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Culture, Careers, and Knowledge:

The Traditions Shaping American Higher Education, 1636-1940

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This paper addresses the role of traditions in the evolution of American higher education from three perspectives. Empirical data is drawn from my forthcoming history of American higher education, from the founding of Harvard in 1636 to 1940.[i] This history was shaped by factors outside higher education that exerted powerful influences within, most importantly the effects of *culture, careers, and knowledge*. The influence of these phenomena is occasionally obvious, but more often subtly manifested in beliefs, expectations, and behavior. And these in turn spawn enduring traditions that directly affect the everyday existence of colleges and universities.

Culture and careers are basic components of social class, which is a much broader phenomenon. Sociologists have addressed class and education in terms of origins and destinations—where students come from socially and where graduates end up. Higher education is inherently connected with expectations about such destinations; it is the means to achieve social and economic aspirations. So, the issue arises: who attended American colleges, and why? The superficial answer is, mostly sons (and later daughters) from the upper range of middle-class families--specifically, families owning property, having some surplus wealth, and relatively high social standing, particularly in professional fields. Few students came from the propertyless lower class, chiefly because for most of this history such children lacked the education needed to prepare for admission. As for the truly wealthy upper class, they had other ways to access culture and little need for college, at least before the 20th century. American colleges were always open to capable middle-class youth who worked to attend or received some aid. And the large, rural middle class of farm owners always sent some sons to college. But the dominance of the professional upper-middle class is confirmed by complaints of exclusiveness from colonial days to the present. On the other hand, low participation rates—less than 3 percent before 1900—suggest that the small minority who went to college possessed special aptitudes and interests, regardless of social background. Despite the persistent social tilt, American college students were a fairly mixed bunch.

The liberal education that colleges offered was always a cultural artefact, from the 17th to the 21st century. This had important implications for the colleges. Knowledge was only loosely connected with the cultural value of college. “Learning,” has commanded enormous respect within higher education throughout its history. But advanced knowledge did not become integral to the curriculum until the academic revolution of the late 19th century, and was resisted by some even then. Earlier, the subject knowledge incorporated into a college course was almost arbitrary compared with knowledge recognized as having cultural value. Practical knowledge relevant to employment also remained largely

separate from college education before the late 19th century. Although reformers periodically sought to connect curricula with careers, their efforts almost always imagined or at best anticipated a demand for such instruction rather than responding to one.

Culture has thus played a critical role. Less tangible than the advancement of knowledge or education for careers, culture affected curricula, institutional mission, and student life. The interplay of these factors presents a kaleidoscope of changing patterns over the history of American higher education.

The establishment of Harvard and Yale during the Puritan Century (1630-1740) embodied a consensus among those communities over culture, careers, and knowledge. Cultural objectives were clearly uppermost—to inculcate the intensely religious worldview of Calvinist Puritanism, but also to educate gentlemen who would become the leaders in church and state. The only "career" existing in this society was that of minister, and most college students would have at least considered the ministry as a potential destination. But the colleges did not train ministers, at least not as undergraduates. Ministers had to be educated men, who could explain and interpret worldly events as well as religion to their congregations. This was accomplished with the traditional "Arts" course, a legacy of medieval universities imported from contemporary Oxford and Cambridge. However, worldly knowledge was a small component of the course. Besides infusing all activities with puritan religiosity and perfecting linguistic competence in Latin and (some) Greek, the Arts course chiefly emphasized speaking skills—disputations to hone logic for argumentation and declamations to practice rhetoric. Secular knowledge still drew heavily from the philosophies of Aristotle and was neither accurate nor useful. Liberal education thus prepared graduates for the status of gentlemen, chiefly by the combination of these elements. Graduates acquired knowledge of the world, such as it was, literacy in the language of learning (Latin), capability for public speaking, and social manners imbued by collegiate living. This was a valuable skill set, whether or not one chose to join the ministry, since it prepared for a variety of life tasks among the upper ranks of hierarchical colonial society. Hence it needed little adjustment even as fewer graduates entered the ministry.

The Enlightenment undermined the knowledge base of the old Arts course. The curriculum had to be altered to encompass the Newtonian cosmos, but the implications drawn from this worldview had a greater impact. New conceptions of Reason and Nature gave rise to natural religion, virtually the antithesis of puritan theology. The Calvinists struggled to retain control of the colleges in order to enforce their theological views, but religious beliefs inexorably changed. As the secular Enlightenment spread, students' desire to prepare themselves to be gentlemen strengthened as well. In New York and Philadelphia, colleges consciously mimicked the mores and fashions of the English upper class. Even the Calvinist colleges were not immune. President John Witherspoon brought enlightenment toleration, new learning, and social pretentions to pious Princeton.

After 1760 the leading colleges taught an updated curriculum, including Newtonian science, Scottish moral philosophy, and English literature. Older materials, like natural law doctrines and Greek and Roman histories, became highly relevant to the growing crisis with England. Students focused on preparing to be gentlemen, and colleges openly embraced their connections with what Witherspoon called "persons in the higher ranks of life".[ii] Students further developed these traits in literary societies, which cultivated public speaking and debate. College study now became more closely linked to careers in the law, although apprenticeship in a law office was still required. In medicine, however, the College

of Philadelphia and King's College established medical schools in which to train gentleman physicians. Higher education reflected the relatively open, but inherently hierarchical character of colonial America. Ambitious middle-class boys found ways to attend, and older students from humble backgrounds, aspiring to be ministers, worked their way to and through college. The colleges were well adapted to late colonial society, on the cusp of revolutionary change.

The American Revolution inspired the idea of republican universities, intended to propound new knowledge appropriate to the new republic. Emphasis was variously placed on science, modern languages, government, and especially 'useful knowledge,' which Enlightenment writers greatly valued. The role of ancient languages was questioned, and religion largely honored outside the curriculum. Useful knowledge included the professions, and at least implied a greater orientation toward careers. In terms of culture, the desirability of fostering a republican consciousness was frequently expressed, but it was still assumed that a republican citizen would be a gentleman of superior social rank. In fairly short order, republican universities failed on all these counts. With respect to knowledge, the Enlightenment promised far more than it could deliver. There was little useful knowledge to teach, no one to teach it, and no apparent way to incorporate such subjects into the arts course. Rather than republicanizing the arts course, federalist educators soon found their institutions being attacked by more democratically inclined citizens as 'aristocratic.' By 1800 the arts course was a shambles and the culture it embodied on the defensive.

The first decades of the nineteenth century marked a low point in all the vital signs of American higher education. It was increasingly ineffective in promoting culture, careers, or knowledge. The assumption of social superiority associated with collegiate education was resented and contested by democratic elements, especially in the recently settled Western lands, but also in Federalist New England. Professional careers were becoming dissociated from collegiate preparation. And what remained of the arts course proffered little general knowledge and nothing useful for careers. In newly established institutions, the skill set that colleges offered was greatly diluted; in established ones, its relevance seemed greatly diminished. After 1800, the movement known as the Second Great Awakening of evangelical piety swept the nation. Emotional and anti-intellectual religious faiths specifically rejected college learning and college educated ministers. The path to rehabilitation for the colleges seemed to lie with resuscitating Latin and Greek—subjects that they at least knew how to teach—and reasserting the role of religion.

The 1820s witnessed fruitless attempts to introduce useful knowledge. Instead, the chief contribution to rehabilitating the colleges was a reformulation of their cultural role. The Yale *Reports* of 1828—a famous document written by the president and faculty of the college—convincingly argued that a four-year course of classical studies would, by instilling "mental discipline," impart a superior culture beneficial for any career. This assertion made explicit the 18th century assumption that connected classical education with social superiority. By 1828, this was an approach that the college community was eager to embrace. The message of the Yale *Reports* was buttressed by the American Education Society, which held that the thorough education of ministers required a four-year classical course followed by three years study in a theological seminary. It would be a century before this pattern of undergraduate-professional education was adopted in law and medicine. But in 1828 it underlined the foundational nature of the classical course. Furthermore, it absolved the college course from teaching any vocationally useful knowledge or pursuing advanced knowledge.

In order to preserve their social base, evangelical churches after 1820 began establishing their own colleges, by no means confined to co-religionists. All of them included preparatory departments, which often taught the majority of students, many of whom never proceeded to college. These multi-level institutions were an important community educational resource. But at the collegiate level they perpetuated the classical course, no matter how poorly taught. The denominational colleges thus conveyed little advanced knowledge, provided a rather superficial form of culture as measured by the Yale *Reports*, and awarded bachelor's degrees that had no value in the labor market. They nevertheless offered the promise of entrée into the developing bourgeoisie.

In the mid-nineteenth century, rapid growth and tentative innovation were premonitions of four major challenges that after 1870 would transform American higher education. Higher education for women raised questions of how male patterns of culture, careers, and knowledge related to a woman's place in society. The growth of scientific knowledge forced consideration of how it could be incorporated into the colleges. The issue of teaching useful knowledge presented itself in ever more pressing terms. And, college culture increasingly transcended the ossified classical course and passed into the hands of students themselves. Each of these developments was strongly affected by the regionalization of higher education—the emergence of distinctive features in the Northeast, the South, and the West.

The traditional forms and customs of American colleges scarcely suited the condition of nineteenth-century women. The culture of mental discipline was hardly needed for students who had no access to the professions and whose social status would be determined by marriage, not career. A different approach to these issues was taken in each region. Southern female colleges served women who would marry but not work. They conveyed a suitable culture of ornamental subjects and a light touch of general knowledge to rather young students. At Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts, Mary Lyon addressed more mature women who expected to have 'careers' as teachers or minister's wives. She aimed to provide subject knowledge comparable to that taught in men's colleges, without classical languages. Coeducational Oberlin College provided an experiment in equal education, although most women took the non-classical lady's course. A few Oberlin feminists resisted social conventions by seeking to enter the professions. The gap between male and female cultures and careers was too large to bridge at mid-century, and would remain a formidable obstacle long afterward. The better female colleges distinguished themselves by thorough teaching of English and science, but qual access to academic knowledge had to await endowed women's colleges and coeducational universities after the Civil War.

The classical bachelor's degree possessed an implicit cultural significance, but the degree alone had limited value and this fact was reflected in student attitudes toward their studies. Young men aspiring to the status of gentlemen instead sought recognition from their peers. This phenomenon was most exaggerated in Southern state universities, where planters' sons above all sought to establish their character and honor through exploits far from the classroom. Campus life at Southern universities was largely conditioned by the culture of the plantations. In the North, rapidly spreading fraternities allowed mid-century students to cultivate the behavior and customs of gentlemanly status. Increasingly, this ideal mirrored the culture of the urban haut-bourgeoisie. Fraternities soon played a huge role in campus activities, but their tacit agenda for members was to learn and practice the manners and mores of the class they aspired to join. Culture, far more than curriculum was the most critical attribute for future careers.

By the 1850s some colleges felt the need to enlarge their teaching in response to the expansion of knowledge. Civil engineering was being taught beyond West Point, and Francis Wayland created a sensation by introducing practical courses at Brown University. Wayland's flawed reforms did not last long, and only piecemeal efforts to teach practical knowledge were made in the Northeast. The exceptions were the new scientific schools at Harvard and Yale, where cultivation of the natural sciences had become institutional traditions. There the desire to advance scientific knowledge was linked with practical applications, more pure science at Harvard and more applied at Yale. These studies were compartmentalized, as the scientific schools were off limits to students in the classical college course. In the West, the multiplying colleges represented community assets. They assumed additional roles to accommodate multiple educational needs, becoming multipurpose colleges. Typically, besides the classical A.B. course, they offered scientific, English and teachers' courses, but all of these provided different degrees of general education, not preparation for careers. Before 1860, only the University of Michigan under President Henry Tappan deliberately sought to become a true university in the breadth and depth of its offerings.

By the Civil War, American higher education was on the cusp of separate revolutions in each of its fundamental functions: the Land-Grant revolution introduced practical subjects; the academic revolution embraced the advancement of knowledge, and the collegiate revolution emphasized the experience and meaning of college for undergraduate students.

The 1862 Morrill Land Grant Act did not introduce the practical arts to American higher education; rather, it implanted them as a permanent presence among other liberal subjects. Agriculture was the most radical addition, since it presupposed a body of relevant knowledge and a population of educable practitioners. In fact, it took fifty years, plus additional federal legislation and subsidies, to create experiment stations to develop agricultural sciences and agricultural extension to bring the results to farmers. But agricultural research and application created a powerful tradition that defined land-grant universities. Engineering required less assistance. Civil engineering was well established by the Civil War, but the major fields of engineering only emerged in the 1880s and were readily incorporated into land-grant and non-land-grant universities alike. The Morrill Act brought the incorporation of truly useful knowledge by establishing a network of relatively strong institutions dedicated, at least in part, to this mission.

American universities developed as compartmentalized institutions, capable of adding additional units for career instruction in business, education, music, fine art, etc., without disturbing core commitments to the liberal arts and sciences. Higher education now offered subjects directly relevant to careers. Meanwhile, cultural subjects were transformed by the academic revolution.

The academic revolution of the 1890s posited the systematic pursuit of new knowledge, embodied in research and graduate education, as the central mission of universities. This launched a tradition that is fundamental to the identity of American universities to this day. The organization of academic disciplines provided a new knowledge base throughout higher education, rendering the fixed classical course obsolete. Traditionalists lamented this presumed loss of culture. However, at Harvard President Charles W. Eliot maintained that a liberal education was best achieved by allowing undergraduate students to choose their own courses in the arts and sciences. Practical and professional subjects, he felt, should be taught in separate institutions or as graduate subjects. Johns Hopkins promoted a different ideal—the relentless advance of knowledge through empirical investigation.

Although originally focused on the arts and sciences, the spirit of research—and its benefits—were appropriated by the practical arts as well. American universities ignored Eliot's distinction and pursued the advancement of knowledge in all its domains. Knowledge was no longer an external influence affecting universities, but rather an internal agent for continual change. However, generating new knowledge through research and graduate education required a scale of operation and expenditure that only a handful of universities could achieve. The rest of American higher education became largely consumers and disseminators of the new academic knowledge.

The majority of college students in the late nineteenth century were more concerned with culture, even if subconsciously, than with practical arts or academic knowledge. Increasingly, the culture they valued came from interactions with peers, not faculty. The rapid growth of student run activities and organizations was the third revolution in higher education—the collegiate revolution. First developed most vigorously in eastern private colleges, it spread fairly quickly across the country. Students judged their classmates and themselves on achievements outside the classroom and were indifferent to achievements within it. The rise of intercollegiate athletics epitomized these developments, but it was only one manifestation of the culture dominating campus life. After 1900, an idealized depiction of this culture was projected in popular media and uncritically digested by middle-class Americans. The collegiate culture was presumed to produce character, 'manliness,' and subsequent success in the business world. This image popularized colleges and, ironically, associated mere attendance with successful careers. A pronounced social bias existed in the campus culture, dominated as it was by fraternities and costly social activities, and increasingly so after 1900. But even the socially homogeneous eastern colleges believed that their culture recognized character and merit.

These three revolutions pulled American higher education in different directions, at least in theory. In practice, these tendencies might coexist without apparent contradiction. For example, at Cornell University in 1900 the majority of students majored in engineering and belonged to fraternities. However, the underlying logics of these revolutions shaped divergent developments in the twentieth century.

The collegiate culture gained momentum and reached a kind of zenith during the Roaring Twenties. But much earlier university leaders had become disturbed by student aversion to serious study. Critics were most concerned with rehabilitating the cultural value of a liberal education, which they saw as having two components: they wished to preserve the spirit and social solidarity of campus culture, but they also felt that students should learn something. Negatively, they specifically attacked the other two revolutions: they denounced 'vocational' courses as superficial and culturally barren; and they criticized 'excessive academic specialization' by professors as inappropriate for undergraduate learning. Presidents Woodrow Wilson at Princeton and Abbott Lawrence Lowell at Harvard were most prominent in imposing greater structure and rigor on the undergraduate curriculum, but this was a project of decades rather than a single reform. The 1920s witnessed numerous attempts to improve or reinvent the college course. Initiatives compatible with the curricular hegemony of the academic disciplines generally had the intended effects, like Harvard's tutors and the Swarthmore honors program, but attempts to reject 'specialization' largely failed. Liberal education could eschew applied subjects, but not the academic revolution.

The second development linked with liberal culture focused on the social environment of colleges. If student socialization formed the peer culture, then it mattered who were the peers. As

applicant numbers mushroomed, the eastern private colleges, led by Columbia, Harvard, Princeton and Yale, all resorted to discriminatory selective admissions, generally to preserve their social base, but specifically to screen out Jewish applicants. High social status was more valuable for the culture they wished to instill than high IQs.

The provision of practical courses of study accelerated after World War I with the advent of mass higher education. Land-grant institutions continued to provide instruction in the practical arts, but they were now complemented by the explosive growth of urban universities. These institutions also had significant enrollments in the liberal arts. Older urban universities, especially Catholic ones, had a base of traditional students, and many new students sought some combination of cultural and intellectual value. Urban universities often separated their liberal and professional campuses, with mixed success. Nonetheless, they responded to the preferences of their students, which were heavily weighted toward professional and career education. Accounting may be the best example of a demand driven subject. The popularity of accounting courses allowed universities to develop larger offerings in business and commerce, thus expanding service to this clientele. Older students or working students were particularly drawn to career education and part time courses, constituting the huge part time and evening enrollments at New York City colleges. The latent prestige of the arts and sciences, among students and education policy makers, produced some tension with such instrumental courses. The campaign for terminal junior college courses, or the efforts to restrict the offerings of teachers colleges, implicitly sought to distance the liberal arts from both. Similarly, the elevation of law and medicine to post-graduate courses validated the cultural significance of an arts and sciences degree.

Once the advancement of knowledge was embraced as a university mission, the progress of the academic revolution became inexorable. But its impact on higher education as a whole was conditioned by three factors in the first four decades of the twentieth century. First was the narrow base of universities significantly engaged in research and doctoral education. Fifteen institutions could be called research universities after 1900, and only Caltech joined that select circle before 1940.[iii] This base may have been constrained by the limitation of inputs—a limited number of active scholars and scientists and the inefficiency of doctoral education before the 1930s. Inputs from universities were also crucial. Even research universities could divert few internal resources to research per se, and their leaders varied widely in the priorities accorded to academic development. Thus, second, the pace of advancement was partly determined by philanthropic foundations. They made concentrated investments in a small number of institutions, and on the whole appear to have invested effectively. They also mitigated the shortage of academic researchers through extensive fellowship programs. Foundations only invested heavily in academic science in the 1920s, contributing significantly to the achievements of American science that became evident by the 1930s. A third factor was the general acceptance of academic expertise as crucial for faculty and teaching among the better colleges and universities. Even research universities were slow to rationalize graduate education on a meritocratic basis and, more egregiously, to regularize academic criteria for hiring and promotion. By the end of the 1930s, these practices were spreading among the more ambitious universities. And liberal arts colleges saw that academic respectability brought greater prestige and financial rewards. Viewed from the top, American science and American universities had attained world-leading positions; but viewed from below, the advancement of knowledge and expertise was only *becoming* generalized throughout a good portion of American higher education.

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The historical workings of culture, careers, and knowledge in American higher education generated powerful traditions that impact the system to this day, for the most part in positive ways. Traditions are most immediately honored by individual colleges and universities. Their traditions (analyzed by Burton Clark as "organizational sagas"[iv]) are tangible factors in holding the allegiances of graduates and attracting potential students. These institutional traditions focus heavily on collegiate culture, including athletics. Memories of collegiate experiences, aided in part by attending athletic contests, inspires feelings of loyalty and identity with *alma mater*, and frequently generous gifts. In this respect institutional traditions are a genuine resource.

The tradition of liberal education is still honored in American higher education, although there is little agreement over content. This tradition is cultivated most intently by wealthy liberal arts college and is an important element in their identity. They operate on the premise that four years of residence at a pleasant campus, amid copious amenities and like-minded peers, produces a liberal education regardless of what subjects are studied. They seek to convey, above all, an intense collegiate culture infused with progressive values.

The identification of college education with careers has spawned traditions that are both beneficial and burdensome. The land-grant tradition is regularly invoked by those institutions originally awarded the land grant revenues. This tradition allows them to reaffirm a commitment to generating and disseminating practical forms of academic knowledge, as well as training expert practitioners in those fields. A cruder version of careerism is regularly articulated by the President and many state governors. In their rhetoric, the sole purpose of college is to prepare students for better jobs with higher earnings. Hence, an avowed national policy of striving toward universal postsecondary education is predicated on visions of greater productivity and wealth generated by a more educated workforce. However, little has been invested in this vision beyond rhetoric.

Ultimately, the most valuable tradition in American higher education is the commitment to the advancement of knowledge that has been internalized in universities, disciplines, departments, and institutes. America's world class universities have relentlessly expanded the frontiers of knowledge, extended the research imperative to a host of applied fields, and inspired the development of a global system of discovery and innovation.

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[i] Roger L. Geiger, *A History of American Higher Education, 1636-1940 [tentative title]* Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming [2014].

[ii] John Witherspoon, *Address to the Inhabitants of Jamaica, and Other West-India Islands in Behalf of the College of New-Jersey* (Philadelphia: 1772).

[iii] Roger L. Geiger, *To Advance Knowledge: the Growth of American Research Universities, 1900-1940* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2004 [1986]).

[iv] Burton R. Clark, *The Distinctive College* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1992 [1970]).