***American and Russian Systems of Higher Education***

(Система высшего образования в Америке и России)

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Modern people cannot imagine their life without higher education. It presupposes better opportunities for promotion, high social status and success in life on the whole. However, all these objectives may be achieved on condition that higher education system is properly organized and works efficiently. For example, the Russian system of higher education is traditionally considered one of the most efficient. Nonetheless, the tendency to its reorganization according to Western models, mostly in American one, is observed nowadays. Both structures have their advantages and disadvantages, which are determined by their peculiarities. On the whole, the Russian and American systems of higher education seem similar in the essence, having a great number of considerable differences.

The first obvious similarity of these two systems is that American and Russian school leavers have a variety of advanced educational opportunities, which are practically the same. In the United States people who are interested in a general education study in professional schools of law, medicine or dentistry, liberal arts colleges, offering widely varying curricula or specialized schools, for example, in music, engineering or agriculture. Similarly, Russian students may attend classical state universities with specialization, which prepare students in a particular field of study. Apart from that, both in the USA and Russia there are private or commercial educational establishments, which are becoming more and more important and wide-spread. The brief summary of educational opportunities available to high school graduates in the United States and in Russia suggests that organized learning can continue for several years beyond the basic grades.

The second essential similarity of the Russian and American systems of higher education is the duration and organization of the academic year. Both in Russia and in the United States it is usually nine months duration, or two semesters of four and a half months each. Just as in the USA, classes in Russia usually begin in September and end in July. In both countries students have winter and summer vocations. Apparently, this notable similarity makes these two systems look alike on the surface.

The third obvious similarity of the American system of higher education and the Russian one is faculty. In both countries the teaching staff consists of professors, lecturers, senior teachers and instructors. One slight difference between the Russian and American systems of higher education is that the American faculty includes also a counselor — a person on a university staff who provides counseling and consultation service to help in decisions regarding courses, majors, vocational plans, career opportunities and personal matters. In contrast, such position is not included into the staff of ordinary Russian universities. In conclusion, faculty is one of the common features of higher education systems in Russia and the United States, though there is a slight difference between them.

The last important similarity of the Russian and American higher education systems is department requirements. The essence of checking students’ knowledge always remains the same: surely, both in Russia and the USA attendance is an important factor of grading the course. Students should attend lectures, seminars and practical classes; also they should take and pass some kind of practice. Just as Russian students, Americans should also pass the finals at the end of the course. In addition, each academic year Russian students write course papers; similarly, in the USA it is also required do prepare and perform a work, which is called a project. All in all, department requirements remain practically the same both in Russia and the United States.

In spite of these similarities, these two systems have several obvious differences.

Admission requirements make the first obvious difference of the American and Russian higher education systems. In Russia applicants are chosen on the basis of their high school records and results of centralized testing on those subjects, which are the most important for this or that department. In America successful applicants are usually chosen on the basis of three principles: their high school records, recommendations from their high school teachers and their scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs). In brief, admission requirements remain one of the obvious differences between the Russian and the American higher education systems.

Academic core makes the second striking difference of the American and Russian higher education systems. In Russia curriculum and syllabus are carefully worked out and strictly organized for every department. In the USA, however, students have opportunities of selecting courses that is, varying their syllabi. The main advantage of this point is the unique education every student gets. Apart from that, taking only some particular subjects one avoids opportunities of missing his or her vocation. Besides, in Russian universities curricular introduce specialization from the first year of study; it is determined beforehand. In comparison, American students determine their specialization from the third year of study; they may easily do it after entering a university. In short, academic core is one of the obvious differences of the American and Russian higher education systems.

The third obvious difference between organizing the process of study in Russian and American universities is methods of assessments and grades. While in Russia students can get a pass in every course at the end of each term, in the USA a student studies four or five subjects during the term and his progress is assessed through quizzes, projects, attending seminars. Thus, American students get their credits. Each course carries a certain number of credits that are awarded after the successful completion of the course. In most universities and colleges the typical class is three or four credit hours. Two or three laboratory periods are usually considered equal to one credit hour. Most students complete 10 courses per an academic year and it usually takes them four years to complete a bachelor’s degree requirement of about 40 three-hour courses or 120 credits. In the American higher education system credits for the academic work are transferable among universities. In addition, each part of students’ work is given a mark on a five-point scale, with letters to indicate the levels of achievement (from A, which is the highest mark, indicating superior accomplishment, to F, which denotes failure), compared to figures in the Russian system of assessment. All in all, assessments and grades make the systems of higher education in Russia and the United States strikingly different.

Another important difference of these two systems of higher education is the system of degrees awarded in Russian and American universities. The Bachelor’s degree, which awarded first in the USA, normally requires four years of academic study beyond the high school diploma; the Master’s degree requires one or two years of advanced courses and seminars. The Doctor’s degree, the highest academic degree, is equal to the Candidate of Science, Philology etc, and the degree, which is awarded first in Russian universities. Russian highest degree, the Doctor’s degree, has no counterpart in the American system of academic degrees. In short, the system of degrees awarded in Russian and American universities is quite different in these two countries.

Student financial aid makes another striking difference of these systems of higher education. Whereas Russian universities do not provide students with financial aid (Russian scholarship is paid monthly by the state), American students, who need a sum of money to attend college, may apply for it and be awarded with part grants (grants need not be repaid, parts of which might come from several sources: federal, state, private scholarship, college scholarship), part loans (to be repaid after college) or given part work (colleges normally expect students on aid to earn some of the money they need by working summers on the campus). In conclusion, financial aid makes the systems of higher education in Russia and the United States look different.

It should be mentioned that a great deal of the cultural and recreational life at a university is created and conducted by students themselves. Both in the USA and Russia extracurricular activities are the responsibility of students unions. However, the attitude to those activities in both countries is different: while in the USA one’s sports, musical and other achievements greatly influence the process of study, in Russia recreation and entertainment are another side of school life, apart from work. In addition, careful organization of extracurricular activities in the USA, which are sex-segregation in fraternities and sororities or including the clubs’ meetings into the schedule, makes them much more popular among students, than in Russia. In brief, extracurricular life of students differs greatly in Russia and the United States.

At last but not least, the American and Russian systems of higher education are different in students’ and teachers’ relations. In Russia these relations are extremely academic and official. Teachers are usually attended with great respect and there is a strict borderline between students and the faculty within universities and even outside. In contrast, in the USA relations between teachers and students are much more informal. A talk on the phone with a teacher is quite common thing, as well as teachers’ involvement into extracurricular activities. Indeed, students’ and teachers’ relations remain one of the obvious differences between the Russian and the American higher education systems.

In summary, taking into consideration all the above-mentioned facts, one may state that, notwithstanding several similarities, the Russian and American systems of higher education have plenty of obvious differences. They differ in many important aspects: structure and organization, rules and traditions. However, due to the fact that Russian educational system is undergoing considerable changes, they may become more similar in the course of time.