Historical Evolution of Higher Education in the United States

Christopher Loss, Serena Hinz, Christopher J. Ryan

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Introduction

In this article, the historical evolution of higher education refers to higher learning in the United States from the colonial era to the present day. A radically pluralistic system of public, private, and for-profit two- and four-year training institutes and colleges and professional and graduate schools, the American system is generally regarded as the best in the world. A by-product of the American commitment to liberty and to the belief that academic freedom should exist outside the grasp of direct government control, US higher education’s independence has gradually decreased since World War II and with the dramatic growth of federal funding for research and student aid. Consisting of 4,700 institutions that enroll upward of twenty million students from the United States and abroad, the sector has become a critical governmental intermediary that relies on heavy state-level and federal subsidies and tax expenditures in order to fulfill its core mission of teaching, research, and service. The higher education system also faces a number of pressing challenges: rising costs, declining public support, high student attrition, and long-term declines that often result in no degrees at all, especially at two-year colleges where the majority of poor and underrepresented minority students enroll. The US higher education system, existing as it does at the intersection of state/society relations, is a fascinating site to study American history. The citations included in this article are intended to provide a point of embarkation for further inquiry. They have been selected because they offer a thematic overview of the history of American higher education intended to provoke additional reading and investigation.

General Overviews

Chapters have been tracing the historical evolution of organized higher learning since its formation in Europe and England in the 11th and 12th centuries (11). In the American context, “house history” of varying quality and accuracy likewise accompanied the founding of the first colonial colleges in the 17th century. While these institutional histories remain a staple of the historical literature and are popular among alumni (and could almost fill an entire annotated bibliography), the first professional histories written by professionally trained historians did not emerge until the late 19th century, which saw the rise of the American history profession. A fringe field dominated by narrowly drawn institutional studies, the systematically scholarly exploration of the history of higher education surged after World War II, when the importance of the research university for national defense and for educating citizens for the rapidly changing labor market and world became manifest. The postwar period witnessed unprecedented demand for collegiate study, especially among the country’s millions of GI Bill-wielding veterans, which, in turn, generated heightened interest in the study of the institution’s historical evolution. In an effort to make sense of American higher education’s dramatic emergence as a key engine of social mobility, economic progress, and national defense, Brubacher and Rudy 1958 examines the history of the higher education sector as it changed from one dominated by the old-time college to one dominated by the research university. Rudolph and Thelin 1990 provides an incisive study of the “collegiate way” and of the lasting influences of the model college on the ascendant university in the late 19th century. For the emergence of the American university, readers should engage Kerr 1983 and Vehey 1965. On the academic enterprise’s transformation into a secular middle-class institution, see Bledstein 1978 and Reuben 1998. For the best synthetic history of American higher education, see Thelin 2011. For a new interpretation of higher education’s role in nation building and in defining the terms of democratic citizenship in the 20th century, see Loss 2012. Finally, Smith and Bender 2006 compiles an impressive collection of primary documents that will assist readers in navigating higher education’s changing meanings, policies, and practices since World War II.


Through a close examination of leading university presidents—including Harvard’s Charles Eliot and Yale’s Noah Porter—the book explores the rise and impact of the middle class on the modern university and how the middle class turned the university into a main engine of upward mobility and social status.


A comprehensive history notable for being among the first critical appreciations of American higher education written in the post-World War II period.


A seminal work—first published in 1963—on the history of the “federal grant university,” what Kerr famously dubbed the “multiversity.” Conceptually rich yet accessible and written, this book is essential reading for scholars, students, and administrators interested in understanding the behavior of the modern research university since World War II.


A social and political history that tracks the growing partnership between the federal government and higher education between World War I and the rights revolution of the 1970s, and the collapse of that relationship from the 1980s onward.


Examines the impact of value-neutrality and end-of objective truth on the gradual disestablishment of religious orthodoxy in the modern university.


Rudolph’s survey covers the colonial college and the rise of the university, but is at its best dissecting the “college movement” of the first half of the 19th century and the spread of the “collegiate way”—the institutions and habits of mind that gradually coalesced to form the general pattern of undergraduate education in the United States.


This collection of primary documents serves as a miniature archive on the history of American higher education since World War II, covering an assortment of topics: from the liberal arts and graduate study to the academic profession, academic freedom, and the rights of students. Provides an excellent guide for faculty and administrators interested in better understanding American higher education.


This well-written and engaging study, which displays sociologist Burton Clark’s view of the university as an institutional saga, is the rare scholarly study that will enlighten both the general reader and the professional academic—ideal for both introductory and advanced courses in higher education administration and policy studies.


Working at the crossroads of organizational theory and intellectual history, this book uses a series of illuminating institutional case studies of the country’s first universities to explore how the fragmentation of knowledge led to the bureaucratization of the institution and to new patterns of social experience for faculty, students, and administrators.

Data Sets and Reports

The collection of data sets presented below aid education researchers and policymakers in their efforts to better understand students’ changing experiences with higher education. For an overview of the nation’s educational progress and enduring challenges, readers should consult the Statistical Abstract of the United States. A second key data repository is available at the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). NCES includes a number of longitudinal studies, dating back to the early 1970s, which are particularly helpful to researchers interested in tracking representative student samples through high school graduation and beyond, including their participation in higher education. For annually updated information on all higher education institutions that receive federal financial aid, readers should consult the NCES National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, which permits users to access and evaluate key trends in higher education, including changes in enrollment, financial aid, and funding patterns. For facts and figures on federal student financial aid starting in the mid-20th century, see the College Board’s Trends in Student Aid reports. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is housed at the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University and includes data intended to help institutions better understand student integration and involvement. Finally, for international comparative data to track America’s educational competitiveness, readers should reference the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s OECD Online Education Database.

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

Part of the US Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences, the NCES provides researchers with access to a vast assortment of education-related data. NCES has data sets from the 1970s through the 2000s.

National Postsecondary Student Aid Study.

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National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

The NSSE is produced by the Center for Postsecondary Research at the University of Indiana. Since 2000 the NSSE has collected annual data on student engagement using its instrument, the College Student Report, which compiles information from participating institutions (385 in 2015) that tracks both student and institutional engagement.

OECD Online Education Database.

Established in 1961, but with roots extending back to the immediate post-World War II period and the reconstruction of war-torn Europe, the OECD has collected data on higher education participation, finance, and personnel for all thirty-four of its member countries since the 1960s. These data are useful for researchers interested in doing comparative educational research.


Every ten years, the US Constitution requires the government to report the number of people who live in the United States. Census data not only determines the numbers of representative each state has in Congress, but it also helps government agencies allocate approximately $300 billion annually for a host of education-related programs.

Journals

Peer-reviewed articles on aspects of the history of American higher education appear regularly in a wide array of history, social science, and higher education journals. The items in this entry represent the most likely outlets in which that scholarship might be found. The two most prominent venues are Perspectives on the History of Higher Education, the only scholarly journal in the United States solely dedicated to the history of American higher education, and the History of Education Quarterly, which includes work on both K–12 and higher education. For other journals that occasionally publish essays and reviews examining American higher education from an historical perspective, see the Journal of American History, Journal of Higher Education, Review of Higher Education, Comparative Education Review, Research in Higher Education, and the Journal of College Student Development.

Comparative Education Review.

A publication of the Comparative and International Education Society, the journal prints original social scientific and humanistic work exploring the social, political, cultural, and historical dimensions of education in a global context.

History of Education Quarterly.

The official journal of the History of Education Society, this journal includes a wide scope of work related to both formal and informal education across all time periods.


Published quarterly by the Organization of American Historians, the Journal of American History is the official journal of record in American history. The journal publishes peer-reviewed articles covering all fields of American history, including occasional articles on the history of education and higher education, broadly conceived.

Journal of College Student Development.

The American College Personnel Association publishes this student affairs-oriented journal, which occasionally publishes historically focused articles and reviews.

Journal of Higher Education.

The Journal of Higher Education is prominent in its field, aimed at both researchers and practitioners, and includes historical pieces on American higher education. It is published by the Ohio State University Press.

Perspectives on the History of Higher Education.

The only American journal devoted solely to the history of higher education, the journal includes original research and historiographical essays covering all time periods. Roger L. Geiger, University Professor and Distinguished Professor of Education in the College of Education at Penn State University, is the founding editor of the journal, previously called the History of Higher Education Annual.

Research in Higher Education.

Research in Higher Education is the main journal of the Association for Institutional Research and aims to help practitioners improve institutional functioning; it occasionally publishes pieces with historical information at the institutional level.

Review of Higher Education.

The official journal of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), the journal generally publishes works that draw on sociological and political science research, as well as psychometric research techniques and methods, although historical pieces and book reviews are sometimes featured.

Land-Grant Colleges and Universities

Prior to the enactment of the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862, the federal government’s role in educational affairs was marginal. The Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 catapulted the government into educational policy matters for the first time, creating fertile ground for the growth of the nation’s publically supported land-grant colleges and universities. The act also institutionalized the idea of practical education in the agricultural and mechanical arts and, from a long-range perspective, set the precedent for greater federal involvement in education. The act was followed up by the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1890, also known as the Second Morrill Act, which provided funding for the nation’s contingent of African American-serving land-grant colleges and universities. For a history of Representative (and later Senator) Justin S. Morrill (R-Vt), architect of the original legislation, see Cross 1999. William’s 1991 provides the best history of the growing federal role in higher education and its culmination in the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862. Hyman 1998 fits the act within a larger stream of federal action related to education policy and its role in nation building. The main focus of the land grants, especially during their formative period of development prior to World War II, was cooperative agricultural extension, jointly administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the land-grant colleges and universities. The main delivery mechanism for extension was the so-called demonstration method delivered by county agricultural agents. On the development of extension and of the demonstration method, see Bailey 1945; Scott 1970 traces farmers’ gradual acceptance of the demonstration method and of roaming county agents, while Rasmussen 1989 tracks the history of cooperative extension in the 20th century, which helped turn the public land-grant sector into the largest sector of the American higher education system. Geiber 2011 contextualizes the emergence of the land grants against the backdrop of the rise of the Populist movement, showing how Populist politics influenced the development of the institutions. For information on the national association of land-grant institutions, and its current activities and interests, see Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities.

Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities.

Official website of the APLU—the main professional body and lobby organization of the land-grant university sector.


An overview of the rise of the demonstration method and the transformation of the land-grant universities told through the history of Dr. Seaman A. Knapp, who created the first USDA demonstration farm in Terrell, Texas, in order to educate farmers about the dangers of the Mexican boll weevil.


This biography of Justin Morrill, the prime mover behind the federal land-grant legislation, explains his motives and intent for helping to push the federal government into educational affairs for the first time.


A careful examination of the influence of Populism on the development of the land-grant colleges around the turn of the 20th century, with a special focus on events in states in the South and Great Plains, the seedbed of the Populist movement.
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A comparative examination of the Morrill Land-Grant Act and its relationship to other key federal legislation aimed at nation building and at educating citizens for life in a democratic republic.


Examines the rise and proliferation of cooperative agricultural extension, connecting extension to the land-grant colleges' goal of democratizing higher education.


Covers the competition between the US Department of Agriculture and the land-grant colleges for supremacy of the countryside, tracking the development of key legislation that culminated in the passage of the Smith-Lever Act of 1914.


This is the best single history on the early decision making, passage, and implementation of the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 as experienced by one of the act's chief supporters, President George W. Atherton of Pennsylvania State University.

Research Universities and Sponsored Research

Prior to World War II the relationship between the federal government and higher education was highly decentralized, with the vast majority of its miniscule research funding (except for funding for agricultural research) deriving from a combination of philanthropic and industrial sources. This changed during the war when the federal government turned to higher education for turnkey research and development in the name of national defense. The most influential early statement on the nature of the postwar federal-academic research complex was drafted by Vannevar Bush (Bush 1945) and advocated the continuation of federal funding for, but academic control of, research and development—a relationship that Price 1954 later described as “Federacy by Contract.” On the 19th-century roots of the research economy, see Oleson and Voss 1979.

Fisher recounts how the founding of the United States Social Science Research Council in 1923, the first national research agency in the social sciences, was driven by philanthropic interest. He shows how the Rockefeller Foundation, as well as other philanthropic institutions, supported academic social science and the creation of research universities. Geiger 2004 provides a comprehensive examination of the origins of federal support for higher education: George W. Atherton and the land-grant college movement.

O’mara 2005 describes the applied influence of a major player in postwar higher education philanthropy—the Ford Foundation—on addressing a critical curricular need in higher education during and after the civil rights era. Finally, Oleson and Voss 1979 describes the social science research council as an example of the “federacy by contract” that the federal government used to fund the country’s research universities.

Research Universities and Sponsored Research


Commissioned by President Franklin D. Roosevelt toward the end of World War II, Bush’s seminal blueprint for the organization of the federal-academic research complex recommended academic control of the federally funded research enterprise.


The author's thesis posits the "exceptional" nature of the American university, arguing that the key to the system’s success has been its penchant for competitiveness derived from ongoing inter-institutional battles for federal funding, top-tier professors, and the most talented students.


Covers the early development of research universities in the United States before the rise of federal funding in World War II.


The best account of the birth of the modern research economy. This study continues the story of American research universities’ rise to international greatness after World War II and the challenges faced by the sector since the 1970s.


A penetrating study of the commercialization of knowledge in the post–Cold War era gathered from an extensive collection of data from ninety-nine different research universities.


A comprehensive examination of 203 research universities that focuses on the spread of the research ideal from a handful of elite, mostly private institutions during and after World War II to public flagship and public regional institutions.


A penetrating collection of essays that traces the reorganization of knowledge production and consumption during the American university’s formative period of development.


A rich political and intellectual history of the rise of Silicon Valley and the less successful attempts to transplant the same research-economic model to other locales, including Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Boston.


Offers the most incisive analysis of the benefits and costs of federal funding for the sciences in the post–World War II period. Shrewdly links the rise of the “contract state” to the rise of the government’s cultivation of academic expertise during and after the war.

Foundations in Higher Education

The presence of foundations in higher education is not a recent phenomenon. Fisher 1993 and Rosenfield 2014 describe the impact of major foundations—namely the Carnegie Corporation and the Rockefeller Foundation—on the trajectory of higher education in the early 20th century. Rooks 2006 describes the applied influence of a major player in postwar higher education philanthropy—the Ford Foundation—on addressing a critical curricular need in higher education during and after the civil rights era.

Oleson and Voss 1979 offers the most authoritative overviews.

Rosenfield’s examination of the roles of the Carnegie Foundation in promoting public welfare provides a lens into how private individuals endeavored to positively remake public growth and development, over the course of more than a century and on a global scale. In the context of higher education, Rosenfield pays particular attention to the efficacy of Carnegie’s presidents at remaining true to the corporation’s founding principle of the “advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding.”

Historical Evolution of Higher Education in the United States - Education - Oxford Bibliographies

This study explores the rise of McCarthyism on campus and its detrimental effect on academic freedom during the Cold War.

One of America’s leading legal scholars provides an updated account of academic freedom’s current challenges and questions in the information age.

A social history of academic freedom at the University of North Carolina during the interwar period, this book is notable... administrators, faculty, students, politicians, and North Carolinians themselves debated and defined the idea of academic freedom at a leading public university in the South.

An authoritative, if encyclopedic, account of the development of academic freedom from the era of the college through the rise of the American university.

Explores how World War I put the nascent definition of academic freedom, first rendered by the AAUP in 1915, to the test.


Furner 1975 tracks the professoriate’s shift from advocacy to objectivity as the inevitable by-product of the quest for protection from outside interference, explaining the ways in which professors delimited—and “professionalized”—their conduct in order to ensure the perpetuation of their hard-fought autonomy. Yet claims to total freedom of thought and utterance proved easier said than achieved; decades passed and violations accrued before the courts and higher education arrived at a durable legal definition of the term. On the World War I period, see Gruber 1975; on the struggle for academic freedom in the South, see Holden 2012; on World War II and the rise of McCarthyism during the Cold War, see Schrecker 1986, a definitive account. O’Neil 2008 discusses new challenges to academic freedom in the information age, while DelFattore 2010 offers an overview of contemporary challenges and redefinitions of academic freedom in both postsecondary and K-12 venues.

American Association of University Professors. 1940. 1940 statement of principles of academic freedom and tenure. Washington, DC: AAUP. 

This is the AAUP’s original statement on academic freedom.


This publication includes all updated guidelines pertaining to academic freedom in the United States.


One of America’s leading legal scholars provides an updated account of academic freedom’s current challenges and questions in the information age.


This study explores the rise of McCarthyism on campus and its detrimental effect on academic freedom during the Cold War.
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Higher education governance and management has transformed significantly since its humble beginnings, when journeyman instructors were required not only to teach and care for students but also to balance the books and maintain the physical plant. The professionalization of the professorate and the departmentalization of knowledge that coincided with the founding of the nation’s first research universities demanded a new cadre of full-time administrative departments and officers to oversee the institution’s increasingly complex, hierarchical, and task-oriented approach. Over the years, scholars have developed a number of different models to explain the relationship between the organization of knowledge and the behavior of individuals in knowledge organizations. Baldridge 1971 identifies three models—political, bureaucratic, and collegial. Bolman and Deal 1998 identifies four—bureaucratic, collegial, political, and symbolic; and Brint 1988 identifies five—bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic, and academic. Regardless of the actual number of models observed, all these organizational theorists support the notion that higher education is a complex entity in which different organizational models battle it out for scarce resources and legitimacy. For an overview of the changing nature of governing authority in American higher education, readers should consult Cohen and Kolker 2010. For those interested in the community college sector, see Cohen and Brewer 2008; for the unique governance and management challenges of for-profit higher education, see Tierny and Hentschke 2007. See also Duryea and Williams 2000.


A classic in the sociology of organizations literature, this work was among the first to advance the idea that different higher education institutions deployed different administrative models in order to operate: political, collegial, and bureaucratic. Subsequent studies would build on this framework, adding new models to Baldridge’s triumvirate of ideal types.


Straddling the divide between the theory and practice of higher education leadership, this book includes vivid case studies that explore the strengths and weaknesses of five competing administrative frameworks: collegial, bureaucratic, political, anarchical, and cybernetic. Ideal for introductory and upper-level courses in higher education administration and policy studies classes.


Widely cited and used by organizational theorists in and outside higher education, this work is distinguished by its rigorous synthesis of leading theories of organizational behavior and leadership (i.e., the four-cornered frame: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic) and its everyday application in large-scale organizations. This book is particularly well suited for courses in leadership and organizational effectiveness.


Chapter 4 of Cohen’s book addresses various approaches to community college governance and organization, while chapter 5 discusses community college finance, including sources of funding throughout the 20th century. The book also provides a short general history of community colleges in America and discussions on student affairs and college access.


Each chapter of this wide-reaching study includes sections on social context, institutions, students, faculty, curriculum, governance, finance, and outcomes. The governance and finance sections offer a feltic synopsis of the development and increasingly complex university management from the colonial period to the present.


Addresses the history of an entity that is important to the governance of many colleges and universities: the governing board. The chapters are divided by era and run from the Middle Ages to the early 21st century. The authors compare the university management model of a governing board to the management of a corporation.


Tierny and Hentschke clarify the differences in governance and finance between for-profit and nonprofit colleges and universities. The authors also explain the social and economic context that aided the growth and development of for-profit institutions in last two decades.

Law in Higher Education

The intersection between higher education and regulatory legal regimes was, until the 20th century, limited. The legal landscape in which higher education institutions now operate is considerably more complex and all encompassing than any other time in history. Kaplan and Lee 2007 provides the most complete overview of the increasing frequency and virtually endless nature of this interaction between higher education institutions and nearly every key area of the law. Aiken, et al. 1978 and Brill and Lake 1999 trace the scope to the liabilities facing higher education institutions in their regular course of operation. Fritz 2003 and Perrett 2007 explain the legal considerations associated with higher education institutions acting as employers of faculty and staff, including accommodating the needs of all stakeholders, especially students. Finally, O’Neil 1997 focuses on the role higher education institutions play in fostering and inhibiting speech rights among their various stakeholders. Each of these contributions to the field describes key areas in which higher education now interfaces with the law.


Aiken, Adams, and Hall craft a comprehensive and practical guide to navigating liabilities that universities as well as their general counsels and risk managers regularly face. Despite the vintage publication date, much of the content is relevant in the modern context.


Blending history, theory, and law into a practical discussion of the laws and liabilities associated with college life, this book contributes significantly on the topics of faculty, staff, and student safety, and tort in the university setting.


Fritz provides a detailed discussion of hiring, training, and dealing with university employees, including difficult employees, with particularly salient sections on employee handbooks, leaves of absence, dismissal, and retaliation.


Kaplin and Lee thoughtfully consider the university and its legal relationships with a range of stakeholders, from governing boards and staff to faculty and students. This textbook is the definitive survey of the legal landscape in higher education.


An unparalleled overview of campus speech codes, speech and technology, free press, artistic expression, academic freedom, religious speech, and freedom of speech at private institutes, providing the clearest articulation of free speech within the university setting.


Although this book is not specifically made for higher education, Perrett’s handbook provides comprehensive coverage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and its employment, facilities, and public accommodations provisions, all of which are germane to the university. Notably, this book clearly defines statutory and regulatory requirements for public and private university employers, conforming facilities, and places of public accommodation.

Race and Culture

Before African Americans penetrated predominantly white higher education institutions beginning in the mid-1960s, they struggled to organize, staff, and populate their own black-serving institutions throughout the Jim Crow South and border states. Before African Americans penetrated predominantly white higher education institutions beginning in the mid-1960s, they struggled to organize, staff, and populate their own black-serving institutions throughout the Jim Crow South and border states. Before African Americans penetrated predominantly white higher education institutions beginning in the mid-1960s, they struggled to organize, staff, and populate their own black-serving institutions throughout the Jim Crow South and border states.


A synthetic history of the origin and struggles over affirmative action in the United States since World War I, including chapters on the rise of affirmative-action admissions in higher education.

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Provides a moving account of African-American college students during the coeducational, interracial heyday of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.


The best study of the United Negro College Fund, which provided crucial support to black colleges and their students throughout the post-World War II era and helped fuel the African-American quest for civil rights.


Gordon examines the origins of "racial individualism"—the mid-century belief that while attitudes were to blame for prejudice and that education was the solution—and explains how it paved the way for legal equality but did nothing to combat structural inequality.


This NCES report (Publication no. NCES 98022) offers a statistical portrait of historically black colleges and universities from 1975 to 1994, providing data on enrollment, degrees awarded, employee salaries, and institutional revenues and expenditures.


This work tells the story of how and why the American South’s elite private institutions—Duke, Emory, Rice, Tulane, and Vanderbilt—resisted desegregation until the 1960s, at which time the pressure and protest had increased to the point that the institutions’ quality and reputation were at serious risk.


A classic study—revised and updated from 1975—tracking the NAACP’s legal team’s long, ultimately successful, efforts to overturn segregated education. This book will be of great use to any reader interested in understanding the road to the Brown decision and its legacy.


A nuanced examination of two decades’ worth of data from nearly thirty institutions, this deeply researched study... admissions, concluding that, in the main, affirmative-action admissions benefit higher education and the... communities.


Katznelson offers a counterpoint, describing how affirmative action policies contribute to diminished student success. On the continuing struggle for... race-conscious admissions, readers should consult... and... 2006. On how best to navigate the admissions process in the face of changing definitions of affirmative action, readers should consult Beckman 2006. For a discussion of the impact of changing state and institutional financial aid practices on college access, see Heller 2002 and McPherson and Shapiro 2002.


Patterson crafts a compelling review of the Brown v. Board of Education case, its litigation, and its fifty-year aftermath, exploring a number of questions that get to the very heart of its legacy, including an examination of the requirements of the court’s holding in the modern context.


Recognizing the role of the individual in bringing the minority rights revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Skenazy gives due consideration to a non-bottom-up narrative, specifically how elites advocated for the expansion of rights for minority groups of all kinds.


This "bottom-up" history of African-American education provides a corrective to past works that have looked exclusively at universities from the North and philanthropists to explain the development of African-American education institutions in the South. Williams persuasively argues that African-Americans themselves were most responsible for the creation and perpetuation of their own education institutions.

Testing and Admissions

Although there was the most egregious case, African Americans were far from the only group blocked from entering the college classroom in the 20th century. The implementation of selective admissions earlier in the century, according to Karabel 2005, intended to prevent racially suspect classes of students (e.g., Jews from enrolling at elite, predominantly white-serving institutions, portended the fierce struggles for affirmative admissions programs in the 1960s and afterward. On the use of affirmative action and the SAT as instruments to determine entry, see Lemann 1999. For the benefits of affirmative action in higher education, see Bowen and Bok 2000. Although... admissions benefit higher education and the larger society that it serves.


Garces investigates the Supreme Court’s decision in Grutter v. Bollinger and its impact on minority student enrollment in graduate and professional education in Texas, finding that the Supreme Court’s reasoning, as interpreted by Texas’s public higher education institutions, helped to increase minority student enrollment rates in graduate and professional schools.


Harry and Tienda examine the access pipeline from start to finish—application, admission, and enrollment—for students in Texas after the Top Ten Percent Plan was passed in the wake of the Hopwood v. University of Texas decision. The results from this study indicate that the affirmative action policies prior to the Top Ten Percent Plan resulted in slightly greater proportions of minority students in Texas’s public higher education institutions.


Heller examines the access pipeline from start to finish—application, admission, and enrollment—for students in Texas after the Top Ten Percent Plan was passed in the wake of the Hopwood v. University of Texas decision. The results from this study indicate that the affirmative action policies prior to the Top Ten Percent Plan resulted in slightly greater proportions of minority students in Texas’s public higher education institutions.

Karabel, J. 2005. The chosen: The hidden history of admission and exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton in the early 20th century and how those policies later served as the foundation of affirmative admissions programs in the 1960s and 1970s. Karabel addresses changing patterns in the admission of groups such as Jews, legacies, students from wealthy families, women, and ethnic and racial minorities.


Katznelson explores how the local administration of federal social policy—including the GI Bill—encouraged discriminatory practices against African-Americans and other marginalized groups before the enactment of antidiscrimination laws in the 1960s and 1970s.


This groundbreaking history of the rise of the Educational Testing Service and the development of the SAT explains how higher education’s quest for a "meritocracy" unexpectedly led to affirmative-action programs that reshaped not only college admissions but also the very structure of social relations in the United States.


Marin and Horn produce a thorough book-length retrospective examination of the origins and development of the use of affirmative action in higher education. The authors provide substantial and thoughtful treatment of the Bakke vs. Regents of the University of California case and the subsequent cases comprising the Supreme Court’s body of affirmative action precedent.
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McPherson and Shapiro explore institutions’ use of financial aid as an enrollment management tool, addressing specifically the practice of giving greater financial aid to students who will help raise institutional rank, despite the fact that students with the greatest academic merit tend to have the least financial need.


Sander and Taylor’s discussion of the pitfalls of using affirmative action in higher education centers on affirmative action practices that place black and Hispanic students into settings where they are less likely to succeed and provides an important counterpart to the majority of the affirmative action literature.


Welch and Grohl chronicle the impact of the Bakke decision on the development of affirmative action programs at medical and law schools and ultimately on professional graduate education, using both using national enrollment data and a survey of law and medical schools.

Student Aid Policy

The rise of federal support for scientific research was not the only way the government transformed American higher education in the 20th century. The creation of a three-tiered student aid system based on grants, work study, and loans also revolutionized higher education for tens of millions of students after World War II. For the best history of financial aid, especially before the federal government’s involvement, see Wilkinson 2005. The GI Bill of 1944 was not only a touchstone for veterans’ benefits but also a bellwether for subsequent federal student aid programming. On the creation of the GI Bill, see Olson 1974. Not all veterans benefited equally from the bill. Fryd 2009 documents how the low-level distribution of benefits by private banks and colleges and universities, combined with entrenched traditions of Jim Crow, severely limited African-American veterans’ access to benefits. Despite these shortcomings, the GI Bill triggered a torrent of interest in widening educational access for all Americans, not just veterans. The next breakthrough occurred with the passage of the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the congressional debates of which are ably reconstructed in Clowes 1981 and Urban 2010. The Higher Education Act of 1965 escalated all previous legislation, remaining to this day the foundation of the federal government’s program for aid to college students. Graham 1964 offers the most complete coverage of the act, which Gladieux and Wolmin 1976 describes as being modified and enriched with the passage of the Education Amendments of 1972. The amendments created the Pell Grant, allocating means-tested and portable financial aid for all qualified students, and Title IX, banning sexual discrimination in higher education. This history of Title IX’s impact on collegiate athletics is covered well in Edwards 2010.


Examines how Title IX unexpectedly revolutionized collegiate athletics and, by extension, the entire American higher education system.


Using state development theory, this book offers a powerful rejoinder to those studies that portray the GI Bill as an “exceptional” piece of public policy, showing the many ways in which the bill’s “local” administration reinforced existing patterns of discrimination and inequality for African-American veterans and their families.


This is a detailed study of the changing dynamics of federal-level education policymaking—particularly the rise of special interests and lobby groups—that focuses on the Education Amendments of 1972.


Covering the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and the Higher Education Act of 1965, this study draws interesting comparisons between the two pieces of legislation on the way toward explaining how exactly the federal government got inexorably enmeshed in education policymaking at all levels.


The earliest comprehensive study of the enactment of the GI Bill, this book offers a detailed account of both the enactment and implementation of the act, including a fascinating case study of the bill’s impact on the University of Wisconsin-Madison.


With careful attention allotted to analyzing the various motivations of the NDEA’s key architects, this detailed policy history of the NDEA of 1958 explores the act’s immediate and long-term influence on K–12 and higher education policy.


This is the best, most comprehensive single history of student aid in America that shows the multifaceted nature of student aid and the different ways in which administrators have used aid for both heartfelt and instrumental purposes.

Student Life and Cultures

The history of college students comprises one of the largest subfields in the history of higher education. McPherson 1987 offers the best single history of college students, covering the intersecting histories of “college men,” “outsiders,” and “rebels” with analytic verve and authority from the colonial era to the end of the 20th century. Several studies focus more on specific student types as they defined themselves at various times in the past. On the violent and unruly lives of college students during the American Revolution through the War of 1812, see Nickell 1977. Allmendinger 1975 discusses the influence of demographic changes in student populations on student life and culture in the 19th century, while Leslie 1992 offers insights into the changing expectations of students and four liberal arts colleges during the era of the ascendancy of the university. Fass 1979 explores the 1930s and the role of students in forging the rituals and institutions of the modern extracurriculum. Levine 1988 extends the analysis to the 1930s and the Great Depression, examining the impact of state and federal interventions on students’ experiences in that challenging era. Finally, for a deeper understanding of one of the oldest, most important institutions of the student experience—Greek-letter organizations—see Syrett 2009 on the history of white fraternities, and Brown, et al. 2005 on the history of African-American fraternities.


Traces the impact of poor, rural students on the academic and social life of New England colleges in the 19th century.


This anthology provides the single best history of the development of the nation’s nine primary African-American fraternities and sororities. It includes a rich assessment of the academic, social, cultural, and political importance of these black-student organizations in the face of legal and informal forms of racial discrimination.


Looking at the world students created for themselves on college campuses in the pivotal 1920s, this book will be of interest to readers wanting to know more about the rise of the modern extracurriculum—what Fass memorably calls the “peer society”—and how it has continued to shape students’ experiences ever since.


Organized around three competing student types—“college men,” “outsiders,” and “rebels”—this study explores the changing dynamics of undergraduate life since the colonial era. Horowitz argues that past student cultures continue to influence present cultures.


An enlightening examination of the enduring collegiate model and its student body as it sought to adapt to a new world of higher education that was dominated by the rising American research university.


Historical Evolution of Higher Education in the United States - Education - Oxford Bibliographies

4/15/2020

Focusing on the rise of middle-class demand for higher learning, this work explores the changing role of the American college during the critically important, if surprisingly neglected, interwar period.


Looks at how college students responded to—and often sought to emulate—the expanding sense of democratic values on their campuses during the raucous early national period.


Tracks white fraternity culture from 1825 to the present, offering novel insights into the intricate machinations of the fraternity system and its powerful relationship to changing conceptions of masculine identity.

Student Politics

Cohen 1997 explores the rise of student political activism during the turbulent 1930s with an eye on the heyday of student action in the 1960s. Not surprisingly, the literature on the 1960s is particularly plentiful. For the shift from an internecidal, integrationist civil rights movement to the struggle for black power in the latter 1960s, see Joseph 2006 and Ropers 2007. Rosemöre 1998 chronicles the rise of the New Left while Schneider 1999 covers the rise of the New Right. Evans 1986, a work on the second wave of women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, deceit the relationship between women's liberation and the civil rights and New Left movements that spawned it. Scholarship on the post-1960s college student, typified by Levine and Curtain 1998, has generally highlighted students' lack of political engagement and focus. For a challenge to this view, see Rhodes 1998, a study that showcases the ways in which the "personal politics" of the 1960s were revived by the campus culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s.


This is the only comprehensive study of the radical college political movements of the challenging 1930s. It provides an excellent corrective to those studies that are depicting the 1960s as the only politically charged era in the history of higher education.


Rosenberg, R. 1983. 


A comprehensive study of the AAUW, which, from its founding in the late 19th century until the 1970s, served as academic women's primary professional organization. For a study of women in higher education between World War II and the outbreak of the second-wave women's movement in the late 1960s, see Eisenmann 2006. Evans 2007 describes African-American women's experiences in higher education from 1850 to 1954, and Miller-Bernal 2004 covers African-American women's experiences since 1950.

Fishel and Pottker 1977. 

Rosenberg 1983

Levine and Curtain 1998


The 1960s was not the only period of committed student political engagement, as this study explores. Post-1960s generations of students have also organized for political battle, often in order to assert their particular group consciousness or identity.


A must-read for any student affair professional, this work offers an illuminating portrait of the lives of America's latest generation of college students.


Examines the evolution of anti–sex discrimination legislation in Congress that culminated in the passage of Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments, which barred sex discrimination in "any education program or activity." For a study of women in higher education from 1850 to 1954, and Miller-Bernal 2004 covers African-American women's experiences since 1950.


Probes the emergence of the women's liberation movement as it took shape following the disestablishment of the male-dominated mass movements of the 1960s.


A novel examination of the rise of the black power movement in the latter 1960s that makes important connections to the earlier internecidal civil rights movement.


Rosenberg, R. 1983. 

Effective reading of the evolution of anti–sex discrimination legislation in Congress that culminated in the passage of Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments, which barred sex discrimination in "any education program or activity." For a study of women in higher education from 1850 to 1954, and Miller-Bernal 2004 covers African-American women's experiences since 1950.


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Rosenberg, R. 1983.
Offers a comprehensive overview of women’s experiences with higher learning. Beginning in the early national period and the rise of female seminaries, academies, and single-sex institutions, Solomon evocatively contextualizes the gradual triumph of co-education and how the achievement of equal educational opportunity transformed colleges and universities along with the students and society served by those institutions.