CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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During a visit to the Midwest in 1910, an editor researching the growth of American colleges and universities noted that “the University of Chicago does not look its age. It looks much older. This is because it has been put through an artificial aging process, reminding one of the ways furniture is given an ‘antique oak finish’” (Slosson, 1910, p. 429). Indeed, American universities’ fondness for Gothic spires and Georgian-revival brick quadrangles reveals an essential feature about higher education in the United States: the American public expects its colleges and universities to be historic institutions with monumental architecture that invokes a sense of continuity and heritage. In fact, a historical profile of US higher education is in large part a story of structures, not just bricks and mortar but also the legal and administrative frameworks—products of US social and political history—that have made colleges and universities enduring institutions.

Our concern is with higher education’s history, not its archaeology, so we need a theme to bring these skeletal structures to life. James Garfield, later president of the United States, praised his own alma mater’s president by proclaiming, “The ideal college is Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 243). His tribute reminds us that despite the proliferation of magnificent buildings and elaborate facilities in American colleges and universities, ultimately the history of colleges and universities in this country is about teaching and learning. Although their relationship has continually evolved, students and faculty members remain the central characters in the higher education drama, without which the structures are nothing but inanimate stage props.

Whether in the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth, or—now—early in the twenty-first century, the American tradition in higher education has espoused a strong commitment to undergraduate education. As historian Larry Cuban of Stanford
University concluded in his study of universities in the twentieth century, it often has been a story of “how research trumped teaching” (Cuban, 1999). This is not—and need not—always be the outcome. From time to time highly publicized commentaries have urged higher education leaders to reclaim the American education heritage by rediscovering the importance of “putting student learners first” (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993, p. 1).

Structures and Students

A good way to chart the history of higher education in the United States is to keep in mind that quantitative changes have signaled qualitative changes. For example, from 1700 to 1900, less than 5 percent of Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two enrolled in college. Between World Wars I and II, this figure increased to about 20 percent, rising to 33 percent in 1960, and dramatically expanding to more than 50 percent in the 1970s. These numbers accurately forecast the transformation of American higher education from an elite to a mass activity, a trend that continued during the final decades of the twentieth century when the prospect for universal access to postsecondary education emerged as part of the American agenda (Trow, 1970). According to one estimate, in 2015 more than twenty million students enrolled in postsecondary education in the United States.

To attempt to grasp the 370-year history of American higher education in a single glimpse is unwieldy and unwise. Therefore, the following pages first consider the legacy of the English influence on colonial colleges and then shift to how America wrestled with the question of creating a distinctive “American way” in higher education during the new national period. Next, the discussion highlights the emergence of the “university” model from 1880 to about 1914, with the reminder that other institutional forms also flourished during this period. After considering higher education in the three decades between World Wars I and II, the historical analysis moves to the problems of abundance and prosperity in the 1960s, whereas the decades from 1970 to 1990 are analyzed as an era bringing further adjustment and accountability. Finally, analysis of some of the demographic and structural trends since 1990 to the present provides a way to make sense from the transition into the twenty-first century. Having completed this narrative account, the chapter then aims to bring coherence to the history of American higher education by considering the implications for professional practices and policies brought on by trends in research and scholarship within a variety of related disciplines.

The Colonial Period: Sorting Out the English Legacy

Although the ideal of an intense undergraduate education by which young adults are prepared for leadership and service is a distinctively American tradition, it owes much to the example set by the English universities of Oxford
and Cambridge in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These institutions earned a reputation for their unique practice of arranging several residential colleges within a university structure, all located in a pastoral setting. This model, commonly known as the “Oxbridge” model, departed from the patterns of academic life and instruction found in the urban universities of the late middle ages on the European continent. At Paris, Salerno, Heidelberg, and Bologna, scholars banded together for protection and to set standards for teaching, pay, and tuition—but they gave little attention to building a permanent campus or supervising student life (Haskins, 1923). In sharp contrast, by the seventeenth century Oxford and Cambridge had developed a formal system of endowed colleges that combined living and learning within quadrangles. This model consisted of an architecturally distinct, landscaped site for an elaborate organizational culture and pedagogy designed to build character rather than produce expert scholars. The college was an isolated “total” institution whose responsibilities included guiding the social and academic dimensions of undergraduate life. The Oxbridge model not only combined these elements but also integrated them within a coherent philosophy of residential education. This approach eventually influenced college builders in the New World.

Rudolph (1962) called this adopted educational tradition the “collegiate way” (p. 87). Even when the realities of the American wilderness set in or when college officials ran out of money for building, the “collegiate way” persisted as an aspiration in the colonial and, later, national culture. The most telling legacy of the early college founders is their combination of optimism and caution in their quest to create what historian James Axtell (1974) has called the “school on a hill.” The American colonists built colleges because they believed in and wished to transplant and perfect the English idea of an undergraduate education as a civilizing experience that ensured a progression of responsible leaders for church and state. The importance of colleges to colonial life is suggested by their proliferation and protection—starting with Harvard, founded in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636, and followed by The College of William & Mary in Virginia in 1693, Yale in Connecticut in 1701, and six more colleges by the start of the Revolutionary War in 1775.

Tensions between students and faculty characterized colonial college life. Indeed, the residential college was as much a recipe for conflicts as for harmony. Numerous consumer complaints ranging from bad food in the dining commons to dissatisfaction with the curriculum often sparked student riots and revolts. Although relatively homogeneous in its restriction to white, Christian young men, the study body still institutionalized the nuances of social class. College rosters listed students by social rank. Furthermore, following the Oxford tradition, academic robes reflected socioeconomic position, delineating the “commoners” (those who dined at college commons) from the “servitors” (those who waited on tables).

Religion, of course, was an important part of the fabric of American culture, including in its colleges. Religious concerns and sectarian
competition often fueled the creation of new colonial colleges. A majority of these institutions developed denominational ties, and most college presidents were men of the cloth. However, emphasis on Christian values and discipline (more specifically, Protestant values) did not preclude preparation for secular and civil life. As relatively young students matriculated, colleges embraced the role of in loco parentis, with the faculty members and president offering supervision of student conduct and moral development. Although colonial colleges did educate future ministers, that purpose was only one of many among the undergraduate bachelor of arts curriculum (Handlin & Handlin, 1974). Few written records are available to help reconstruct the colonial collegiate curriculum. The best estimate is that oral disputations provided the most rigorous hurdles, subject to the immediate critical evaluation of masters and fellow undergraduates. American higher education in the eighteenth century did include some precedents for diversity—and the associated challenges of that commitment. Periodically colonial colleges attempted to expand their missions but often encountered only weak or even disastrous results. For example, attempts to extend the collegiate education beyond the white population of the British colonies reflected noble intentions, but it relied on limited planning, and thereby generated extremely limited results. One of these episodes caused Benjamin Franklin (1784) to recount how after a group of Native American students returned from their scholarship studies at The College of William & Mary, their chieftain fathers complained that the sons had become unhealthy, lazy, and unable to make good decisions. As a result, tribal elders politely refused the college’s offer to renew the scholarship program, suggesting instead that perhaps the colonial leaders would like to send their sons to the Native Americans for an education that would make the Anglo boys into strong and wise men.

The novelty (and high failure rate) of such experiments underscores the fundamental limits of the colonial colleges’ scope and constituency. Enrollment in college courses was confined to white males, mostly from established, prosperous families and members of each colony’s dominant Protestant denomination. College attendance tended to confirm existing social standing rather than provide social mobility. The curriculum primarily provided for an analytic or intellectual edge in the discourse and writing associated with public life, such as the practice of law (Handlin & Handlin, 1974). In plain terms, the college mission was to ensure the preparation and disciplined seasoning of a future leadership cohort.

The aim of the colonial college then was the rigorous education of the “gentleman scholar.” If the colonial colleges were limited in their constituency and their mission, they were at least remarkably effective in their education of an articulate and learned leadership group, as suggested by the extraordinary contribution of their alumni (including Thomas Jefferson and James Madison) to the political and intellectual leadership of the American Revolution and the creation of the new United States.
Creating the “American Way” in Higher Education: The New National Period

During the new national period following American independence in 1776 and extending into the mid-nineteenth century, the small college persisted as the institutional norm, despite scattered attempts to create a modern comprehensive university. On closer inspection, continual innovations and experimentation in American higher education existed, as indicated by the curriculum proposed by Thomas Jefferson at the new University of Virginia. An undeniable fact of American life well into the late nineteenth century was that going to college was not necessary for “getting ahead” economically, although a college degree did confer some prestige. Colleges had to compete incessantly for the attention of donors and paying students. New state governments showed relatively little inclination to fund higher education, although granting college charters was a popular and easy way for legislators to repay political debts. State universities in Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina were chartered by the early nineteenth century, but they enjoyed only sparse support from their respective legislatures and often took years to get around to the business of actually enrolling students and offering instruction. That the American college was not universally supported—by legislators, donors, or paying students—did not mean it was unimportant. The fervor generated by the Second Great Awakening seemingly caused every religious group to want to build its own college for propagating its doctrines and for reinforcing its distinctive orthodoxy among members who were growing from adolescence into adulthood. The interesting result was a boom in college building in the first half of the nineteenth century: whereas in 1800 there were probably twenty-five colleges offering instruction and conferring degrees, by 1860 this number had increased almost tenfold to 240—not including numerous institutions that had opened and then gone out of business (Burke, 1982).

Between 1860 and 1900, such historically excluded constituencies as women, African Americans, and Native Americans gained some access to higher education. By the mid-nineteenth century, women in particular had become formal participants in advanced studies. One educational innovation was the founding of the “female academies” and “female seminaries”—institutions that offered a range of courses and instructional programs beyond elementary and secondary schooling. In part, curricula included home economics and, at some institutions, the social graces and deportment associated with a “finishing school.” Important to keep in mind is that the curriculum also included formal instruction in the sciences, mathematics, foreign languages, and composition—subjects associated with undergraduate collegiate curricula. Even though such studies did not officially lead to the bachelor’s degree for women, they often rivaled the academic excellence of the men’s colleges of the era. Over time, especially by the 1860s and 1870s, many of the female seminaries became degree-granting colleges in their own right (Horowitz, 1984). In the late nineteenth century a few colleges, such as Oberlin and later Cornell,
pioneered coeducation, enrolling men and women—a policy that would soon gain a wide following in the Midwest and on the Pacific Coast (Gordon, 1990).

Although a few Northern black colleges—Lincoln University (Pennsylvania), Cheyney University (Pennsylvania), and Wilberforce University (Ohio)—had been established by free blacks and white abolitionists prior to the end of the Civil War, between 1865 and 1910 additional provisions were made for African American students to pursue higher education, with the founding of many small black colleges in the South. The first impetus for financial support for these colleges came from Northern philanthropic groups such as the Peabody Foundation. The colleges also benefited from the financial support of black churches, state governments, and the federal government through the Freedmen’s Bureau. Many of these institutions, such as Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, began as a combination of elementary and secondary schools that eventually offered a college-level curriculum. In this respect, newly established institutions for African Americans followed familiar patterns of American nineteenth-century colleges, displaying an array of curricular emphases—ranging from liberal arts at Fisk, Howard, Spelman, and Morehouse to industrial arts and normal schools at Hampton Institute in Virginia along with black state colleges in numerous Southern states (for example, Prairie View A&M University). The Land Grant Act of 1890 also provided funding for black colleges in sixteen states in the South, leading them to offer studies in agriculture and the mechanical arts. The black colleges and universities, despite differences in curricula, religious affiliation, and leadership, shared a widespread condition of uncertain and inadequate funding. Furthermore, well into the twentieth century many of these institutions were prohibited by state governments from offering graduate programs, advanced work, or first professional degree programs such as law (Wright, 1988). Illustrative of the impediments the black colleges and universities faced in the South was that they were not admitted to full membership in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools until 1957 and even after admission there is considerable evidence that they were treated in discriminatory ways. Despite the double burden of not having large endowments or being able to charge more than modest tuitions, these colleges have been disproportionately effective in the enrollment and graduation of a large number and percentage of African American students (Drewry & Doermann, 2001). In effect, black colleges and universities are responsible for the education of the black middle class as we know it today. An often overlooked fact is that federal monies and private foundations of this era also support some higher education for Native Americans—whether as part of campuses such as Virginia’s Hampton Institute or at distinct institutions such as California’s Sherman School for Indians, Pennsylvania’s famous Carlisle School for Indians (Jenkins, 2007), or the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

The cumulative impact of the innovations and experiments in American higher education in the nineteenth century generated an interesting social change: by 1870, “going to college” had come to capture the American fancy. As one brash, ambitious (and perceptive) undergraduate candidly told
historian Henry Adams in 1871, “A degree from Harvard is worth money in Chicago” (Adams, 1918, pp. 305–306). More precisely, to be a “college man” or a “college woman” lifted one to a social standing that had prestige and “scarcity value” (Canby, 1936, pp. 25–26). About 1890, popular national magazines started to run profiles of selected colleges and universities as a regular feature.

University Building and More: 1880 to 1914

As higher education became more and more popular, the emergence of the modern university in America dominated press coverage. At one extreme, the ideal of advanced, rigorous scholarship and the necessary resources of research libraries, laboratories, and doctoral programs were epitomized by the great German universities. Emulating and transplanting the German model to the United States became the passion of The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Clark University in Massachusetts, and the University of Chicago. At the same time, a commitment to applied research and utility gained a following at the emerging land-grant institutions, ranging from the Midwestern, rural University of Wisconsin to the urban Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Between 1870 and 1910 America was the setting for a dramatic “university movement,” which created a hybrid type of institution undergirded by large-scale philanthropy and widespread construction of new campus buildings (Veysey, 1965). On balance, the building of great universities in America contributed to the advancement of cutting edge scholarship. At the same time, however, this “cutting edge” remained marginal to the central purpose of undergraduate education. Although the ideals of research and utility were conspicuous, they were tempered to varying degrees by the value traditionally placed on a liberal education and, often, on piety. The best evidence of this claim is that no American university, including the pioneering examples of Johns Hopkins and Clark, was able to survive without offering an undergraduate course of study. Furthermore, in contrast to higher education in the twenty-first century, American universities of 1910 remained relatively underdeveloped and small. Only a handful of institutions, such as the urban universities of Harvard, Columbia, and Pennsylvania, enrolled more than five thousand students.

Sponsored research and graduate programs were limited in size and resources. One of the more substantial achievements of the university-building era was the annexation of professional schools such as medicine, law, business, theology, pharmacy, and engineering into the academic structure of the university. Equally important, American undergraduates displayed ingenuity and perseverance by creating a robust extracurricular world of athletics, fraternities, sororities, campus newspapers, humor magazines, and clubs. These vied successfully for attention with the official curriculum. Observers likened the student culture to a “primitive brotherhood” or, drawing an analogy from political science, the campus was a “state within a state” (Canby, 1936, p. 245).
The strength of the undergraduate culture gained added support from a new entity: organized alumni associations, which created an alliance of old and new students who worked tirelessly to ensure that presidents and professors did not encroach on the precious traditions of undergraduate life.

**Higher Education after World War I: 1915 to 1945**

Historian David Levine (1986) charted the rise of American colleges and the concomitant “culture of aspiration” (p. 14) in the three decades between World Wars I and II. The most salient feature of this period was the stratification of American higher education into institutional layers, indicating that distinctions were drawn between prestige and purpose in pursuing a college education. The emergence of public junior colleges, an increase in state normal schools and teachers colleges, and the creation of new technical institutes all represented this trend (Diener, 1986; Levine, 1986). The great state universities of the Midwest and West finally started to fulfill the promise of the Morrill Act to serve the statewide public, with enrollment at typical large campuses reaching fifteen thousand to twenty-five thousand.

Perhaps the greatest puzzle facing American higher education in the early twentieth century is what may be termed the dilemma of diversity. Individuals at the most heterogeneous institutions often encountered the most glaring conflicts, hostilities, and discrimination within the campus life. Coeducation, for example, deserves to be hailed as a positive change in promoting equity and access for women. At the same time, however, such celebration needs to be tempered with careful historical analysis of how female students were actually treated once admitted. Gordon (1990) found that at the University of California, the University of Chicago, and Cornell, women undergraduates encountered discrimination academically and in student activities. A comparable pattern of discrimination occurred at those universities that enrolled ethnic, racial, and religious minorities. Historian Helen Horowitz (1987) traced the effects of this discrimination, noting how student subcultures developed over time, with “insider” groups tending to dominate the rewards and prestige of campus life. Conversely, Horowitz’s (1984) account of the founding of new women’s colleges from 1860 to 1930 suggests that special-purpose colleges provided distinctive educational benefits for their students and alumni.

In the 1920s some colleges enjoyed the luxury of choice. For the first time they had more applicants than student places, enabling administrators to implement selective admissions policies. They looked to testing programs of the United States military for models and inspirations of how to administer and process standardized tests. Ultimately the Educational Testing Service (ETS) was developed as an appendage of the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB). Creation and refinement of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (widely known as the “SAT”) gained stature and infamy among education-minded young Americans as a rite of passage from high school to college (Lehman, 2000). Unfortunately, these various admissions tools and practices were often
used to exclude some students on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, or other
criteria unrelated to academic merit (Karabel, 2005). Synnott’s (1979) study
of admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton suggested selective admissions
was at best a “half-opened door.” On balance, American higher education’s
capacity to provide access ran ahead of its ability to foster assimilation and par-
ity within the campus. The result was a complex dilemma for campus officials
and policy analysts: how to best serve minority groups and new participants in
higher education? More often than not, American higher education achieved
diversity through colleges dedicated to serve a special constituency, whether
defined by race, gender, or religious affiliation. Accommodation with segrega-
tion was in the American grain.

**Higher Education’s “Golden Age”: 1945 to 1970**

The dramatic changes in student recruitment after 1945 came from the fed-
eral government intent that the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, popularly
known as the GI Bill, provide a short-term measure by which the federal gov-
ernment could mitigate the pressure of simply allowing hundreds of thou-
sands of returning war veterans to become job seekers in a saturated national
labor market. The strategy was to make federal scholarships for postsecondary
education readily available to veterans. But the GI Bill had unexpected long-
term consequences: first, it was far more attractive than legislators anticipated;
second, it set a precedent for making portable government student aid into an
entitlement; and, third, it provided a policy tool for increasing the diversity of
students at American colleges and universities. In retrospect, the unexpected
successes of the bill also revealed some dysfunctions in the ideals of expand-
ed opportunity. First, even though thousands of women were veterans of war
service, they were disproportionately underrepresented as recipients of the
GI Bill’s benefits. Second, the bill’s well-intentioned provisions to provide GI
scholarship recipients with a wide range of choices of programs and institu-
tions exposed the lack of standards or accountability in matters of institutional
quality and legitimacy. This latter weakness opened the gates for regional
accreditation associations to provide legislators and taxpayers with some
reasonable thresholds of academic integrity among institutions approved to
receive federal scholarship funds. And third, the influx of new students on
many campuses, including black colleges and universities, resulted in great
stress on the physical plant of the campuses, causing institutions to create
make-shift classrooms and residence halls.

The popularity of the GI Bill underscored the importance of higher edu-
cation to the nation’s long-term adjustment to a new economy and postwar
democracy. A 1947 report authorized by President Harry S. Truman brought
to Congress and the American public the bold proposition of permanently
expanding access and affordability to higher education. This egalitarian
impulse coincided with effective lobbying for the expansion of government-
and foundation-sponsored research grants for scholars at universities. The
convergence of the two trends resulted in what has been called higher education’s “Golden Age,” one marked by an academic revolution in which colleges and universities acquired unprecedented influence in American society (Freeland, 1992; Jencks & Riesman, 1968). The new commuter institutions often enrolled a large percentage of “first-generation” college attendees; the consequence was that those students probably most in need of academic support and immersion were less likely to receive it (Brint & Karabel, 1989). It also pointed to signs of “tracking” in the American higher education system, because community colleges showed a student profile skewed disproportionately toward enrollment of African American and Hispanic students. At worst, this ease of admission at community colleges was followed by ease of departure, because community college students who were underprepared or unfamiliar with navigating academic institutions were at risk and tended to have a high drop-out rate.

Problems during a Time of Prosperity: The 1960s

Ironically, the prosperity of the 1960s actually created new problems for higher education. Freeland’s (1992) study of universities in Massachusetts during the years from 1945 to 1970 recounted an era of ruthless competition among colleges and universities, especially in the greater metropolitan Boston area, in pursuit of students, research grants, donors, and external funds. Most troubling for those concerned with the quality of undergraduate education was the strong temptation for all universities to use undergraduate enrollments as a convenient means of subsidizing new graduate programs and research institutes. In many states policy proposals included discussions between university officials and legislative subcommittees over teaching strategies.

The prestigious title used to describe the idealized institutions of the era was “multiversity,” which connoted what Kerr (1964) called the “federal grant university” (p. 46). These institutions consisted of a flagship campus with advanced-degree programs, whose enrollment usually exceeded twenty thousand students and whose budgets relied heavily on the “soft money” of external research and development projects funded by the federal government and private foundations. Despite the predominance of these schools, enrollments in other kinds of institutions—small independent colleges, religious colleges, private universities, community colleges, regional campuses, and technical institutes—were also healthy, often beyond enrollment capacity. As sociologist Burton Clark (1970) documented, at the same time that the multiversity gained prominence, the private distinctive liberal arts colleges also flourished. Curricular innovations at all of these types of institutions added honors programs and freshman seminars. Testimony to the strength of the “collegiate ideal” for American educators of the late twentieth century was that even the large public universities came full circle to ponder ways in which mass higher education might provide a modern equivalent of the old New England hilltop college. Kerr (1964) summed up the challenge for undergraduate
education at the prestigious, large state universities of the mid-1960s with the rhetorical question, “How do we make the university seem smaller as it grows larger?” (pp. 104–105). He then proceeded to answer his own query supporting an interesting innovation known as the “cluster college”—separate residential units within a large university that restored the colonial ideal of bringing living and learning together within an Oxbridge model of higher education transplanted to the late twentieth-century United States.

The history of higher education is often a story of unexpected consequences. For college and university administrators of the 1960s, the boom in construction and enrollments tended to mask problems and tensions among students that would emerge between 1963 and 1968 and violently erupt between 1968 and 1972. Two distinct yet related sources of undergraduate discontent existed. First, discontented students complained about large lecture classes, impersonal registration, crowded student housing, and the psychological distance between faculty members and students caused by the expanded size of campuses. Second, student concern about external political and societal events—notably the Vietnam War, the military draft, the counter-culture movement, and the civil rights movement—kindled a visible and eventually widespread student activism. This activism not only preoccupied but also strained the real and symbolic foundations of higher education, and it affected universities’ internal and external conduct.

### An Era of Adjustment and Accountability: 1970 to 1990

Years of student unrest contributed to several negative effects on American higher education, not the least of which was declining confidence on the part of state governments and other traditional sources of support. No longer did public officials assume that a university president or a dean of students could keep his or her “house in order.” By 1972 the federal government’s action emerged with large-scale entitlements for student financial aid—an alphabet soup of funding including Basic Educational Opportunity Grants (BEOG) (later known as Pell Grants) and the Supplementary Educational Opportunity Grants (SEOG). These generous programs embodied the ideal that affordability should not circumscribe students’ choices in making college plans. During the same years, new legislation prohibiting discrimination in educational programs via the 1972 federal Title IX allowed women and other underrepresented constituencies to gain access gradually yet persistently to academic fields such as business, law, medicine, and a host of PhD programs. By 1990, Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act had further encouraged diversity and access by providing guidelines and advocacy for students with disabilities who sought admission to higher education institutions.

The early 1980s was a period in which a succession of commission reports, including *A Nation at Risk*, criticized American public education as uncertain and incoherent. Initially the focus was on primary and secondary schooling—a focus that gave higher education a temporary reprieve. However, this changed
in 1984 when the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education (sponsored by the National Institute of Education) released its report, Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education. Its call for scrutiny and reform in higher education was reinforced by numerous other reports, especially periodic studies on the college curriculum, the college as a community, and reconsideration of scholarship that the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching published under the leadership of Ernest Boyer. Consequently, by 1985 colleges and universities, especially public institutions, were increasingly expected by governors and state legislators to demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness. One state strategy was to tie a portion of state appropriations to performance measures as part of a larger assessment movement that caught on in numerous states, including Tennessee, Arizona, Kentucky, and New York.

The problems were real, and the concerns were warranted, but American higher education demonstrated a great deal of innovation and resiliency. Enrollment declines were muted as colleges recruited new constituents, including older students and more students from traditionally underserved groups such as women and minorities. Campus administration underwent a managerial revolution in two ways. First, administrators increasingly relied on systematic data analysis from national and institutional sources, which helped them make informed decisions that promoted budget accountability. Second, new government-incentive programs prompted colleges to shift resources to marketing, fund-raising, and student recruitment in order to seek and retain new student constituencies—and to develop new programs to serve them.

History, however, always includes seasonal changes, and ultimately American colleges and universities could not evade financial problems. By 1990, reports from virtually every governor’s office in the country indicated severe shortfalls in state revenues in addition to other sustained indications of a depressed economy. At the same time, federal support for university-based research tapered, making even the most prestigious universities vulnerable to budgetary problems and cutbacks. If an apt motto existed for the situation facing higher education in the final decade of the twentieth century, it was the admonition, “Do more with less.”

The Twentieth to the Twenty-First Century, 1990 to 2015

Between 1990 and 2000 most colleges and universities were prosperous and had robust enrollments that erased the harsh memories of declining state appropriations and dismal endowment portfolios of 1989. K. Patricia Cross (1981), a pioneering dean of students and renowned researcher, forewarned her colleagues of the presence of a generation of “new learners” and of another constituency, “adults as learners.” Developments at the end of the twentieth century reaffirmed her research findings and projections from the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, even though parents and institutions
enjoyed prosperity in the 1990s, concerns about rising college costs and their subsequent high prices persisted (Ehrenberg, 2000). Vice presidents and deans of student affairs had to face the fact that the services for which they were responsible accounted for a substantial portion of rising college costs. Whatever luxuries American higher education of the 1950s or 1960s claimed, closer inspection finds them modest and frugal in comparison to contemporary expectations with regard to such obvious services as career planning, campus security, residence hall wiring to accommodate computers, health and wellness programs, and numerous new, expanded programs and facilities for students.

By 2000 the certainty and coherence of the undergraduate campus experience had been diffused and diluted. The diversity of students in American higher education eventually influenced the shape and structure of institutions. Also during this time, women became a decisive majority of student enrollments at numerous independent and public institutions. Nowhere was this change reflected more than in the character and composition of women’s intercollegiate athletics and other student activities. Despite some gains, it appears that even by 2008 women in coeducational institutions still received less than their fair share of resources and opportunities in all activities. Within the campus at several state universities data indicated that first-generation college students, including women and students of color, participated in student government and campus elections. This participation had resulted in the emergence of new leadership groups among students—and in some cases, signs of decline of the influence of traditionally powerful groups such as fraternities in campus-wide activities. Adults, often placed in the category of “nontraditional students,” continued to gain in numbers and as a percentage of enrollments at each and all levels of academic degree programs.

Some women’s colleges that had resisted the invitation to adopt coeducation in the 1970s now enjoyed a resurgence of enrollments and revitalization of their special missions and constituencies. Tribal colleges and universities, especially in the far West, gained autonomy and funding after numerous deliberations with state and federal governments. And, Hispanic-serving institutions, which were established under the Higher Education Act of 1965, grew at enormous rates—a reflection of the increasing presence of Latinos in the United States population (Gasman, Baez, & Turner, 2008).

Finally, American consumerism combined with technological advances to provide a generation of students with opportunities to study via distance-learning courses, Internet curricula, “virtual universities,” and off-campus sites. Each and all of these could be mixed and matched in conjunction with the traditional residential campus. These innovations led nontraditional students, especially adults, to show inordinate interest in a new segment of postsecondary education—the for-profit education sector. However, because the proprietary institutions acquired eligibility for federal student financial aid, combined with their enterprising use of new electronic technologies, they became a substantial force within the ranks of degree-granting institutions nationwide.
Conclusion

Any attempt to present a brief survey of American higher education over four centuries risks superficiality. A good resolution to carry away is to see the history of American colleges and universities less as a compendium of facts and more as a description of the lively process by which each generation of college students, administrators, donors, and legislators has wrestled with the issue of who shall be educated and how. Clark (1970), for example, developed the notion of a “campus saga” to explain how some colleges acquired over time a sense of heritage and mission that they effectively transmit to new students, administrators, faculty members, as well as alumni. Much work remains to be done in order to apply Clark’s concept to numerous understudied and unexamined community colleges, colleges, and universities. Intensive case studies of individual institutions are a good way for higher education professionals to make sense of their own experience and campus in terms of preceding generations and national trends.

This issue usually is played out in the media for students and their families with the rhetorical question, “Why does college cost so much?” Although this concern probably refers to all aspects of college and university operations, it has particular significance for this book because of its inordinate presence in the expenses associated with expanding a wide range of student services and support systems. According to a series of reports from the Delta Cost Project sponsored by the American Institutes of Research (AIR) in 2010 and 2012, most colleges and universities in all categories show a steadily increasing problem of various revenue streams not keeping pace with annual expenditures. Usually this means that students have been expected to bear an increasing proportion of this burden, as demonstrated through tuition charges that have risen annually more than various price indices (Desrochers & Wellman, 2010; Hurlburt & Kirshstein, 2012).

College student life and the numerous activities and services associated with it are part of this renegotiation because many of the professionals and services in this broad area cross boundaries. It is not always clear or consistent, for example, whether a study skills center falls under the auspices of an academic dean or, perhaps, is hosted and staffed by the vice president for student affairs. These permutations reflect a growing trend in recent years for the extracurricular activities often to be redefined and renamed as being “cocurricular.”

Not surprisingly, most colleges and universities show great and growing concern about those offerings that tend to attract and retain academically able, motivated undergraduates who one hopes will complete their degrees in a timely manner. In fact, luxuries are outliers and even when they take place, they do not explain the larger, more serious question of institutional investment in learning—and where money comes from and then where money goes. A more thoughtful analysis comes from Scott Carlson, a feature writer for The Chronicle of Higher Education, whose summer 2014 lengthy analysis of spending on student services provides genuine insights into the prospects and problems many colleges face—and will continue to face in the twenty-first century.
Carlson (2014) found that the keen competition to increase the number of applications and then to enroll students has had a differential impact on a particular group of institutions, namely, those that are located in geographically isolated areas and that tend not to have the great financial and historic reservoirs of reputation in trying to attract good students. Translated into budgetary terms and decisions, this means that spending on a student center, recreation center, career planning office, and offering a generous slate of varsity teams is seen as an imperative. It means that residence life cannot run the risk of offering the austerity and obsolete technology of decades-old dormitories.

Hence, at every turn, the well-intentioned race to remain attractive and competitive tends to drive up spending—especially in student services and facilities. This is going to be the widespread situation facing colleges and universities—a peculiar, particular legacy of consumerism in the present and future era of highly sophisticated and high expectations, which students—and their parents—bring to the central matter of college choice. A college’s decision to provide more services and facilities for students also raises the difficult question of whether such innovations are enhancing a college experience or simply making students more comfortable and entitled (Hoover, 2014).

The sobering, undeniable fact of institutional life is that it is a situation that most likely will increase the chasm between “haves” and “have-nots” among colleges and universities in an arms race that does not always acknowledge let alone reward the thoughtfulness and dedication of faculty and staff members to teaching and learning for students. This is a living tradition that truly connects past and present in American higher education’s perennial quest to attract and serve students.

Discussion Questions

Identify a college or university with which you have had first-hand experience. It could be your undergraduate alma mater, perhaps your graduate school, or a campus where you have worked.

1. How does this living history shape the organizational life and culture in the present?
2. How might the campus saga be revised and reconsidered over time?
3. What are the distinctive legends and heroic events from the past that have helped shape or define this campus today to create its institutional saga?

References


