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## Today's News

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### **Conference Roundup: American Colleges Seem Ill-Prepared for Foreign Competition and Natural Calamities**

By [MARTIN VAN DER WERF](#)

Clearwater, Fla.

American colleges and universities have become complacent about their standing in global higher education, even while other countries are surpassing the United States in their citizens' attainment of bachelor's degrees, a speaker said here on Monday at an academic conference.

The United States ranks first among the largest modern democracies in attainment of bachelor's degrees by those ages 55 to 64, at 35 percent. But the country drops to eighth in the rankings of bachelor's degrees by those ages 25 to 34, said Dewayne Matthews, senior research director at the Lumina Foundation for Education.

He presented the statistics, which compared the United States with the other 29 members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, at a conference on higher education and the law, presented here by Stetson University.

About 37 percent of Americans ages 25 to 34 have bachelor's degrees, said Mr. Matthews. Canada, at 53 percent, and Japan, at 52 percent, lead the list. Other countries with percentages higher than the United States are, in order of ranking, South Korea, Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Belgium, said Mr. Matthews.

"Other countries are not complacent, and their young people are increasing their educational attainment levels," said Mr. Matthews. His research buttresses arguments raised in the recent best-selling book *The World Is Flat*, in which the *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman writes that other countries are catching up to and surpassing the United States in areas where this country once dominated, such as science and technology education.

The trends for attainment of bachelor's degrees are likely to worsen in the United States, Mr. Matthews said. The country's fastest-growing minority group is Hispanic Americans, and they have traditionally gone to college at lower rates than all other segments of the population.

Paul Lowell Haines, a higher-education lawyer in Indianapolis who was formerly a vice president at Taylor University, took Mr. Matthews's argument several steps further.

"This is a system that is apparently failing its populace," he said. "We need to refocus on serving the public good."

American colleges now are too focused on competing to serve only the best students, rather than giving a leg up to all students, he said. "We need to educate more minority students," said Mr. Haines, who is now a trustee at Taylor.

To overhaul the system, he said, federal student aid should be redirected from wealthy institutions that don't need it to community colleges and other institutions that have no endowments and serve those least able to afford an

education.

He suggested that earnings from endowments be taxed, and the resulting proceeds used to give financial aid to needy students. He also suggested that students seeking to enter the most lucrative careers, such as medicine or law, should pay higher tuitions than those studying social work or other low-paying professions.

As if those proposals were insufficiently provocative, he also said tenure must be abolished. "I understand the reasons for tenure," said Mr. Haines. "There are a lot of good reasons. But in this situation, we have to take on sacred cows. Tenure gums up the works. It makes it hard to be flexible, to move people."

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Recent natural disasters, including Hurricane Katrina, have many colleges wondering if they are doing an adequate job of preparing for floods, windstorms, blizzards, and even outbreaks of contagious diseases.

"If you have 400 kids stranded on your campus because they had nowhere else to go, would you be held liable for their safety?" said Christiane Groth, a risk analyst with United Educators, an insurance company for universities, colleges, and elementary and secondary schools. She spoke at a conference session about strategies for avoiding liability for negligent management of emergency situations.

Most of the 100 or so people in attendance agreed that the university probably would be liable and would have to have a plan to keep the students safe.

After talking for an hour about different possible emergencies, Ms. Groth asked the audience members if any of them felt that their emergency plans could withstand thorough scrutiny. Not a single hand was raised.

"We have well-written stuff, it's well thought out, but I'm not sure we've trained enough people," said Benjamin Evans, director of risk management and insurance at Temple University.

Future claims are likely to be based on whether an institution could have predicted the calamities it might face. "Foreseeability is very fluid," said Ms. Groth. "You need to have an ongoing emergency-planning process in place, and constantly update it."

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