insists that "donations to mega-rich universities do not directly improve the academic experience of their professors and students, or result in any qualitative improvement in student learning." Philanthropic dollars could go a long way toward offsetting the burden higher education places on middle- and lower-class families, especially "when states' appropriations to higher education are declining relative to the cost of tuition." The money would help sustain the diversity, represented by more than 4,000 colleges and universities, that is one of American higher education's great strengths.

Yet according to the Council for Aid to Education, $1.2 billion of last year's $2.4 billion increase in private donations went to the top 10 fundraisers. The process is self-reinforcing, as donations allow the richest institutions to beef up fundraising staffs and encourage them to judge university presidents "less by the academic success of their institutions and more by the size of donations generated under their watch."

In Michael's opinion, donors "should think of where their dollars will make the most difference," places where even small donations would mean that "classrooms can be upgraded, libraries renovated and expanded, and the burden of cost on students alleviated." At such places, unlike at Ivy League schools or other top fundraising universities, donor dollars have the "potential to transform the institution," and fundraising campaigns are "for genuine academic excellence, not merely the growth of the endowment or the ego of the president."

SOCIETY

## Hamburger Snobbery

**THE SOURCE:** "Democracy Versus Distinction: A Study of Omnivorousness in Gourmet Food Writing" by Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann, in ***American Journal of Sociology***, July 2007.

When *Food and Wine* magazine emblazoned a hamburger on its cover in 2004, casual readers might have concluded that food snobbism was dead. Snooty foodies, however, are alive and influential, and eating habits remain an important indicator of social status, write Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann, sociologists at the University of Toronto. The difference is that 50 years ago familiarity with a single culinary tradition—French—identified diners as belonging to the elite. Today, knowledge of ethnic and regional cuisines is as important as the ability to pronounce *au jus* correctly was two generations ago.

The expansion of the high-status food repertoire exemplifies a cultural trend called omnivorousness—eating, or trying, everything—in sociology-speak. The same thing has happened in music. Where it once might have been enough to recognize classical composers, today the status-savvy need an ability to banter about bluegrass pickers and Cuban singers.

As Americans publicly disdain snobbism and embrace meritocracy, the "democratic ideology" of omnivorousness fuels the notion that arbitrary standards of culinary distinction based on a "single, elite French notion of culture are unacceptable." The cuisine of other cultures and classes now gets its due, according to Johnston and Baumann. But anything still does not go. Although a taste for pecorino, a hard cheese made from sheep's milk, marks the palate of a sophisticate, Velveeta, the easy-melting "cheese product," remains verboten. What is the standard?

Based on their study of 102 articles in four leading gourmet magazines in 2004, the authors conclude that food writers judge cuisines by citing authenticity. They legitimize dishes by locating them in Lucknow, India, or Siglufjördur, Iceland, and by stressing their simplicity, their

***"I'll start with the arugula-and-goat-cheese salad, and then I'll have the blackened wolf."***

nonindustrial production, and their organic origin. They also connect high-status food to personalities, famous chefs, or well-known families in the food business—although the writers quite consistently leave unnamed the cooks they discover in quaint huts or roadside stands in the developing world. Historical tradition is also important, such as noting that the ancestors of the roasted whole goats in Monterrey, Mexico, have grazed nearby since the 1700s. Exoticism is conveyed by unusualness and rarity. A cheese called Flixer, for example, is eulogized as a "nutty number made only from the milk of 12 very talented Swiss ewes."

The omnivorousness trend makes lowbrow food worthy of highbrow interest, but only certain lowbrow fare. Many of the authentic foods that are exalted under the new "democratic" standard of food writers are extremely expensive and difficult to acquire in the mainstream commercial supermarkets and restaurants most Americans patronize, Johnston and Baumann note. Democracy ends at the checkout line.

SOCIETY

## The Myth of the Master's Degree

**THE SOURCE:** "Teacher Credentials Don't Matter for Student Achievement" by Charles Clotfelter, Helen Ladd, and Jacob Vigdor, as summarized in ***The NBER Digest***, Aug. 2007.

In many school districts, slogging through extra college courses to get a master's degree boosts a teacher's annual salary by $2,000 or more. But an extra diploma doesn't significantly improve student achievement. In some cases, elementary school pupils taught by teachers with advanced degrees actually do worse, write Duke University economists Charles Clotfelter, Helen Ladd, and Jacob Vigdor.

Most Americans agree that the quality of their child's teacher is crucial to learning, but teacher quality is notoriously hard to measure. The Duke economists studied the test scores of about 75 percent of all North Carolina third, fourth, and fifth graders between 1994 and 2003. They found that a teacher's increasing experience and acquisition of a "regular" teaching license rather than an "other" license (given to those who do not meet all official requirements) made a positive difference on students' test scores, particularly in math. Teachers with 21 to 27 years of experience were most effective, they found.

But teachers who earned a master's degree before they began their career or during their first five years of teaching were no better at raising student achievement than teachers with only an undergraduate degree. Those who got an advanced degree more than five years after they started teaching appeared to be "somewhat less effective" on average than those who did not get one at all, the researchers found.

The authors question whether the higher salaries given to teachers with master's degrees—not to mention the graduate education subsidies offered by some districts—are well spent. In ascertaining why master's degrees don't matter, the answer could well be a variation on Bill Clinton's old campaign slogan: "It's the teacher, stupid."

PRESS & MEDIA

# Forget the Error

**THE SOURCE:** "How Complete Are Newspaper Corrections?: An Analysis of the 2005 'Regret the Error' Compilation" by Michael Bugeja and Jane Peterson, in ***Media Ethics***, Spring 2007, and "Reign of Error," by Jack Shafer, in ***Slate***, Aug. 15, 2007.

Newspapers constantly call for more vigilance and transparency in government and other institutions, but in the one realm over which they have total control—their pages—they have failed their own test, according to a study of 600 corrections from 70 newspapers conducted by Michael Bugeja and Jane Peterson of Iowa State University. In fact, if editors confessed to everything that was wrong in their news columns, they would have to devote 50 times more space each day to corrections, says Jack Shafer, editor at large of *Slate*.

Moreover, published corrections, as highlighted on the website Regret the Error, maintained by Canadian freelance writer Craig Silverman, were themselves often full of blunders. Only 30 percent specified when the error happened, very few described how it occurred, and virtually none