A belief in individualism and opportunity is deeply ingrained in the American character. Anyone, the litany goes, has a chance to make a fortune, ascend the corporate ladder, gain election to public office, hit a home run, or earn a college degree if only he or she will draw on a combination of talent and dedication. But the sobering truth is that our life choices more often than not are mere probabilities shaped by collective forces outside our control. Historical timing, age, gender, religion, race, ethnicity, and family background are just a few variables that intervene with individual efforts and aspirations. Nowhere is this clash of democratic dreams and demographic realities more evident than in the American saga of higher education and social mobility.

At best, its celebration is conveyed by the 1954 Norman Rockwell painting Breaking Home Ties, which appeared as the cover on the Saturday Evening Post: a young man with his suitcase sits on the running board of the family Ford Model T as he bids farewell to his grizzled farmer father—and heads for the state college. It’s comparable to the theme that attracted historian Frederick Rudolph who wrote in 1962:

‘State College’ would come to have as homely and honest a ring about it as any of the numerous institutions associated with agrarian America. State Fair. Fourth of July picnic. Church social. Saturday night in town. None of these came any closer than ‘State College’ in evoking an appreciation of wholesome, rural values—

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clean, hard-working, honest young men and women, determined to live good lives in a good world, gone down or up to the state college, there to broaden their horizons and to perfect their ingrained common sense.¹

Nor is this theme confined to the heritage of rural Americana. Here, in a reverse twist from the land-grant celebration, the failure to provide higher education access to urban immigrants in the early 20th century was cast as a costly social injustice—a loss of human capital both to individuals and the nation. This dire message was conveyed graphically in a 1976 fund raising poster featuring a forlorn young factory worker in New York City:

Sixty years ago, you didn't need a college education. . . . The story of woe, due to the lack of opportunity to go to college, was that, in fact, you didn't much of anything except a willingness to work 16 hours a day. . . . For 8 cents an hour. Under brutal conditions. . . . But times have changed drastically. . . . Give to the college of your choice. Now!”²

These examples—one optimistic, one cautionary—suggest the importance of our belief in college as a source of upward mobility. And, as Americans, our attitude toward the growth and expansion of colleges and universities usually has been one of “Great Expectations.” But the painful corollary is that this optimism has often been followed by disappointment that those expectations were not completely fulfilled. It is this sweet-and-sour combination that characterizes our national attitude toward higher education.

Making sense out of five centuries of American higher education in order to connect the past and present is no easy task, especially in a relatively short essay. My approach is to focus first on students and “going to college” from the 17th to 21st centuries. Then, I will attempt to interpret this story from the historical perspectives of the American academic profession. It’s not a complete grasp of higher education—but it is a significant strand. The saga of individualism versus institutions has an underlying optimism in the nation’s wish to serve students that competes with a public reluctance to invest in a robust academic profession to carry out this charge appropriately. So, to paraphrase Bette Davis in the 1950 Hollywood movie, All About Eve, as we begin the fantastic voyage of American higher education, “Fasten your seat belts! It’s going to be a bumpy night!”

As Americans, our attitude toward the growth and expansion of colleges and universities usually has been one of ‘Great Expectations.’
The statistical profile of undergraduate enrollments over almost 400 years provides an alluring, albeit deceptively smooth, pattern of growth, a trajectory that suggests a national success story of expanding access. As sociologist Martin Trow wrote in *Daedalus* in 1970, within the 20th century “going to college” was transformed from an elite experience for less than 5 percent of late adolescent Americans to “mass higher education” in which about 30 percent to 40 percent of young Americans enrolled in college. And, more recently, around 1970, there dawned an era in which the national commitment was to universal higher education. In other words a diverse array of postsecondary institutions—including a relative new entity, the public community college—was able to accommodate about 70 percent of traditional high school age graduates. In the past quarter century, this typology has been dramatically altered by expansion of what are characterized as “non-traditional” students—students older than the conventional 18- to 21-year-old cohort that has proceeded directly from high school to college. The remarkable percentage gains are enhanced by the demographic fact that they have been achieved while the population was expanding.

What the statistical trajectory masks, however, is that the enrollments are marked by potholes and detours, especially when one disaggregates the gross data. Taken as a whole, American higher education has been reasonably successful in expanding student access to higher education—but does less well in fulfilling student choice. The latter phenomenon has meant access has been accompanied by students experiencing exclusion, discrimination, tracking, legal segregation, high prices, and lack of information. Also uneven is the effectiveness of American colleges to educate students, as suggested by low rates of retention and graduation. Starting in the early 19th century, access to higher education was gained piecemeal, as various special interest groups simply founded colleges to serve their specific constituency. The result was a patchwork of “separate but not necessarily equal” colleges.

Religion and ethnicity often overlapped in the college building boom, as one finds Presbyterian colleges serving primarily children of Scotch-Irish immigrants, Lutheran campuses geared to German and Scandinavian families, Catholic colleges enrolling primarily students of Irish, Italian, and Slavic descent. Methodists and Baptists created their academic and denominational sanctuaries, usually followed by doctrinal feuds and more splintering into colleges for the disaffected.

*American higher education has been reasonably successful in expanding access to higher education—but does less well in fulfilling student choice.*
Northern philanthropies and the second Morrill Act (1890) fostered what we now call the “Historically Black Colleges and Universities.” In the mid-19th century, the establishment of women’s colleges provided some access for higher education regardless of gender—and ultimately would be supplemented by co-education of the sexes. At times, the customary self-selection and balances broke down, illustrated by the imposition of quotas on Jews at historic East Coast universities in the 1920s. In sum, there was some accommodation without complete integration within a diverse, educationally ambitious population.

I’m going to go out on a limb and offer, at least as an hypothesis, that over most of American history, our colleges, universities, and related postsecondary institutions have been an over-built and under-funded enterprise. Until the end of World War II most colleges scrambled to enroll an adequate number of paying students who could pass the requisite entrance examination and demonstrate the potential to do what each college considered to be tolerable academic work. Furthermore, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, most college officials worked to keep tuition charges low. The price of college at most institutions was not outlandish. The impediment was that any charge for tuition, whether $1 or $100, was beyond the reach of most American families who depended on earnings from their children’s early entrance into the labor force. Also, in trying to figure out why many young Americans did not go to college, it’s important to note that along with exclusion and discrimination, there were other attractions. Few occupations required a college degree. Even medicine and law relied on apprenticeships and had minimal, haphazard licensure requirements. The challenge, then, is to reconcile these historical details with the statistical profile—in other words, to transform the quantitative data into a qualitative interpretation of college going.
At times higher education in the United States has been an over-built enterprise due, paradoxically, to the high esteem in which it was held by Americans. Nowhere is this more evident than in the college building boom of the 19th century where hundreds of communities considered a new campus to be a source of instant civic or state pride. In the colonial-royal era, a college charter was difficult to obtain—and included the compact that the host government assumed a responsibility to provide regular funding. For signs of a world turned upside down, one has only to look at college founding after 1785. Under the auspices of state (not federal) government, the norm—especially in the new states of the West and South—was that a college charter was easy to obtain. However, state legislatures showed little responsibility to bestow annual funding. The consequence was a proliferation of new colleges whose endowments and enrollments were small. Running a college was a year-by-year venture. This instilled in the college president and boards a strong awareness of what today we call “student consumerism.” It meant that enterprising colleges were apt to introduce new courses of study such as engineering, sciences, or commerce to appeal to prospective students who had little interest in classical studies. Clearly, colleges faced a challenge in attracting a critical mass of adequately prepared students because most states and communities were slow to exhibit much commitment to building a strong foundation of elementary or secondary schools. So, colleges were America’s peculiar institution in that they usually were opened prior to availability of a reliable source of nearby high school graduates.

The idyllic American depiction of collegiate learning was captured by U.S. President James Garfield’s nostalgia for his undergraduate days at Williams College: the college president as a teacher on one end of the log, the student on the other. Unfortunately, the metaphor quickly runs aground. It would be difficult for any college to afford a “one to one” student-faculty ratio. More likely, one would find dozens if not hundreds of students on one end of the collegiate log, with a single instructor on the other. Parents and taxpayers may have waxed nostalgic about dedicated professors and individualized attention to students—but few were willing to pay for such pedagogy.

It’s not clear that small classes would have endeared undergraduates to college studies if they were available. Most analysts of American higher education have pointed out that college students and professors chronically avoided one another. Students created a world on their own terms in extracurricular activities, including...
literary societies, debating clubs, athletics, and a system of fraternities and sororities. Woodrow Wilson as president of Princeton conceded, “So far as the colleges go, the sideshows have swallowed up the circus and we in the main tent do not know what is going on.”

Why was this so? Historian Laurence Veysey has pointed out that even in the heroic age of university building between 1870 and 1910, the American campus was characterized by a “gulf between students and faculty.”

Sociologists Christopher Jencks and David Riesman concluded that a “war between the generations” created enduring tension between teachers and taught, whether in 1768 or 1968. The late 19th century was considered a “golden age of student pranks,” where a class recitation was dominated by a “hidden curriculum” as students and instructors continually tried to outwit the other—with the assigned translations or mathematics problems really being incidental to the larger stakes of student-faculty jousts. Yale students took pride in low scholarship. The class of 1904 boasted “more gentlemen and fewer scholars than any other class in the memory of man.”

The Class of 1905 countered with the claim:

Never since the Heavenly Host With all the Titans fought Saw they a class whose scholarship Approached so close to naught!

In contrast to the continual skullduggery in the battles between teachers and students, since 1920, the usual resolution has been a truce in which college students and faculty acquiesced to be civil within carefully defined limits. Sociologist Edward Shills recalled a typical undergraduate class at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1930s:

The classes were not large, yet there was no discussion. No questions were raised in class, and there were no office hours. Students were addressed—if they were addressed at all—by their surnames . . . I cannot recall ever having heard of a student who had been invited to the home of a teacher . . . It all worked fairly well. The students did not complain about the distance between themselves and their teachers. The teachers kept to themselves and so did the students. One latent function of the “elective system” of the early 20th century was that it allowed professors to offer specialized courses in their favorite topics. At the same time, undergraduates were free to choose on any basis, ranging from intellectual interest to scheduling convenience. As Robert Benchley recalled from his days at Harvard College:
My college education was no haphazard affair. My courses were all selected with a very definite aim in view, with a serious purpose in mind—no classes before eleven in the morning or after two-thirty in the afternoon, and nothing on Saturday at all. That was my slogan. On that rock was my education built. As what is known as the Classical Course involved practically no afternoon laboratory work, whereas in the Scientific Course a man's time was never his own until four p.m. anyway, I went in for the classic. But only such classics as allowed for a good sleep in the morning. There is such a thing as being a studying fool.

James Thurber recalled his freshman orientation at Ohio State University as a blur of swimming tests, ROTC drill, and failed botany labs. When students and faculty were required to meet, it was painful for both, as conveyed by memoirs about (ugh!) advising sessions. James Thurber recalled his freshman orientation at Ohio State University as a blur of swimming tests, ROTC drill, and failed botany labs. All this led his advisors to cry out, “You are the main trouble with this university!” Thurber reflected, “I think he meant that my type was the trouble with the university but he may have meant me individually.” Thurber was in good company of indifferent or bewildered students, many of whom left the university without completing a degree.

Advising was seen by most professors as a thankless obligation. George Boas, writing in Harper's magazine in 1930, recalled meetings with new students:

Here they come. . . His name is Rosburg Van Stiew. One can see he is one of the Van Stiews—and if one can't, he'll let one know soon enough. . . . Already he has the Phi Pho Phum pledge button in his buttonhole. . . . ‘Very well, Mr. Van Stiew. Have you any idea of the course you'd like to take?’
‘No . . . aren't there some things you sort of have to take?’
‘Freshman English and Gym.’
‘Well, I may as well take them.’
‘History?’
‘Do you have to?’
‘No, you can take Philosophy, Political Science, or Economics instead.’
Mr. Van Stiew tightens his cravat.
‘Guess I'll take History.’
‘Ancient or Modern?’
‘Well—when do they come?’
‘Modern at 8:30, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays; Ancient at 9:30, Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays.’
‘Oh, Ancient.’
Mr. Van Stiew looks shocked that one should have asked.
If professors were viewed by the college administration and the American public as the hired help for the main event of collegiate student life, it was a role not without some rewards. A professor enjoyed respect as part of the local establishment. Compensation was middling, yet varied greatly from one institution to another. In late 19th century liberal arts colleges in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, professors were paid fairly well, bought comfortable houses near campus, and—wonder of wonders—it was an era when even some professors and their families had servants! Elsewhere, especially in the rural colleges of the Midwest and South, the academic life was grim, characterized by low salaries, high teaching loads, and attendance at numerous college events. When the editor of The Independent in 1905 featured a muckraking series on “Undistinguished Americans,” he included the plight of the wife of a professor at a small college in Kansas along with sympathetic profiles of hardship for a coal miner, a sweatshop girl in a garment factory, oppressed workers in the South, and abused immigrant laborers. In sum, the status of the academic profession in the United States remained uneven and uncertain at best well into the 20th century.

The literary anecdotes and memoirs about the gap between college students and faculty make more sense when discussed in the context of quantitative data sets. My premise is that the tensions or mismatches between the undergraduate cohort and the academic profession are due in part to their markedly contrasting and largely inescapable dynamics. The foremost disparity between the statistical patterns of student enrollments and faculty hiring is that the two groups display markedly different life cycles in how long each is a member of the college community. A college student generation is about four to six years. In contrast, a professor who is hired—especially in something approximating a vocation and career path—typically represents about a 20- to 30-year commitment between the institution and the individual. When the respective patterns for undergraduates and faculty are over-laid, one can see readily how difficult it is to mesh the supply-and-demand of both groups at the same time. And, since most colleges rely on students’ tuition payments, faculty have tended to be the malleable or expendable group in making periodic adjustments.

The era in which faculty most shared with students the ethos of “Great Expectations” was after World War II—especially from about 1958 to 1972. This especially in the rural colleges of the Midwest and South, the academic life was grim, characterized by low salaries and high teaching loads.
professional optimism was fueled by the warning by some economists in the late 1940s that the United States’s expanded commitment to higher education was going create of a severe shortfall in the supply of qualified Ph.D.s to fill anticipated new professorial appointments nationwide. The coincidence of rising curves both for student enrollments and faculty hiring started around 1957 and peaked in 1972. This period of growth in terms of construction, campus expansion, research grants, and student financial aid, however, did not continue indefinitely. Starting in 1973–74 college enrollments faced decline due to, again, demographic factors beyond the control of either the academic profession or their universities—

Starting in 1973–74 college enrollments faced decline due to demographic factors beyond the control of either the academic profession or their universities.

a drop in the actual number of high school graduates combined with inter-regional migration out of areas where large numbers of colleges were located. This was exacerbated by the discovery that a dwindling percentage of high school graduates were opting to go to college. Also, the end of the military draft meant that college lost its appeal as a sanctuary. In contrast to the demand for new facilities and faculty in 1965, colleges were over-built—and faculty hiring, except in a few new fields, dried up.

A good illustration of this sudden reversal of fortunes—and expectations—within the ranks of professors is illustrated by sociologist Christopher Jencks and David Riesman’s monumental book, *The Academic Revolution*. Published in 1968, its title unwittingly provided a snapshot of a drastic shift in directions and attitudes toward higher education. Based on research conducted over a decade, the book was intended to herald the long-awaited triumph of the American professoriate and its hard-fought gains in acquiring respect and influence within American society. It was, as the title suggested, no less than an “academic revolution” in which professors (finally) had gained a foothold in the establishment as respected experts who were also well paid and whose evaluations of students were consequential in the hiring decisions of employers. Tenure, rights of academic freedom, and opportunities for research and graduate-level work further characterized this idea of faculty coming of age as an established profession. But, by the time the book went to press, the term “academic revolution” suddenly brought to mind for the American public an entirely different vocabulary and set of images of student revolt, campus rebellion, and chaos. Whatever gains the faculty had made, many of them had been neutralized as perceptions shifted to the campus as a national headache.
Beyond the tensions of these two contrasting “academic revolutions,” there is another, more persistent tension between undergraduate admissions and faculty hiring that makes institutional change difficult. Consider its implications for attempts to reform configurations of gender and higher education. Since about 1970, the percentage of women law students and medical students has risen steadily from less than 5 percent to about 45 percent to 55 percent—a substantial gain in three decades. Meanwhile, the percentage of women who hold tenured faculty positions in medicine and law lags far behind these enrollment percentages. Why? In part, faculty inertia and outright gender discrimination tell the story. But there also is a demographic factor related to historic timing. Most universities had exhausted the majority of their tenure track lines with robust hiring by 1972. This meant that there would be relatively little fresh faculty hiring for several decades, if one accepts the premise that a tenure-track and then tenured professor holds a position for 20 to 30 years. Meanwhile, established doctoral programs continued to send new Ph.D.s into an academic market that had virtually collapsed. Consider the 1980 study by sociologists Neil Smelser and Robin Content on the academic market place of 1975–76, in which four junior faculty vacancies in sociology at the University of California, Berkeley attracted 285 applicants. Demography and timing, not talent, limited the life choices of a new generation of scholars, most of whose expectations were shaped in the 1960s. Now, articles on the “graying of the faculty” and the glut of tenured professors surfaced in academic journals and the popular press. Mary Burgin’s 2006 book, Whatever Happened to the Faculty?, provides a fitting transition into a postscript on decreasing influence of American professors in campus governance since the 1970s. Fortunately, in recent years we also have the benefit of outstanding systematic analyses of the changing professoriate in studies by such scholars as Jack Schuster, Howard Bowen, Martin Finklestein, Robert Seal, Roger Baldwin, Jay Chronister, and other colleagues. Their studies are good—but most of the news is not. In the early 21st century, the American faculty is defused and dispersed. Not only does this snapshot emerge from the large scale data sets, it also surfaces in observations of the typical American campus. Socialization into citizenship of the academic life does not appear to be especially effective. Symptomatic of this disconnection is a demise of the “faculty club.” It parallels the disintegration of such organizations as the American Legion or the
Elks Lodge, which enjoyed high participation by a generation who came of age as adults and professionals 1950s. My observation is that a new generation of professors have stopped joining the faculty club. Once a source of camaraderie and fellowship in the center of campus, these clubs have lost connection with new faculty—and often survive only by having transformed themselves into social centers for alumni, donors, and administrators. Meanwhile, in faculty hiring, the notion of a full-time, tenure track professor whose role combines teaching, research, and service has lost ground. A rising proportion of new faculty appointments are as adjuncts, part-time instructors, clinical faculty, and grant project researchers. Creation of new administrative positions abound—suggesting that it was a “managerial revolution” of the 1960s that prevailed more so than did Jencks and Riesman’s depiction of an “academic revolution.” Some of these changes bring new expertise and flexibility within the American university. At the same time such innovations extract a price. The historical legacy for our times is that fulfilling the ideal of what might be termed “the compleat professor” that offered great expectations less than a half century ago is increasingly faint, pushed from the center to the margins of the American college and university.

ENDNOTES

SPECIAL FOCUS: Will the Past Define the Future?


19 Mary Burgan, What Ever Happened to the Faculty?: Drift and Decision in Higher Education (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).
