Association of American Colleges & Universities
A Voice and a Force for Liberal Education in the 21st Century

Higher Education and a Living, Diverse Democracy: An Overview

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In the face of threats to our democracy, colleges and universities are perhaps the American institutions with the strongest commitment to our democratic values. Yet the history of higher education in the United States predates the nation and its democracy; colonial-era colleges created not for revolutionary or even for democratic purposes helped provide the leaders who would create the new country.

Colleges historically have not always promoted democratic missions and have often replicated existing power structures. Colonial colleges, missionary schools, and vocational boarding schools all failed to provide high-quality, culturally relevant education to American Indian students. Tribal colleges created and led by American Indians in the twentieth century emerged to remedy this failure. Colleges certainly failed to promote a higher set of democratic values in the antebellum South, but even after the Civil War, racial segregation by law or in fact was mostly the rule in both the North and South. Following the beginning of the US women's rights movement, many colleges and universities authorized coeducation in the late 1800s, only to simultaneously restrict it with paternalistic rules. Land-grant colleges and universities struggled to gain footing in the mid-1800s: the public felt these institutions were unnecessary when many jobs were available without need of an advanced education.

This essay focuses on the various types of institutions that have emerged over time to meet the needs of our living, diverse democracy. Americans historically have demanded higher education that is practical and available, so one national university (an idea cherished by George Washington and other leaders) or a chain of colleges on the Eastern seaboard (later termed the Ivy League) would never satisfy a continent-spanning country. Accordingly, state colleges and universities, and later junior and community colleges, popped up across the nation. Also, the competition for souls among religious congregations, both Protestant and Catholic, led to the creation of private denominational colleges in the nineteenth century, dotting the Midwest especially. When segregation and legalized discrimination prevented freedmen and women from enrolling in Southern colleges after the Civil War, many historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were founded, joining a few that existed before the Civil War.

These institutional adaptations have allowed American higher education to grow. Moreover, institutional responses to democratic demands have allowed the system of American higher education—if we can conceive of it as a cohesive system—to survive. This article aims to provide an overview of how American colleges and universities have come to take their democratic missions more seriously, so that today these institutions are key bulwarks in the defense of our democracy.

Colonial Colleges

Since the Massachusetts General Court established Harvard College in 1636 as the first institution of higher education in the British colonies of North America, colleges and universities have conflicted and compromised with the public regarding curricular offerings, missions, and admissions policies. From the start, the public financially supported Harvard, not for some dreamy ideals, but because the colony needed educated clergymen and leaders (Rudolph 1962).

In areas of student life, curriculum, administration, and organization, Harvard followed the great English universities in Oxford and Cambridge, and other colonial colleges followed Harvard. This was problematic for their future democratic missions. England, while a progressive monarchy for its time, was ready to fight a war to prevent a democracy from emerging. The colonial colleges were institutions of elites, with few people able to afford tuition. Less than one colonist in a thousand attended college prior to the Revolution, and fewer graduated (Lucas 1994). Benjamin Franklin, who never attended college, spoke for many colonists when he described Harvard as a place "where students learn little more than to carry themselves handsomely, and enter a room genteelly" (Rudolph 1962, 20). Franklin instead proposed schools focusing on the needs of Pennsylvania, including a public academy that opened in 1751 and merged into the University of Pennsylvania in 1791. This college was created not to train clergymen (the Quaker leaders of Philadelphia would not presumably have supported such a mission) but to develop leaders in business and public life (Geiger 2015).

The colonial colleges, only narrowly open to White men, were closed entirely to Black slaves and freedmen and all women. Further, while the colleges marketed their missions to educate American Indians, they only made faltering efforts. In its 1636 charter, Harvard's leader cited as ideal practices "the Education of the English and Indian youth of this country in knowledge and Goodness" (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 1989, 8). In 1654, Harvard established an official college for Native Americans, but it petered out by 1665 due to low enrollments and because its tutor was "idle and drunken" (Morison 1964, 39).

Other colonial colleges either were created to educate Native Americans or had major sections in their charters on the importance of these efforts. For example, Eleazer Wheelock founded Moor's Charity School in Connecticut in 1755 with the intention of schooling Native American students. Female students were boarded in colonists' homes, where they learned housekeeping and sewing, and attended school once a week for reading and writing lessons. Male students lived at school and learned reading, writing, arithmetic, English, Greek, and Latin. Wheelock founded Dartmouth College in 1769, hoping to enroll students from tribes closer to Canada, but

between 1769 and 1893, only fifty-eight American Indian students received instruction there. There were not many American Indians remaining in New Hampshire and there was little incentive for them to enroll, as Dartmouth made no effort to provide a curriculum relevant to their needs, and the institutional mission was to Christianize these students and assimilate them into White society (Adams 1971).

Regardless of their poor records of achievements, the colonial colleges' programs established ideas that were retained in church and federal Native American educational institutions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of these ideas, that Native Americans should be assimilated into White culture, is the "dominant and consistent theme in federal (Native American) educational policy throughout U.S. history" (Champagne 1994, 992). Notions subordinate to this theme were that the tribes must be converted to Christianity; that the education at Indian schools should be appropriate to each gender's assumed role in tribal society (as viewed by White cultural expectations); and that Native American children must be removed from the "corrupting" influences of tribal life into schools administered by Whites (Coleman 2008, 63). When American Indian tribes established their own colleges in the 1960s, they used a very different model from this racialized, culturally colonizing approach, with a central mission of preserving American Indian customs, languages, and identities.

It is a daunting challenge for the historian of higher education to look back over two hundred years and gauge the shortcomings and successes of the colleges and universities that have been in operation since the colonial period. None of the colonial colleges were founded with the idea that they would be training students to be the spearhead of a revolution. Yet when the Revolution came, a rising democratic tide overtook the colleges (Rudolph 1962). It has been a remarkable challenge for colleges designed to educate a colonial elite to adapt to the needs of a democratic society. Yet the colleges formed in the colonial period have for the most part thrived and have trained many leaders of our democracy for generations.

Private Denominational Colleges

As the United States expanded its geographic territory in the nineteenth century, always at the cost of American Indians, many small, private colleges were created in the Midwest, often serving members of Protestant denominations. The colleges' missions were not only to educate students in academic subjects but also to train ministers for communities farther West, similar to the original missions of many colonial colleges.

An interesting case can be found in Ohio's Oberlin College, founded by Presbyterian ministers in 1833. Oberlin stood out from its peer institutions by opening admissions to Black and White, male and female students from its inception (Morris 2014). By the end of the Civil War, one hundred African American men and women had studied at Oberlin, and thirty-two had graduated (Lawson and Merrill 1983). Very few other colleges admitted African American students, and nearly all HBCUs were created after the Civil War. A third of Oberlin's African American students during this pre-war period came from Cincinnati. Many had graduated from Gilmore High School, a private school for African Americans that was created in 1844 because Ohio law disallowed the use of public funds for the education of African Americans (Lawson and

Merrill 1983; Morris 2014). With its founders closely tied to the abolitionist movement in Cincinnati, Oberlin forged a close bond with Gilmore (Morris 2014).

In the small denominational colleges of the Midwest, democratic ideals and religious aims usually fit comfortably together. Even beyond Oberlin, the leadership of denominational colleges provided much of the intellectual force and moral heft of the abolitionist movement.

These colleges have a powerful historical legacy. Many are still in operation, and many encouraged the growth of small colleges farther west (Rudolph 1962). These institutions ensured the survival of the small liberal arts college and its extension beyond the northeastern United States. Through their liberal arts curricula, they have espoused democratic values since their creation.

Public Land-Grant Colleges and Universities

Before the Civil War, there was little demand for public higher education. Senator Justin Morrill failed in 1857 to pass his bill providing federal support for higher education, coming up against Southern and Western opposition. It was not until the Southern states seceded that Senator Morrill could get his Land Grant Act passed in 1862. This was the birth of what later came to be called "democracy's colleges"—public land-grant colleges and universities that benefited from the sale of federal lands by the states (Ross 1942).

Often, states and territories accepted Morrill Act funds long before their citizens were interested in a state college. In 1885, the Arizona State Legislature met in a session popularly known as "The Thieving Thirteenth Session" for its clear corruption. Its priorities were, in order, locating a state capital, picking a site for the state insane asylum, and choosing a location to host the state university and teachers college (Martin 1960). To the legislature, "a university and a teachers college were of secondary interest because no community really wanted them." The favorite quip was "Who ever heard of a professor buying a drink?" This was why (supposedly) saloonkeepers did not want a university in Tucson (Martin 1960, 21–22). Of course, the Arizona state system of higher education would later become an engine of social progress committed to democracy and social justice.

When land-grant schools were established, the people sometimes argued for a practical course of study that would bring immediate local benefits, and the faculty resisted in some cases. The Reverend William Maxwell Blackburn, one of the first presidents of the University of North Dakota, argued in 1885 against the traditional liberal arts curriculum in favor of a vocational course preferred by the local people—and the faculty forced him from office. The editor of the *North Dakota Herald* leapt to the president's defense, asking, "Is the university to be built as an American institution or shall it be run as a cramming, dry-as-dust, stilted, 50-years-behind-the-times, dead-and-gone style? It is a fight of plain, practical, common sense education adapted to the wants of a new population against the setting of a standard, a stilted curriculum so high that before you could enter the walls of the institution you would have to be trained at Oxford. Our university must walk before it can run" (Geiger 1958, 43).

The Federal Department of Agriculture was founded in 1862, the same year the Morrill Act was passed, and both measures were dedicated to the needs of a vital voting bloc: farmers. Indeed, the Morrill Act stated that land-grant schools should provide agricultural education. Yet, for many years, these schools did not possess sufficient means for agricultural programs. The Hatch Act of 1887 subsidized the establishment of agricultural extension stations, helping cement the popularity of the land-grant colleges. At the University of Nebraska, for example, funds from the Hatch Act encouraged agricultural research such as developing a new variety of spring wheat, new weather forecasting techniques, and more efficient irrigation plans (Manley 1969). Within decades, experimental stations such as those in Davis and Riverside were converted to full campuses of the University of California. The original agricultural missions of these campuses have since been absorbed into the curricula of a research university.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

While many HBCUs were created in the years following the Civil War, federal funding did not flow equitably to these new institutions. The Second Morrill Act of 1890 forbade racial discrimination in the distribution of funds (Neyland and Fahm 1990), and the South of the Jim Crow Era responded by creating institutions of higher education intended solely for African American students, often with a mainly agricultural mission. These institutions were separate but clearly not equal; funding was always terribly low for HBCUs relative to the colleges and universities reserved for White students. Nevertheless, HBCUs, public or private, shared the "unique mission of providing their students with a culturally, socially, economically, and politically relevant education" (Brown and Freeman 2004, 8). HBCUs emerged with a small but committed group of graduates who carried forward these vital missions.

Many HBCUs are still operating today with great success. As of 2016, there were 102 HBCUs spread across nineteen states, with non-Black students now composing 23 percent of enrollments. Yet HBCUs are still vital to educational outcomes for African American students. For example, recent data show that 30 percent of African American students who earned science and engineering doctoral degrees also held a baccalaureate degree from an HBCU (NCSES 2017).

It is a deep irony that in an era of austerity, these institutions that adapted to surviving on paltry public support are now held up as cost-effective choices for all students, not just African Americans. More importantly, HBCUs "have been at the center of the Black struggle for equality and dignity," and therefore—perhaps more than any other institutional type discussed here—epitomize the central role colleges and universities have played in the cultivation and defense of democratic values (Allen et al. 2007, 263).

Women's Colleges

Women's colleges became a significant new institutional type in the nineteenth century, and it is useful to consider an early successful model, Mount Holyoke College. Mary Lyon, who in 1837 founded Mount Holyoke Seminary, did not intend her school's graduates to compete on equal terms with men but rather to be intellectually stimulating partners for their husbands. Mount Holyoke women were to stay near the hearth, a soup ladle in one hand, a book of Sophocles in

the other. Teachers were paid a pittance, and students did chores and cooked their own meals. Religion was a focus of student life, with Lyon herself presenting a daily scripture lecture. Upon graduating, students were expected to help convert nonbelievers to evangelical Christianity. While 83 percent of Mount Holyoke graduates taught school after graduation, half of the graduates taught for five years or less (Butchart 2002).

Women's colleges have since become tremendously influential, producing leaders in education, law, government, science, business, and many other fields. Five of the original "Seven Sisters" women's colleges—Barnard College in New York; Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania; and Smith College, Mount Holyoke College, and Wellesley College in Massachusetts—still operate as women's colleges, while Radcliffe College merged with Harvard, and Vassar College in New York became coeducational in 1969. These institutions inspired the creation of other women's colleges, such as Mills College in California. In 1990, Mills became the only women's college to reverse a decision to become coeducational, following a student strike that was supported by Mills faculty, staff, and alumnae, as well as by students at women's colleges around the nation (Tidball et al. 1999).

While major universities adopted coeducation starting in the late 1800s, women's colleges retained, and still retain today, a reputation for providing a superior liberal arts education. Today, there are forty-six women's colleges in the United States (Women's College Coalition 2014). These institutions are producing many graduates in STEM fields, considered by many as crucial to the future: at Smith, for example, 40 percent of students major in a STEM field (Smith College 2016). Women's colleges also remain relevant for their defense of democratic values and commitment to inclusiveness. Women's colleges are leading the way as constructions of gender change, with Mount Holyoke, for example, admitting transgender applicants beginning in 2014 (Misner 2014). Even though just 1 to 2 percent of full-time women students attend women's colleges (Jaschik 2017), the history of these institutions shows their flexibility and strong leadership, and they will doubtless continue to thrive.

Normal Schools

Normal schools, which became known later as teachers colleges, were designed to further efforts toward mass basic education. First implemented in Massachusetts in the 1830s, normal schools were eventually created in every state, training thousands of schoolteachers, mainly women. In 1870, the University of Missouri allowed women students to apply to its new Normal Department due to the need for schoolteachers in public schools, yet for at least the first year, female students were kept apart on campus from male students and were even walked to their classes by teachers.

By 1894, one hundred thousand US students—86 percent of them women—were attending normal schools (Parente 1998). Normal schools encouraged the gradual integration of women students into public higher education. When these institutions merged into state teachers colleges, which later became state universities, women continued to attend them, but not necessarily in teacher training programs.

Junior and Community Colleges

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the demand for higher education was increasing as masses of students graduated from public high schools. In 1900, there were only 650,000 US high school graduates, yet by 1930 there were more than five million (US Census Bureau 2003). The junior (later community) college model emerged to relieve the pressure on four-year schools.

Junior and community colleges have been referred to—accurately—as democracy's colleges. More than any other institution of American higher education, they evolved in response to the needs of the people. The federal government made clear in President Harry S. Truman's Commission on Higher Education report of 1947 that placing a community college within commuting distance of every American should be a top priority. This had clear political importance. Thanks to the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly known as the GI Bill, 40 percent of junior college students in 1946 were veterans. Enrollments at junior colleges more than doubled to five hundred thousand between 1944 and 1947 (Meier 2018).

Community colleges have continued to gain popularity, especially among students of color. In 1976, just under 20 percent of community college students were students of color. In 2016, that proportion had increased to 49 percent nationwide, 59 percent in Texas, and 65 percent in California. Furthermore, 37 percent of community college students are first-generation college students and 46 percent are adult learners, compared with 23 percent and 24 percent, respectively, of students at four-year, private nonprofit and public institutions.

The greatest challenges for community colleges are providing equitable outcomes and keeping college accessible and affordable. African American, Latinx, and American Indian students are less likely than White students to complete terminal degrees or certificates or to transfer successfully to a four-year college or university (Malcom-Piqueux 2018). Yet today, community colleges deliver on the democratic mission of higher education by serving communities that previously lacked access to college.

Tribal Colleges

Tribal colleges started in the late 1960s as two-year institutions adapted from the community college model, focusing on vocational and agricultural education. In 1963, the Haskell Institute of Kansas (now Haskell Indian Nations University) began to offer college preparatory classes, and in 1970, Haskell became the first federally sponsored Native American junior college (Champagne 1994).

In 1968, only 181 American Indians received four-year degrees. In response, American Indians wrested promises of new policy directions from the federal government. President Lyndon B. Johnson declared in 1968 that the federal government must adhere to "a policy expressed in programs of self-help, self-development, self-determination" (Prucha 2000, 249).

The Navajos took the lead in demanding reform of the federal government's Indian policies. This tribe was the best able to put political pressure on Washington: the Navajos maintain the largest reservation in the United States; Navajos were communications and code specialists

during World War II; and tribal elections had produced chairmen committed to taking control of education (Stein 1992). After Navajo Community College (now Diné College) was founded in Arizona in 1968, new institutions—created and controlled by Native Americans and located on reservations—followed its example. Ten years of growth and success concluded with the passage of the Tribally Controlled Community College Act in 1978 (Stein 1992). Since Diné College's founding, twenty-seven other tribally controlled colleges have commenced operations (Boyer 1997).

That the community college is the model Native Americans used in forging their own institutions of higher education deserves attention. The community colleges' institutional missions of "open admission, job training, and community development" best suited the goals of the Navajos and other tribes (Boyer 1997, 25).

Local programs reflected local needs: Salish Kootenai College in Montana began its curriculum with forestry classes; Dull Knife College on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation offered mining training; and aquaculture classes were part of the curriculum at Northwest Indian College on Puget Sound (Boyer 1997). When asked what distinguished Navajo Community College from other colleges, president Ned Hatathli said, "Well, we don't teach that Columbus discovered America" (Stein 1992, 105).

Tribal colleges have made significant contributions to US higher education, but perhaps their most vital contribution is helping make American Indian students, faculty, educational programs, and institutions visible, helping to defeat the invisibility to which American Indians have historically been subjected, especially in elite colleges and universities (Brayboy 2004). Tribal colleges allow American Indian students and their communities to benefit from relevant higher education without having to travel far from home or go through the often alienating experiences of attending a predominantly White institution (PWI), with the historical legacy of forced assimilation practices.

Hispanic-Serving Institutions

Democratic institutions must adapt to serve the people, or they fail their democratic missions. Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) are authorized by the federal government and defined as "accredited, degree-granting, public or private nonprofit institutions of higher education with 25 percent or more total undergraduate Hispanic full-time equivalent (FTE) student enrollment" (Santiago, Taylor, and Calderón Galdeano 2016, 5). Most HSIs were historically PWIs but their student bodies changed over time to reflect shifting demographics (Valdez 2015). Indeed, only two universities in the continental United States were created expressly to serve Hispanic students: Boricua College (1968) in New York and the National Hispanic University (1981) in California (Santiago, Taylor, and Calderón Galdeano 2016). As of the 2016–17 academic year, there were 492 HSIs scattered across twenty-one states and Puerto Rico; 215 were public two-year colleges. Today, 63 percent of Hispanic students attend HSIs (HACU 2018).

In 2025, 32 percent of all US college students will be Latinx (Hussar and Bailey 2017). HSIs are acting as leaders for all colleges and universities in focusing on these vital students and their varied needs (Garcia and Taylor 2017).

Conclusion

American colleges and universities have not always been in step with the democratic needs of the larger society. However, these institutions have been expected to meet Americans' growing demand for higher education and have responded with a variety of institutional types to support their democratic missions and ideals. We may expect this evolution to continue so long as we maintain a living, diverse democracy.

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