



Ambassadeurs  
de la  
Jeunesse

**Bachelor's, baccalauréat, and the Pursuit of  
Happiness : An American Student's  
Comparison of the French and American  
Systems of Higher Education ?**

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It is an impossible task to compare every aspect of the French and American university systems because they are both constantly evolving, and because they are influenced by the diverse and creative minds of their students and faculty. However, given the status and influence of both countries as social, economic, and political leaders in the industrialized world, it is important to understand some of the basic similarities and differences between these two systems which cultivate many of the great thinkers and global actors of the present and future. This article will briefly discuss some of the differences in access, campus activities, social systems, and academics in the university systems of France and the United States.

### Historical Roots

Both systems find their origins in the royal administrations and religious communities of Europe. In France, the first universities were founded by the Crown in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in affiliation with the Catholic Church, and in the U.S., the first universities were founded by the local legislatures of British colonies in affiliation with the Church of England and the King. During the French revolution, France took possession over the Church-owned universities and transitioned them into to a publically funded and maintained system of higher education. The United States, in the years following independence, allowed for the development of both public and privately owned universities, run by either state, city, or private institutions.

### Private vs. Public

While today there are few private universities in France, some of the most well respected institutions in the U.S. are privately run. Some examples of private American universities are the Ivy League universities, comprised of Harvard, Yale, Brown, Princeton, Cornell, Dartmouth, Columbia, and the University of Pennsylvania. One may think that the

prestige of these institutions would make them much more expensive than public institutions of lesser status, but while the Ivy Leagues tend to be the most selective regarding admissions, the difference in cost of tuition between them, other private universities, and public universities for out-of-state students is negligible, and sometimes even reflects lower cost at the ivy leagues. For example, Princeton University, which currently ranks number one in national universities, wields a yearly tuition of \$48,448, while Tufts University, ranking 29<sup>th</sup> nationally, has a tuition of \$52,430, and the University of Virginia, a public university ranked number 25, has a yearly tuition of \$45,066 for out-of-state students. University of California (UC) Riverside, a public university ranked number 124 nationally, is \$41,931 per year for out-of-state students. The most visible difference between public and private universities has always been that prices were significantly better for public institutions, which still holds true for in-state residents attending public universities and colleges. For example, if a student from San Diego, California is accepted to UC Berkeley, she or he will only have to pay \$14,194 in yearly tuition. However this cost will easily double or even triple for the student when factoring in the cost of

housing, and the overall cost of living in a college town or big city.

### **Financing of Education**

Due to these expenses, many American students accumulate debt from the tens of thousands to the hundreds of thousands of dollars. In fact, the current overall cumulative amount of student-debt owed as of 2018 is \$1.48 trillion, owed by 44.2 million Americans. Not only does this create immense financial pressure for students to finish their studies in four years, it often encourages an environment of anxiety, stress, and intense competition, and incentivizes students to compromise their personal goals to choose a career path that will better protect them from future default on their loans. In France as of 2013, only about 12.5 % of students were in debt for their studies, and they only owed about 3 billion euros total. Many American students who study in Paris find themselves shocked by the sense of lightness with which some French students navigate questions of career pursuit, considering most do not have the same financial burdens as Americans for when they graduate. Surely, the differing financial situations for students has an effect on the mentalities and outlooks of these students.

Despite the economic circumstances for students in the U.S., students from many backgrounds constantly find creative ways to pursue higher education. Many institutions offer scholarships and grants for students with high academic performance and strong extracurricular experience, and even for those who are recruited to play on sports teams for the university. This is one avenue for many low-income individuals to access universities.

### **Accessibility and Diversity**

While students with undocumented immigration status are not permitted to receive federal financial assistance, a rising community of young undocumented students has been advocating ardently for their rights as students whose families contribute to the rich fabric of American society, but are afforded far fewer rights and protections than those born in the United States or who have been able to secure legal residency or citizenship. This movement of students has similar ambitions to the “*étudiants sans papiers*”, an organization of undocumented students formed at the University of Paris 8 in Saint-Denis, who endeavor to be treated with the same legal rights as their fellow students who possess permanent legal status in France.

As in France, American universities are home to many political and social organizations run by students. Many of these organizations take the form of student unions organized around specific racial, ethnic, gender/sexual orientation, or political affiliations, and include student unions of African-Americans, Latinos, Arabs, Jews, LGBTQ individuals and many others. There are also many grassroots movements such as Black Lives Matter and environmental groups that actively organize on campuses across the U.S. The culture of community organizing, activism, and group solidarity permeates university campuses in most countries of the world, but this culture is particularly robust in both France and the U.S.

### **Student Societies and Organizations**

An element of student life that profoundly distinguishes the United States from France is the involvement of students in fraternities and sororities. The

dominance of “Greek life” in the social lives of many American students is an unmistakable cultural relic of the American university experience. Even for students who do not participate, the culture of house-parties which permeates college campuses is deeply linked to the social culture of Greek life. In fact, the presence of fraternities and sororities points out an even larger difference between student experiences in France and the U.S. In France, it seems there is a relatively circumscribed process of making friends at the university, and a bit more reservation between students upon first encounter. Even on day one, students who already have friends from their prior educational experience or from their programs tend to stick together during smoke breaks, and might only expand the friend group with the entry of an extended friend of a friend, or potentially a classmate who perchance builds a connection with the group. Of course, not all French students subscribe to this platform of constructing their social lives. On American college campuses, sororities and fraternities, student unions, and political student organizations campaign for membership, which is largely the foundation of many friendships at universities in the U.S. This emphasis on organized social recruitment may be partially due to the tendency of American students to travel away from their hometowns for college when they graduate from high school, thus finding themselves far from established friends, and thus strategizing to make friends and meet new people.

### **Cultural Relationship to Academic Qualifications**

For many in the U.S., a bachelors degree is far less definitive for one’s career than in France. For example, there are no

bachelor’s degrees in law or medicine. For students who intend on being lawyers, many will study criminal justice or political science, and for those wanting to be doctors, many will study biology or chemistry. However there is no uniform track, and a person can certainly go into law school directly after studying engineering, neuroscience or business, as long as that person performs well enough on the qualifying exam. Thus, only after completing the four-year bachelor’s degree will students be eligible to enroll in a graduate program to begin studying law, medicine or several other specialized professional fields.

### **Educational Programming**

Furthermore, in the first two years of university studies for a bachelor’s degree, the majority of required classes do not correspond with any particular course of study, but cover more general topics. This is quite different from the French system, in which students begin intensive courses in their fields from the beginning of their university education. One could consider the curriculum of the first two years in the American system to be a more rigorous version of high-school education, which has its benefits for students who are likely to discover a bit later what they truly want to pursue as a career, but may seem superfluous to students who are already sure about their academic paths. Conversely, some French students express frustration with having to decide so early on what they plan on studying, and with the difficulty of changing courses after beginning if they change their minds. This frustration has been exacerbated in early 2018 when President Macron announced plans to change the *baccalauréat* to increase selectivity for academic programs and to

require students to specialize from an even younger age, during *lycée*.

### **One World, Two Systems**

As mentioned above, it is quite difficult to truly compare the two systems, since there are so many different factors at play. One of these factors is the difference in population of the two countries, at approximately 65,182,826 (France) and 326,305,076 (United States), as of April 20th, 2018 (United Nations). Taking into consideration the varying cultures, histories, and economies of the two countries, it will be no surprise why there are some fundamental differences in the two systems of higher education. However, it will continue to be important to thoroughly examine different aspects of each system, as well as the educational systems of states around the world to continue moving forward in pursuit of making higher education accessible, practical, and fulfilling for the diverse populations of both countries.

## L'auteur

Après un passage à l'Université de San Francisco en 2012, David Weinstein est entré à l'American University Washington College Law où il a obtenu la WCL Merit Scholarship et la Peggy Browning Fellowship. Depuis le mois de juin 2018, il obtient également un Master I en droit international à l'Université Paris Nanterre et exerce, depuis la même année, la fonction de Délégué Amérique du Nord au sein des Ambassadeurs de la Jeunesse.



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