Forum

The Campus and Beyond: Higher Education and Social Inequalities in Europe and the United States Since the 1870s

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Since the late nineteenth century, European and North American universities have evolved from small, elite schools into sprawling institutions that have become, as historian Laurence Veysey predicted in 1970, as common "as the church was three hundred years ago." Diplomas, for example, may have stood out a century ago, but today many adults on both sides of the North Atlantic list at least one college degree at the top of their resumes or CVs. Today's degree holders likely enrolled in college or university for many reasons, but teachers, politicians, economists, university spokespeople, and many others assure aspiring students, young and old alike, that higher education remains essential for better economic opportunities in the future. No matter what financial challenges or struggles to stay in school an applicant may face today, the message is that a degree will eventually be worth it.[1]

Yet inequality remains endemic to colleges and universities on either side of the North Atlantic. While reporters have drawn attention to student visa restrictions as well as political threats to jobs, donations, and grants in recent years, it is the soaring costs of a

1 Laurence Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago, 1970), quote on x; for the statistical change, see for the U.S.: https://ies.ed.gov/learn/blog/celebrating-150-years-education-data; for Imperial Germany: https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/students-attending-universities-and-other-institutions-of-higher-learning-in-prussia-1869-1912; See the contributions in *The Transformation of Higher Learning, 1860–1930: Expansion, Diversification, Social Opening, and Professionalization in England, Germany, Russia, and the United States*, ed. Konrad Jarausch (Chicago, 1983).

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college education that have dominated the news. In the United States, tuition fees have skyrocketed over the last decades with some schools listing fees as high as six figures a year. Millions of students, even those enrolled at less expensive universities, have to rely on government loan programs that often leave them, and their parents, with crippling debts.[2]

Rising college costs have also exacerbated inequalities in Europe. English universities recorded recent rises in tuition costs in line with inflation.[3] On the continent, university towns simply do not have enough housing for residents, much less students, who struggle to find affordable housing.[4] Meanwhile, enrollment statistics demonstrate that educational opportunities are still largely tied to social background. For example, in Germany, the European Union's most populous country and the member state with the highest GDP, the vast majority of the children of academics enroll at a university themselves (79 percent in 2022). Despite the successes of individual, pioneering first-generation students, only 27 percent of children born to parents without a university education matriculated in 2022.[5]

Journalists have thus far not paid as much attention to demands for more inclusive, affordable universities. Over the last two decades, for example, strikes and protests have roiled British campuses.

2 Tracy Moran, "Canada, U.S. both roll back welcome mat for international students," *National Post*, July 9, 2026, https://nationalpost.com/news/canada-u-s-both-roll-back-welcome-mat-for-international-students; Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Indentured Students: How Government-Guaranteed Loans Left Generations Drowning in College Debt* (Cambridge, MA, 2021); Thomas Adam, *The History of College Affordability in the United States from Colonial Times to the Cold War* (New York, 2020); Felix Krämer, "Living on Credit: Student Debt in the U.S. History of Knowledge," *History of Knowledge,* September 27, 2024, https://doi.org/10.58079/12pzx; Elissa Nadworny, "College 'sticker prices' have risen dramatically. Here's why," *NPR*, November 20, 2025, https://www.npr.org/2025/11/20/nx-s1-5600854/college-costs-have-risen-dramatically-in-the-last-20-years-heres-why.

3 Branwen Jeffreys, "University Tuition Fees in England to Rise with Inflation Every Year from 2026," *BBC News*, October 20, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgkzj87n8rdo. On the crisis of British universities and the resulting layoffs and closures of departments see Daniel Siemens, "Dem Aufschwung folgt der Ausverkauf," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* June 24, 2026, N4.

4 Helen Whittle, "Germany's Housing Crisis Hits University Students Hard,"*Deutsche Welle,* October 22, 2023, https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-housing-crisis-hits-university-students-hard/a-67149695; "The European Students' Union's Opinion on the European Affordable Housing Plan," January 30, 2026, https://esu-online.org/the-european-students-unions-opinion-on-the-european-affordable-housing-plan.

5 *Hochschul-Bildungs-Report 2020 – Abschlussbericht 2022*, ed. Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft e.V, https://www.hochschulbildungsreport.de/sites/hsbr/files/hochschul-bildungs-report_abschlussbericht_2022.pdf, 2022, 13. However, in Germany the quota of first generation students at private institutions of higher learning is higher than in the public education sector: Gerald Wagner, "International Universities. Studium zum Schleuderpreis, in *FAZNET*," July 16, 2025, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/karriere-hochschule/die-international-university-lockt-mit-guenstigen-gebuehren-und-schnellen-titeln-110590778.html.

Students have condemned the funding cuts and tuition hikes that have made higher education even more unaffordable. They have been joined by faculty who objected to temporary contracts replacing permanent jobs as well as significant pension reductions. In 2021, German academics launched a social media campaign in response to a video published by the Ministry for Research and Education that was supposed to demonstrate the advantages created by a new law introducing fixed-term contracts for mid-level academic staff (*Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz*, WissZeitVG). Using a fictitious character named Hanna, the video sought to illustrate how the new law improved her academic career opportunities. The ensuing *#IchBinHanna* campaign cleverly highlighted the challenges many German academics faced trying to secure permanent positions, which have also become rarer at North American universities.[6]

In the United States, students, parents, citizens, and politicians have debated what kind of institutions universities should be and what uses they should have long before University of California President Clark Kerr mused about the many purposes of the "multiversity" in his now canonical *The Uses of the University* (1964). Campuses transformed North American and European societies, which greatly benefited from the advances in science, technology, and medicine that research universities produced. Yet historians have noted that postsecondary institutions have also reflected and contributed to longstanding social inequalities even when purportedly contributing to what Charles Dorn has called the "Common Good."[7] Other historians have emphasized critical differences between U.S. and European universities. Mitchell G. Ash, for example, argues that Americans have focused on higher education as a "private good" for individual professional development whereas Europeans have tended to argue that universities must function for the "public good."[8]

6 Sean Coughlan, "Students protest against tuition fees," *BBC News*, November 4, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/education-34721681; "UK universities hit by strike action over pay and pensions," *Guardian*, November 30, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/nov/30/uk-universities-hit-by-strike-action-over-pay-and-pensions; Amrei Bahr, Kristin Eichhorn, Sebastian Kubon, *#IchBinHanna: Prekäre Wissenschaft in Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main, 2022). For an analysis of this social media campaign, see Ahmadou Wagne, Elen Le Foll, Florentine Frantz, and Jana Lasser, "Giving the Outrage a Name – How Researchers Are Challenging Employment Conditions under the Hashtags #IchBinHanna and #IchBinReyhan," *Information, Communication & Society* 28, no.9 (2025): 1647–1673.

7 Charles Dorn, *For the Common Good: A New History of Higher Education in America* (Ithaca, NY, 2017).

8 Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, MA, 1964); Mitchell G. Ash, "Higher Education in the United States and Europe since 1945. Multiple Transformations and the Current Crisis," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 77 (Spring 2026): 59-90, 87-90. https://www.ghi-dc.org/fileadmin/publications/Bulletin/bu77/GHI-77_04-FEA-Ash_Universities_3pp.pdf

This forum builds on a conference held at the German Historical Institute and the George Washington University Museum and Textile Museum in October 2025.[9] Our conference unearthed how different higher education systems have sustained similar, intertwined inequalities. The papers in this forum build on an immense body of scholarship as the history of universities in Europe and the U.S. is a well-established field.[10] However, the historiography of universities has traditionally tended to focus more on the institutions rather than on the social realities of those attending, teaching, or working at them, although those dynamics have received more attention in recent years.[11]

This forum highlights the complex dynamics between inequalities on and off college campuses. Many of those disparities have been and remain rooted in capitalism, which has long enabled a wealthy few to more easily succeed politically, financially, and, of course, academically. Entering higher education rather than starting a job right after secondary school has long been and remains a financial decision, often not just for the potential student but for their entire family. In the Industrial North, college attendance remained, often well into the twentieth century, disproportionately concentrated among white men of means, a pattern produced by exclusionary social norms and institutional practices that restricted access along racial, ethnic, gender, and ability lines. Although specific colleges for racial minorities, women, and the deaf were more common in the United States than in Europe, all these demographics faced real limits on educational opportunities, although not always explicitly. Social norms, customs, university rules, and state laws, for example, kept European and North American women from matriculating at many schools until well into the twentieth century.[12] Few schools in the United States, especially in the Southern states, admitted African Americans, who also faced numerous obstacles finishing the high school diplomas needed for admission by the

9 The conference was organized by Raphael Rössel, Stefanie Coché, and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer. It was generously funded by the GHI Washington and the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. See the conference report by Vincent Musebrink in the *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 77 (Spring 2026): 133-140. https://www.ghi-dc.org/fileadmin/publications/Bulletin/bu77/GHI-77_09REP-campusandBeyond_3pp.pdf

10 Among the many syntheses of the history of U.S. higher education is John Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore, 2019); for Europe see the four-volume series *A History of the University in Europe*, ed. by Walter Rüegg and Hilde de Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge, 1992-2011).

11 For a broader sociohistorical approach towards education, see Till Kössler, "Sozialgeschichte der Bildung in der Erweiterung. Einleitung," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 62 (2022): 9-30.

12 Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale and Princeton* (Boston, 2005); Harold S. Wechsler and Steven J. Diner, *Unwelcome Guests: A History of Access to American Higher Education* (Baltimore, 2021).

early decades of the twentieth century.[13] Likewise, students classed as disabled received schooling that ended without degrees or gave them credentials that would not allow them access to higher education. Jewish students faced exclusionary quota systems on both sides of the Atlantic. And even if they were admitted, Jewish students often faced severe everyday discrimination as well as physical and verbal abuse that made it clear to them that they were not welcome.[14]

The five articles assembled in this forum shed light on different dynamics in the interplay of academia and social stratification. Olga Sparschuh reveals the history of German students of dental medicine traveling to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to obtain the doctorates that the established German medical academy denied them at home. In contrast to Germany, a multitude of degree programs for aspiring dentists had been established in the United States by that time, some of which turned out to be diploma mills rather than respectable institutions. Many German dental practitioners or those aspiring to take up the profession felt that the lack of a doctoral degree disadvantaged them in comparison to other fields of medicine and sought to overcome this professional inequality by obtaining a foreign degree. In the long run, the proliferation of American doctorates in the German Empire pressured German universities and the medical establishment to accept the degree "Dr. med. dent."

Jonathan Voges analyzes how the League of Nations sought to tackle the problem of academic unemployment in the interwar period. The intergovernmental organization founded after the First World War hoped to go beyond merely studying the question of rising unemployment among academics. The International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC), an advisory board to the League, envisioned a global scholarship program that would help academics to continue their work despite a scarcity of funds in academia. Voges shows how renowned scientist Marie Curie not only took a leading role in the debates about the scholarship program but also stressed how it could particularly benefit women in academia. Ultimately, these initiatives were stunted by the global Depression and rising nationalism in the 1930s.

13 Linda Perkins, *To Advance the Race: Black Women's Higher Education from the Antebellum Era to the 1960s* (Urbana, 2024), 227.

14 Raphael Rössel, "Die Abwehr unerwünschter Kommilitonen. Initiationsgewalt gegen jüdische Akademiker in den USA, 1890er- bis 1920er-Jahre," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 74, no.1 (2026): 24-39.

Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak traces the rise of Croatian secondary and postsecondary education for women during the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the emergence of a Yugoslavian state. As the end of the Empire curtailed student mobility and impacted women's collegiate choices, female academics had to navigate various cultural, legal, and social barriers. Gorenjak's work also reveals how opposition and support for women's higher education intersected with the ongoing processes of nation building.

Stefanie Coché's article focuses on the strategic use of notions of diversity by evangelical colleges from the 1980s onwards.[15] While evangelical institutions are often seen as places that limit expressions of sexuality, Coché shows that they did incorporate some aspects of diversity into their mission statements. Institutions like Liberty University in Virginia and Fuller Seminary in California used sign language and prominently featured female students in their promotional material. Those choices helped both universities remain eligible for federal tuition assistance programs and secure donations, which were both vital to the U.S. academy's highly complex business model, which relies on many different types of funding.[16] But these institutions also strategically cast themselves as representatives of religious minorities whose rights were legally protected when seeking accreditation from professional organizations.

In the final contribution, Aaron Schulze looks at the economic impact of German unification on East German students and professors. In the GDR, higher education was tightly controlled by the ruling SED party to create a politically loyal elite. East German students were provided with monthly stipends by the state that made them financially independent from their parents at a relatively early age. After unification in 1990, East German students had to adjust to the West German system of financial support, which granted student loans only if the income of the students' parents was deemed to be insufficient to finance their child's university education. Moreover, unification created a class of East German professors, the so-called gap professors, who were ineligible to receive the same level of pension payments as their West German peers

15 Adam Laats, *Fundamentalist U: Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education* (New York, 2018); Sophia Egbert, *Religion und Psychologie: Forschung und Lehre an evangelikalen Hochschulen in den USA, 1945–1998* (Köln, 2026).

16 Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *The Business of Education: Why American Universities Have Always Had to Hustle* (forthcoming in 2027).

because they were above the age limit for entering Germany's civil service. Their organization, Aaron Schulze emphasizes, continues to address this imbalance.

Taken together, these contributions shed light on the complex inequalities that continue to shape academia on both sides of the Atlantic. Even though university systems in the United States and Europe differ significantly, particularly in terms of funding, this forum also emphasizes that students faced, and still confront, similar obstacles — class, race, and gender have long determined access to higher education as well as chances of academic success. A history of universities that focuses on the production of, and the struggle against, social inequalities makes an important contribution to understanding how belonging and inclusion were negotiated throughout the long twentieth century. Such an approach to the history of higher education emphasizes that students, faculty, and university leaders had agency. They fought for inclusion as well as against discrimination and biases. We contend that those who were experiencing financial hardship often found ways to better their situation. Indeed, all of the articles reveal that inequality is socially and politically created and, therefore, can be undone.

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Stefanie Coché is an assistant professor at Justus Liebig University Gießen and has recently published her second book, *Religiöse Erweckung und Irdische Macht. Religion und Demokratie* (Hamburger Edition, 2025). She previously led a research group on "Evangelical Colleges in the U.S. since 1945." Her award-winning dissertation examined psychiatric commitment in the age of extremes. It was published in English translation as *Psychiatric Institutions and Society: The Practice of Psychiatric Committal in the "Third Reich," the Democratic Republic of Germany, and the Federal Republic of Germany, 1941–1963* (Routledge, 2024).

Elizabeth Tandy Shermer is a professor of history at University of Georgia, where she teaches courses on labor, capitalism, and politics. She has written about those topics in op-eds, academic articles, and scholarly books, including *Sunbelt Capitalism* (2013) and *Indentured Students* (2021), as well as edited collections, such as *Barry Goldwater and the Transformation of American Politics* (2013) and *The Right and Labor*, a 2012 volume co-edited with Nelson Lichtenstein. In 2027, the University of Pennsylvania Press will publish her research on the public/private character of American higher education, *The Business of Education*.

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