Hugh Hawkins

The Making of the Liberal Arts College Identity

FOUNDED AS A NORMAL SCHOOL and serving later as a teachers college, North Adams State College lobbied successfully in 1997 to be renamed "Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts." The institution's leaders sought inclusion in a well-established category of higher education, one that is peculiarly American. The institutional identity of a "liberal arts college," however, has emerged only after some painful vicissitudes.

In undertaking a survey of those ups and downs I am well aware that educational history, however delightful to its practitioners, gives no close guidance in policy decisions. There is nevertheless comfort in knowing of earlier administrators, teachers, and students who faced uncertainties. This is not to say that their responses will apply today; still, a historically contextualized approach is likely to be healthily tentative, with more respect for alternatives and imponderables and an awareness of the strange interlacings of persistence and change.

NEW VARIETIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the United States of the mid-nineteenth century, no one was deeply concerned about a specific meaning for "college." Every frontier community, it sometimes seemed, wanted one and state legislatures issued charters without asking hard questions. An "academy" and a "college" often competed for the same students and offered the same subjects. Although the name "university" was usually associated with a single institution that

---

Hugh Hawkins is Professor of History and American Studies at Amherst College.

was the capstone for education in a state and somewhat more of a state obligation than other educational institutions, there were conspicuous exceptions. In spite of the vindication of continuing charter privileges in the Dartmouth College case of 1819, the distinction between "private" and "public" institutions remained hazy. A college with enough influence in the legislature could get not just a charter but supporting grants, often in the form of land.[1]

Observers with European experience might find fault with the untidiness of it all. At England's Oxford and Cambridge, a college was a residential unit that performed teaching functions but lacked degree-granting authority. In Germany, the gymnasium prepared students for entrance into a "university," where they at once chose a specialized "faculty"—philosophy, theology, medicine, or law. French education at all levels still functioned under the highly standardized system instituted by Napoleon I, with ultimate authority assigned to the minister of public instruction.

Though they were to grow much more intense by mid-century, as early as the 1820s calls for a more utilitarian approach questioned the customary required curriculum with its emphasis on ancient languages and mathematics. Nowhere were these challenges as thoughtfully addressed as at Yale, where paired reports drawn up by faculty and trustees defended Yale's "impractical" course of study. The heart of the document declared:

> The two great points to be gained in intellectual culture, are the discipline and the furniture of the mind; expanding its powers, and storing it with knowledge. The former of these is, perhaps, the more important of the two. . . . No one feature in a system of intellectual education, is of greater moment than such an arrangement of duties and motives, as will most effectually throw the student upon the resources of his own mind. . . . The scholar must form himself, by his own exertions. . . . We doubt whether the powers of the mind can be developed, in their fairest proportions, by studying languages alone, or mathematics alone, or natural or political science alone.[2]

Strong, artful words. But this rationale of 1828, though often cited and quoted, did not convince all academic leaders. Colleges began adding "partial" and "parallel" courses that let students avoid classical languages and study more science, though these programs did not lead to the prestigious B.A. degree.

Portentous of things to come, in the 1850s the University of Michigan, under a German-inspired president, offered training to graduate students and gave an earned advanced degree (unlike the familiar, virtually automatic, "in course" M.A.). Further evidence of educational ferment came with the creation of Farmers' High School, which soon gave a bachelor's degree and was renamed the Agricultural College of Pennsylvania. Like Peoples' College in New York, it expressed the irritation of practical folks with the elitist limitations of existing colleges, a dissatisfaction reflected also in the founding of technological schools that took the name "institute."

Even though President James Buchanan had recently justified vetoing a similar bill partly on the grounds that it was prejudicial to existing colleges, passage of the Morrill Act in 1862 brought little reaction from educators. The act provided federal land grants for support in each state of at least one institution where the leading object was "to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts," but "without excluding other scientific and classical studies." Supporters of the infant agriculture schools might have rejoiced, but presidents of the classical colleges did not at first see the new institutions as serious rivals. By 1890, however, when the Second Morrill Act provided for continuing annual federal support for the "A&Ms," small colleges struggling for adequate enrollment began to think themselves unfairly disadvantaged.[3]

Another alternative institution was well defined by the 1890s. "Universities" now differentiated themselves from "mere colleges." After the granting of the first American Ph.D.'s—by Yale in 1861 and Harvard in 1873—came the opening in 1876 of Johns Hopkins University, with research and graduate study as its central purpose. By 1892, the revived University of Chicago proposed to compete with the most advanced universities of Europe. If universities that included liberal arts programs for the bachelor's degree were to be the academic apex, then the "mere colleges" needed to find a clear rationale for their existence and to reconsider their claims to preeminence in the American educational world.

The colleges' intimate connection with religion seemed for some time to offer a firm bulwark. Besides the Congregational-Presbyterian alliance to christianize the West by (among various means) founding colleges, other denominations sought to sponsor at least one college in each state. Such foundings continued apace in the post–Civil War years. These multiplying institutions maintained that they deserved support as Christian communities. They helped questioning youth find faith, trained ministers and missionaries, and kept the children of believers true to the family's denomination (though welcoming others, since potential students were scarce). Colleges also relied on local or regional loyalties. Often their location traced back to an initial town subsidy. Their presence represented civilization, and supporting them let local elites claim a more elevated social function than just raw economic development.

The heightened self-awareness of colleges helps explain a new stress on their role as preservers and purveyors of something called "the liberal arts." If not unique in this task, at least they could claim to be the institution most deeply dedicated to that ideal. Might there not be a way to define the liberal arts that gave a special role to the colleges? Technology and engineering, studies that emphasized things rather than ideas, had no place in the liberal arts colleges. Though supportive of the study of nature (the work of the Almighty), they subordinated it to religion and ethics. No course was more important than moral philosophy, usually taught by the president to all seniors. Graduates, it was asserted, left college with a Christian worldview and standards to guide them through life.

From the more ambitious "universities" the colleges could distinguish themselves by remaining undistracted by specialized studies, studies alleged to be narrowing, even inhumane. Contributing to the growth of new knowledge was less important than conveying to promising members of the rising generation what Matthew Arnold described as "the best which has been thought and said in the world." The human products of such education would take their places among the "cultured" and be prepared for positions of leadership in civil affairs.

Bruce Kimball's study of the liberal arts idea from antiquity to the present distinguishes between the orator tradition (as in the Ciceronian emphasis on civic duty) and the philosopher tradition (as in the Socratic emphasis on questioning).[4] This contrast, which is immensely useful to intellectual historians and encourages a refreshing skepticism about alleged etymologies, is nevertheless one that college spokesmen skated between or found ways to blend into a list of goals. To the extent that their rhetoric can be pinned down, nineteenth-century college representatives preferred the orator tradition, and increasingly so as college revivals and conversions declined in frequency. Here was a substitute for the religious dedication that had often motivated the founders; here was a counter to both the utilitarianism of the technology schools and the claims of "new truths" made by the universities. One heard more and more about "character," "the well-rounded man," and "social service."

The critique from the universities was sometimes gentle. Daniel C. Gilman, president of Johns Hopkins, declared that colleges' preparation of students through the baccalaureate course was a boon to his institution. Hopkins deemphasized its own undergraduate program and insisted that candidates for the Ph.D. already have their bachelor's degree, setting the same entrance standard for M.D. candidates. The latter requirement was unique in the 1890s, but even universities that demanded two years of college before admission to their medical and law schools helped colleges attract students. Leaders of the professions began to stress the need for collegiate preparation, well aware of the potential gains in status and income if qualifications were made more rigorous.

Harvard's Charles W. Eliot was less charitable than Gilman. Scoffing at colleges' claims to produce "well-rounded" graduates, he recommended analogizing the educated mind with a cutting-tool or a drill. As for the religious claims of colleges, those suggested to him narrowness and prejudice. It was "impossible to found a university on a sect," he announced. He was especially hard on the Jesuit colleges' curriculum, which he extravagantly judged to have "remained almost unchanged for four hundred years." In a sharp exchange with President Charles A. Blanchard of Wheaton College in Illinois, Eliot disparaged church colleges as obstructing students' access to the fullest and most stimulating education. For his part, Blanchard called for "a multitude of Colleges widely dispersed," where instructors "who do not worship God" would not "instruct the children of men and women who do." Blanchard also attacked Harvard's elective system for encouraging premature specialization and spiritual decay. Harvard, of course, prided itself on pioneering this system, which widened from the 1860s on until in 1899 nothing was required but English and a foreign language in the freshman year. This "system of liberty," Eliot claimed, allowed all students but the hopelessly shallow to find an interest that released their greatest potential. Confinement to required courses, even in the first years of college, was stultifying.[5]

Since small colleges could not afford to hire the additional faculty electivism required, they sought to vindicate a more limited curriculum. Here they received help from some professors within the proud new universities. Princeton's Woodrow Wilson warned against "the scientific conception of books and the past." Harvard's Irving Babbitt found the free exercise of student choice a dubious development if one valued, as he did, the humanistic tradition with its allegiance to standards, accumulated wisdom, and balance. But besides claiming to provide "that without which no one can be an educated person," some college spokesmen renewed the case for mental discipline. Latin and mathematics should be required because they had proven ability to strengthen the mental faculties. Perhaps Latin and mathematics were not unique in this capacity, but in any case, the faculty as a body was better positioned than students to declare which studies offered genuine intellectual exercise. Allowed free choice, the argument went, students would select the easy courses, or the entertaining ones, or, if they could find them, those that were both.[6]

But none of these prescriptions—not readying students for graduate study, nor the cultural elevation urged by the humanists, nor the strengthening of mental functions—offered panaceas for ailing colleges. In the early 1880s, the presidents of Dartmouth, Hamilton, and Union, who too vigorously played the patriarchal role, something essential to the early colleges, found themselves labeled as anachronisms and placed on trial by the trustees after student and faculty complaints.[7] It was at about this time that clerical influence among trustees began to shrink, and the boards increasingly included successful lay alumni, most of them with urban careers.[8]

In a perceptive study of four mid-Atlantic institutions, W. Bruce Leslie has shown their gradual development of a collegiate culture that had become dominant by the time of World War I. This culture included eliminating preparatory departments, becoming more age specific, relaxing curricular requirements, downplaying religion, and encouraging a vigorous extracurriculum with sports competition at its center. More often than not, these colleges were coeducational. The new collegiate pattern included loosened denominational, ethnic, and local ties and sought students more widely, though colleges still did not welcome blacks, Catholics, or Jews. The first two groups were assumed to be happier "among their own kind," and the last was reputed to corrupt the collegiate atmosphere by being too aggressively studious. In short, the product of these colleges was to be a Protestant gentleman, economically successful and socially adept, one who could answer with confidence the question "What is your alma mater?"[9]

To a considerable extent the same ideal was set for women students at coeducational institutions, though with less expectation of economic achievement or social leadership. The separate colleges for women, especially those founded after the Civil War, such as Wellesley and Smith, attracted students and benefactors partly because of parental caution and partly because women's colleges could combine intellectual challenge with special attention to female self-assertion. Women's colleges were one of the few places where women could pursue intellectual careers, and the faculty sought to inspire confidence in their students that they were as intelligent as men and more insightful into the evils of industrial society. In the social settlement movement, college women took the lead.[10]

Leslie's chapter title "The Age of the College" points to the largely successful effort to form a new institutional identity between 1880 and 1917, but from the standpoint of academic influence and social power, the era has been properly labeled "The Age of the University." In fact, one of his four selected institutions, Princeton, did become a university during this period in both form and name (though it did not develop a medical or law school). Another, Bucknell, continued to offer undergraduate vocational programs even as it claimed to be a "liberal arts college." This duality of function came to characterize another variant that emerged during these years, especially in the cities—the "comprehensive service university," an institution that gradually increased its attractiveness as an alternative to the small residential college.

DEMONSTRATING THE SPECIALNESS OF LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES, 1900–1940

Near the turn of the century, national organizations were forming among self-consciously categorized institutions of higher education, a step liberal arts colleges were slow to take. The Morrill land-grant colleges created a national group in 1887 and began a fruitful career of lobbying Congress. A less-active association of state universities followed in 1895. A third organization, the Association of American Universities (AAU), in 1900 identified its members (originally only fourteen) as those with worthy doctoral programs. It tried with some success to squelch colleges that granted low-quality Ph.D. degrees. Some of these offenders were indeed diploma mills, but others were respectable colleges, stretching a point to enhance the reputation of a faculty member or reward a recent graduate who remained on campus for further study. When the AAU found that European universities were rejecting the undergraduate credits of any student not trained at an AAU member institution, the organization began paternalistically to issue a list of "approved" colleges, those whose alumni were regularly accepted for entrance into graduate work by AAU members. The sternly limited list that initiated the program in 1913 embarrassed the omitted colleges. It was gradually expanded, and for a time inspection of candidate institutions constituted the AAU's major activity.[11]

Even as they moved toward the new collegiate model, colleges had plenty of reason to be worried. Academic leaders like John W. Burgess of Columbia and William Rainey Harper of the University of Chicago had been suggesting that small colleges might do well to shrink to two-year institutions—leaving all advanced work for the B.A. to the universities—or even to disappear, squeezed out between universities and enhanced secondary schools. For several decades denominations had supported their colleges through national boards, with the Methodists being particularly active in such oversight. But by 1915 a group of college presidents, notably Robert L. Kelly of Earlham, decided on a more ambitious undertaking. They formed the Association of American Colleges (AAC), which was an outgrowth of a loose confederation of church boards of education but also included non-church-related institutions. The shift was timely. Various forces were loosening ties between colleges and churches, not least the restriction to "nonsectarian" institutions that was attached to the professorial pensions offered by the new Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

A clear defensive strategy marked the AAC's effort to regularize the definition of a liberal arts college, with an early AAC committee spelling out the minimum criteria for membership and setting higher preferred standards. The association asked the United States commissioner of education to drop the label "sectarian" and distinguish between "church-controlled" and "church-affiliated," and it urged legislatures to block the creation of "institutions with vastly inferior standards." Still, the AAC's efforts were modest compared to the Carnegie Foundation's push to regularize colleges by issuing lists of those with adequate faculty, endowment, and admission standards. In practice the AAC rarely rejected an applicant for membership; still, its promotion of the liberal arts helped those making the case for the four-year college as a clearly identified stage in the formal pursuit of learning, one that provided the sine qua non for those hoping to become "educated persons."

Among the multiple voices within the AAC those stressing intellectual development were only part of the mix. However, two college leaders who first found an audience shortly before the AAC's emergence gained persisting influence as advocates of intellect. Alexander Meiklejohn, dean at Brown and then president of Amherst, attacked the slogans of "efficiency" and "social service," maintaining that "the primary function of the American college is the arousing of interests." The founding president of Reed, William T. Foster, helped create an institution that abjured intercollegiate sports and fraternities and required all seniors to write a thesis. Both objected to the vapid utterances of some who urged the offering of more "culture courses."[12]

The years between the two world wars saw a widening of the distance between universities and liberal arts colleges. An influx of students made universities even larger (seven thousand in 1920 at the University of Wisconsin, ten thousand a decade later), a development welcomed by university administrators seeking legislative support or gains in tuition income, but one that further opened their institutions to charges of impersonality and a lack of distinctive mission. Colleges reasserted their conviction that small size encouraged a healthy sense of community, that they could attend to a student's all-around development (mind, body, and spirit comprised the usual formula), and that college faculty were dedicated teachers not seduced by the mystique of research. Four years with one's age cohort in a physically attractive setting, usually nonurban, promised a life-enhancing self-development.[13]

In the 1920s "selective" colleges could use the new popularity of higher education to adopt a strategy of recruiting widely while limiting enrollment and raising tuition. Some colleges declared themselves to be "small but national," and admission officers or committees could see to it that only suitable companions for their largely middle-class clientele were admitted. The standard of "character" became a sifting device to keep out the grubby, and regional quotas that produced "geographical diversity" could help limit the proportion of "New Yorkers" (or whatever the euphemism was for Jewish applicants). In time, requesting a photograph or the mother's maiden name aided in selecting the desired "qualified student."[14]

Those admitted could look forward to congenial pastimes and opportunities to meet altogether suitable candidates for matrimony. If they wanted to cross social class lines, then a stint in a college-sponsored settlement house might serve. Whereas once women students had been regarded as the most serious of all, seeking to prove their intellectual equality with men, now jokes abounded, such as the one about seeking not the degree of B.A. but of "M.R.S." The pleasure and the prestige of college attendance figured in different proportions among prospective students and their parents, but the combination of these motives surely helped increase enrollment. Political ambition might be better served by going to the state university, but for other forms of "leadership" the small colleges were increasingly the choice of upper-middle-class youth. Ways of showing advanced literacy had changed, but they still mattered in cultivated company. Where once college graduates had been equipped to insert Latin phrases into their conversation, now they could quote a line of Wordsworth or T. S. Eliot.

Briefly after World War I groups that overlapped the AAC membership hoped to reinvigorate the religious emphasis within colleges. Although the pan-Protestant Interchurch World Movement collapsed, the Council of Church Boards of Education continued to be active. Goshen College and other evangelical institutions maintained a strong religious ethos, as did Catholic men's and women's colleges, the number of the latter rising sharply in the 1920s. Elsewhere, the YMCA and YWCA played useful roles as activity centers (sometimes, indeed, altruistic activity), but the collegiate religious atmosphere bore little resemblance to the revivalism and missionary zeal of the mid-nineteenth century. As for required chapel services, they disappeared at Yale after a student campaign for abolition, and some colleges followed suit. Where chapel survived, it usually became briefer, less frequent, and less overtly religious. Still, the image of the "godless university" continued to enhance the case for attendance at a small college, and the term "church-related" allowed for a religious aura without any implication of coercion or proselytizing.[15]

Novels and magazine stories about taboo-breaking students (*This Side of Paradise* set the trend) and ominous connotations to the new term "flapper" made smaller colleges attractive to worried parents. Colleges' rules for student conduct could be stricter than those of universities, or, if no different, better enforced. But student rebelliousness could surface at the small institutions also. At Fisk in Nashville, then known as a "Negro" college, the students successfully battled rules that banned dating and football and so brought their school closer to the dominant liberal arts college model.[16]

The thirties differed, of course, from the twenties. There was less spending money, less frivolity, more concern about economic issues and the danger of another war. In the early depression years enrollments dropped and endowments lost earning power. Some colleges had to close, but a larger number entered into mergers, a step especially notable among church-related colleges and applauded as a corrective for excessive competition, even within the same denomination. When enrollment figures rose, the colleges did proportionally better than the universities. Paid work through the National Youth Administration helped students stay in school, and with few jobs outside the schools, nothing was lost by prolonging one's education. One ambitious youth who found his way to a small college linked to his denomination was Ronald Reagan (Eureka, class of 1932). Others found it necessary to live at home and attend the closest institution, which for Richard Nixon (Whittier, class of 1934) meant a college suiting his family's Quakerism. In contrast, Alfred Kazin took the subway from his family's Brooklyn home to populous City College, where secularism and radicalism set the tone.[17]

One problem for small colleges was that universities typically included a "college of arts and sciences" devoted to the needs of undergraduates seeking a liberal education. These "university colleges" tended to attract more public attention than most colleges could hope for, and not just by dominating the sports pages. They drew praise in educational circles for curricular innovations, such as concentration-distribution requirements at Harvard and the contemporary civilization course at Columbia (developed out of the war issues course). Although denied the renown of being the originating institutions, colleges could readily imitate such programs; an honors system, including tutorials, comprehensive examinations, and senior theses, gave Swarthmore a lasting reputation for challenging bright students to move beyond traditional "college life." Swarthmore's president, Frank Aydelotte, a former Rhodes scholar who insisted that Swarthmore could be both democratic and elitist, became widely known as a spokesman for new possibilities in undergraduate education.[18]

NEW CONFIDENCE, NEW CHALLENGES, 1940–1970

As during the previous war, higher education joined vigorously in the nation's drive for victory in World War II. The desire for national survival and the defeat of a fascist enemy were leading motivations, but there was also the very practical consideration that government training programs could help compensate for the debilitating loss of regular male students of draft age. The nearly four years of World War II allowed time for postwar planning, and various local and national committees explored how to take advantage of the war-related disruptions. Might language teaching be improved by the immersion techniques used by the military? Should the closed fraternities be allowed to reopen? Was credit for nonacademic experience appropriate? Salient in these explorations was the advocacy of "general-education" programs developed in the 1920s and 1930s, notably one at the University of Chicago. The repeated discussions of how "general education" differed from "liberal education" usually concluded that general education was introductory, preliminary to more specialized studies that still qualified as liberal. Typically, the new programs would include a "core curriculum" requiring distribution across divisions or even specific courses. Among other benefits of general education, defenders cited the creation of a community of shared knowledge, the preservation of the Western cultural tradition, and exposure to scientific thinking. The programs were widely adopted in the postwar years, though they often prompted complaints about the shallowness of survey courses and the coercion involved for both students and teachers. Was this really part of liberal education, or was it remedial work required because of inadequate secondary schools?

Some of the problems of general-education programs sprang from the sharp increase in college attendance after the war. Almost no one had foreseen how many veterans would take advantage of the educational opportunities offered by the GI Bill of Rights, and some academic leaders openly dreaded an influx of ill-prepared students. But for colleges that had suffered from a paucity of applicants the sudden increase in aspiring students with government funds behind them was good news. Besides, the veterans could bring a fresh perspective to some of the staid liberal arts. Although veteran enrollments declined after the peak year of 1947, the percent of college-age students pursuing formal education kept rising at a rate that justified an enlarged physical plant and new faculty hirings even at the sleepier institutions. Although the big federal research grants went to universities, colleges shared in federal housing funds that could be devoted to dormitories. As swelling enrollments inspired the founding of new institutions, branches of state universities, urban comprehensive universities, and community colleges were the usual newcomers. Rarely were new liberal arts colleges established. One that did survive and grow was Evangel College, founded in 1955 by the Assemblies of God. Eisenhower College, which was founded in 1968 with an illustrious name but lacking a church affiliation, a traditional reputation, and organized alumni, eventually met with failure.

One source of the rising enrollment figures was a changing attitude toward who should go to college. The democratic ideology of the war and the horrors of Nazi racism raised doubts about the kind of selectivity practiced in higher education, notably in certain private colleges. The Zook Commission (the President's Commission on Higher Education, appointed by Truman in 1946) declared that higher education should no longer limit itself to "producing an intellectual elite" and that nearly half of the population were intellectually qualified to pursue higher education. It was recommended that economic, ethnic, and geographical barriers be lowered and the curriculum broadened. The report's plea for general education pronounced it "not sharply distinguished from liberal education," even though escaping the "original aristocratic intent" of the latter. Liberal arts colleges were torn between resentment at the implied criticism of undemocratic admission policies and curricula and the hope that a widened source of students would keep up enrollments. AAC debates revealed sharp disagreement over how seriously to take the commission's recommendations. Was community homogeneity likely to be damaged? Did the standards of a liberal education risk deterioration from new students insisting on a more immediate vocational payoff? Such concerns help explain the 1959 change of the stodgy name of the AAC's *Bulletin* to *Liberal Education*.[19]

Though not the slogan it was later to become, "diversity" did increase, even in colleges that retained ethnic or religious identifications. Jewish and Catholic students and faculty were increasingly visible at distinctively Protestant colleges. Less often, but still notably, African American students in token numbers appeared at once–"all white" colleges, and an occasional daring Caucasian would enroll at what (years later) would be known as a "historically black college." But this new openness was far from the most conspicuous characteristic of the postwar colleges. By the 1950s, with no new Great Depression in sight, prosperous times were breeding a student population that saw college as a way to prepare for the good life. Fraternities and sororities returned in full vigor. A familiar institutional rationale persisted: a liberal education prepared one for living, not for making a living. But the practices linked to that ideal multiplied and gained variety. A wider curriculum allowed explorations in the arts, study-abroad programs encouraged foreign travel, and the residential ambience offered models for gracious domesticity. Though their numbers were rising, women undergraduates as a percentage of college enrollment declined. Many married and dropped out, and those who graduated were less likely to seek advanced degrees. Observers worried about student conformity among both sexes and spoke of a silent generation. To some extent students were reflecting faculty attitudes. Cold War tensions, with fear of Soviet ambitions and rising McCarthyism, meant that faculty members were not likely to express their more radical ideas, even if they had not altogether given them up. The small-college setting could not protect from dismissal the Dickinson professor who claimed his Fifth Amendment rights before a Congressional committee. Some dismissed radicals found positions in small colleges for Negroes, but even there they were sometimes hunted down and forced out.[20]

In the numbers game liberal arts colleges were proportionally losing ground. By the mid-1950s they comprised about 40 percent of all institutions of higher education, enrolling about a quarter of all students. By 1970 these colleges were down to roughly one quarter of all institutions, dropping even further in their portion of the student enrollment—to about 8 percent.[21] Still, in the increasingly prosperous academic world of the 1950s, liberal arts colleges found causes for optimism. Four-year colleges in 1964 had an average enrollment of between 1,700 and 1,800, still safely below the university giantism that was said to cause loss of community and allow inferior teaching. Increased numbers of applications for admission enabled the more widely known colleges to become even more selective. Generally they used this opportunity to raise the intellectual level of the entering class and—gradually—to shape an ethnically more inclusive student body. The increasing number of students planning graduate education somewhat demeaned liberal education, identifying it as preparatory to more important professional training, but the trend also motivated students to work harder to earn an impressive transcript. Undeniably, university ideals of research and professional preparation were affecting the colleges. Faculty members were increasingly prone to replicate their graduate training in the courses they taught. Younger faculty who judged college teaching as a stepping stone to a university career were attentive to how they were regarded by their graduate-school mentors and looked for opportunities to present work at professional meetings.

The sixties, many historians maintain, began midway into the decade and ended only in the early 1970s. In any case, such a chronology usefully embraces two disparate developments for college students. First, through direct grants and loans to individual undergraduates, the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the Education Amendments of 1972 circumvented old arguments about the inappropriateness of federal support for private institutions and opened the floodgates to federal aid. Second, students starred in a series of uprisings against racism, against academic bureaucracy, and against the war in Vietnam. The media made much of these actions, and at one point polls found “student unrest” to be the leading issue among the public. The new federal money for students was not particularly conspicuous to the general public in an era of breakthrough legislation, but academic officials were well aware that institutional prospects had brightened. It was henceforth easier for them to increase charges to students, and soon students and parents were dealing routinely with "financial aid officers" to work out a package of aid, loans, and earnings that made higher education seem affordable. Faculty saw their salary scale rise, and the students they taught began to come from a somewhat wider range of economic backgrounds. Federal programs significantly benefited hard-pressed private colleges where salaries had lagged and where it had seemed necessary to admit students who, though untalented, could afford to pay. Of course, neither of these problems disappeared.

As to "student unrest," here a certain time lag affected the collegiate situation. It was Berkeley, Columbia, and other universities that saw the early strikes and building seizures that sometimes paralyzed academic activities. Still, colleges were not immune to student protest, just as their students were not immune to the appeals for racial justice, resistance to institutional regulations, and mobilization against the war. If not the superstars, some memorable student activists came from liberal arts colleges: Mary King from Ohio Wesleyan, Ruby Doris Smith from Spelman, and Bob Zellner from Huntingdon College. William Sloane Coffin, first at Williams and then at Yale, typified the college chaplain who could inspire students to risk challenging the status quo. The oft-claimed community atmosphere did sometimes make a difference, with moratoriums on classes voted by faculty to allow a campuswide discussion of issues. A sit-in in a president's office at a college was more likely to lead to a frank exchange than to arrests. Still, the colleges did not escape trauma. At Oberlin demonstrating students were teargassed, and at Swarthmore the president suffered a fatal heart attack in the midst of a campus protest.

Were there long-range benefits from the protest era? Most colleges would count as positive the widened economic and racial origins of students and the regularized participation of students in decision making. In the curriculum, general-education requirements often dropped away, and programs or departments in black studies set a trend that women and various ethnic groups later followed in search of curricular relevance and recognition. Gone at most colleges were compulsory physical education and chapel attendance, along with strict supervision of dormitory life. Separate January terms allowed participation in freewheeling courses or time away from campus. Among the new experimental colleges of the decade, most were to grow traditional, but the private Hampshire and the public Evergreen managed to survive and to institutionalize some of the era's ideals, by using student-created dossiers instead of transcripts, for instance, or encouraging student-designed courses. After the notorious sixties ended, however, many of these changes helped set the themes for external criticism.

AFTER THE SIXTIES: SOBRIETY AND MANAGERIALISM

Although the "selective" colleges had long thought of themselves as easily distinguishable from the "local" or "church" colleges, a movement set in after 1970 toward clearer classification. When the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) agreed that its published figures on faculty salaries and benefits should not lump four-year colleges with universities, a wave of protest spread through those colleges where salaries were often close to the higher university levels. Indeed, the publication of the AAUP statistics had been used by these faculties to increase salaries. Some colleges claimed that they could and should compete for students and faculty with even the leading universities. The AAUP relented and began to report separately on "Liberal Arts Colleges I." Soon thereafter major studies of higher education sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation and headed by Clark Kerr sought to categorize the postsecondary educational institutions, with their "three thousand futures." The result included a slightly euphemistic division of liberal arts colleges into "selective" and "less selective," with a careful explanation of the criteria used.

Of course the prestige order was infinitely more complicated, and colleges weak in one aspect might emphasize another—if not high average SAT scores among matriculants, then a junior year abroad program, if not a high proportion of Ph.D.-holders on the faculty, then a specialty in environmental studies. Was there institutional snobbery? Yes. Was there a sense of a shared enterprise in which colleges helped each other? Also yes. Regional groups of institutions, such as the Great Lakes Colleges, developed many avenues for mutual aid, including cross-enrollments and sharing of library resources. As the AAC expanded its central office and admitted increasing numbers of complex institutions (ultimately changing its name to the "Association of American Colleges and Universities"), various smaller gatherings of college leaders appeared. The so-called Annapolis Group brought together annually the presidents of fifty small residential liberal arts colleges, who purposely avoided organizational apparatus and limited themselves to discussions of shared problems as well as projects to address them.

It is hard to find the right name for what followed the sixties. Backlash, conservative reaction, hard times, times of troubles—none of these quite captures the danger to academic life and the need for sober attention to difficulties old and new. After its enrollment dropped 35 percent in six years, Beloit College in the late 1970s cut its faculty by one-third and instituted courses in "applied liberal arts," such as museum management. Overall, however, the long-predicted decline in student numbers was slow in coming; 1984 was the first year to see a drop in total higher-education enrollments. In part because the lower birthrate had forewarned of such a decline, institutions had undertaken various programs to attract "nontraditional" students. Generally this meant older students, most often women, but the new effort to admit "disadvantaged students" or "students of color," even when motivated by a sense of the social good, also helped fill classrooms. The same can be said of the shift of single-sex colleges to coeducation (a shift more widely seen among men's colleges, since many women's colleges continued to maintain that they filled a special need). The motive might be gender equality, but usually there was the benefit of a rise in the ratio of student tuition-payers to fixed costs. Fears that the "Reagan Revolution" would decimate federal aid programs proved exaggerated. The higher-education lobbyists in Washington, once rather ineffectual, had learned the ropes.

Slowly the solemn truth dawned that along with government aid went government regulations, and academic officials adapted to setting affirmative-action goals and equalizing salaries across gender lines. Although both racial and gender discrimination were subjects of court cases, the latter made more of the headlines.

After the Supreme Court ruled in the Grove City College case that federal aid to one program at a college did not entail bringing the entire institution under civil-rights regulation, Congress passed a new law to reverse the effects of the decision. Federal involvement was here to stay, and academic bureaucracy expanded to deal with it.

Administrative elaboration was an old story at universities, and part of the colleges' claim to specialness was that they escaped the bureaucratic octopus and could concentrate on the teacher-student encounter. Now, however, colleges found that they needed new officers for both external relations and internal order. Sometimes faculty members were happy to have a dean replace a committee. More often they complained about coercive application of rules and the swelling of the administrative part of the budget. Administrators were increasingly likely to be imported professionals with relevant advanced degrees rather than colleagues taking up deanly duties. Painfully for the presidents, faculty members increasingly regarded them as the head administrator rather than as *primus inter pares*. The cross-pressures on presidents from the colleges' various constituencies, which had always made for difficulties, now intensified. The length of presidential tenures declined; the thirty-four-year presidency of the beloved "Casey" Sills of Bowdoin now seemed like something from another age.[22] Managerial practices and language of the sort derided by Thorstein Veblen impaired the college's vaunted communal atmosphere. One heard of "cost accounting," "waste management," "mailouts," and even "throughput." Should admissions officers speak of "yield" and "pools"? Rhetoric professors might shake their heads, but as computers and computerese spread across campus, it seemed clear that the battle against jargon was lost.

Among the changes in which administrators, backed by trustees, took the lead was a higher bar to winning tenure. Whereas once a young faculty member who got along with colleagues and was liked by students had not needed to worry much about being "kept on," in the 1970s era of stagflation, with returns on endowment dropping and heating costs rising, junior faculty submitted to a sterner inspection. In the next decade, after a new federal law forbade forced retirement because of age, worries about institutions being overtenured deepened. The resulting tensions for younger faculty mocked claims to warm communality. Money was saved by turning to part-time and visiting faculty who had no claim to tenure consideration; for them, too, it was difficult to feel part of an academic "family" (as the term had once been).

Did evangelical colleges escape some of these problems? Did shared religious faith bind administrators, faculty, and students in a special way? It is hard to be sure. The big evangelical academic successes of the late twentieth century have been Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma and Liberty University in Virginia, large institutions created by fundamentalist charismatic leaders and enriched by television audiences. In 1988 only 1 percent of the operating costs of colleges claiming church connections came from churches. Calvin College survives, but the 167 private four-year colleges that disappeared between 1967 and 1990 included some that had once been the hopeful offspring of a denomination. Catholic women's colleges were especially undercut by rising costs and the declining appeal of single-sex institutions. Some simply closed, others merged with a nearby Catholic men's college. Among institutions of higher education, both the proportion of four-year colleges and the proportion of undergraduates attending them declined during the 1990s.

Amid new crises colleges could be surprisingly resilient. Alumni loyalties proved strong in fund drives, private foundations continued to judge education a deserving object of philanthropy, and gifts from business corporations did not always have strings attached. The more "private" an institution appeared, the more generously these three sources gave, sometimes because of a conviction that government influence in education was a dangerous thing. Perhaps, too, memories of college years were especially warm in a mobile nation where neighborhoods, hometowns, and corporate employers were increasingly seen as temporary, or perhaps the colleges had truly opened paths to a better life for which graduates were expressing thanks. At any rate, one branch of the expanded bureaucracy, increasingly expert, was dedicated to fund-raising. Whatever euphemistic name this branch operated under, it still entailed a bigger administration. But faculty members could hardly resent the resulting benefits to scholarship funds, salaries, research support, and classroom buildings.

Part of the post-sixties reaction focused on the curriculum, on increased electivism and course proliferation. Among the more publicized documents were an AAC committee report that deplored the "supermarket curriculum" and a study by Secretary of Education William Bennett that praised the loyalty to core courses in three distinctly "less selective" colleges.[23] A portent of many future books, Russell Kirk's *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning* assailed "Behemoth State University" and suggested small liberal arts colleges as a hope for restoring timeless values. He praised the approach of two Catholic colleges, Thomas Aquinas in California and Cardinal Newman in Missouri, as well as Gordon in Massachusetts, a Protestant institution.[24] But later, more widely read assaults on academe's student radicals and faculty relativists, notably Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, denounced "the university" without suggesting that small colleges might provide a healthy alternative. In truth, the most selective colleges generally shared the offending openness to curricular and behavioral freedom, but some did begin asking if curricular exfoliation and student choice might have gone too far. In one case, every course at Gustavus Adolphus College was challenged in a quo warranto proceeding in 1981. Some disappeared, and a required core was instituted.

For all the turmoil they had caused, it was hard not to recall the more idealistic young protesters with some favor, especially as later student generations turned sharply to self-interested and economically focused goals. Stagflation had raised questions about whether they would attain even the level of security and comfort of their parents, much less live out the American dream of generational upward mobility. But the glittering prizes of law firms and corporations had an appeal independent of hard-times worries. As enrollments in humanities departments declined, undergraduate business majors outstripped all others, reaching 16 percent by 1980. Elite colleges that did not offer such a major still found more and more corporate recruiters scheduling meetings on campus and telling those interested that the skills developed in a liberal arts education would prove highly useful in a business career—in fact, it was just those skills they were looking for. If after a stint at the firm the student wanted to go on to earn an M.B.A., there might be help with that. No one could recall when careerism had been so powerful in liberal arts colleges. "My folks want to know what I can do if I major in your department?" was a question often heard. Between 1970 and 1987, the proportion of entering students who embraced the goal of "being very well-off financially" rose from 39 to 76 percent. The trend thereafter reversed, however, and increasing numbers of new freshmen cited their desire to develop "a meaningful philosophy of life."[25]

* * *

Like any institution, liberal arts colleges in the United States have changed under the influence of their changing social environment. Like any academic institution, they have responded to alterations in accepted knowledge—more slowly than research institutes and universities, more rapidly than lower schools. Given weak central control, governmental or nongovernmental, liberal arts colleges have been able to vary from a standard model. A few have innovated rather adventurously, some have altered themselves in order to adapt to a particular setting or clientele, most have only grudgingly departed from inherited prescriptions. By the early 1900s and continuing through the century, the interested public has accepted a relatively firm meaning for "liberal arts college"—namely, a four-year institution of higher education, focusing its attention on candidates for the B.A. degree who are generally between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, an institution resistant to highly specific vocational preparation and insisting on a considerable breadth of studies. Motives for adherence to this ideal have included an understandable wish to justify institutional survival by claiming a unique identity. The most generous motive, however, has been the hope that liberal arts colleges will develop interests and capabilities that will enrich both the individual learner and future communities.

ENDNOTES

[1] Readers seeking a survey of all of American higher education over a longer period can consult John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition: A History of American Colleges and Universities, 1636–1968* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968); Christopher J. Lucas, *American Higher Education: A History* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994); or Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962). Two valuable recent works, more narrowly focused, are Richard M. Freeland, *Academia's Golden Age: Universities in Massachusetts, 1945–1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[2] "The Yale Report of 1828," in *American Higher Education: A Documentary History,* ed. Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 1:278–279.

[3] Edward Danforth Eddy, Jr., *Colleges for Our Land and Time: The Land-Grant Idea in American Education* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), esp. 32–33.

[4] Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators & Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 1986).

[5] Hugh Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America: The Educational Leadership of Charles W. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), esp. 88–91, 125–127, 187.

[6] Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), esp. 194–206.

[7] George E. Peterson, *The New England College in the Age of the University* (Amherst, Mass.: Amherst College Press, 1964), chap. 4.

[8] For an exemplary exploration of the shifting composition of boards of trustees, see David B. Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1831–1910: Collegiate Enterprise in New England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).

[9] W. Bruce Leslie, *Gentlemen and Scholars: College and Community in the "Age of the University," 1865–1917* (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

[10] Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 189–192. See also Lynn D. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

[11] This paragraph and the following two draw on Hugh Hawkins, *Banding Together: The Rise of National Associations in American Higher Education, 1887–1950* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

[12] Veysey, *Emergence of the American University*, 210–212.

[13] This paragraph and the next two draw on David O. Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration, 1915–1940* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986). On the "collegiate syndrome" at universities, see Roger L. Geiger, *To Advance Knowledge: The Growth of American Research Universities, 1900–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 115–139.

[14] Marcia Graham Synnott, *The Half-Opened Door: Discrimination and Admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, 1900–1970* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1979); Harold S. Wechsler, *The Qualified Student: A History of Selective College Admission in America* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1977).

[15] Here I draw broadly on *The Secularization of the Academy*, ed. George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and William C. Ringenberg, *The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1984).

[16] Paula S. Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) is usefully supplemented by Raymond Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus: Black College Rebellions of the 1920s* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975).

[17] Levine, *American College*, chap. 9.

[18] Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), esp. 230–231.

[19] Hawkins, *Banding Together*, chap. 8.

[20] Ellen W. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[21] For the difficulties of statistical exactitude regarding liberal arts colleges, see the essays in this issue by Alexander W. Astin and by Michael S. McPherson and Morton Owen Schapiro. See also Charles J. Anderson et al., comps., *Fact Book on Higher Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 138.

[22] On presidential challenges see Clark Kerr and Marian L. Gade, *The Many Lives of Academic Presidents: Time, Place and Character* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1986).

[23] *Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community* (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges, 1985); William J. Bennett, *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1984).

[24] Russell Kirk, *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning: An Episodic History of American University and College since 1953* (South Bend, Ind.: Gateway Editions, 1978).

[25] Eric L. Dey, Alexander W. Astin, and William S. Korn, *The American Freshman: Twenty-Five Year Trends, 1966–1990* (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, 1991), 23.

Overall, I think the future will see more differentiation among institutions of higher education, for some of the reasons noted above. The need to reexamine missions, to focus and adapt to these changing forces and circumstances, is imminent. This could be a very healthy scenario for the nation and for higher education as an enterprise. Certainly, having more institutions with differing missions, goals, and educational experiences will offer students of various backgrounds and ages more options for their education, and technology will allow a greater degree of commonality and uniformity across institutions. These positive outcomes will be enhanced if differences among institutions are not automatically translated into differences in quality and if excellence is accepted and judged in different ways for different institutions. Along similar lines, a healthy differentiation among institutions could be inhibited by attempts to apply a uniform set of criteria to measure institutions, as is happening in the growing number of such popular rankings of colleges and universities as *US News and World Report* and others.

Periods of great change can be unsettling and may be seen as threats or opportunities; higher education is not immune to these feelings. However, we have reason to be optimistic about the future of American higher education. One of the great strengths of our system of higher education has been its great diversity, not in terms of students on campuses, but in terms of the different types of institutions. As with any organism, the ability to adapt to change and evolve is proportionate to the complexity of the organism. American higher education is certainly diverse and also complex.

—Walter E. Massey
“Uncertainties in the
Changing Academic Profession”

from *Dædalus*, Fall 1997
“The American Academic Profession”