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CULTURE, CAREERS, AND KNOWLEDGE

THIS HISTORY OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION has focused on institutions—colleges and universities legally empowered to award the degrees that certify advanced education. These institutions by 1940 constituted a system whose structure, formal rules, and powerful traditions had evolved over three centuries. This evolution was affected by features of American society outside of higher education, most importantly *culture, careers, and knowledge*. These phenomena are multifaceted, change over time, and defy precise definition. Their influence is occasionally obvious but is more often subtly manifested in beliefs, expectations, and behavior. Their effects have influenced American higher education in an evolving manner from the founding of Harvard College to World War II.

Culture and careers are basic components of social class, a much broader phenomenon. Sociologists have addressed class and education in terms of origins and destinations—where students come from socially and where graduates end up. Higher education is inherently connected with expectations about such destinations; it is the means to achieve a desired end. So, who attended American colleges, and why, become fundamental questions. The first answer is: mostly sons (and later daughters) from the upper range of middle-class families—specifically, families owning property, having some discretionary wealth, and having respected standing in their communities. Few students came from the propertyless lower class, chiefly because such children lacked access to the necessary preparatory instruction. As for the wealthiest, they had little need for college education and indulged only sporadically, at least before the late nineteenth century. Colleges were always open to capable middle-class youth who worked to attend or received some aid, and this social stratum for most of these years encompassed relatively prosperous farmers. But the dominance of the upper-middle class is confirmed by complaints of exclusiveness from the Early Republic to 1940. On the other hand, low participation rates—less than 3 percent before 1900—suggest that aptitude and interest played a large role in determining the small minority who went to college, regardless of social

background. Despite a persistent social bias, American college students were a fairly mixed bunch.

Upper-middle-class families looked to colleges chiefly to accomplish what today is called social reproduction. This required the acquisition of a cultural foundation, based ostensibly on academic knowledge, but also other aspects of the college experience. Such a foundation supported numerous possible careers—in family business, the professions, civic affairs, managing family properties, or some combination of these. Of course, for many students, such activities and lifestyles represented social advancement. Rural students in particular used college as a path from the agrarian to the town or urban world. Their college education did not prepare them for any particular occupation, outside of the humble post of schoolteacher, but rather taught them how to conduct themselves among what were called the upper ranks of society, genteel society, or the bourgeoisie.

The liberal education that colleges offered was always a cultural artifact, from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. This had important implications for the colleges. Knowledge was only loosely connected with the cultural value of college. Advanced learning has commanded enormous respect within higher education throughout its history. But such knowledge did not become integral to the curriculum until the academic revolution and was resisted by some even then. Earlier, the subject knowledge incorporated into a college course was almost arbitrary compared with knowledge recognized as having cultural value. Instrumental knowledge relevant to employment also remained largely separate from college education before the Civil War. Although reformers periodically sought to connect curricula with careers, their efforts almost always anticipated a demand for such instruction rather than responding to one.

Culture has thus played a critical role. In ways less tangible than the advancement of knowledge or education for careers, culture affected curricula, institutional mission, and student life. The interplay of these factors presents a kaleidoscope of changing patterns over the history of American higher education.



The founding of Harvard and Yale during the Puritan century embodied a consensus among those communities over culture, careers, and knowledge. Cultural objectives were clearly uppermost—to inculcate the intensely religious worldview of Calvinist Puritanism, but also to educate gentlemen who would become the leaders in church and state. The only “career” existing in this society was that of minister, and most students at some time considered the ministry as a potential calling. But the colleges did not train ministers, at least not as

undergraduates. Ministers were expected to be educated men who could explain and interpret worldly events as well as theology to their congregations. This was accomplished with the traditional “arts” course, a legacy of medieval universities imported from contemporary Oxford and Cambridge. However, worldly knowledge was a small component of the course. Besides infusing all activities with Puritan religiosity and perfecting competence in Latin and (some) Greek, the arts course chiefly emphasized speaking skills—disputations to hone logic for argumentation and declamations to practice rhetoric. Secular knowledge was largely derived from the philosophies of Aristotle and was inherently limited. This education prepared graduates for the status of gentlemen, chiefly by the combination of these elements. Graduates acquired knowledge of the world, such as it was, literacy in the language of learning, capability for public speaking, and social skills imbued by collegiate living. This was a valuable skill set, whether or not one chose to join the ministry, since it prepared men for a variety of life tasks among the upper ranks of colonial social hierarchy. Hence it needed little adjustment, even as fewer graduates entered the ministry.

The Enlightenment undermined the knowledge base of the old arts course. The curriculum was altered to encompass the Newtonian cosmos, but the implications drawn from this worldview—natural religion and philosophical Anglicanism—had a greater impact. Calvinists struggled to retain control of the colleges in order to enforce their theological views, but religious beliefs inexorably changed. As the secular Enlightenment’s influence deepened, the lure of a gentleman’s life style strengthened as well. In New York and Philadelphia, in particular, colleges consciously mimicked the mores and fashions of the English upper class. Even the evangelical colleges were not immune. John Witherspoon brought enlightenment toleration, intellectual advance, and social ambitions to pious Princeton.

After 1760 the leading colleges taught an extensively updated curriculum, including Newtonian science, Scottish moral philosophy, and English belles lettres. The growing conflict with England made older material, such as natural law doctrines and Greek and Roman histories, highly relevant. Students focused on preparing to be gentlemen, and colleges openly identified with what Witherspoon called “persons in the higher ranks of life.” Students further developed these traits in literary societies, which cultivated belles lettres, public speaking, and debate. College study now became more closely linked to careers in the law, although apprenticeship in a law office was still required. In medicine, however, the College of Philadelphia and King’s College established medical courses to train gentleman physicians. Higher education reflected the relatively open, but inherently hierarchical, character of colonial America. Ambitious middle-class boys found ways to attend, and older students from humble backgrounds,

aspiring to be ministers, worked their way to and through college. The colleges were well adapted to late colonial society, on the cusp of revolutionary change.

The American Revolution inspired the idea of republican universities, intended to propound new subjects befitting the new republic. Emphasis was variously placed on science, modern languages, government, and especially “useful knowledge,” valued so highly by Enlightenment writers. The role of ancient languages was questioned, and religion largely honored outside the curriculum. Useful knowledge included the professions and at least implied a greater orientation toward careers. In terms of culture, the desirability of fostering a republican consciousness was frequently expressed, but it was still assumed that a republican citizen would be a gentleman of superior social rank. In fairly short order, republican universities failed on all these counts. With respect to knowledge, the Enlightenment promised far more than it could deliver. There was little useful knowledge to teach, scarcely anyone to teach it, and no apparent way to incorporate such subjects into the arts course. Rather than republicanizing the arts course, federalist educators soon found their institutions being attacked by more democratically inclined citizens as “aristocratic.” By 1800 the arts course was a shambles, and the culture it embodied was on the defensive.

The first decades of the nineteenth century marked a low point in all the vital signs of American higher education. It had become ineffective in promoting culture, careers, or knowledge. The assumption of social superiority associated with collegiate education was resented and contested by democratic elements, especially in the expanding western settlements, but even in Federalist New England. Professional careers became increasingly dissociated from collegiate preparation. And what remained of the arts course proffered little general knowledge and nothing useful for careers. In newly established institutions, the skill set that colleges offered was greatly diluted; in established ones, its relevance seemed greatly diminished. After 1800, as the Second Great Awakening of evangelical piety swept the nation, emotional and anti-intellectual religious faiths specifically rejected college educated ministers. The path to rehabilitate the colleges seemed to lie with resuscitating the classical course—subjects the colleges were able to teach—and reasserting the role of religion.

The 1820s witnessed fruitless attempts to introduce useful knowledge. Perhaps the only success was the teaching of civil engineering at the United States Military Academy. Thomas Jefferson realized his vision of a republican university in Virginia, but in practice it served largely to provide acculturation to planters’ sons, largely through student socialization. Instead, the chief contribution to rehabilitating the colleges was a reformulation of their cultural role. The *Yale Reports* of 1828 convincingly argued that a 4-year course of classical studies would, by instilling mental discipline, impart a superior culture beneficial for

any calling. This assertion made explicit the eighteenth-century assumption that connected classical education with superior status in society. By 1828, this was a definition of means and ends that the higher-education community was ready to embrace. The message of the Yale *Reports* was buttressed by the American Education Society, which held that the thorough education of ministers required a 4-year classical course followed by 3 years of study in a theological seminary. It would be a century before this sequence of undergraduate-professional education was adopted in law and medicine. But in 1828 it underlined the foundational nature of a liberal education. Furthermore, it absolved the college course from teaching vocationally useful knowledge, as specifically rejected in the *Reports*.

The evangelical denominations of the Second Awakening soon recognized a need for colleges of their own. They had little interest in advanced knowledge but found ignorance a handicap. Developing communities needed educated people, and persons who valued them became dissatisfied with churches that did not. Education still conferred social status. In order to preserve their social base, evangelical churches after 1820 began establishing their own colleges, by no means confined to coreligionists. They all included preparatory departments, which often taught the majority of students, many of whom never attended the college. These multilevel institutions were an important community educational resource. But at the collegiate level they perpetuated the classical course, no matter how poorly taught. The denominational colleges thus conveyed little advanced knowledge, provided a rather superficial form of culture by the criteria of the Yale *Reports*, and awarded bachelor's degrees that had no value in the labor market. They nevertheless offered the promise of entrée into the developing bourgeoisie.

In the mid-nineteenth century, rapid growth and tentative innovation were premonitions of four major challenges that after 1870 would transform American higher education: (1) Higher education for women raised questions of how male patterns of culture, careers, and knowledge related to a woman's place in society. (2) The growth of scientific knowledge forced consideration of how it could be incorporated into the colleges. (3) The issue of teaching useful knowledge presented itself in ever-more pressing terms. And (4), collegiate culture transcended alleged effects of the ossified classical course and passed into the hands of students themselves. Each of these developments was strongly affected by the regionalization of higher education—the emergence of distinctive patterns in the Northeast, the South, and the West.

The traditional forms and customs of American colleges scarcely suited the condition of nineteenth-century women. The culture of mental discipline was hardly needed for students who had no access to the professions and whose social status would be determined by marriage, not career. A different approach to

these issues was taken in each region. Southern female seminaries served women who would marry but not work. They conveyed a suitable culture of ornamental subjects and a light touch of general knowledge to rather young students. In Massachusetts at Mount Holyoke, Mary Lyon addressed somewhat older women who expected to have careers as teachers or minister's wives, and she aimed to provide subject knowledge comparable to that taught in men's colleges, sans classical languages. In the "West," evangelical Oberlin provided an experiment in equal coeducation, although most women took the nonclassical lady's course. But Oberlin feminists resisted social conventions by aspiring to enter the professions. The gap between male and female cultures and careers was too large to bridge at this juncture and would be a formidable obstacle long afterward. However, the better female colleges distinguished themselves by thorough teaching of English and science. Access to academic knowledge had to await endowed women's colleges and coeducational universities after the Civil War.

The classical AB degree possessed an implicit cultural significance, but the degree alone had limited value, and this fact was reflected in student attitudes toward their studies. Young men aspiring to the status of gentlemen instead sought recognition from their peers. This phenomenon was most exaggerated in Southern state universities, where planters' sons above all sought to establish their character and honor through exploits far from the classroom. Some of these students may have sought careers as professionals, but campus life largely reflected the culture of the plantations. In the North, rapidly spreading fraternities allowed midcentury students to cultivate the affects of gentlemanly status. Increasingly, this ideal mirrored the culture of the urban *haut-bourgeoisie*. Fraternities soon played a huge role in campus activities, but their tacit agenda for members was to learn and practice the manners and mores of the class they aspired to join. Culture, far more than curriculum was the most critical attribute for future careers.

By the 1850s some colleges felt the need to enlarge their teaching in response to the expansion of knowledge. Civil engineering was now taught beyond West Point, and Francis Wayland created a sensation by introducing practical subjects at Brown. Wayland's flawed reforms did not last long, and only piecemeal efforts to teach practical knowledge were made in the East. The exceptions were the new scientific schools at Harvard and Yale. There the desire to advance scientific knowledge was linked with practical applications. Freedom from a fixed curriculum allowed these schools to pursue both objectives, more pure science at Harvard and more applied at Yale. Such studies were off limits to students in the classical course and thus free from its limitations. In the West, the multiplying colleges represented community assets. They assumed additional roles to accommodate multiple educational needs, becoming multipurpose colleges. Typically,

besides the classical AB course, they offered scientific, English, and teachers' courses, but all these provided different versions of general education, not preparation for careers. Only Michigan under Henry Tappan consciously aspired to become a true university in the breadth and depth of its offerings.

By the Civil War, American higher education was on the cusp of separate revolutions in each of its fundamental functions: the land grant revolution in introducing practical subjects; the academic revolution in committing to the advancement of knowledge; and the collegiate revolution in defining the experience and meaning of college for undergraduate students.

The 1862 Morrill Act implanted the practical arts as a permanent presence among other liberal subjects. Agriculture was the most radical addition, despite a few precursors, since it presupposed a body of relevant knowledge and a population of educable practitioners. In fact, it took 50 years: additional federal legislation and subsidies created experiment stations to develop agricultural science and cooperative extension to bring the results to farmers. Engineering required less assistance. Civil engineering was well established by the Civil War, and although Justin Morrill's conception of mechanic arts proved a blind alley, the major fields of engineering emerged in the 1880s and were readily incorporated into land grant and non-land grant universities alike. The Morrill Act hastened the incorporation of truly useful knowledge by establishing a network of what became relatively strong institutions dedicated, at least in part, to this mission.

American universities developed as compartmentalized institutions, capable of adding additional units for business, education, music, fine arts, and others, without disturbing core commitments to the liberal arts and sciences. Higher education now offered subjects directly relevant to careers. Meanwhile, cultural subjects were transformed by the academic revolution.

The academic revolution posited the systematic pursuit of new knowledge, embodied in research and graduate education, as a central mission of universities. The organization of academic disciplines provided a new knowledge base throughout higher education, rendering the fixed classical course obsolete. Traditionalists lamented this presumed loss of culture. However, Harvard President Eliot maintained that a liberal education was best achieved by allowing undergraduate students to choose their own courses in the arts and sciences. Practical and professional subjects, he felt, should be taught in separate institutions or as graduate subjects. Johns Hopkins promoted a different ideal—the relentless advance of knowledge through empirical investigation. Although originally focused on the arts and sciences, the spirit of research—and its benefits—were appropriated by the practical arts as well. American universities ignored Eliot's distinction and pursued the advancement of knowledge in all its domains. Knowledge was no longer an external influence affecting universities but rather

an internal agent for continual change. However, generating new knowledge through research and graduate education required a scale of operation and expenditure that only a handful of universities could achieve. The rest of American higher education became largely consumers and disseminators of the new academic knowledge.

The majority of college students in the late nineteenth century were more concerned with culture, even if subconsciously, than with practical arts or academic knowledge. Increasingly, the culture they valued came from interactions with peers, not faculty. The rapid growth of student-run activities and organizations was the third revolution in higher education. First developed most vigorously in eastern private colleges, it spread rapidly across the country. Students judged their classmates and themselves on achievements outside the classroom and dismissed achievements within it. The rise of intercollegiate athletics epitomized these developments, but it was only one manifestation of the culture dominating campus life. After 1900, an idealized depiction of this culture was projected in popular media and uncritically digested by middle-class Americans. The collegiate culture was presumed to produce character, “manliness,” and subsequent success in the business world. This image popularized colleges and, ironically, associated mere attendance with successful careers. A pronounced social bias in campus cultures, dominated by men’s and women’s fraternities and costly social activities, increased markedly after 1900. But even the socially homogeneous eastern colleges believed that this culture recognized character and merit.

These three revolutions pulled American higher education in different directions, at least in theory. In practice, these tendencies more often coexisted with little apparent tension. For example, the majority of Cornell students at the turn of the nineteenth century majored in some of the country’s leading engineering departments and belonged to fraternities. However, the underlying logics of these revolutions shaped divergent developments in the twentieth century.

The collegiate culture gained momentum and reached a kind of apotheosis during the Roaring Twenties. But much earlier, university leaders had become disturbed by student aversion to serious study. Critics were most concerned with rehabilitating the cultural value of a liberal education, which they saw as having two components: they wished to preserve the spirit and social solidarity of campus culture, but they also felt that students should learn something. Negatively, they specifically attacked the other two revolutions: they denounced “vocational” courses as superficial and culturally barren, and they criticized “excessive specialization” by the professoriate as inappropriate for undergraduate learning. Woodrow Wilson at Princeton and Abbott Lawrence Lowell at Harvard were most prominent in imposing greater structure and rigor on the undergraduate curriculum, but this was a project of decades rather than a single reform. The

1920s witnessed numerous attempts to improve or reinvent the college course. Initiatives compatible with the curricular hegemony of the academic disciplines generally had the intended effect, like Harvard's and Swarthmore's honors programs, but attempts to reject specialization largely failed. Liberal culture could eschew applied subjects but not the academic revolution.

The second development linked with liberal culture focused on the social environment of colleges. If student socialization formed the peer culture, then it mattered who the peers were. As applicant numbers mushroomed, the eastern private colleges, led by Columbia, Harvard, Princeton and Yale, all resorted to discriminatory selective admissions, generally to preserve their social base but specifically to screen out Jewish applicants. High social status was more valuable for the culture they wished to instill than high IQs. This conscious effort to groom a social elite in democratic America might be compared with earlier preoccupations with culture—the gentleman ideal of mid-nineteenth century or the preoccupation with social rank in colonial and Federalist society. However, charters from colonial times forward stipulated that a college would not exclude any student on the basis of religion. Now they did.

The provision of practical courses of study accelerated after 1900 with the advent of mass higher education. Land grant institutions continued to provide instruction in the practical arts, but they were now complemented by the explosive growth of urban universities. These institutions also had significant enrollments in the liberal arts. Older urban universities, especially Catholic ones, had a base of traditional students, and many new students sought some combination of cultural and intellectual learning. Urban universities often separated their liberal and professional campuses, with mixed success. Nonetheless, they responded to the preferences of their clienteles, which were heavily weighted toward professional and career education. Accounting may be the best example of a demand-driven subject. The popularity of accounting courses allowed universities to develop larger offerings in business and commerce, thus expanding service to this clientele. Older students or working students were particularly drawn to career education, constituting the huge part-time and evening enrollments at New York City colleges. The latent prestige of the arts and sciences, among students and education policy makers, produced some tension with instrumental courses. The campaign for terminal junior college courses, or the efforts to restrict the offerings of teachers colleges, implicitly intended to distance the liberal arts from both. Similarly, the elevation of law and medicine to postgraduate courses testified to the cultural significance of an arts and sciences degree.

Once the advancement of knowledge was embraced as a university mission, the progress of the academic revolution became inexorable but not its velocity or its impact on higher education as a whole. Three factors determined the

incidence of the academic revolution in the first four decades of the twentieth century. First was the narrow base of universities significantly engaged in research and doctoral education. Fifteen institutions could be called research universities after 1900, and only Caltech joined that select circle before 1940. This base may have been constrained by the limitation of inputs—a limited number of active scholars and scientists and the inefficiency of doctoral education. Inputs from universities were also crucial. Even research universities could divert few internal resources to research per se, and their leaders varied widely in the priorities accorded to academic development. Thus, second, the pace of advancement was powerfully shaped by the foundations. They made concentrated investments in a small number of institutions and on the whole appear to have invested effectively. They also mitigated the shortfall of academic researchers through extensive fellowship programs. Foundations invested heavily in academic science in the 1920s, contributing significantly to the achievements of American science that became evident by the 1930s. A third factor was the general acceptance of academic expertise as crucial for faculty and teaching among the better colleges and universities. Even research universities were slow to rationalize graduate education on a meritocratic basis and, more egregiously, to regularize academic criteria for hiring and promotion. By the end of the 1930s, these practices were spreading among the more ambitious universities. And liberal arts colleges perceived that academic respectability brought greater prestige and financial rewards. Viewed from the top, American science and American universities had attained world-leading positions; but viewed from below, the advancement of knowledge and expertise was only *becoming* generalized throughout a good portion of American higher education.



American higher education in 1940 reflected American society, for good and for ill, as it always had. The new palatial residential colleges at Yale and Harvard intentionally aimed to reproduce an exclusive, elite culture, although always reserving some space for the merely talented. The elevation and professionalization of medical education allowed gatekeepers to exercise social as well as intellectual selection. Ethnically and religiously insular communities preferred to educate their children in colleges under their own control, with little regard for accreditation or conventional notions of quality. A huge gulf separated African Americans from mainstream institutions in higher education and all other aspects of their lives. Leaders of the higher education community shared the inclination of traditionalists to divert the educational ambitions of many aspirants to terminal 2-year institutions. The low status of teachers, mostly female, was reflected in the

restricted resources and curricula of teachers' colleges. And women, generally, had relatively broad access to higher education but faced employment opportunities that failed to match their educational attainments.

However, American society was still more open and democratic than any other developed country. That openness was reflected in a system of secondary education that graduated 50 percent of 18-year-olds and a diverse array of colleges and universities that offered places to nearly a third of those graduates. Individual colleges and universities, not government ministries, found ways to bring instruction to those who sought it in accordance with their own institutional incentives. Nuances of prestige still existed among different curricula and different institutions, and they continued to shape student choice. However, graduation from college was recognized as signifying acquisition of some combination of useful and liberal knowledge, a foundation for successful careers. American youth enrolling in 1940 acted on just such a belief. More socially diverse than ever before, they found opportunities for better futures across a panoply of institutions that offered culture and knowledge for future careers.

Less evident but more portentous for the future, American higher education exerted a reciprocal influence on American society. Such influence had no doubt been growing slowly since at least the Civil War. However, in 1940, the higher-education system was poised to assume a strategic role in shaping national developments that would emerge only after World War II.

First, the notion of liberal education, now sometimes called general education, which had been a signature feature since the founding of Harvard, survived as a bedrock foundation defining colleges and universities. The intense interwar scrutiny of this idea and the many proposed reformulations changed little but, rather, cemented its centrality. The concern to privilege instruction in the arts and sciences explains the huge postwar interest in the Harvard Redbook, *General Education in a Free Society*, which affirmed that central role. Vocational instruction might be offered in short courses or through extension, but graduation from a chartered college signified the attainment of some degree of disinterested, noninstrumental knowledge. A&M colleges and teachers colleges eventually rose to that standard, obviating the invidious distinction that existed in other countries between university degrees and nondegree courses for teachers and technicians. In the United States, college graduate was a universally recognized level of cultural attainment, which was consciously replicated in the great postwar expansion.

Second, Justin Morrill's instinctive belief that practical forms of advanced education should be elevated to the same plane as liberal education was fully realized in the United States by 1940. This feature of American higher education, again in stark contrast with coeval developed nations, provided an untold supply

of practitioners and “know-how” to the economy. Every country trained engineers, but the University of Illinois, for example, prepared engineering specialists in twelve fields; MIT, in fourteen. Curricula in business administration was less developed, but fifty-two accredited schools or colleges in universities were dedicated to imparting the managerial skills utilized by growing corporations. Colleges of agriculture, through their federal partnership, not only drove technological progress but also conveyed the results to family farms. More generally, American colleges and universities had no compunction against establishing professional schools wherever demanded, which by 1940 included journalism, library science, forestry, social work, and home economics—and in the future would include still more fields. Besides training practitioners, such schools fostered expertise from dedicated faculty who hastened the pace of technological change. Science-based fields like engineering and agriculture, moreover, advanced further and faster given proximity with basic university research. The existence of such assets in 1940 meant that know-how and expertise would be multiplied after World War II by the massive influx of veterans under the GI Bill, supplying an extra impetus to the world’s leading economy. As a bonus, the rapid escalation of college graduates did not produce a queue of unemployed university degree holders expecting civil service positions; American graduates with their useful skills were absorbed into the productive economy.

Third, the ascendancy of American science to world leadership, described above, brought incomparable advantages, not just in waging war but for technological and industrial development after 1945. Of course, both wartime and postwar federal science policies amounted to a gigantic mobilization of scientific expertise, but it was mobilization of a base that had been formed in universities during the interwar years. In 1940, just sixteen institutions merited the title research university, but their academic culture and practices would be progressively adopted across the university sector after 1945, creating an incomparable array of what are now called world-class universities.

Fourth, the postwar embrace of limitless expansion of higher education was premised on the historical dynamics of American colleges and universities. During the interwar years, pundits in foundations and government expressed concerns that too many students were going to college. They would have preferred higher standards for fewer students and possibly diverting the less fit into terminal programs. Such wisdom had no effect (Minnesota’s General College notwithstanding) on the ballooning of enrollments to 15 percent of age cohorts. Colleges and universities, acting independently, sought students in order to serve their constituencies and balance their budgets. After the war, these institutional imperatives, heightened by the deluge of GI Bill students, evolved into a national consensus. The liberal President’s Commission argued in 1947 that one-half of

all students were capable of benefiting from higher education and should, by 1960, have such opportunities. The conservative rejoinder, while emphasizing academic standards, still recommended that higher education should serve 25 percent of American youth—two-thirds more than in 1940. The new national consensus in favor of expansion would soon be endorsed by state legislatures with appropriations to build flagship, regional, and community college campuses, altering the structure of American higher education but not the dynamics of independent colleges and universities serving the public good while pursuing their own institutional incentives.

For three centuries in preindustrial and industrializing America, higher education had largely responded to the demand for genteel culture, opportunities for careers, and the inexorable growth of knowledge. While those influences would remain, by 1940 an extensive and highly organized system of higher education was on the cusp of assuming a larger role, contributing to the shaping of American society. Unforeseen in 1940, American universities would soon be recognized as central institutions of postindustrial society.

