



Looking west: Universities on America's Pacific coast

Description

Aside from the UK's University of Cambridge (number one in 2010 and 2011), only two universities have topped the QS World University Rankings. Harvard University, which held on to the top spot between 2004 and 2009 (it is number three this year), and this year's first time table-topper, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

The two are very different in a lot of ways. While it's hardly a young upstart, MIT is less than half of the age of the US's oldest institution, and in terms of its student body, it is also only around half the size. Its technological focus – though it is actually a comprehensive university – also makes it stand out, with almost 60% of undergraduate and 45% of graduate students studying at its college of engineering.

However, they both have one key thing in common, and that is that they are both based in Cambridge, Massachusetts (meaning that only cities called Cambridge have been home to the number one institution in the QS World University Rankings!).

Widening the lens a little, both geographically and beyond the top three in the rankings, we can see that the east coast of the US – particularly in its northern reaches – is something of a promised land for higher education. In the top 20 alone, it is possible to count no fewer than eight universities in close proximity to the Atlantic coastline.

Of course, with the eight universities of the Ivy League all based in the northeast, as well as institutions such as MIT and Baltimore's medically focused John Hopkins University, this is perhaps to be expected, but the fact remains – the east coast boasts a pretty impressive (to say the least!) roster of some of the world's very best universities.

And it's not just the top 20, further down we have institutions like New York University (43), Carnegie Mellon (49 – also in New York City) and Boston University (64).

A tale of two coasts

So, when it comes to universities at least, could it be fair to say the east coast is king? Well, actually, itâ??s not so black and white. Some 2,000 miles plus away, on the other side of the contiguous United States, there is a whole other coast which â?? when it comes to higher education â?? we cannot overlook.

The highest ranking institution on this side of the country is, in a striking example of symmetry, the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) in 10th place. This small institution, with a student body of fewer than 2,500, has been a consistent feature in the upper reaches of the QS World University Rankings, coming 5th as recently as 2008. Notably, it boasts the second highest rate of citations per faculty in the rankings â?? an indicator in which it was the worldâ??s best in 2011.

Among other things, anti-matter, protons and neutrons, and the science of recommended daily allowances (in food) were all discovered or pioneered at the university. It ranks fifth in the engineering & technology faculty ranking, and seventh in the natural sciences (the faculty rankings only take into account the opinions of academics).

Though lower down the overall rankings, perhaps the next highest ranking west coast institution is better known. Stanford, at 15, is a consistent feature at the very top of the faculty rankings, coming in at sixth in arts & humanities and natural sciences, fourth in life sciences & medicine, and third in social sciences & management.

This is all fair and good, but it is in engineering & technology that Stanford excels, serving as something of a flagship institution for the Silicon Valley. It is particularly known for its strength in computer science (its most popular major). Only MIT can best Stanford in this faculty ranking.

Strong in STEM

We can also look to Californiaâ??s public system, with the University of California, Berkeley (22) and Los Angeles (UCLA, 31) the two highest state-owned US universities in the public system, and a further five of the stateâ??s universities in the top 200 of the system. The first two are ever-presents in the faculty rankings, never finishing outside of the top 15. Berkeleyâ??s highest finish is in engineering & technology, in which it comes 3rd, while UCLAâ??s strong suit is arts & humanities, where it is 8th. In life sciences & medicine, the San Francisco and San Diego branches of the state system can also lay claim to top 15 status.

In terms of STEM subjects, then, California is indisputably one of the worldâ??s leading regions. It has been noted that tech universities are on the rise in the QS World University Rankings, and looking to the engineering & technology faculty rankings in particular, it is clear that the southwestern stateâ??s universities are at the forefront of this revolution.

And of course, thereâ??s more to the Pacific coast than California. You might also look to the University of Washington, in 54, or the University of Arizona in 163. There are countless other options too â?? like the east, the west boasts strength in depth.

So, east coast or west coast? Well, as you can probably tell, both certainly have their merits. But perhaps it is somewhat reductive to consider these coasts as wholes, in some sort of opposition to

each other. Maybe in Silicon Valley's tech culture or the proximity to power and wealth offered by universities in the northeast, there can be identified a certain culture, but each institution is unique and offers its own advantages and disadvantages. It can be accurately said that the east edges the west in the terms of the number of ranking institutions, but this can be ascribed as much to population density as anything else.

And, of course, which coast you prefer might come down to something as simple as whether you prefer cities that never sleep or spending your days on the beach relaxing. Beyond that, let's call it a score-draw!