Failure is not an option

Reflexive claims for the US academy’s greatness ring hollow, says John Summers, given elite institutions’ tight links with economic and political power and lack of appetite for challenging ideas

Laura Tyson, who has served as dean of the business schools at the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of London, chimed in: “There is not another country’s system that does as well – although others are trying aggressively to catch up.”

In higher education, Fallows reports, lies “America’s advantage”. Certainly, a degree from a leading school is an “advantage” in national politics. Like his presidential predecessor George W. Bush (Yale University, 1968), Barack Obama (Columbia University, 1983) has surrounded himself with graduates of elite private universities. The members of his cabinet, his chief of staff and three senior advisers are together a tribute to ethnic and racial diversity. But only Vice-President Joe Biden and Labor Secretary Hilda Solis received undergraduate degrees from public colleges.


Certainly, too, the elite private university confers an “advantage” in business. Asked in February 2010 by Bloomberg Businessweek to name chief executives he admires, the president cited FedEx’s union-busting chief, Fred Smith (Yale, 1966). When asked about his ambitious plan to double US exports, Obama showed how fully he has absorbed the consensus: “We have still got the most innovative economy,” he boasted. “We have still got the best universities in the world.”

The consensus betrays a hollow conception of higher education that puts product development over moral and cultural development. The president’s secretary of education, Arne Duncan (Harvard, 1987), makes the point clear in Foreign Affairs (November/December 2010). Hailed as one of the administration’s deep thinkers, Duncan peddles a cost-free vision of progress via education replete with the usual lazy connotations of political deference to the economic marketplace, of power with knowledge, and of knowledge with information.

The name of the Department of Education’s reform programme, Race to the Top, perfectly captures the education secretary’s blink of insight of life as a competition. In this market-oriented educational creed, the ambiguities and uncertainties entailed by the actual experience of learning are nowhere acknowledged.

“In moments of agony, I envied my fellow slaves for their stupidity,” Frederick Douglass wrote in his autobiography, A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845). “I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me.”

Columbia sociologist Jonathan Cole’s unusually titled book, The Great American University: Its Rise to Preminence, Its Indispensable National Role, Why It Must Be Protected (2007), celebrates its many scientific advances and attributes them to its economic ecosystems. But just as the new credo takes “everlasting thinking” out of the curriculum, so colleges and universities lost their distinctive institutional character as they turn into a branch of industry. Every further advance into this brave new world, every innovation like stem cells and gene-splicing, confuses the academic value of research with the commercial value of profitizing, the disinterested quest for knowledge from the instrumental expectation of profitability.

It was Stanford that taught two computer scientists, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, to ignore the line separating scholarship from entrepreneurship. Page and Brin met during an orientation session for computer science graduate students. Eventually they convinced Stanford to lend the computing power for the experiments that led to Google. The company models its headquarters on a university campus and promotes itself as a simulacrum of a postgraduate student milieu. It rewarded Stanford for the right to use its key internet search technology, developed by Page and Brin as students there, with stock and royalties; Stanford’s president John Hennessy has a seat on the board.

Neither Page nor Brin completed their postgraduate degrees, but they staffed Google
by League campuses are filled with wealthy middle classes, children of alumni and those with "development admits", ie, admitted because of their family’s donation potential

Future possibilities graduate students at the University of California, Los Angeles, will probably not slide so effortlessly into top careers as their Ivy League contemporaries

Ivy League campuses are filled with wealthy middle classes, children of alumni and those with "development admits", ie, admitted because of their family’s donation potential

Association (Princeton, 1970) began their gilded Wall Street careers. As graduates of the Ivy League, they hired their own, reassured by the compliant notion that they were getting into the smartest, most capable members of society. Over the decades, Wall Street, like the elite universities from which it recruited, evolved a stratified labour system, routinised conflicts of interest and vitiated a semblance of justice. It is a society that, once you have entered, you leave behind. Of course, in the last two decades, Wall Street has made a huge splash in television and film. But it is only a subset of the total population. It is still an elite society, and it is still a closed society. But it is a society that is open to everyone."