Reach Higher in Higher Education:

What Romania Can Learn from the US Example?

Sebastian I. Burduja

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies; Harvard University; Stanford University

sebastian@burduja.ro

Abstract

This article presents a personal account of good higher-education practices in America, as experienced at Harvard and Stanford. Key-scholars and decision-makers in Romania may consider replicating and/or adapting these elements to the local context. The analysis focuses on seven prominent features of the US model: student-centered community; ethics and value-based curriculum; skills for success; alumni networks; career support; monitoring and evaluation systems; and making a difference. The final section concludes, putting forth several recommendations on what Romania could learn from the US model.

Introduction

Romania recently celebrated 27 years since the fall of communism, but the break with the past remains incomplete and unsuccessful. The country's education system is a perfect example of this bitter reality: crumbling infrastructure, chronic underfunding, outdated curriculum and deep politicization, lack of quality control, widespread accusations of plagiarism and corruption, inadequate autonomy and accountability at the level of universities, inability to manage human resources, etc. The list could go on and the causes are complex, but it all boils down to the simple fact that Romania has not had a fundamental transformation of its education system since the 1989 Revolution.

The scope of the current article is far less ambitious than the magnitude required by current challenges: what follows is merely a personal account of several good practices present in the American higher-education system, primarily based on my experiences at Stanford and Harvard. The hope is that key decision-makers in Romania will be able to replicate all or at least some of these elements, adapting them to the local context. Importantly, the assumption is not that these features are completely lacking the Romanian system, but that – even if they exist in some form today – there is always room for improvement based on the example of

what many hail as the best higher-education system in the world. The analysis covers the following: (i) student-centered community; (ii) ethics and value-based curriculum; (iii) skills for success; (iv) alumni networks; (v) career support; (vi) monitoring and evaluation systems; and (vii) making a difference. The final section concludes, putting forth several recommendations on what Romania could learn from the US model.

Student-Centered Community

The most striking feature of the US higher-education model present in elite institutions is its relentless focus on the students. In simple terms, the entire system is built around student needs and experiences. I still remember my first day at Stanford and how special the university made me feel to be part of its amazing community from my very first steps on campus. I had arrived after a very long flight from Bucharest to San Francisco, thousands of miles away from Romania, and was buried in thoughts similar to every freshman embarking on a new academic journey: "is this where I am supposed to be?" The Stanford Farm, as the nickname goes, quickly dispelled all doubts and made me feel at home: a big red welcome banner on the main road entering the campus and, to my huge surprise, a sign that included my name, right in front of my assigned dorm.

This was the start of my "orientation", a series of events designed for new incoming students, including a component dedicated specifically to those coming from overseas. This is meant to acquaint students with their new social circle and help them navigate through the university's systems for selecting courses, choosing meal plans, signing up for volunteer activities, exploring resources offered on campus (e.g., financial aid offices, career counseling centers, libraries, labs, gyms, etc.). Again, everything is targeted to students' needs and everything is constantly evaluated in search of opportunities for improvement.

Multiple elements go into this sense of community. It starts with the physical space on campus: What would Stanford be without its Main Quad? What would Harvard be without its Harvard Square? It continues with everyday experiences that go far beyond the classroom. Some of them are still academic in nature, as is the case of study groups facilitated by the university. At the Harvard Business School (HBS), for instance, we were divided into "learning teams" in the beginning of the first year and we met every morning before class to discuss the assigned case studies. Other activities involve volunteering, both on and off-campus. There are over 600 student clubs and organizations at Stanford, spanning everything from "careers" to "community service" and "religious/philosophical."

Other activities are purely social, including various traditions specific to each school and highly effective in fostering a sense of pride for a unique community, with its own norms. For instance, the famous Stanford "primal scream" happens at midnight the Sunday night of Dead Week, i.e., the week before the final exams commence. Certain long-held traditions are deeply associated with a particular public space on campus, as is Stanford's Full Moon on the Quad celebration, which started with senior men welcoming freshman women to the university by gifting them a rose and a kiss.

The US model further strengthens student-centered communities through university-level sports and related activities. Historic rivalries carefully planned "big games", social events before and after sporting events promote a sense of unity among the student body. Some traditions may appear bizarre of funny: for example, in the week before the big game between Stanford and longtime rival University of California Berkeley the Stanford students often drag behind their bikes teddy bears, Berkeley's beloved mascot. There are also huge "BEAT CAL" banners all around the campus.

Ethics and value-based curriculum

As explained throughout this article, my academic journey in the US included many moments of cultural shock, perhaps none greater than when we were left unsupervised during my first final exam at Stanford. Initially, I thought the professor was playing a joke on us: how could we be left alone in the classroom? My entire world, built back in Romania on the premise that all potential cheaters would indeed cheat if allowed to, was coming apart. I learned about the Stanford Honor Code, dating back to 1921, "an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively…that they will not receive aid in examinations…[and] that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code." This may be one of the most effective and brilliantly written phrases in the past century.

Indeed, throughout my time at Stanford and Harvard, the integrity of the academic process was upheld at all times. I realized that it is a lot more effective to have 400 students monitoring each other during a final exam than to have a single professor trying to monitor them all. I also believe that when the rules of the game are fair and the culture is strongly based on such written and unwritten norms, the risks of cheating are basically zero. Violation of these rules is punished drastically, ranging from failing a course to suspension from school and even hours of community service. Plagiarism is taken very seriously and students are

taught precisely what counts as plagiarism, how sources must be cited, and what an original research and analytical effort requires.

In addition to all this, the required curriculum at top US universities often includes courses promoting values and principles: freedom, accountability, public service, etc. For example, HBS includes a course on Leadership and Corporate Accountability (LCA). I vividly remember discussing cases like the fall of Enron, in which Jeffrey Skilling, an HBS graduate, played the key role. The school recognizes the importance of instilling the values of authentic leadership and underlining the fact that indeed graduates of these academic institutions have an important responsibility to lead by example and to promote ethical conduct throughout their careers. This would be particularly important in developing economies struggling with systemic corruption and nepotism, as is also the case in Romania.

Skills for Success

In my journey from a Romanian to an American education system, I experienced one particular paradox that haunted my first year in the US: on the one hand, I was much more advanced than my colleagues when it came to calculus or statistics; on the other hand, I was completely unprepared to succeed at tasks that seemed a lot more basic – reading, writing, and speaking in public. To clarify: I was fluent in English, and passed both my SAT and TOEFL tests with flying colors. The problem was that I was misusing these skills.

For one, I was unprepared to read – or, rather, to skim and extract the essence from hundreds and sometimes thousands of pages of papers and books, assigned from one session to the next. Second, I was taught to write beautifully and poetically in all my language and literature courses in Romania. I learned the hard way in the US that every word you use counts – figuratively and literally. I was also skeptical of asking questions, facing the doubts that kill the curiosity of so many young people around the world: "what if I ask a stupid question and everyone laughs at me?" Very quickly I learned that in the American culture there is really no such thing as a silly question and, very often, many of my colleagues had the same exact question in mind and were also looking for answers. My professors – without a single exception in my seven years of my bachelor's and two master's degrees – were all extremely supportive of students asking questions, praising them for raising certain points and taking time to provide thoughtful answers. Last but not least, I had the same fear of speaking in public experienced by so many people around the world; surveys say this sometimes ranks

even higher than the fear of death. Of course, getting good at speaking in public with confidence comes down to a lot of practice and a supportive environment.

This is the key: regardless of how unprepared I was in terms of particular critical skills, the universities provided me with all the resources I needed to quickly fill these gaps and succeed. I spent many hours in the writing center and benefitted from the free advice of highly gifted writing and public speaking tutors. My roommates and colleagues were also very helpful, often offering to read over a draft and suggest improvements. At Stanford, everyone was required to take writing and rhetoric in the freshman year. I wrote many papers and made a habit out of speaking up in class. This proved vital for surviving the first year at the Harvard Business School, which is famous for its case-study (Socratic) method, where most of the learning happens through the dialogue between students, skillfully guided by the professor. Class participation weighs heavily on the final grade of a course (sometimes up to 50%) and even the physical environment of the classrooms facilitates lively discussions through the famous HBS U-shaped auditoria.

All this took a lot of hard work and perseverance, but I am so grateful to both Stanford and Harvard for helping me – and pushing me – to perfect those skills. I later found out as a management consultant and as a World Bank expert that reading, writing, and speaking well are incredibly important and rare skills in many jobs.

Alumni Networks

Before I graduated from the Harvard Business School and the Harvard Kennedy School, one professor told us in the final session of his course: "always remember where you went to school." Indeed, the sense of belonging to a community does not end with Graduation Day. In some ways, it becomes stronger with time, for both sentimental and pragmatic reasons. On the former, it is human nature to see the past in brighter colors; so many alumni love to think back to their university days. At the same time, alumni networks continue to deliver tangible benefits to their members and to the university. Many graduating seniors find their first job through an alumna or an alumnus, and over an entire career there are countless networking opportunities through alumni networks. Students also have access to internships through these channels, which can also turn into full-time jobs after graduation.

Alumni also tend to be very generous throughout their careers, in part because they continue to feel part of the school's community and mission and in part because they seek a way to "give back" for all the opportunities their school created for them (academic, professional,

and personal). Farran Powell reports for USNews that alumni contribution for US colleges and universities reached $10.85 billion in 2015, including a 10% increase compared to 2014. Harvard raised $650 million just in 2015, while Princeton was the school with the highest percentage of former students contributing in the entire US: over 63% of alumni donated to the university between 2013 and 2015.

There is a lot to learn from how alumni societies engage their members and maintain a strong and coherent community despite limited face-to-face contact among members. To give just a few examples: alumni may have access to free monthly magazines updating them on what is new with the university (I get these delivered by mail, for free, all the way to Romania and I always read them and save them as a precious way to keep in touch with my schools); alumni may get calls from current students who are benefitting from some sort of financial aid and sharing their experiences; schools make it very easy to contribute through flawless online donation systems and often send reminders right before the end of the tax year; school reunions are very carefully planned, as key opportunities to reconnect with former colleagues, share life updates and learning, and relive "the good ol' days"; etc.

Career Support

Top US universities are extremely serious about supporting students transitioning to professional careers. This is a key measure of each university's success (more on this in the next section) and also a major selling point for attracting new incoming talent (students, professors, and other staff), boosting donations from alumni and other supporters, and generally strengthening a school's reputation. It is no wonder that career centers are typically well-funded and highly successful, and many go above and beyond to support students in their job searches. Multiple instruments are commonly used.

For one, schools provide students with a full package of career coaching services. Students have access to professional trainers and mentors, including from the alumni community. They are taught how to write an effective résumé and a great cover letter. They are also trained on how to make cold calls to potential employers, how to write a professional email, how to master interviews, and how to be successful networkers. Some workshops help build general skills, others are industry-specific: for instance, there are specialized training programs for those seeking to go into management consulting, including practicing case-study interviews (you can see, for instance, *Case in Point: Complete Case Interview Preparation* written by Marc P. Cosentino). I have been part of multiple interview panels and know first-hand that all

these abilities are incredibly important for employers: in fact, when we encountered unprofessional résumés or cover letters we would often drop the entire application. Good jobs are so incredibly competitive in today's economy that top employers typically resort to this basic filter, so it is quintessential for schools to prepare their students to fulfill these basic conditions.

Schools also ensure a direct and reliable link to employers through specific events: job fairs, career days, and even a "dedicated interview week" at HBS, when interested recruiters come to campus specifically to meet new potential hires. Career events also take place off-campus. I have taken part in many Harvard events in Washington, D.C. targeted at current and former students pursuing careers in government and related sectors. Alumni networks are particularly important for getting a first job after graduation. To be clear: alumni do not grant any special favors granted to current students, but access to information remains the key. Students have a direct channel to inquire about professional opportunities, find out more about a firm's culture and prospects, and evaluate – perhaps together with the potential employer – whether the fit is right.

Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

A wise business principle states that "you can't manage what you don't measure." Top US universities focus a lot on gathering and assessing critical data related to current and former students' educational and professional outcomes. There is a wide range of indicators tracked by every school and by different associations, from average salary after graduation to the amount of time required to find a job, post-graduation decisions (e.g. pursuit of another academic program, getting a job in a particular sector, etc.). Professors are evaluated directly and anonymously by their students at the end of each course. Average scores actually do matter a lot for professors' compensation and advancement opportunities. There are also online platforms where former students share their feedback, accessible to their younger colleagues at the click of a button. This ensures accountability and, again, is a simple example of how the system puts students and their needs front and center.

The entire administrative culture of top US universities is deeply anchored into monitoring and evaluation systems. From social events to career and academic services, university staff constantly inquire what is going well and what could be done differently. I have filled out countless paper-based and online surveys and, what is more impressive, I often quickly noticed the direct results of providing feedback.

Making a Difference

Last but not least, a particular feature of top US universities is that they take on a public agenda that reaches far beyond the boundaries of a typical academic institution. In short, they carry out policy work that is both relevant and impactful. A case in point is the HBS US Competitiveness Project, "a research-led effort to understand and improve the competitiveness of the United States — that is, the ability of firms operating in the U.S. to compete successfully in the global economy while supporting high and rising living standards for Americans", as written in the presentation of the project. This is the perfect example of a school taking on an extremely tough question – how the US could enhance its competitiveness – and brings together a mix of resources to answer it. Current HBS professors and students take part in the research effort, but there are also global surveys of the HBS alumni community. The program received a lot of media coverage and has served as a key reference point for both scholars and policymakers.

In addition to these specific initiatives, top US universities are a platform for influencers – scholars and decision-makers alike, together with emerging experts, i.e., students and recent graduates. The Harvard Business Review is another very powerful tool: more commercial than an academic journal and more technical than a regular magazine, it has come to influence millions of business leaders around the world.

Conclusions

As noted in the introductory section, this article is limited in scope: it is neither a detailed account of the US model, nor a comprehensive guide for reforming Romanian higher education. My hope is that the list of experiences, activities, and good practices shared above will spark interest and debate among academic and policy circles in Romania, and serve as a first step toward analytical work that would determine whether there is replicable potential in the domestic environment. I end with a list of basic recommendations for possibly taking further the ideas included in this article. Many of them would not require substantial resources for implementation. All of them would require vision, flexibility, and openness to doing this differently.

All of them would require vision, flexibility, and openness to doing things differently.

- Nurture student-centered communities:

- o Design and institutionalize a specific track for students, starting with their first day on campus and ending with Graduation Day;

- o Review, evaluate, and create a list of social events for the student community;

- o If possible, develop old traditions/norms and create new ones to enhance the sense of pride for belonging to a specific community;

- o List all student and voluntary clubs and organizations and support the establishment of new ones, in line with students' interests;

- o Invest in university-level sports, partner with public and civic institutions that specialize in organizing competitions within and across universities, and gradually build a culture around these events, which can also serve as a source of funding.

- Focus on ethics and design a value-based curriculum:

  - o Review and improve the Ethics Code;

  - o Create a culture based on trust among students and professors, and possibly experiment with supervision-free exams (i.e., entirely based on an Honor Code);

  - o Regardless of the profile of the school, include in the required curriculum a course on professional ethics and accountability.

- Develop the skills needed for success:

  - o Invest time and resources in teaching basic skills needed for success throughout an academic and professional career: speed reading (i.e., absorbing large amounts of data and extracting key insights), writing, and public speaking;

  - o Foster an open and safe culture where students are not afraid but encouraged to ask clarifying questions;

  - o Experiment and develop the Socratic case-study teaching method.

- Establish and grow an effective Alumni Network:

  - o Draft and adopt a strategy for building the school's alumni network;

  - o Set up key infrastructure needed and design projects/programs with the active involvement of alumni;

  - o Run fundraising campaigns specifically targeted at alumni;

- Consider editing an Alumni Magazine and experiment with different ways of staying in touch with the alumni community aside from the occasional reunions.

- Invest in real career support for students and graduates:
  - Develop a platform for engaging employers – including from among school alumni – with tangible benefits;
  - Initiate, develop, and institutionalize career events on campus, giving recruiters the opportunity to come interview students;
  - Develop career centers with hands-on coaching, including on how to prepare competitive job applications and how to master interviews.

- Establish reliable monitoring and evaluation systems:
  - Survey and listen to the students, placing them at the center of the entire university system – make their lives easier and allow them to focus on learning;
  - Develop a list of required basic indicators for tracking school-wide performance (e.g. % graduates hired within six months of graduation, average salaries for the first job, etc.);
  - Institutionalize and make publicly available the results of students' evaluations of their professors (in full or at least in part, including the average scores for a number of set categories);
  - Ensure feedback loops – assign a specific person/department to the role of monitoring and evaluating results, and have them ensure that learning are captured and translated into positive changes of the school system.

- Make a difference beyond the university:
  - Develop a strategy for how to enhance tzhe school's impact beyond campus, including a public schedule of events, new publications, speaker series, etc.;
  - Aim to tackle a big issue every year (e.g. climate change, poverty, inequality, etc.) and dedicate special resources to researching it and to making sure that insights influence the public agenda.