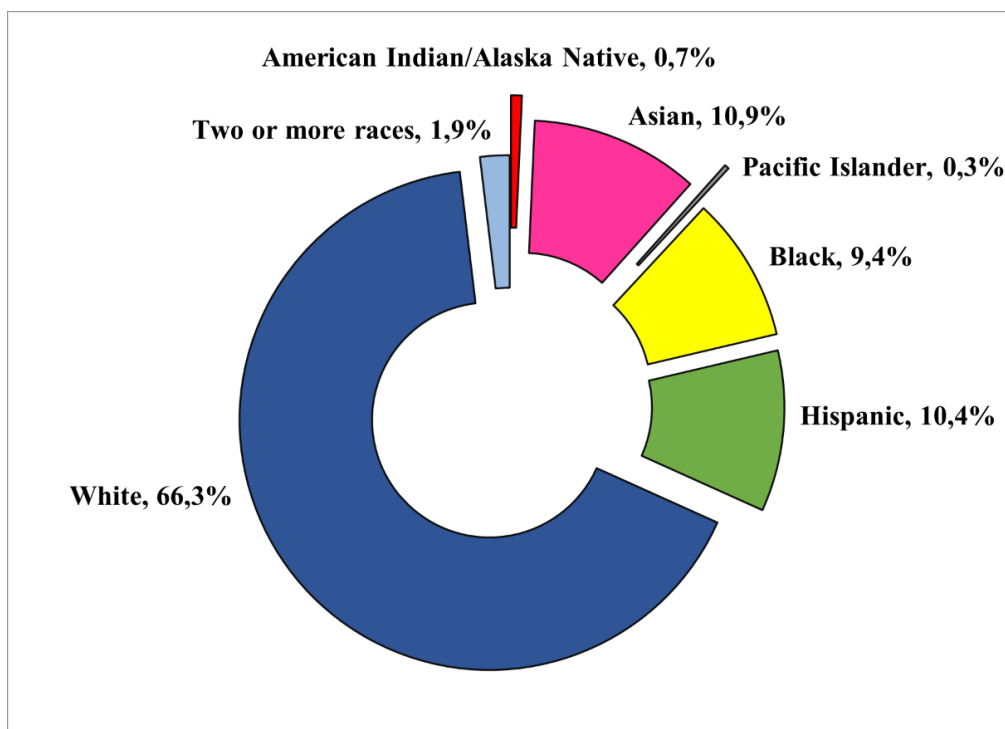


Figure 3. Percentage distribution of STEM degrees/certificates awarded to US citizens and permanent residents (2012-2013 academic years).

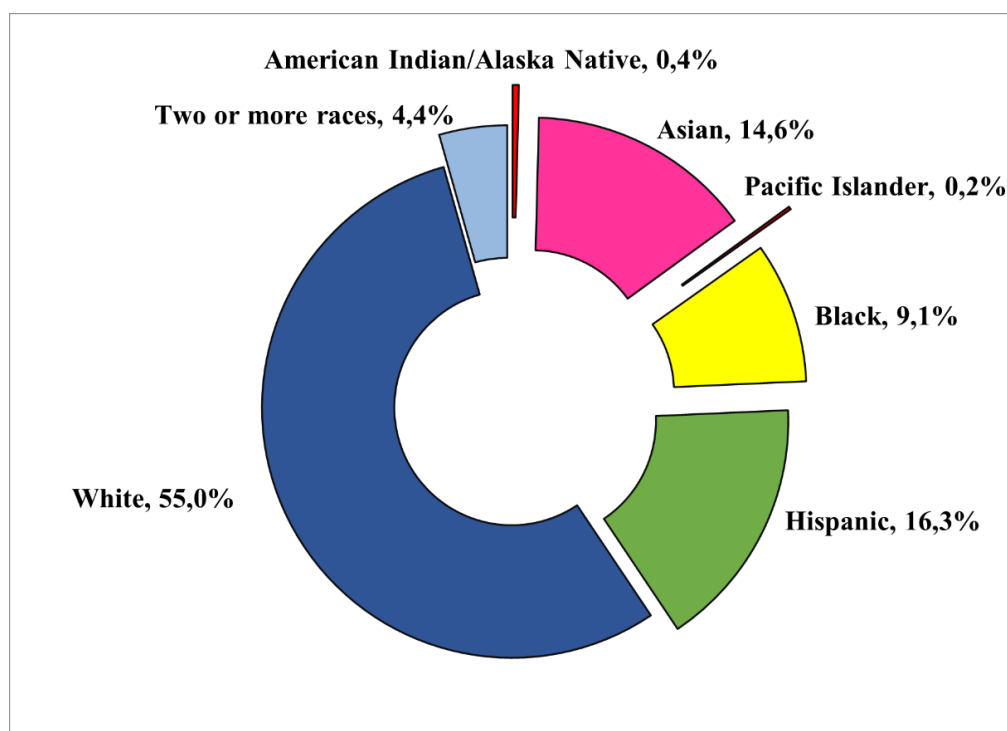


Figure 4. Percentage distribution of STEM degrees/certificates awarded to US citizens and permanent residents (2022-2023 academic years).

The data presented in Figures 3 and 4 includes all degrees and certificates, but does not include postbaccalaureate or post-master's certificates. General education and other programs were the primary credentialing streams for most students in the 2022-2023 school year. There are many factors that influence educational access and success, such as income, wealth, geography, and age. However, as this and other studies show, race and ethnicity remain a dominant factor in many educational outcomes in the United States. The racial and ethnic makeup of the United States has changed significantly since the country's founding, with dramatic changes occurring in just the past 20 years. The 50 percent of students from communities of color enrolled in K-12 public schools will soon make up the majority of the U.S. adult population. Racial and ethnic diversity has a number of benefits at all levels of education and in the labor market, leading to higher productivity, innovation, cultural competence, and so on. As the U.S. population has become more racially and ethnically diverse, so has the number of students at all levels of higher education. The growth of the Hispanic population and the increase in higher education enrollment have played a central role in both trends. As shown in Figures 3 and 4, the number of Asian and Latino students increased by almost 5 percent over the nearly decade from 2012 to 2023. For Hispanics and Asians, each 10-year age cohort had higher rates of higher education completion than the next age group (Digest of Education Statistics, 2024). The number of students with parents of different ethnic backgrounds has also

increased. Unfortunately, the number of black students has remained almost the same. The percentage of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander students, who have historically had the lowest educational attainment and college enrollment rates among traditional-age high school graduates and who make up a disproportionately older population of students in the United States, has also declined. Despite the fact that, thanks to education initiatives and policies under President Barack Obama and President Joe Biden, students of color were more likely than their white peers to earn a bachelor's or master's degree or to enroll in a four-year graduate program from 2007 to 2024, there has been no significant change in the statistics. A higher proportion of white students pursued a bachelor's degree in health sciences (22.1 %) than any other group. Asian students were nearly twice as likely as black students to pursue a bachelor's degree in STEM (17.1 % and 8.8 %, respectively). Native American or Alaska Native students were twice as likely as Asian students to pursue a bachelor's degree in manufacturing, military technology, and other applied fields (26.4 % and 13.4 %, respectively) (Digest of Education Statistics, 2024).

One of the important divisions of institutions, as mentioned above, is the division of higher education institutions depending on the sources from which institutions receive funding for their educational activities. The cost varies significantly among institutions of different types. In expensive private colleges and universities, the annual cost, which includes the cost of tuition, accommodation, food, purchase of necessary educational literature, etc., can exceed \$ 30,000. State universities are much cheaper. However, in such educational institutions the cost of tuition is always higher for students who are not permanent residents of this state. The cost of tuition at community colleges averages about \$ 3,000. In state colleges, the cost is about twice as high. The cost of education is constantly growing. In the early 2000s, it increased by 5-7% per year. The need to cover the costs of tuition, accommodation and food is a significant problem for a number of students. Most families open special savings accounts to accumulate funds for their children's education. In addition, the United States of America has a developed credit system that is available not only to parents and guardians, but also to students themselves. Educational loans are issued at low interest rates and for a long period. Payments are regulated in such a way that students begin to cover most of the debt only after graduating from a higher education institution and finding permanent employment. However, for some categories of American families this does not solve all the problems associated with financing education (Taylor, et al., 2023). Many students, especially in their senior years, take on part-time (less often full-time) work to cover the costs of food and accommodation, personal needs, or in order to pay off a student loan already taken out at the bank more quickly. Such a schedule for obtaining

education increases the physical, psychological and emotional burden on students, not leaving them enough time for rest.

The US government is involved in providing financial support to those students who are particularly in need of this financial assistance. There are three main types of financial assistance (Bastedo, et al., 2023): 1) Scholarships and grants, which are non-repayable financial assistance, money that students must repay; 2) Loans provided to parents and students on preferential terms; 3) Part-time work provided by the educational institution to students throughout the academic year.

Most of the financial support is focused on those students who really need it, and does not depend on the academic success and/or achievements of the students. And this is a significant difference from the financial rewards, scholarships, and grants provided to students by higher education institutions in Ukraine. In the US, as in Ukraine, there are types of financial incentives for the best students, but such types of funding are less common, and very widely limited.

Funds for all types of financial aid in the United States of America for education come from three main sources: from the federal government, state governments, and private investors. In each American college or university there are financial aid departments, whose obligations include helping students find out what form of aid they can count on, as well as helping with filling out complex applications and completing the entire package of documents (Hillman, 2024). For foreigners who have permanent registration in the United States, the form of financial aid in obtaining higher education is the same as for local students. However, for foreign students who come to the United States for the purpose of obtaining education, financial aid is limited, these students do not fall under financial aid programs.

According to estimates from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), college enrollment has generally shown an upward trend over time since the 1970s, with some periods of decline or no growth (Digest of Education Statistics, 2024). Enrollment trends are related, at least in part, to trends in the employment opportunities of future professionals (e.g., the Great Recession between 2008 and 2010). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, during periods of fewer job opportunities and higher unemployment, college enrollment generally increased. The number of undergraduate students increased sharply during the Great Recession, reaching numbers from 15.6 million in the fall of 2007 to a peak of 18.1 million in the fall of 2010, before sharply declining by 2% between the fall of 2011 and the fall of 2012 and by 3% between the fall of 2012 and the fall of 2014. The next similar decline in the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions was observed between 2014 and 2018, reaching 16.9 million in 2016 and 16.6 million in 2018. In the fall of 2018, public institutions accounted for 79% of undergraduate student

enrollment, private nonprofit institutions accounted for 17%, and private for-profit institutions enrolled 4% (Lane, et al., 2024; Irwin, et al., 2024; Digest of Education Statistics, 2024). Because public higher education institutions in the United States enroll, on average, more students than private nonprofit and private for-profit institutions, the distribution of enrollment under control conditions differs significantly from the distribution reported in the statistics produced by educational institutions. In 2018-19, 41% of U.S. higher education institutions were publicly owned, 41% of higher education institutions were private nonprofit, and 18% of higher education institutions were private for-profit.

Although there has been some fluctuation in the share of enrollment at public institutions since 1975, public higher education institutions have consistently enrolled over 70% of undergraduate students. In 1975, 81% of undergraduate students were enrolled at public higher education institutions. The public education sector share in the United States declined to 76% by fall 2010 and was 77% in 2014 and 2015. In 2016, the public education sector share rose again to 78%, and by 2018 it was 79%. The share of undergraduate students enrolled in private non-profit higher education institutions ranged from 19% in 1975 to 15% in 2009. In 2018, 17% of undergraduate students were enrolled in private non-profit higher education institutions (16.7% in 4-year and 0.3% in 2-year private non-profit higher education institutions). During the 1990s, approximately 2% of undergraduate students were enrolled in private for-profit 2-year and 4-year institutions of higher education. The share of private for-profit institutions of higher education where students receive education in 2-year and 4-year bachelor's degrees increased during the 2000s, reaching a peak of 10% in 2010 and then declining to 4% in the fall of 2018. NCES projections for the period 2025-2029 are (enrollment per year), in 4-year institutions of higher education in the United States approximately 11.644 million students, in 2-year institutions of higher education in the United States, enrollment is 3.4 million students (Digest of Education Statistics, 2024).

The selectivity of a higher education institution is measured using the Barron's Competitiveness Index (Barron, 2022). Barron's does not publish annual comprehensive rankings of universities. However, Barron's Best Colleges publishes a biennial guide that includes selectivity ratings based on a university's Selector Rating system (All Barron's Lists & Rankings, 2024). While the guide is not a comprehensive ranking system, it aims to evaluate institutions based on their competitive admission standards, assigning a score to each one. Barron's selectivity indicators are determined by several factors, including: average SAT or ACT composite score; a student's high school class rank; a student's GPA; and the percentage of students accepted. The SAT, known for most of its history as the «scholastic aptitude test» which consists of two components: a verbal (reading

and writing) and a mathematical component, each of which is scored on a scale of 200 to 800. The test was originally called the SAT I: Reasoning Test, then the SAT Reasoning Test, and then simply the SAT. The SAT scores range from 400 to 1600 for the overall score. The higher your score, the better off you are on the exam compared to other applicants (Edwards, 2024). Barron's does not publish individual SAT rankings, but their «Selectivity Index» ranks schools based on a variety of factors, including acceptance rate, GPA, high school standing, and SAT scores. While this index is not a stand-alone SAT ranking, it does provide a measure of a school's overall competitiveness. Barron's selectivity scores group schools into six different levels, from most selective to least selective, including: Most Competitive, Highly Competitive, Very Competitive, Competitive, Less Competitive, and Not Competitive. In the fall of 2023, the majority of undergraduate students, 59 % were enrolled in 2-year or 4-year institutions of higher education that were not classified as competitive. 45 % of undergraduate students were enrolled in 4-year institutions classified as «competitive» or higher. 3.8 % of students were enrolled in the «most competitive» USA institutions. 37 % attended 2-year institutions. The remaining students attended for-profit institutions (4 %) or unranked public and nonprofit 4-year institutions (12 %), or institutions designated by Barron's as Special (1 %), Noncompetitive (2 %), or Less Competitive (4 %) 4-year institutions.

Some researchers (Pusser & Marginson, 2013), argue that university and college rankings justify growing inequality and «reinforce both new and old forms of power», due to their detrimental effects, especially on institutions that focus on educating minority, racialized, and Native American students. In the American educational landscape, K–12 schools that serve predominantly minority students are often under-resourced compared to other schools. Rankings do not account for these factors, and as a result, institutions that serve minorities suffer, as they may enroll students with lower test scores and spend resources supporting their successful graduation relative to others (Richards, et al., 2018).

Three companies dominate global university rankings, namely the «Big Three», which include the Times Higher Education World University Ranking, the QS World University Rankings, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities. the Times Higher Education World University Ranking, the QS World University Rankings, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities. These rankings have numerous subsidiary rankings (Stack, 2016), including best student city, regional rankings, etc., and software tools that promise university administrations the ability to make tenure and promotion decisions that are consistent with the metrics used by the ranking experts. QS is a particularly entrepreneurial ranking. QS provides assistance in determining the strategic direction of the institution, student recruitment, and external strategy. The QS Intelligence Unit provides services to higher education

institutions that help universities improve on the basis of QS indicators, and through auditing (for a fee) the opportunity to obtain up to 5 stars that can be used for marketing. Most of the top ten US higher education institutions in the world are located in California, the tri-state area (New York, New Jersey, Connecticut) and neighboring Massachusetts (Stack, 2019).

The student community, whose life is closely connected with American colleges, despite the existing certain difficulties associated with paying for tuition, is remembered by many people as the most exciting time of their lives. Students are involved in various activities that go beyond the curriculum. Such activities include various sports, publishing newspapers, participating in musical groups, and participating in political and religious student communities. Most colleges and universities have student councils in which students come together to prepare for classes, to participate in clubs for interests, and simply to communicate (Brown, 2021). On many campuses, social life revolves around male or female groups (fraternities and sororities). Sports are an important part of student life on most American campuses. Most higher education institutions belong to various sports leagues. Teams in these leagues compete with each other for championships. American football is one of the student sports that attracts the greatest interest. The games are real training with the participation of musical groups and special support groups. Other sports that arouse special interest among students include basketball, swimming and track and field. Some colleges and universities have strong teams in tennis, sailing, wrestling, football, baseball and golf. Higher education institutions invest in the development of sports and physical training of their students, creating, based on their financial capabilities, a modern sports infrastructure. Physical education is not a mandatory subject in the higher education program, however, the availability of resources and propaganda carried out by educational institutions make it an integral part of education. Sports achievements help applicants to enter the college of their choice and even receive a scholarship. In addition, sports help American students to cope with stress, which is a characteristic feature of the American higher education system (Donaldson & Hammrich, 2016; Calkins, et al., 2023).

For most students, the years of study in higher education institutions are interesting and fruitful. Almost all college and university students face the pressure of a busy educational program and the need to make decisions about their future careers, as well as anxiety about exams and grades. In most educational institutions in the United States, the spirit of competition for results is very strongly developed. Students understand that their further employment depends on the indicators with which they receive their diplomas. When selecting candidates, employers focus on the grades received during their studies, on achievements, and on the

recommendations that graduates receive from their teachers and supervisors. The assessment criteria are very strict. The use of a rating system, written tests and exams, leads to the fact that every mistake can lower the final results. Working on homework takes up most of the students' time, leaving few hours for sleep and rest. Students feel pressured by the realization that their future depends on how successfully they cope with the curriculum. Some students, in addition to psychological and physical stress, experience emotional stress associated with living on campus, far from family and friends. Understanding the difficulties that students have to face, many educational institutions provide them with free professional psychological assistance. Psychological centers (Counselor service) are a common phenomenon in the American education system. Along with psychological support for students, and sometimes even parents of students, educational institutions organize career counseling centers (Career centers), where senior students are helped to decide on a job choice. In addition, each student has his or her own supervisor, whom they can contact regarding problems related to studies. A set of these measures on the part of the educational institution helps students go through the path from the beginning to the end of their studies and achieve the maximum possible results. Perhaps that is why, despite all the difficulties that American students go through, most of them carry love for their alma mater throughout their lives. Graduates, even after many years, cheer for the sports teams of their college or university, try to attend alumni meetings and even make donations to the development of their educational institution. It should be noted that there are alumni councils, which are often one of the main investors in colleges and universities, and which are members of the boards of trustees of their educational institutions. Educational institutions, for their part, try not to forget their graduates and are proud of their successes.

In the United States, obtaining education to further choose a better job, or to improve one's skills, or for personal growth is a continuous process. After completing all levels of primary, secondary and higher education, people continue to study in different places and for different reasons. About 76% of the country's adult population attends some kind of classes or courses, mostly through distance learning. Most of these classes and educational programs are very often aimed not at obtaining credits, but at obtaining knowledge that students can use in the future in their work, at their workplace, to implement their hobbies or for personal growth. Many employees attend classes directly at their workplace. Many companies and enterprises pay for such educational programs, sponsor training if their employee returns to an educational institution in order to obtain the knowledge and competencies that are necessary to better perform their duties at the workplace. Continuing education programs, often referred to as adult education (Tamassia, et al., 2007; Heller & Mumma, 2024) or continuing education, are offered at many high schools, colleges,

and even museums. Institutions such as Harvard University, Columbia University, Boston University, Johns Hopkins University, Harvard Extension School, the Smithsonian Institution, the Texas Historical Commission (THC), and others offer low-cost educational seminars and free webinars for school, college, and university teachers; for museum professionals; and offer certificates of higher education and master's degrees in museum studies, with special emphasis on the basic principles and practices of modern museums (Top Masters Programs in Museum, Museology and Curatorial Studies, 2024; Harvard Division of Continuing Education, 2024).

Education, like any other field of modern human activity, uses all the possible advantages of the latest technologies. Developing technologies lead to the fact that some skills become obsolete, while others become extremely in demand in the labor market. As a result, this leads to the fact that most workers at different levels realize the need to improve their professionalism, and therefore the need for training. Even professionals such as doctors, dentists and engineers continue to learn in order to respond to modern changes taking place in the professional sphere. Education is an important element in the lives of citizens of the United States of America. The American dream of achieving success in the professional and financial spheres is most often achieved through obtaining a high-quality higher education. For the sake of this dream, people are ready to make large financial investments, are ready to spend many years of their lives and invest enormous physical efforts. The state, in turn, understands how great the need for educated, competent specialists is and creates the most favorable conditions for their education and training.

Discussion. Higher education in the United States encompasses a wide range of educational institutions and institutions with diverse academic and scholarly traditions. The study shows that the United States Government's focus on higher education institutions that are the flagships of the educational environment and on those that are educational outsiders results in the country's best higher education institutions receiving an average annual budget of approximately \$2 billion, which is often money redirected to them from those higher education institutions that serve the majority of students. Sometimes, if an educational institution has a «permanent» good reputation, meaning that even if it is not very profitable but is in good standing with the state, it is automatically considered profitable; that is, the reputation of higher education institutions does not necessarily relate to actual economic indicators, but rather is built on the perception and interpretation of signals from the educational environment that the institution provides; The logic of the US government's funding of educational institutions is to focus on reputation, rather than on what actually happens in the institution (Bowman & Bastedo, 2011; Marginson, 2014). Thus, regardless of changes in the indicators used by the ranking agencies, universities such as Yale, Harvard, Stanford, and Princeton will always be at the top due to their

«constancy» (Esposito & Stark, 2019). This approach does not contribute to improving teaching and learning in US higher education institutions. This ultimately leads to the fact that deans of departments, heads of educational institutions, or research laboratories at educational institutions can receive funding, grants, and awards based on social capital. Higher education institutions that have more work, articles, grants, and achievements may continue to be ignored by the government. In other cases, some higher education institutions sometimes even manipulate data in an attempt to improve their ranking (Barnard, 2018; Bhattacharjee, 2011; Jaschik, 2018). Some researchers even believe that university and college administrators who use rankings to make official decisions sometimes do not have a proper understanding of the methodological and theoretical issues related to rankings and traditions within the logic of ranking universities with different missions (Hosier & Hoolash, 2017; Olcay, & Bulu, 2017; Paradeise & Toenig, 2013). Given such «small» moments, even small differences can have a significant quantitative impact on an institution's ranking and, consequently, on its funding (Fowles, 2016; Stack, 2021).

Conclusions. Higher education is not just preparation for future professional activities. People who are well-educated have a better chance of becoming better citizens, better parents, and more interesting individuals. And of course, specialists with higher education undoubtedly have an advantage in the labor market in many areas of professional activity. That is why not only young people but also those who were unable to get an education in their youth become applicants to higher education institutions in the USA. College education is not the prerogative of only the rich or talented. Education is available to everyone who is able to get it. With such motivation and a large number of higher education institutions, it becomes a question of the appropriate choice. Of course, information can be obtained from school counselors, from directories, public libraries, on the Internet, and in the educational institutions themselves. Almost all, without exception, higher education institutions in the USA have their own websites that provide all the information necessary for applicants and their parents. Colleges and universities send their representatives to secondary schools to recruit potential students. School students, while still in school, visit a number of higher education institutions, take campus tours and communicate with consultants. Before making a final decision, the applicant should answer the following questions: does the educational institution have a field of study that meets his/her interests and what is the reputation of the university in training in this field? What is the chance of being accepted to this particular higher education institution, taking into account the grades and achievements of the applicant? Do you like the location and climate? What is the size of the educational institution? After all, in a small educational institution, a student can feel less lonely. Can the university provide the largest number of educational programs, courses, extracurricular

activities? Can the applicant or his/her parents afford to pay for tuition and accommodation at this educational institution? Is it possible to get an education of this level elsewhere for a lower cost? The system of functioning and the role of higher education institutions in the choice of education seekers of their future educational environment, a comparative analysis of the number of 4-year higher education institutions and 2-year higher education institutions that issue diplomas and for the period from 2012 to 2024 academic years, and the percentage distribution of STEM diplomas/certificates issued to US citizens and permanent residents for the period 2012-2013 and 2022-2023 academic years presented in this article provide potential seekers of American education, Ukrainian teachers and educators with the knowledge necessary to ensure a qualitative understanding of the issues of obtaining higher education in the American environment, depending on the goals, strategies and understanding of the identity of higher education institutions (cultural or demographic differences, career aspirations) that differ significantly between our educational environment and the educational environment of the United States of America. Early-career Ukrainian higher education faculty members who are in the process of establishing themselves in the department, or faculty members with extensive teaching and pedagogical experience, may benefit from periodic updates on knowledge, best practices, and opportunities to understand the achievements of higher education in the United States.

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