

A Legacy of Public and Private Good

For the Common Good: A New History of Higher Education in America

by Gary Dorn

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REVIEWED BY MARK F. SMITH

While Gary Dorn acknowledges the enormous shadow that Lawrence Veysey's *The Emergence of the American University* casts over all subsequent attempts to examine the history of higher education in the United States, he nevertheless has accomplished something quite impressive in *For the Common Good: A New History of Higher Education in America*.

Dorn uses a series of case studies to trace the development of U.S. colleges and universities across time, illustrating the immense variety of institutional types. While acknowledging numerous differences within each of the types, Dorn still manages to emphasize the particulars of each category of institution. As a result, *For the Common Good* represents one of the few major histories of higher education not restricted to a particular sector. Dorn convincingly shows that this profound diversity both characterizes American higher education and represents its greatest strength.

The motivating purpose of higher education institutions has changed over time, Dorn shows, from a commitment to the common good to a

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means to gain individual or private success. Reading the current literature about colleges and universities highlights an undeniable tilt toward the private in today's world, but the fact is that colleges and universities have always mixed public and private motivations in their missions. Even the religiously driven colleges of the Colonial Era focused on providing career opportunities for their students, in addition to promoting the word of God.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE GOOD

In the early national period, Dorn emphasizes the public concerns and practical geographical advantages colleges such as Bowdoin (founded by the Massachusetts legislature in 1802 as a liberal arts college) and South Carolina College (founded in 1801 by the South Carolina legislature as a state college).¹ Georgetown (founded in 1898 by the Jesuit order as a religious institution) represents a more traditional commitment to the common good, but all three provided opportunities for students who found it difficult to attend more established colleges further from their homes.

The 1857 founding of the Agricultural College of Michigan in East Lansing (later to become Michigan State University), and the start of the California State Normal School in San Francisco (later to move to San Jose, and become San Jose State University), represented a more specialized focus on farming and teaching, resulting in further mixing of public and private motivation. Dorn points out "the relationship between the development of teacher-training institutions and the shift toward practicality in colleges and universities during the Antebellum and Civil War eras." He also notes that, "in many states normal-school founding legislation linked teacher training with instruction in agriculture, mechanics, and the military" (pp. 94-95). The passage of the Morrill Act in 1862 gave this link a national focus.

Dorn's discussion of research universities provides his most interesting arguments. The focus is on Stanford, which he cites as "a conspicuous manifestation of commercialism's rise in American higher education" (p. 116). At the same time he recognizes the dual mission the Stanfords intended for their university. Founding documents stated that "the institution's central 'object' was 'to qualify its students for personal success,'" while at the same time stating "that the university's 'purpose' was to 'promote the public welfare'" (p 117).

David Starr Jordan, Stanford's first president, advocated the practicality of American higher education, contrasting it with more traditional offerings from Oxford and Cambridge. "It is the business of the American university to give the best possible training in any direction of intellectual effort," he stated. "There is no honorable calling in life that cannot be made a learned profession." Other university presidents of the time echoed that sentiment. Wisconsin's Charles Van Hise would "never be content until the beneficent influence of the university reaches every family in the state." Columbia's Nicholas Murray Butler claimed, "the university is both for scholarship and service" (p. 119). Given the enrollment figures of the time, there was more than a little *noblesse oblige* to these sentiments. In 1914 Charles and Mary Beard wrote:

The modern idea of the university is not only to cherish and spread among the people the wisest and best that has been thought out in science, literature, politics, and morals, but also to develop those practical arts and sciences which will help the people do their daily tasks more easily and more intelligently.²

It is significant that these comments come in a book titled *American Citizenship* and in many respects this continues to represent the ideal of the Land-Grant University.

Dorn presents the founding of women's' colleges and historically black colleges and universities as examples of institutions founded to address the needs of individuals who could not get what they needed from existing institutions, as well as attempts to reject the commercialism of the time by restoring curricula from colleges such as Bowdoin, South Carolina, and Georgetown. Even so, the examples he cites—Smith College in Massachusetts and Howard University in Washington D.C.—found themselves addressing more materialistic individual desires.

Finally, Dorn's choice of institutions founded in the 20th century seemingly cement his argument about the turn to private needs over the public good. He examines the University of South Florida, founded in 1960 as an urban branch campus orientated to business needs (to create jobs and grow the economy), as well as two community colleges, the Community College of Rhode Island and Santa Fe Community College.

There is no argument that community colleges often work closely with local industry, and heavily promote vocational education to provide jobs for students. But many community colleges also provide liberal arts education either as a way station to four-year institutions or as an end in themselves.

AN EYE TO THE FUTURE?

Dorn includes an epilogue where he briefly mentions the growth of for-profit higher education, and raises numerous questions that lead one to hope for a subsequent volume discussing the future of higher education. The dispassionate analysis that Dorn brings to this volume seem to promise that he would be able to lay out future directions in a way that could further debate, unlike most volumes discussing the future that convince only the already convinced.

The mixture of public and private goals that Dorn sees in the middle years of his chronology is still present in today's colleges and universities, and educational leaders that pander to policymakers hostility to learning that is not immediately and explicitly job related do themselves and higher education a disservice. Not only do colleges and universities continue the mixture of public and private aspects of education, but many advocates of the humanities argue that there are practical aspects of liberal arts education that do not have the obvious path to employment, but nevertheless have immense practical effect. In the late 19th century, University of Wisconsin professor William F. Allen wrote:

The student who has acquired the habit of never letting go a puzzling problem—say a rare Greek verb—until he has analyzed its every element, and understands every point in its etymology, has the habit of mind which will enable him to follow out a legal subtlety with the same accuracy.³

This is proper response to inane statements from policymakers such as Florida Governor Rick Scott's claim that his state had too many anthropologists, or Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's attempt to change the mission statement of the University of Wisconsin from the "Wisconsin Idea" to meeting the state's workforce needs. It is significant that popular resistance stopped Walker's attempt, and today's educators need to push back along the same lines. Charles Dorn's *For the Common*

Good: A New History of Higher Education in America provides us with the history and the arguments to make that case. But if you also take a look at Veysey's *The Emergence of the American University* alongside Dorn's book, you will find it well worth the time.

ENDNOTES

1. In 1802 Maine was part of Massachusetts. It became an independent state in 1820 as part of the Missouri Compromise.
2. Beard, Charles and Mary. 1914. *American Citizenship*. New York: The Macmillan Company, p. 226.
3. Veysey, Lawrence. 1965. *The Emergence of the American University*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 24.