

Higher Education and the American Dream
– Book Launch

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The book launch, devoted to the recently edited book *Higher Education and the American Dream-Success and its Discontents* by Marvin Lazerson, was held on 17th February at CEU University, Budapest.

The author is professor of higher education policy in the Department of Public Policy, Central European University and professor emeritus, University of Pennsylvania. He is a widely published scholar in the areas of educational history, higher education, and social policy. A member of the National Academy of Education (U.S.), he is past president of the History of Education Society.

He has taught at Harvard University, Stanford University, and the University of British Columbia, as well as at Penn, where he also served as dean of the Graduate School of Education and the university's interim provost. His recent books include: *The Education Gospel: the Economic Power of Schooling* (Harvard University Press, 2004); *Institutions of American Democracy: the Public Schools* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

The main aim of the interactive lecture was to explore the reasons why US higher education could become a prosperous industry and what are the social-economic consequences of this tendency.

Mr Lazerson started by explaining the relations between the typical American view of education and the emerging new system itself. In contrast with the pre-Bill Gates period, when attending college meant a privilege and therefore was regarded as a substantial advantage in the labor market, the situation today is much more complex. The desires of an average US family, such as having a house in the suburbs and a car, also include sending their children to college. The reason for this is the assumption that higher education equals economic development and individual success, an attitude that formed educational policy all over the States – low-interest mortgage and easily-gained credit enable parents to sacrifice their safe future for their children's.

It is not surprising, then, that these institutions were basically built on public initiative, a bottom-up organization that reflects well the general US attitude and can-do spirit. The result: more and more universities founded, and a system that did not have rival between 1945-2000.

Although even now education is considered to be a wise investment in one's future career, the enormous system has also produced inconveniences that cannot be neglected. Such a giant industry needs an unthinkable amount of money, and the more it develops, the more profit it makes, which again leads to new investment, creating a vicious circle that might lead to dissatisfaction at the point when graduate students will not be able to find a job that matches their degree or expectations. Therefore, the labor market, called free-agency market in this respect, now put the responsibility on every student to "sale" themselves, an issue becoming more and more difficult with the growth of the college-network. Today, "rise on entitlement" means enrollment to a university as not an opportunity, but an obligation without alternative if someone decides to make his way in life.

Besides, this tendency also means the doom for little seminars and personal professor-student contact. Another drawback of the system is that 45% of freshmen do not graduate, and this way leave the system without a deeper sense of the world around them.

When asked about the American Dream itself, Mr Lazerson defines this phenomenon as a sense of opportunity, a chance to do as well as one can regardless of collar, gender, race and so on. Whether education is needed to fulfill the Dream or not is not known. What is sure is that migrants coming to the US have an idea of their own success, a future that also pushes America onwards. As compared to the EU, where the common idea is still about reaching a common goal, the US builds its future on individuals. The American model is still more successful than the emerging Asian and European one, but how long this is going to continue, is not known yet.

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