

The Power of the Parochial in Shaping the American System of Higher Education

by

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The roots of American higher education are extraordinarily local. Unlike the European university, with its aspirations toward universality and its history of cosmopolitanism, the American college of the nineteenth century was a home-town entity.<sup>1</sup> Most often, it was founded to advance the parochial cause of promoting a particular religious denomination rather than to promote higher learning. In a setting where no church was dominant and all had to compete for visibility, stature, and congregants, founding colleges was a valuable way to plant the flag and promote the faith. This was particularly true when the population was rapidly expanding into new territories to the west, which meant that no denomination could afford to cede the new terrain to competitors. Starting a college in Ohio was a way to ensure denominational growth, prepare clergy, and spread the word.

Alternatively, colleges were founded with an eye toward civic boosterism, intended to shore up a community's claim to be a major cultural and commercial center rather than a sleepy farm town. With a college, a town could claim that it deserved to gain lucrative recognition as a stop on the railroad line, the site for a state prison, the county seat, or even the state capital. These consequences would elevate the value of land in the town, which would work to the benefit of major landholders. In this sense, the nineteenth century college, like much of American history, was in part the product of a land development scheme. In general, these two motives combined, as colleges emerged as a way to advance both the interests of particular sects and also the interests of the towns where they were lodged. Better to have multiple rationales and sources of support than just one (Brown, 1995).

As a result, church officials and civic leaders around the country scrambled to get a state charter for a college (but with little or no state financial support), establish a board of trustees made up of local notables, and install a president. The latter would rent a local building, hire a small and modestly accomplished faculty, and serve as the CEO of a marginal educational enterprise, which sought to draw tuition-paying students from the area in order to make the college a going concern. With colleges arising to meet local and sectarian needs, the result was the birth of a large number of small, parochial, and weakly funded institutions in a very short period of time in the nineteenth century, which meant that most of these colleges faced a difficult struggle to survive in the competition with peer institutions. Having to operate in a time and place when the market was strong, the state weak, and the church divided, these colleges found a way to get by without the kind of robust support from a national government and a national church that universities in most European countries enjoyed at the time.

In this paper I examine some of the consequences of the peculiarly dispersed circumstances in which American colleges had their origins. These colleges proliferated to such an extent that by the mid-nineteenth century the U.S. had the largest number of institutions of higher education in the world. They were not only geographically localized but also quite parochial in intellectual and academic stature. Quantity not quality was the driving force, and supply vastly exceeded demand. As a result, enrollments at individual institutions were small, and colleges had to drum up business every way they could. When a broader societal rationale for pursuing higher education began to emerge late in the nineteenth century – arising from the German model of the research university and from middle class demand for socialization and credentialing that would give students advantageous access to the emerging white collar occupations – the large number of existing colleges provided a widely distributed and fully operational infrastructure to make a huge expansion in student enrollments easy to accomplish. Only at this point did research begin to emerge as a central part of American colleges and universities.

This historical background helps explain how American higher education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century rose from being an intellectual backwater to a world leader. These institutions enjoyed a broad base of political and financial support, which was at the same time populist (educating large numbers of local students at the undergraduate level), elite (educating a small number of graduate students and producing high level academic research), and practical (providing professional training and useful inventions to serve the needs of the community).

For educational research on higher education, this structure has posed distinctive limitations. Researchers are concentrated in institutions at the top of the structure, and as a result research on higher education has tended to focus on places like Harvard and Yale rather than the community colleges and regional state universities that employ the large majority of faculty and enroll the large majority of students. In addition, the extreme geographical dispersion and decentralized governance of the system has led researchers – especially in the history of education – to focus on the distinctive characteristics of individual colleges rather than on the characteristics of the overall system.

### Rapid Expansion and Dispersion of U.S. Colleges in the Nineteenth Century

In 1790, at the start of the first decade of the new American republic, the United States already had 19 institutions called colleges or universities (Tewksbury, 1932, Table 1; Collins, 1979, Table 5.2). The numbers grew gradually in the first three decades, rising to 50 by 1830, and then started accelerating. They doubled in the 1850s (reaching 250), doubled again in the following decade (563), and in 1880 totaled 811. The growth in colleges vastly

exceeded the growth in population, with a total of 4.9 institutions per million population in 1790 rising to 16.1 institutions per million in 1880. As a result, the United States during the nineteenth century had by far the largest number of colleges and universities of any country in the world.

By contrast, the United Kingdom started the nineteenth century with 6 institutions and had 10 by 1880, while in France the number of universities rose from 12 to 22. In all of Europe, the number of universities rose from 111 to 160 during the same period (Ruegg, 2004). So in 1880 the United States had five times as many institutions of higher education as all of the countries in Europe combined. Why did this remarkable explosion of college expansion take place in such a short time and in such a cultural backwater?

One answer is that the large majority of these American institutions were colleges in name only and had but the weakest of claims to being purveyors of higher education. These colleges were very small. Because of the dispersed and marginal nature of these institutions, it is hard to determine their size and even their number until the federal government began to collect statistics in 1870. But the figures collected by Colin Burke (1982, computed from Tables 1.5 and 2.2) suggest that the average private liberal-arts college (excluding the small number of state universities) had an enrollment of 42 students in 1830, rising to 47 in 1850. This varied widely by region. New England colleges – the earliest institutions, which in turn served the largest population – had an average enrollment of 128 students in 1850, while, in the rapidly expanding educational arena of the Midwest, colleges had an average of only 23 students. By 1880, the average institution of higher education had 131 students (Carter et al., 2006, Table Bc523). In 1870, the first year for which we have data on professors, the average American college faculty had 10 members, rising to 14 in 1880 (Carter et al., 2006, Table Bc571). The total number of degrees granted annually per college was only 17 in both 1870 and 1880 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975, Series H 751).

Not only were these colleges very small, but also they were widely scattered across the countryside, the large majority located far from a major city. Burke's survey of liberal arts colleges showed that in 1850 only 7 percent were in New England and 15 percent in the Middle Atlantic regions, the two centers of population at the time, while 28 percent were in the Southwest and 31 percent in the Midwest, the most sparsely populated sections of the country. In addition to being geographically dispersed, the sponsorship for these colleges was also widely dispersed across a large number of religious denominations. He estimates that 87 percent of the private colleges in 1850 were denominational in origin, with 21 percent Presbyterian, 16 percent Methodist, 14 percent Baptist, 10 percent Catholic, 8 percent Congregational, 7 percent Episcopal, and the rest scattered across seven additional denominations (Burke, 1982, Table 1.9).

Another sign of the lowly status of these nineteenth century colleges is that they were difficult to distinguish from the variety of high schools and academies that were also in abundance across the American landscape. For students, it was often a choice of going to high school or to college rather than seeing one as the feeder institution for the other. As a result, the age range of students attending high schools and colleges overlapped substantially. And some high schools offered a program of studies that was superior to the offerings at many colleges. So, for example, in 1849 the Pennsylvania legislature gave the Central High School of Philadelphia the right to offer its graduates college degrees, including the bachelor of arts and master of arts (Labaree, 1988, p. 109).

If you delve into the histories of individual American colleges during the mid-nineteenth century, you find tales of woe: students rioting because of bad food; faculty salaries in arrears; no books in the library; and the poor beleaguered president trying to keep the whole shaky enterprise afloat. Take the case of Middlebury College, a Congregational institution founded in 1800, which has now become one of the premier liberal arts colleges in the country, considered one of the "little ivies." But in 1840, when its new president arrived on campus (a Presbyterian minister named Benjamin Labaree<sup>2</sup>), he found an institution that was struggling to survive, and in his 25-year tenure as president this situation did not seem to change much for the better. In letters to the board of trustees, he detailed a list of woes that afflicted the small college president of his era. Hired for a salary of \$1,200 a year, he found that the trustees could not afford to pay it and immediately set out to raise money for the college, including a \$1,000 contribution of his own and gifts from the small faculty, the first of eight fund-raising campaigns that he engaged in. Money worries are the biggest theme in his letters (trouble hiring and paying faculty, mortgaging his house to make up for his own unpaid salary, and perpetually soliciting gifts), but he also complained about the inevitable problems that come from trying to offer a full college curriculum with a tiny faculty.

I accepted the Presidency of Middlebury College, Gentlemen, with a full understanding that your Faculty was small and that in consequence a large amount of instruction would devolve upon the President – that I should be desired to promote the financial interests of the Institution, as convenience and the duties of instruction would permit, was naturally to be expected, but I could not have anticipated that the task of relieving the College from pecuniary embarrassment, and the labor and responsibility of procuring funds for endowment for books, for buildings etc., etc. would devolve on me. Could I have foreseen what you

would demand of me, I should never have engaged in your service.... (Labaree Picks Up the Pieces, 1975, p. 20)

At one place in the correspondence he listed all of the courses he had to teach as president: “Intellectual and Moral Philosophy, Political Economy, International Law, Evidences of Christianity, History of Civilization, and Butler’s Analogy” (p. 20).

The point is that these rapidly proliferating American colleges in the nineteenth century were much more concerned about surviving than they were about attaining academic eminence. Unlike the situation in the old world, where a small number of institutions could count on the support of a strong state and a unified church, they had to scramble to acquire financial resources and social legitimacy from a ragtag mix of small churches and small towns scattered across a lightly populated terrain. This does not sound like a formula for success in building a world-class system of higher education. But that, in the twentieth century, is exactly what happened. It turned out that these unimpressive origins contained key elements that enabled the system’s later climb to distinction.

### Sources of Strength in a Humble Collection of Colleges

By 1850, the United States had a large array of colleges that constituted a loosely defined system of higher education. Constructed without an overall plan, this system was characterized by wide geographical dispersion, radically localized governance, and the absence of guaranteed support from either church or state. Only a small number of these institutions were creatures of the individual states and dependent on state appropriations. The modal institution was the independent college in a small town with a corporate charter and stand-alone finances. Most had the blessing of a religious denomination, which granted legitimacy and a source of students but provided little or no financial help. Instead they had to survive on the tuition paid by students and the gifts of individuals from the town and from the larger church community. They operated in a very competitive market for higher education, where supply vastly exceeded demand and where their main selling points were that they were geographically accessible, religiously compatible, academically undemanding, and relatively inexpensive. On the latter two points, gaining admission was not a problem, flunking out was not likely, and the cost was low enough to make it manageable for children from middle-class families with modest resources.

Already by 1850 there were other forms of higher education emerging on the American scene, including the state university, the land grant college, and the normal school. In the next section, I discuss how these forms increased the complexity and added to the strength of the higher education system. But for now the key point is that these new forms entered a system where the basic model for the college was already established and where any newcomers would have to adapt to the same conditions that had shaped this model over the years.

At the heart of the college system was a strong and entrepreneurial president appointed by a lay board. Board members were the trustees of the corporation, who were responsible for maintaining its financial viability and who (as leading citizens of the town and members of the clergy) brought the college social legitimacy and helped it solicit donations. The president was the college’s chief executive officer, who had to give the school academic and spiritual credibility while at the same time maneuvering the institution through the highly competitive environment within which the college had to operate. Survival was the first priority of every president, and, as we saw in the case of Middlebury College, the job involved a constant struggle to keep the institution financially afloat. This meant the president had to attract and retain credible faculty and to attract and retain tuition-paying students, while at the same time raising donations and teaching a large number of classes. In the absence of steady streams of funding from church or state, these colleges had to depend heavily on the tuition dollars brought in by students. This was never enough to pay all the bills, so fund-raising from the various donor constituencies was critical, but tuition was the bed-rock on which the college’s financial survival depended.

This competitive environment produced a system of colleges that by the 1850s had managed to prevail in the struggle for survival. They were lean and highly adaptable organizations, led by entrepreneurial presidents who kept a tight focus on the college’s position in the market while keeping an eye peeled for potential threats and opportunities on the horizon. Presidents, trustees, and faculty knew they had to keep the student-consumer happy with the educational product or he would attend college in the town down the road. Likewise, they had to keep the loyalty of local boosters, denominational sponsors, and alumni if they were going to maintain the required flow of donations.

### Building New Capacity and Complexity into the System

On this landscape of numerous and widely scattered colleges in the mid-nineteenth century grew three new kinds of institutions of higher education, which came to comprise the major sources of growth in the number of colleges and enrollments: state universities, land grant colleges, and normal schools.

State Universities: First to arise was the state university. Initially, the distinction between public and private institutions was unclear, since all of them received corporate charters from individual states and some of the “private” ones (such as Harvard, from its earliest days in the colonial period) received state subsidies. But gradually a new kind of institution emerged, which was legally constituted as being under the control of state government and was not affiliated with a particularly religious denomination. The first was University of Georgia, founded in 1785. There were five such universities by 1800, 12 by 1830, and 21 by 1860. At the latter point, 20 states had established at least one state university while 14 others had not (Tewksbury, 1932, Tables 12 and 13).

These institutions received more state funds and were subject to more state control than their private counterparts, but otherwise they were not very different. Deliberately located at a distance from major population centers, they continued the pattern of geographic dispersion. Landing one of these institutions was a major plum for town fathers, and there is much lore about the chicanery that often determined which town won the prize. These state universities initially were rather small, sometimes dwarfed by the preexisting private colleges. James Axtell discovered that in 1880 only 26 of the 881 institutions of higher education had an enrollment of more than 200 students. “Amherst [private] was as large as Wisconsin and Virginia [public], Williams [private] was larger than Cornell and Indiana [public], and Bowdoin [private] was near the size of Johns Hopkins [private] and Minnesota [public]. Yale [private] with 687 students was much larger than Michigan, Missouri, or the City College of New York [public] (quoted in Thelin, 2004, p. 90).

State universities were similar to their private counterparts in another way as well. They were often the result of competitive pressures. States were reluctant to get behind in the race with other states in establishing a state university. Much like the kind of local boosterism that motivated small towns and religious denominations to support the founding of colleges, states saw the establishment of a public university as a way to support their claims to be considered an equal to their counterparts in the union, as centers of culture, commerce, and learning and as beacons of progressive public policy. Also, it helped that a state university provided a venue for doling out political patronage. For the most part, state universities developed outside New England and the Middle Atlantic states, where existing private colleges were already serving many of the same functions and effectively lobbied to head off state-subsidized competition.<sup>3</sup>

Land-Grant Colleges: Another form of higher education institution was arising only slightly later than the state university: the land-grant college. This uniquely American invention began as an outgrowth of efforts by the federal government to promote the sale of public lands in the new territories and states of the expanding nation. The Northwest Ordinance in 1787 set aside blocks of land in the new Northwest territory (now the American Upper Midwest) for the support of public schools. This procedure became standard practice for new states and was extended to the support of higher education. Between 1796 and 1961, Congress made land grants for higher education to 17 new states. These grants ranged from 46,000 to 100,000 acres per state. The state was permitted to sell, lease, or donate these lands for the purpose of developing higher education. State governments frequently followed suit by donating public land to colleges instead of providing cash appropriations.

Initially the support was for higher education in general, but quickly the pattern developed that these land-grant institutions were to focus on a particular form of learning that was in support of “the useful arts.” This patterned was codified in the enormously influential Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, which specified that the proceeds of the land should be used to support such practical programs of study as agriculture, engineering, military science, and mining. Several land grant laws followed the initial model of the Morrill Act, expanding this process of infusing resources into practical education. The number of institutions created by the various Morrill Acts alone (1862 to 1890, not including the numerous land grants before 1862) totaled 107 (Ogren, 2005, pp. 363-4). Much of this money went to support existing universities, but often the money went to new land-grant schools that signaled their practical focus by including A & M (Agricultural and Mechanical) in their titles (Thelin, 2004).

These land-grant schools were public institutions, but they had a different orientation from the existing private colleges and state universities, whose curriculum was a traditional mix of liberal arts subjects. The new institutions sought less to prepare people for the clergy and high professions than to provide students with practical training in the skills needed to promote growth in the agricultural and mechanical sectors of the economy. And outside the classroom the faculty at these institutions focused their energies on providing support to the state’s farmers and industrial enterprises – patenting inventions, solving mechanical problems, and setting up systems of agricultural extension agents throughout the state.

Normal Schools: A third group of institutions that emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century were initially more like high schools than a colleges: normal schools. These were established by state governments (also

by local municipalities and school districts) to prepare teachers for the public schools, driven by the rapid expansion of universal public schooling between 1830 and 1860 and the subsequent demand for new teachers. The first state normal school emerged in Massachusetts in 1839, but by 1870 there were 39 and by 1880 there were 76 (Ogren, 2005, calculated from appendix, pp. 370-390). These institutions focused initially on preparing students to become elementary teachers, and their course of studies included both pedagogy and instruction in the core school subjects. They functioned as vocational high schools for teachers, and during most of the nineteenth century they were not considered institutions of higher education. As a result, their numbers are not included in the counts of such institutions given earlier.

But the reason for including them here is that by the end of the century they had started evolving into colleges. By the 1890s, some of them were beginning to become teachers colleges, with the right of granting bachelor's degrees. By the 1920s and 30s, they were beginning to drop the word "teachers" in the titles and substituting the word "state." By the 1960s and 70s, they became regional state universities. So, for example, one such institution in Pennsylvania was founded in 1859 as Millersville State Normal School; in 1927 it became Millersville State Teachers College, in 1959 Millersville State College, and in 1983 Millersville University of Pennsylvania (Ogren, 2005, appendix). In 100 years of so, these institutions rose from being high schools for training teachers to regional state universities offering a full range of university degrees.

As a result of this remarkable evolution, normal schools became a central part of the American system of higher education. And their history shows how the patterns established in the mid-nineteenth century shaped the subsequent development of the system. Like their predecessors – private colleges, state universities, and land-grant colleges – they were located mostly in small towns and were scattered widely across the countryside, so they were geographically close to a large number of students. Also like the others, admission was easy and costs were low. And because their number was so large (Michigan and Minnesota had four each; California had eight), these institutions were markedly more dispersed and accessible than state universities or land-grant colleges. Like the latter two, they were state subsidized but depended heavily on tuition, donations, and other sources of income in order to keep afloat. Their dependence on student tuition, and the consequent need to attract and retain student consumers, explains why they were so quick to move up the hierarchy to the status of university. This is what the students demanded. They saw the normal school less as a place to get trained as a teacher than as a more accessible form of higher education. As such, it would serve their purposes in opening up a broad array of social opportunities if it was able to grant college degrees, then offer programs in areas other than teaching, and eventually offer a full array of university degrees.

### The System's Strengths in 1880

By 1880, the American system of higher education was extraordinarily large and spatially dispersed, with decentralized governance and a remarkable degree of institutional complexity. This system without a plan had established a distinctive structure early in the century and then elaborated on it over the succeeding decades. As noted earlier, with over 800 colleges and universities, the U.S. had 5 times as many institutions as all of the countries in Europe. They consisted of a heterogeneous array of institution types, including private denominational and nondenominational colleges, state universities, and land-grant colleges. In addition there were 76 normal schools that were already on a trajectory to become colleges.

Of course, the large majority of these colleges were neither academically elevated nor large in scale. Recall that the average institution in 1880 had 14 faculty and 123 students and granted 17 degrees. Only 26 of the 811 colleges had more than 200 students. The system had enormous capacity, but only a tiny part of this capacity was being put to use. At 16.1 colleges per million of population, it is probably safe to say that no country in world has ever had a higher ratio of institutions of higher education to population than the U.S. had in 1880 (Collins, 1979, Table 5.2). This was a system that was all promise and little product, but the promise was indeed extraordinarily. Let me summarize the strengths that this system embodied at the moment its overcapacity was greatest and the boom era of the university was dawning.

**Capacity in Place:** One strength of the system was that it contained nearly all the elements needed for a rapid expansion of student enrollments. It had the necessary physical infrastructure: land, classrooms, libraries, faculty offices, administration buildings, and the rest. And this physical presence was not concentrated in a few population centers but scattered across the thinly populated landmass of a continental country. It had faculty and administration already in place, with programs of study, course offerings, and charters granting colleges the ability to award degrees. It had an established governance structure and a process for maintaining multiple streams of revenue to support the enterprise. And it had established a base of support in the local community and in the broader religious community. The main thing the system lacked was students.

A Hardy Band of Survivors: Another source of strength was that this motley collection of largely undistinguished colleges and universities had succeeded in surviving a Darwinian process of natural selection in a fiercely competitive environment. Since they could not rely on steady streams of funding from church and state, they had learned to survive by hustling for dollars from prospective donors and marketing themselves to prospective student who could pay tuition. And since they were deeply rooted in isolated towns across the country, they were particularly adept at representing themselves as institutions that educated local leaders and served as cultural centers for their communities. Often the college's name contained the name of the town where it was located (Middlebury College, Millersville State Normal School), and this close identification with people and place was a major source of strength when there were so many alternatives in other towns. If they had succeeded in surviving in the mid-nineteenth century, when the number of colleges was growing so much faster than the population and funds were scarce, then they were well poised to take advantage of the coming surge of student interest, new sources of funding, and new rationales for attending college.

Consumer Sensitivity: These colleges were market-based institutions that had never enjoyed the luxury of guaranteed appropriations, so they had become adept at meeting the demands of the key constituencies in their individual markets. In particular, they had to be sensitive to what prospective students were seeking in a college experience, since these consumers were paying a major part of the bills. This meant that they did not have the ability to impose a traditional curriculum, which would be self-destructive if they sensed that students wanted something different. So when the land-grant colleges grew in popularity, other colleges quickly adopted elements of the new practical curriculum in order to keep from being squeezed out of the market. Even publicly supported institutions, such as state universities and land-grant colleges, had to be sensitive to consumers, because their appropriations were proportional to enrollment numbers. And colleges also had a strong incentive to build longstanding ties with their graduates, who would become a prime source for new students and the largest source for donations.

Adaptable Enterprises: The structure of the college – with its lay board, strong president, geographical isolation, and stand-alone finances – made it a remarkably adaptable institution. These colleges could make changes without seeking permission from the education minister or the bishop. The president was the CEO of the enterprise, and his clear mission was to maintain the viability and expand the prospects for the college. So presidents had to become adept at reading trends in the market, sensing shifts in demand, anticipating the concerns of alumni and other constituencies, and heading off threats to their mission and intrusions into their educational terrain. They had to make the most of the advantages offered to them by geography and religious affiliation and to adapt quickly to shifts in their position relative to competitors concerning such key institutional matters as program, price, and prestige. The alternative was to go out of business. Burke (1982, Table 1.2) estimated that, between 1800 and 1850, 40 liberal arts colleges closed, 17 percent of the total.<sup>4</sup>

A Populist Role: Clark Kerr (2001, p. 14) identified three forms of higher education that fused together to form the American university: the British undergraduate college, the American land-grant college, and the German research university. The first two were firmly in place by 1880 and the third was on its way. The undergraduate college was the populist element, which started with the residential and rural college experience developed in Britain and added to it a some distinctively American components that opened it up to a larger array of students. By locating these colleges in small towns all across the country and placing them in a competitive market that made these colleges more concerned about survival than academic standards, the American system took on a middle-class rather than upper-class character. Poor families did not send their children to college, but ordinary middle class families could, if they chose. Admission was easy, the academic challenge of the curriculum was moderate, and the cost of tuition was manageable. These elements created a broad popular foundation for the college that saved it, for the most part, from Oxbridge-style elitism. The college was an extension of the community and denomination, a familiar local presence, a source of civic pride, and cultural avatar representing the town to the world. Citizens did not have to have a family member connected with the school to feel that the college was theirs. This kind of populist base of support came to be enormously important when higher education enrollments started to skyrocket.

A Practical Role: Another key characteristic of the American model of higher education was its practicality. As Richard Hofstadter (1962) showed, the United States has had a long tradition of anti-intellectualism. Overwhelmingly, Americans have given more attention to those who make things and make money than to those who play with ideas. Its central figures of admiration and aspiration have been inventor-engineers like Thomas Edison and self-made businessmen like Andrew Carnegie rather than academic intellectuals like William James, who were considered “European” (not a compliment). The American system of higher education, as it developed in the mid-nineteenth century, incorporated this practical orientation into the structure and function of the standard-model college. The land-grant college was both an effect and a cause of this cultural preference for usefulness. The focus on the useful arts was written into the DNA of these institutions, as an expression of the American effort to

turn a college for gentlemen or intellectuals into a school for practical pursuits, with an emphasis on making things and making a living more than on gaining social polish or exploring the cultural heights. And this model, which was quite popular with consumers, spread widely to the other parts of the system. The result was not just the inclusion of subjects like engineering and applied science into the curriculum but also the orientation of the college itself as a problem solver for the businessmen and policymakers in the community. The message was: “This is your college, working for you. We produce the engineers who design your bridges, the teachers who teach your children, and the farmers who produce your food. We develop better construction methods, better school curricula, and better crops.” So in addition to the system’s broad populist base of support, there was also a practical rationale that made the system of higher education a valued contributor to the community, which earned support even from people whose children were never going to enroll in it.

### The Pieces Come Together with the Emergence of the Research University

When the German research university burst onto the American educational scene in the 1880s, the last piece of Kerr’s three-part vision of American higher education fell into place. In this emerging model, the university was a place that produced cutting edge scientific research and that provided graduate-level training for the intellectual elite. This provided a way out of the doldrums that had settled on the once vibrant university structure in Europe, which had become irrelevant while the major scientific work was being done elsewhere. And American scholars started flocking to Germany to acquire the union card of the new research-oriented scholar, the doctorate in philosophy, and to learn about the elements of the German model for transport back to the States. Johns Hopkins University, founded in 1876, was the first American institution designed around this model, but other newcomers quickly followed (Chicago, Clark, Stanford), and the existing institutions scrambled to adapt. Consider why this model was so attractive for the American system and how the system managed to incorporate it into the existing structure.

A Research Role: The situation facing American higher education in 1880 brought opportunity but even greater risk. The system had an enormous amount of excess capacity: all of those buildings and professors and programs to maintain with a thin and uncertain stream of revenue. Lacking reliable funding from church and state, it was heavily dependent on students, yet there were not nearly enough students available to support the 900 or so colleges and proto-colleges that were in existence at the time. In addition, whereas the higher education system had broad support as an institution that was both popular and practical, it was lacking in the one thing that would distinguish it from other popular and practical institutions (such as museums and trade schools and apprenticeship programs) – academic credibility. There were too many colleges for more than a tiny number of them to be academically distinguished (Harvard, Yale, and a few others), they were too small to hold a credible concentration of academic talent, and they were too widely dispersed across the countryside to create viable cultural communities of high intellectual caliber.

The German model of the graduate-oriented research university offered help with a key part of this problem. In short, it offered a way to put the higher into American higher education. It gave a parochial, benighted, and dispersed array of colleges and universities a way to attain some degree of credibility as institutions of advanced academic learning. Its professors would come to have the new scientific degree, the Ph.D., which certified their position at the cutting edge of academic attainment, and they would be evaluated based on their own research productivity. Its graduate schools would draw the best-educated and most talented students in the country and induct them into the scientific methods of research and the habits of mind that would lead to authoritative scholarly publication. For this heterogeneous and barely academic structure of higher education, the German model offered the chance to attain serious academic standing in the community and even the world.

Merging the Populist, the Practical, and the Elite in the American System: So the German research ideal offered academic hope for the American system, but it also posed a number of problems. The model envisioned a university that was extraordinarily elite academically and radically more expensive per student than anything that had existed before in the U.S. To pursue this approach in the unalloyed fashion that German universities were doing was impossible in the American system. The German approach called for strong state support, since small and elite graduate programs could otherwise provide lack both the flow of funds and the political legitimacy needed to keep them going. This would not work in the American setting, where state investment in higher education still paid only a fraction of the total cost and where student tuition was essential for survival.

So instead of adopting the German model, the American system of higher education incorporated a version of it within the existing structure. The most ambitious, best financed, and oldest institutions – spurred by competitive pressure from research-oriented newcomers like Hopkins and Chicago – sought to establish key elements of the model: organizing graduate schools, hiring professors with Ph.D.’s, developing advanced graduate



programs, recruiting academically talented graduate students, and shifting faculty incentives toward the production of research. But they did this without abandoning the elements of the existing model that were critically important if they were going to be able to survive and thrive within the market-based political economy of American higher education. And they were aided in this effort by a development that had little to do with the graduate university but a lot to do with the sudden surge in student interest in enrolling in an undergraduate program.

It would take a book to explain why going to college started to become de rigueur for upper-middle class American families in this period, but fortunately others have written such books, which I can draw upon here (e.g., Bledstein, 1978; Clark, 1995; Veysey, 1970). One factor was that the sharp decline of small business and the sudden rise of managerial work in the new corporate economy meant that families of a certain means were unable to pass on social advantage directly to their children by having them take over the family business; instead they increasingly had to provide their children with educational credentials that would give them priority access to the new white collar work. Another factor was that high school enrollment was beginning to increase rapidly in the 1880s, and the middle class families that had relied on a high school education as a form of distinction began to look to college as a way to mark themselves off from the incoming horde of high school students. And a third factor is that the overbuilt higher education system was desperately looking for ways to attract students. So in the 1880s American colleges and universities invented (or copied from peers) most of the familiar elements the twentieth-century American undergraduate college experience, which made attending college attractive to so many students: fraternities and sororities, football, comfortable dormitory rooms, and grassy campuses adorned with medieval quadrangles in a faux gothic style. It was a mix that said: This is a place where you can pick up social capital, cultural capital, and a useful credential; enjoy social life in a comfortable middle-class style; and do all this in a setting adorned with newly created social traditions and with academic nods to the great universities of the old country.

The large infusion of tuition-paying undergraduates reinforced the populist role that the American college had long played. Now attending college was both attractive and useful for large numbers of young middle-class men and women. This sharp increase in student enrollments brought an equally sharp increase in tuition revenues, and the closer loyalty to alma mater engendered by the new all-inclusive college lifestyle made graduates into an increasingly reliable and wealthy source of future donations for the institution. All this new money helped to subsidize the growing graduate programs and increasingly expensive research-oriented faculty. The undergraduates supported the elite academic enterprise that now allowed the college to call itself a research university. And the growth of research and graduate programs gave the institution the academic credibility it needed, to offset what otherwise would have been little more than a party school for socially qualified but academically challenged undergraduates. And on top of these elements – the populist and the elite – was the continuation of the college's practical functions, serving business and society through applied work and the production of the higher end of the workforce.

This mix of the populist, the elite, and the practical has continued to characterize the middle and upper ranges of the American system of higher education from the time of its creation at the end of the nineteenth century. Ever since then, the central struggle for university presidents, admissions officers, and fund raisers has been to determine exactly what mix of these elements was right at a given time for a particular institution in a given market niche. And this in turn allowed the institutions to preserve their autonomy from the state, drawing on a rich combination of income streams and sources of legitimacy. The resulting structure displays a peculiar mix of traits. It is highly accessible and radically stratified; it is widely localized and remarkably homogeneous; it includes under the label of higher education some of the most exclusive and academically elevated institutions in the world and many more of the most inclusive and academically mediocre such institutions. And the entire structure still bears the marks of its modest beginnings in the penurious and parochial nineteenth century college.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the international conference on "Institutional Spaces of Educational Research," Research Community on Philosophy and History of the Discipline of Education, Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany, November 17-19, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Labaree was my grandfather's grandfather.

<sup>3</sup> In one extreme case, the New York did not establish a state university until 1948.

<sup>4</sup> Tewksbury (1932, Table 2) argued that the failure rate on the frontier was much higher than this. He calculated that, in 16 states outside of New England between 1800 and 1860, the college mortality rate was an astonishing 81 percent. Burke (1982, p. 13), however, says that this estimate is much too high, because Tewksbury counted a college as being founded if it received a state charter; but many of these chartered institutions never opened their doors, and many were high-school-level academies rather than colleges. All of this confusion about what was a college and what was a failure underscores the fluidity and volatility of the situation facing American colleges in this period.