

Let Us Have Such Colleges

Between Citizens and the State: The Politics of American Higher Education in the 20th Century

by Christopher P. Loss

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The University and the People: Envisioning American Higher Education in an Era of Populist Protest

by Scott M. Gelber

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Let us have such colleges as may rightfully claim the authority of teachers to announce facts and fixed laws, and to scatter, broadcast that knowledge which will prove useful in building up a great nation—great in its resources of wealth and power, but greatest of all in the aggregate of its intelligence and virtue.

Rep. Justin S. Morrill of Vermont

*Speech on the Floor of the House of Representatives,
In Support of the first Morrill Act, April 1858¹*

This summer public colleges and universities celebrated the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Morrill Land Grant Act. Signed into law on July 2, 1862, by Abraham Lincoln, a Republican-led Congress had persevered to pass the bill after President James Buchanan, a Democrat, had vetoed an earlier version in 1859. The act assigned public land revenues to the states to support and maintain public colleges “to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the

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mechanic arts” and also “to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes on the several pursuits and professions in life,” and marked the first national approach to investment in public colleges and universities.² Morrill, who never attended a university himself, highlighted the intended combination of practical education with broad public purpose in the initial debate:

Pass this measure and we shall have done: Something to enable the farmer to raise two blades of grass instead of one; Something for every man who loves intelligence and not ignorance; Something to remove the last vestige of pauperism from our land; Something to increase the loveliness of the American landscape.³

Looking back to the Morrill Act gives an idea of how far the modern Republican Party has strayed from its roots, but also how the very concept of “the public” has weakened in the American consciousness. Today, we are in the midst of an active debate over the purpose of higher education, mostly attacking this or that perceived failure of the system. The debate largely lacks an adequate sense of historical consciousness or awareness of the varied missions of colleges and universities.

This past spring, while campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination, former Senator Rick Santorum famously called President Obama a snob because, “he wants everyone to go to college.” Santorum, who holds a B.A., an M.B.A., and a law degree, believes “college” is where students are “taught by some liberal college professor trying to indoctrinate them.”⁴ In a slightly more sophisticated analysis, *Washington Post* columnist Robert Samuelson uses the conclusions he draws from Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s *Academically Adrift*⁵ to argue that “the college-for-all crusade has outlived its usefulness.... it’s now doing more harm than good.”⁶ Neither example addresses higher education outside the four-year liberal arts sector. Even as informative and well-argued a book as Benjamin Ginsberg’s *The Fall of the Faculty*, which argues that the replacement of faculty decision-making by administrators threatens the academic integrity of higher education, self-consciously relies on the author’s personal experiences as a student at the University of Chicago, and as professor at Cornell and Johns Hopkins universities, all elite private research universities.⁷ And the historical context for this discussion is largely since the end of the Second World War, a highly unusual period of expansion.

For this reason, Christopher P. Loss’s *Between Citizens and the State* and Scott Gelber’s *The University and the People* are welcome additions to the literature of higher education studies. Both authors provide historical looks at the evolution of higher education’s relationship with state and society. Loss examines the evolving relationship between higher education, society and the federal government during the 20th century, while Gelber focuses more directly on the period of political turmoil in the 1890s, illuminating how the populist insurgency impacted state col-

leges and universities, especially in those states where populists achieved political authority.

Loss explicitly uses the insights of American political development theory, arguing that because the American polity preferred a noninvasive central state, “state development...relied on institutions at least once removed from the federal government’s immediate family of bureaucratic agencies.”⁸ He identifies colleges and universities as fulfilling such intermediate institutional roles between citizens and the state, and cites examples of policymakers utilizing them that way. In response to pressures from agricultural interests, for example, Congress expanded the agriculture extension service at land grant institutions during the Progressive and New Deal eras.

As World War II drew to a close, Congress passed the GI Bill in 1944, providing aid to veterans to attend college, among other benefits. The passage of the National Defense Loan Act in 1958 and the Higher Education Act (HEA) in 1965 continued this approach, and represented the apex of state efforts to educate democratic citizens in a community. The HEA’s expansion of student and institutional support led to increased access for poor and middle-class Americans, and helped a wide variety of colleges and universities. But, at the same time, the 1960s-era development of identity politics and a more rights-focused ideology, began leading the state into a more market-oriented commitment to individual rights. Loss argues that when economic troubles hit in the 1970s, this trend made it easier for conservatives to enact budget cuts in the last years of the 20th century and, by implication in the 21st century as well.⁹

In explaining the growth of higher education institutions and in the number of students served in the 20th century, Loss argues that the traditional explanations about “the rise of the professions and the growth of the federal-academic research matrix” explain only a part of the story.¹⁰ His contribution in this book is to show how the belief of policymakers “that higher education created psychologically adjusted citizens capable of fulfilling the duties and obligations of democratic citizenship” led the state to coordinate and fund a remarkable expansion of higher education to achieve those goals, a theme that completes the explanation of American higher education expansion in the 20th century.

Instead of explaining a century of development, Scott Gelber examines a particular political experience at the end of the 19th century in *The University and the People*, but he also looks at how the state used colleges and universities to expand the potential for democratic citizenship. He writes, “More than five decades before the era that is typically regarded as the beginning of the drive for mass higher education, academic populists advocated for free tuition, scholarships, campus work programs, and low-cost room and board.”¹¹

But the Populist experience in terms of funding was mixed, some opposition drawing on earlier anti-elitist politics. In the 1830s, U.S. Representative Davy Crockett of Tennessee, of Alamo fame, argued “this college system ... separated the children of the rich from the children of the poor.”¹² In the economic difficul-

ties of the 1890s some populists, such as Mississippi's Frank Birkett sponsored efforts to redirect public funding from state colleges to common schools whose benefits for a wider public seemed clearer.¹³ In other states, faculty salaries were an especially appealing target for cutting budgets.¹⁴ At the same time, other populists, like Kansas Governors Lorenzo Lewelling (1893-95) and John Leedy (1897-99), consistently supported public funding for higher education. In the end Gelber concludes that Populists "were more sympathetic to requests for tuition subsidies and new buildings, as opposed to support for faculty salaries or research," an attitude that has persisted among policymakers to this day.¹⁵

Gelber concedes that some populist arguments were distasteful, and threatened important aspects of academic life such as provision of adequate funding, academic freedom, and governance, but on the whole he finds the movement beneficial. "Despite its brashness, demagoguery, and occasional incoherence, the Populist campaign was fundamentally optimistic about higher learning." He further argues that such arguments must complement internal campus debates over governance, autonomy, and curriculum to honestly engage in the "conversation about the meaning of democratic higher education."¹⁶

Both Loss and Gelber argue convincingly that a sense of higher education based on promoting the values of democratic citizenship still stands as an appealing goal, despite current anti-egalitarian attacks. Gelber remains more optimistic that the eternal tension between populist demands for relevance and academic values can be resolved, but both works illustrate a more historically informed picture than most recent critiques of higher education. Neither work addresses community colleges adequately, although perhaps Gelber can be excused since community colleges developed after the time frame of his study. On the other hand, one could argue that the vocational education championed by the Grange in the mid-19th century anticipated much of the community college mission.¹⁷ The various missions of community colleges bring them closer to public interest while reflecting many of the tensions facing higher education. Student diversity is broader, often older, like the veterans of the GI Bill era. The curriculum ranges more widely. At the same time they are much more closely tied to business interests and face more local pressures.

In *The Fall of the Faculty*, Benjamin Ginsberg uses the "part-human, part-machine 'Borg'" characters from *Star Trek* to "represent the expansion of bureaucracy and the demise of individualism." Where the Borgs were adamant that, "You will be assimilated, resistance is futile," Ginsberg counters:

Perhaps the Borg were correct. Perhaps the professorate will join the other professions assimilated into the expanding white-collar proletariat. Even the once-proud and seemingly invincible physicians have been defeated by a Borg-like coalition of bureaucrats, insurance peddlers, and drug pushers and assimilated into their dark machinery. But if resistance is futile, it remains essential. The university can be a marvelous institution—well worth protecting.¹⁸

And Ginsberg is right: even if futile, resistance to an entirely privatized future is essential. The best of American higher education remains in its public traditions first enacted into law by Justin Morrill and his visionary colleagues of the 19th century Republican Party. [nea](#)

ENDNOTES

1. Justin S. Morrill, Speech to the House of Representatives, April 1858. www.aplu.org/page.aspx?pid=2377. (Accessed July 17, 2012.)
2. "The Morrill Act, 1862 in Richard Hofstadter and Winston Smith (ed.), *American Higher Education: A Documentary History. Volume Two*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961, p. 568.
3. Justin S. Morrill, op cit. April 1858.
4. *The Washington Post*, February 25, 2012. www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/election-2012/post/santorum-obama-is-a-snob-because-he-wants-everybody-in-america-to-go-to-college/2012/02/25/gIQATJffaR_blog.html (Accessed July 17, 2012.)
5. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. This book was reviewed in the 2011 issue of *Thought & Action*.
6. Richard Samuelson. "It's time to drop the college-for-all crusade," *The Washington Post*, May 27, 2012.
7. Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrator University and Why it Matters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
8. Christopher P. Loss. *Between Citizens and the State: The Politics of American Higher Education in the 20th Century*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 2.
9. Loss, *ibid*, pp. 214-5.
10. Loss, *ibid*, p. 1.
11. Scott M. Gelber, *The University and the People: Envisioning American Higher Education in an Era of Populist Protest*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011, p. 84.
12. Gelber, *ibid*, p. 20.
13. Gelber, *ibid*, p. 151.
14. Gelber, *ibid*, pp. 154-155.
15. Gelber, *ibid*, p. 166.
16. Gelber, *ibid*, p. 180.
17. Gelber, pp. 24-34.
18. Ginsberg, op cit, p. 219.