

Higher Education and the Public Good: A Critical Historical Analysis from the Colonial Period
to the Golden Age Era

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Running Head: HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE PUBLIC GOOD: A CRITICAL HISTORICAL ANALYSIS FROM THE COLONIAL PERIOD TO THE GOLDEN AGE ERA

What is the purpose of higher education? Who benefits from higher education? How has American higher education served the public good? Since the founding of Harvard College in 1636, higher education in American society have served the public good that was modeled on “a borrowed instrument” (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 100) coming from Western Europe. Hastings Rashdall once referred the university as “a distinctly medieval institution” (Kerr, 1995, p. 8) that have remarkably survived into three centuries of extraordinary vitality. From once preparing individuals for clergymen to now preparing them for all types of social service, higher education in America have served a democratic purpose by providing “knowledge for the sake of serving society and knowledge for the sake of serving social demands” (Guttmann, 1987, p. 188). Although the earliest work of John Henry Newman in *The Ideal of a University* have vastly renovate overtime, there are two social and cultural forces in American history that would radically change the path of higher education as a public good: 1) the emergence of land-grant institutions that allowed states of receive benefits from the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 and 1890, and 2) the rise of an American university as comprehensive research institutions during the industrialization and urbanization period.

During the Colonial period (1636-1787), American colonial and antebellum colleges were established with a combination of both public and private control that was the result of European social forces and cultural movements (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 30). In the early years, American colonial colleges had served two primary purposes: 1) settler’s determination to live a life different from the government and 2) Protestantism and Anglicanism desire to separate from Catholicism. A large number of colonial institutions were founded upon Old World models that would serve all types of college students. Harvard, Dartmouth and Yale were all founded by Congregationalists to prepare men for ministers and public servants. College of William and

Mary was established to prepare clergymen for civil service in the Anglican Church (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 19). These colonial institutions along with five others would provide social mobility for young men to integrate religion with society as college would serve as “sanctuaries” for free expression (Guttmann, 1987, p.174).

To enumerate, prior to the U.S. Declaration of Independence, American colonial colleges were originated as a source of Unitarian training rather than a place for scholarship or research. Colonial and antebellum colleges would serve as recognizable symbols of community pride that had educated the whole student “in preparing men and women to be desirable citizens and persons as well as specialists and savants” (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 434). Although most U.S. colonial institutions were inaugurated to develop individual moral disciplines, quite frankly, the vast majority had served little purpose to society as many careers did not require further study. Consequently, enrollments remained vastly small because many colonial institutions would enforce strict admission requirements. For example, Harvard and Yale required all students to speak Latin verse and prose. The College of William and Mary expected applicants to be at least fifteen years of age while Princeton, quite surprisingly, required all students to understand arithmetic in addition to Latin and Greek (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 13). Geiger (2005) suggest that an estimated one out of every thousand colonists had attended college (p. 42). Because the number of students attending was quite limited, many colonial colleges would close at the end of the period to give way to the emergence of new sectarian or denominational colleges that would serve the democratic good in American society.

The opening of the West, sometimes referred to the Revolutionary Era or the Republican Education generation of 1776-1820 (Geiger, 2005, p. 43), would charter a new pathway for higher education in which U.S. institutions would seek to advance the knowledge of society,

such as, the Franklin's American Philosophical Society. Several prominent events after the U.S. Revolutionary War, such as, the opening of The First Bank of the United States, along with a post office, copyright law, and bankruptcy laws, would be notable for the rapid expansion of population, territory, and manufacturing in America society. Individuals from various backgrounds would begin to attend college not only to become civil or public servants but to obtain knowledge that would better prepare them for the new republic. For instance, Yale College had utilized a classical curriculum instruction as a way to better train young men for society or, as the Yale Report of 1828 emphasized, to "lay the foundation of a superior education" (Geiger, 2005, p. 48) that would discipline the mind. Likewise, Union College had encouraged students to take science and moral philosophy courses even if they were not enrolled in a degree program (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 44). Although the events leading to Civil War would eventually decrease the number of men in higher education, the larger effect of the war would force colleges to renew their academic structures and to invest additional funding on new research projects and training programs that would benefit the public good in American society.

The post-Civil War period, often identified as the University Transformation Era (1821-1944), would fuel unprecedented growth in industry, capital, and population from both the North and the West. Although the South was devastated by the American Civil War, the number of new colleges after the Jacksonian Era would significantly expand, especially with the emergence of land-grant institutions and the development of research universities. The Morrill Land Grant Acts, a program sponsored by the U.S. federal government to establish state universities through federal grants-in-aid, would markedly transform higher education into a "service-station" institution (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 228). Larger proportions of Americans would be given the opportunity to create hubs of scholarship and research that focused on regional needs

(Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 429). For example, William Watts Folwell of the University of Minnesota would establish an institution that had served “all worthy comers not merely for the people but for the people” (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 164). Comparatively, Henry Philip Tappan of University of Michigan would transform a German-style university into an “America’s Valley of Democracy” (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 157). Equally important, Briton James Bryce believed in the pursuit for democracy and equality of opportunity. He once wrote in the *American Commonwealth*: “It is the glory of the American university to be freely accessible to all classes...which led people to believe in the value of university education” (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 172). Nevertheless, the social forces leading to the Morrill Land Grant Acts would drastically shape higher education as a public good. Many Americans were believed that all classes can access higher education to those who wish to attain it.

Similarly to the Morrill Land Grant Acts, the social forces leading to the establishment of “research universities” during the industrialization period would encourage more individuals to develop new scholarly inquiry for the democratic good of American society. To point out, the rise of the German-type universities would essentially become models for U.S. higher education system in which higher learning would be “the workshop of free scientific research” (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 174). In historical context, the German higher education system was heavily invested on research in the areas of science and medicine. German academician believed that a university should be focused on scientific research that would solve all types of problems, often coined as *Lehrfreiheit* -suggesting “freedom to teach” (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 174) or “freedom of the professor to do as he pleases” (Kerr, 1995, p. 33). Henceforth, the German-type university structure would persuade American higher education leaders to become more democratically self-governing. For instance, Daniel Gilman of John Hopkins wanted to recruit

world-class scholars that could merge teaching and research within specialized fields (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 233). By doing so, he believed that the U.S. federal government would provide more support to research, such as, the Hatch Act of 1887, of which Congress gave state land-grant colleges funding to enhance agricultural experiment stations.

To clarify, the agricultural experiment stations had played an essential role to the beginnings of research, a center often devoted to solve problems in the food and agricultural industries during and after World War I. The idea to build research centers for the public society would be popularized by Charles Eliot, who developed Harvard's graduate school. Eventually, this allowed John Bardeen, for example, to discover the semiconductor and the transistor during the early twentieth century of which would open up doors to the research field in physics and computers. Accordingly, the rise of research universities had not only sparked economic growth in American society but also a national movement for democratic higher learning in the U.S., or, as Guttman (1987) infers, a community in which "members are dedicated to free scholarly inquiry and who share authority in a complex pattern that draws on the particular interests of administrators, faculty, students, and trustees" (p. 193).

In the long run, the rapid expansion of research universities after World War II, also viewed as The Academic Revolution generation (1945-1975) (Geiger, 2005, p. 61), or as Bender (1997) classifies as the "golden age" era (p. 1), would drastically shape American higher education toward the path of secularization and community service on behalf of governmental agencies. The American university would become more "self-sufficient" (Bender, 1997, p. 2) as access to higher education expanded to accommodate a larger and diverse student body (Bender, 1997, p. 5). For example, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (the GI Bill) would give returning soldiers or veterans full benefits to attend college at a low cost. Moreover, the

President's Commission on Higher Education report in 1947 would further increase access to all students seeking to obtain knowledge for the democratic public. The *Higher Education for American Democracy* report once stated: "Every American should be enabled and encouraged to carry his education, formal, and informal, as far as his native capacities permit" (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 234). For this reason, many colleges and universities in the United States would diversify overtime as several institutions would transform themselves into either community colleges or comprehensive research universities throughout the Cold War period (Wilson, 2001, p. 204), an era now often coined as "Shock Wave I" (Kerr, 2001).

In essence, the American higher education system is essentially *sui generis* (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008, p. 424). Ever since the early seventeenth century to the early "golden age" era, higher education have served the public good by producing highly educated leaders and informed citizens that would contribute to the growth of American society. Higher education institutions must continue, as Guttman (1987) asserts, "to think carefully and critically about political problems" (p. 173) as a way to protect American society from the threat of democratic tyranny (p. 174). Chiefly, as David Starr Jordan once observed, "The true American University lies in the future" (Kerr, 1995, p. 64) of knowledge. It is this very notion, as Abraham Flexner once suggested in 1930 that allows "an institution consciously devoted to the pursuit of knowledge, the solutions of problems, the critical appreciation of achievement and the training of men at a really high level" (Kerr, 1995, p. 4).

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