

Integrating Disciplinary Perspectives into Higher Education Research: The Example of History

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Source: *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 75, No. 1, Special Issue: Questions of Research and Methodology (Jan. - Feb., 2004), pp. 7-22

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3838686>

Accessed: 12-01-2020 00:55 UTC

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Integrating Disciplinary Perspectives into Higher Education Research

The Example of History

Few would deny that higher education has matured as a field of study: dozens of higher education graduate programs now thrive, scholarly organizations and journals abound with enthusiastic contributors, and new scholars consider themselves higher education specialists. The *Journal of Higher Education* has entered an eighth decade of publishing, and the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) just celebrated a twenty-fifth anniversary as the most prominent research group devoted to postsecondary educational concerns.

Yet, higher education represents a fairly recent area for research, a field that has been built through the contributions of previously established disciplines. In recognition of this history, editor John C. Smart solicited a series of articles for the annual *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* which offer autobiographies of several “pioneers” of higher education research. In highlighting the work of Robert Pace (1998), W. J. McKeachie (1999), Burton Clark (2000), and Robert Berdahl (2001), Smart cites these “distinguished scholars from other disciplines whose cumulative contributions are seminal to the development of higher education research literature” (1998, p. 1). His contention—supported by the scholars’ accounts—is that higher education coalesced into a research field when such psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists, joined by economists, historians, philosophers, and others, applied modes of inquiry from their home disciplines to postsecondary education.

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The Journal of Higher Education, Vol. 75, No. 1 (January/February 2004)
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This mix of methodological and epistemological contributions raises two questions for higher education research. First, as the field matures, does it continue to value, welcome, and integrate the perspectives offered by the disciplines? Some are doubtful. A recent survey of ASHE members (Aleman, 2002) reveals some disenchantment with higher education scholars' seeming penchant for studying increasingly smaller parts of collegiate issues without wider contextual analysis. This concern leads to the second methodological question: how can discipline-based scholars continue to use higher education to explore vital questions, questions that both advance their disciplines and extend our understanding of higher education?

This article uses the discipline of history to explore these questions. While not a teeming group, historians of higher education have employed their disciplinary lens to advance several lines of significant postsecondary inquiry (for example, issues of access, social mobility, professionalism, gender, and regionalism). This article first traces historians' early contributions to higher education, noting that most considered themselves scholars of history who happened to find higher education a fruitful spot for their investigations. Over time, a cadre of educational historians developed, scholars who focus intentionally on higher education; the next section explores their growing contributions. But this latter group faces its own methodological challenge: how to balance between generating research that is guided by the insights and problems of history versus allowing contemporary educational puzzles about students, leadership, organization, or markets to determine their research agenda. Recognizing this as a difficult choice for any disciplinary scholar, this article encourages historians to consider the value of the second approach, suggesting that it offers strong potential for strengthening higher education research.

Early Historical Contributions to Higher Education Research

Historian John Thelin, whose recent presidency of ASHE marks him as a scholar sensitive to the postsecondary present, explored the origins of historical scholarship on higher education in a 1985 review. He observed that most early contributors were historians first and higher education specialists only incidentally. Yet, as the field developed, Thelin worried that later scholars too frequently ignored the contemporary implications of their analyses.

Thelin tracked the field's serious origins to the 1960s, when historians began to examine the collegiate past within a "wider sphere of social context and change" (p. 350). They abandoned an earlier tendency to tell

stories of individual campuses simply as parts of an unquestioned march of progress and instead pursued a deeper inquiry into the importance of collegiate organization, politics, growth, and conflict. Historians increasingly viewed colleges and universities as a structural element in the social history of the United States, one that traditionally served a professional, or at least privileged, class of students. Several of these 1960s historians produced classic interpretations that are still used by higher education scholars, including Frederick Rudolph's *The American College and University: A History* (1962) and Laurence Veysey's *The Emergence of the American University* (1965).

Thelin noted the strong "cross-fertilization" between history and sociology as a hallmark of higher education scholarship by the 1970s. Sociologists such as David Riesman, Christopher Jencks (1968), and Burton Clark found in higher education history examples of concepts like stratification, class, and functional analysis that expanded our understanding of how higher education affected social mobility. Historians Harold Wechsler (1977) and Marcia Synnott (1979) followed this lead in a specific direction, producing impressive analyses of how colleges had dealt over time with minority populations and selective admissions. This era, and the disciplinary collaborations it fostered, established the themes of access and mobility as one of higher education's strongest strands of inquiry.

Yet, assessing the field in the mid-1980s, Thelin was wary. He gauged the 1970s as the peak of history's influence, given the prominent scholars using the approach and the relative ease with which they attracted financial support. By 1985 Thelin judged that "the logic and methods of historical analysis remain accidental or marginal in higher education as a field of study" (p. 374). He worried that historians were ignoring potent current applications, perhaps from a fear of having their work labeled "presentist" by other historians who decry using current problems to drive historical questions.

Hoping to allay worry and encourage stronger collaboration, Thelin outlined a series of potential connections between historians and other scholars who wish to explore the role of collegiate institutions in American life. A study of the relationship of access and admissions, he suggested, could clarify the accumulated impact of each era's decisions about who constitutes a desirable student. Historians' explication of social context could provide information to help institutions in their long-range strategic planning. Likewise, clarity about the shifting historical role of financing and economics could inform policy analysis.

Thelin never suggested that historians let their scholarship be guided by purely utilitarian ends, choosing topics only for their contemporary

relevance. Such an approach would deny the true nature of scholarly inquiry. However, he called on historians, higher education scholars, and practitioners to end their strategy of “mutual avoidance,” encouraging historians to show how they could contribute to contemporary discussions of mission, student retention, remediation, marketing, and organizational context.

A New Assessment

How has the collaboration between history and higher education fared nearly two decades after Thelin’s analysis? Have historians responded to Thelin’s encouragement? This section traces an array of contributions, showing first how non-historians in higher education have used historical perspectives to clarify their own work. It then outlines how historians have provided “building blocks” for the field, sometimes examining specific issues, other times redefining a scholarly understanding. I suggest that, although only some historians have intentionally heeded Thelin’s call for a more contemporary-focused inquiry, all their work demonstrates strong implications for understanding the present, thereby expanding the base of higher education scholarship.

As higher education research has matured, practitioners with an appreciation of history have applied a historical lens to their own work. The pioneers’ autobiographies (Pace, 1998; McKeachie, 1999; Clark, 2000; Berdahl, 2001) offer one example, as does a twenty-year retrospective by members of the postsecondary research division, presented at the 2001 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Morey, et al., 2001). Similarly, the *Journal of Higher Education* published an anniversary issue in 1999 that reprinted a collection of articles from the 1930s, its first decade. Editor Leonard Baird observed the ahistorical nature of this work, finding the early articles generally void of references to literature beyond higher education. Especially striking was that, for a group of pieces written in the Depression-era 1930s, so much of the surrounding tumult was “perplexingly absent.” At best, Baird noted, 1930s authors presaged issues around administrative change, selective admissions, assessment techniques, and curricular innovation, but without much analytical prescience (JHE, 1999).

Such efforts are useful examples of higher education scholars applying a historical lens to the overall direction of the field. An additional contribution occurs when scholars who are not historians recognize the importance of exploring the historical bases of their own research. Robert Birnbaum (2000), for example, realizes the impact of historical cycles in analyzing how management “fads” have seduced higher educa-

tion administrators over the last several decades, letting them conveniently forget the promises and pitfalls of previous solutions. Arthur Cohen (1998) recognizes how strongly the history of the community college movement has affected its current place—and challenges—within the higher education taxonomy. Susan Twombly and Marilyn Amey (1991) use a historical lens alongside a contemporary one in exploring how decisions by national community college leaders have affected local decision makers. James Hearn (2000) emphasizes contextual historical analysis when examining inconsistencies in the growth of four decades of federal student aid programs, showing the absence of expected demographic, managerial, fiscal, or political requisites. Patricia McDonough, Marc Ventresca, and Charles Outcalt (1995) begin a study of how institutions approach student access by first outlining how historians, including Veysey, have explained organizational change in higher education.

Such use of historical analyses by non-historians is a sign of the field's maturity. Clearly, historians of higher education have been creating building blocks and crafting new perspectives that others can tap as they explore contemporary concerns. How have historians developed these perspectives, and to what extent do they acknowledge, and even foster, implications to current issues?

Often, historians' inquiry is prompted by particular historical puzzles, situations, or developments, many of which are connected to the present. Connolly (2000), for example, examines the appearance over time of Native American nicknames and logos at various American colleges and universities and sorts periods of acceptance, offense, challenge, and change that resulted from attention to their symbolic meaning. Hutcheson (1997) acknowledges the ongoing significance of 1950s McCarthyism to understanding past and present faculty life but also highlights the historiographic problems that have kept scholars from fully understanding the impact of that movement. Historians like Wallenstein (1999) and Kean (1999) are beginning to refine the history of the 1950s and 1960s campus-based civil rights movement by adding the stories of individual black Southerners, including women, who challenged segregation before and after the 1954 *Brown* decision. These fuller stories affect the way that campuses view their own recent histories.

At times, the consideration of a group's experience attracts historians' attention. For example, the history of African Americans in higher education has been expanded by James Anderson's *The Education of Blacks in the South* (1988), a work that emphasizes the agency of black participants in dealing with white philanthropists and power brokers. Vanessa Siddle Walker's *Their Highest Potential: An African American School*

Community in the Segregated South (1996) extends Anderson's analysis by stressing the significance of community to the development of African American institutions. Amy McCandless (1999) has done much the same for consideration of women's role in higher education. Her award-winning study of Southern women's education clarifies the roles played by both white and African American students and educators, even as it reclaims the history of the South in the development of post-secondary education.

Sometimes the analysis of an individual campus deepens or corrects contemporary understandings. Katherine Reynolds (1998), writing on Black Mountain College, David Potts (1992) on Wesleyan University, and John Rury (1997) on DePaul have all provided such deeply analytical campus histories, at times surfacing situations and memories that challenge a thoroughly positive picture. When historians take on the ultimate contemporary challenge by writing the history of their own campus, real political concerns and scholarly conflicts can emerge. A group of historians who have attempted institutional histories have written about the difficulties they face: sponsors can resist the uncovering of unsavory episodes, still living participants can be hurt by revelations or analyses, scholars can be pressured to conform to a specific preferred interpretation (Leslie, 2000). To combat these concerns, these historians recommend taking a strong scholarly stance, rather than being seen as public relations advocates. Like all good scholars, they attempt to challenge prevailing interpretations through analysis of strong data.

Other historians have done the same when redefining a larger issue in the field. The historical development of college and university administration offers a good example of how historians' rediscovery of forgotten elements has reoriented our understanding. Collegiate administration has a surprisingly underanalyzed history, given its growth throughout the twentieth century. Early contributor Veysey (1965) briefly examined increases in administrative roles while explicating the larger growth of the research university. More recently, Carolyn Bashaw (1999), Jana Nidiffer (2000), and Robert Schwartz (1997) have approached this history by examining the little-studied student affairs deanship. All three have found that women helped professionalize a field that had been staffed only haphazardly by men. Perhaps because men traditionally had more professional options, they overlooked the potential power of the dean's role; women, on the other hand, used it as an entering wedge into higher education administration. The new interpretation crafted by these historians changes our understanding of the place of student affairs within the wider postsecondary enterprise.

Nidiffer and Bashaw (2001) pursued the implications of knowing

more about women's role in the development of administrative positions. They co-edited a book with the unusual goal of combining historical and contemporary analyses of women as educational leaders, presenting contributions by historians and practitioners in the same volume. Through a historical analysis of women's experience, the authors not only highlighted a continuing issue of discrimination, but also identified places in collegiate administration where women—as presidents, deans, physical education teachers, and health professionals—claimed space, power, and influence for themselves and for female students.

Historians have similarly prompted a reinterpretation of the role of college athletics on contemporary campuses. Current observers worry about the disproportionate influence of athletics on curriculum, finances, and image, yet their critiques often miss the element of how sports acquired such a key role in college life. Historical analyses from scholars like Thelin (1994) and Toma and Cross (2000) assert that changes in current athletics policies must start by recognizing the contribution of sports, athletes, and coaches to the collegiate enterprise. Historical analysis reminds us, for example, that for many taxpayers, the fortunes of the state university team epitomize education's real "success" as well as the status of public commitment to education. Athletics has provided an unusual connection between higher education and the democratic polity that cannot be ignored, either historically or in the present.

A third area (in addition to administration and athletics) where historians have helped redefine contemporary understanding is the growth of systemic elements in higher education. Sometimes these elements are particular types of institutions; other times, they are state or national influences. For instance, Roger Geiger (1986, 1993) has investigated the growth of research universities over the course of the twentieth century. Nancy Diamond and Hugh Davis Graham (1997) are intrigued by the selective growth of such institutions after World War II, wondering how some schools benefitted so demonstrably from the era's rise of "big science," as well as how this growth affected collegiate missions. Their *The Rise of American Research Universities: Elites and Challengers in the Postwar Era* could be a primer for contemporary institutional planners by exploring how some schools seized new opportunities, redefining both their mission and curriculum, while others fumbled in responding to the new environment. John Aubrey Douglass (2000) interrogates the development and impact of a state-level system, analyzing the 1960s California Master Plan that served as a model for so many other states. When Douglass explores some of the costs from this planned reorganization of higher education, he helps explain current developments in California that result from decades of state-level planning. George

Marsden (1994) and Philip Gleason (1995) have led a concerted effort to reexamine the development of Catholic institutions, considering them not only as a separate strand, but also investigating the effect of such a unique option within higher education. Each of these analyses is conducted by historians who see implications of the past for the present.

Occasionally, historians attempt a wide revision of the history of higher education, although few have done so since Rudolph and Veysey in the 1960s. This development may be slow because new historical methods like social history and quantitative analyses are providing complex basic analyses that make syntheses difficult. However, the history of women in higher education offers one example of a recently reconceptualized history. Historian Barbara Solomon's *In the Company of Educated Women* (1985) synthesized the increasingly sophisticated contributions being made by new developments in women's history. Using newly available research, Solomon offered a reconceived exploration of women's demand, use, participation, and effect on American higher education, emphasizing their varied successes amid long periods without welcome. Although Solomon's work is now old enough to merit revision of its own (Eisenmann, 1997, 2001), it nonetheless stands as a strong reanalysis of a large sweep of higher education, one that helps analysts better understand women's ongoing struggles for professional acceptance (e.g., "the glass ceiling").

Roger Geiger (1992) offers another wide-ranging new analysis in his exploration of collegiate growth and change throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His "matrix" approach to higher education examines consecutive periods of collegiate development according to changes in knowledge, institutions, and constituents. Such a conception invites other historians to provide additional building blocks and data points that can help affirm, disconfirm, or revise Geiger's analysis.

Recent historical work in higher education—whether closely focused on a single topic or widely conceived—has clearly enriched the field. At times historical scholars have intentionally applied their findings to contemporary situations; but often, the implications remain to be drawn. How might a historian more actively respond to issues of contemporary application that arise during research?

Using the Historical Lens

In this article, I have agreed with Thelin's (1985) suggestion that historians re-examine their solipsistic research inclinations, and I have highlighted examples that demonstrate how solid historical scholarship can—intentionally or not—inform current research. The challenge is not

an easy one, however, for historians who must employ the methods, curiosity, themes, and inquiry of their discipline, whether or not the findings apply to the present. In this final section, I use my own current explorations of post-World War II higher education to examine how a historian can recognize a dialogue between historical findings and contemporary implications.

I am pursuing two lines of historical research on higher education from 1945 to the present. My main focus examines women's participation as faculty and students from 1945 to 1965, before the new women's movement took firm hold on American campuses (Eisenmann, 2002, 2003). I explore connections between women's more recent activism and a quieter period in their history. A second, more preliminary project investigates the history of comprehensive, urban universities (like the "Urban 13") that prospered and expanded during the high-growth 1960s.

We already know a great deal about some aspects of this "golden age" of American higher education. Richard Freeland (1992) and Roger Geiger (1993), among others, have traced the development of research universities through the postwar influx of federal research dollars, emphasizing the power of this new sector and its mission. The appearance of G.I. Bill veterans has provided another line of historical inquiry, with attention to how this new group altered the student profile (Olson, 1974; Clark, 1998). General education was also reinvigorated during the postwar landscape, partially prompted by Harvard's explorations (Harvard University, 1945; Rudolph, 1977). Work on all of these areas has helped redefine our understanding of contemporary institutions.

But other elements of postwar collegiate development—ones with equally strong contemporary applications—have attracted less attention from historians. For instance, looking at institutions, community colleges burst with growth as new populations, new needs, and new money coincided in the 1960s. Yet these schools lack a thorough exploration of their history (Hutcheson, 1999). Likewise, other significant institutions, like comprehensive universities and urban institutions, found added constituents, growing support, and invigorated missions in a burgeoning postwar period, but historians have yet to seriously analyze the effects of their development.

The shifting populations in higher education—which are intriguing to current scholars of access and financial aid—also lack a full examination through the lens of social history. Women, people of color, and middle-class students (beyond the veterans) changed the look of campuses; but what else did they change? How might deeper investigations of postwar organizations, students, and influences reveal antecedents or clarifications of current concerns?

The study of women's postwar educational participation promises clarity on a few of these questions. Women's postwar role has, perhaps surprisingly, been rather neglected, even with the last two decades of strong research. Perhaps the "Father Knows Best" stereotypes of the 1950s have encouraged us to accept Betty Friedan's (1963) picture of women carelessly abandoning college in favor of home and family. In fact, although women's percentage of the student body dropped immediately following World War II, their actual numbers in higher education grew steadily from 1945 to the present (with slight dips only in 1951 and 1952) (NCES, 1993). Simultaneously, women's participation in all segments of the labor market—including single women, married women, and older women—grew steadily (Goldin, 1990; Kessler-Harris, 1982). These two facts suggest how postwar women came to understand the economic power of collegiate training; they also inform the recent concern that women now "overpopulate" sectors of higher education at the expense of men (Eisenmann, 2003).

When current scholars and student affairs professionals lament the continuing lack of understanding about students of color, women, and gay and lesbian students, they might be informed by the studied indifference accorded these groups in the postwar era. African Americans and women generally attracted attention only from people holding direct responsibility for them, including administrators at historically black institutions and women's colleges. Most postwar observers and scholars regarded these groups as far too marginal to hold any explanatory power in larger models or policy recommendations.

For example, Caplow and McGee's influential analysis of *The Academic Marketplace* (1958), dismissed women entirely: "Women tend to be discriminated against in the academic profession, not because they have low prestige but because they are outside the prestige system entirely and for this reason are of no use to a department in future recruitment" (p. 111). Minority scholars met much the same fate. The authors did acknowledge the "inequitable treatment" that these scholars experienced, but they offered few suggestions for analyzing or amending the damage (see also Caplow & McGee, 2001).

Postwar organizations and commissions offer potentially fruitful avenues for exploring the actual situation for such scholars and students. Ad hoc groups like the President's Commission on Higher Education (also known as the Truman Commission) (President's Commission, 1947) and the Commission on the Education of Women of the American Council on Education (1953–1962) focused attention not only on these students but also on institutions and research that supported them, emphasizing the ongoing effects of discriminatory practice. Similarly, or-

ganizations like the National Association of Women Deans and Counselors, the American Association of University Women (Bashaw, 2001), and its African American counterpart, the National Association of College Women (Perkins, 1990), reveal historical antecedents of exclusion that help explain subsequent (and sometimes difficult) efforts to claim a place for women professionals. Examining these organizations allows us to trace, from past to present, the personal, professional, and research concerns surrounding these populations, as well as to reclaim the contributions of individual postwar scholars and activists.

We can also inform our understanding of how different groups of students have experienced college by investigating their treatment in the past. For example, postwar cultural norms preached heterosexuality and the preeminence of the family. Consequently, most gay and lesbian collegians and faculty were either closeted or persecuted for much of this period. The Kinsey reports of 1948 and 1953 signaled a slow acceptance of new approaches to sexuality on campuses (Bailey, 1999 ; D'Emilio, 1992). Similarly, countercultural groups like the Beats allowed women limited new options for self-expression (Breines, 1994).

The postwar growth of institutional “tiers” and the power of the research model help explain the “mission creep” that has been identified among many current institutions trying to redefine their place in the hierarchy. The history of Massachusetts offers an interesting example. Unlike many states, Massachusetts has a weak history of state-sponsored higher education. The five campuses of the University of Massachusetts were organized into a system only in 1991, and the state colleges have developed more autonomously than in many regions of the country. Currently, at least one of these state colleges aspires to university status; its president has proclaimed this institution as ready to “advance” to a new tier. Resistance and doubt have met the president’s announcement. Certainly, Massachusetts’ long history of strong private institutions that denigrate the former teachers colleges, along with the slow growth of state influence, help explain the reaction—and, perhaps, the college’s chance of success.

Connecting History and Practice

Work like my own that attempts to clarify the “ecology” of a wider array of higher education populations and institutions holds considerable promise for the way we understand contemporary higher education. Examining how various sorts of institutions interacted, as well as how higher education met challenges posed by growing student populations, can better inform our appreciation of current concerns.

Yet not all historians would perceive such an easy conversation between examining the present via the past. Like all disciplinary scholars, historians generate their questions and organize their inquiry according to the tenets of their field. Thus, many would reject as presentist any suggestion that their analyses be dictated by the interests of practitioners and policymakers.

However, the material highlighted here demonstrates that there can be a symbiosis between rigorous historical analysis and careful contemporary application. Historians like Rudolph, Veysey, and Solomon used sound historical methods and produced work that is both ground-breaking to history and helpful to scholars of higher education. Likewise, more recent historians, working on challenges and puzzles found in the historical record, have prompted insights into the postsecondary present.

Perhaps the results are strongest when the responsibility for applying historical analysis is shared by those who *produce* it and those who *use* it. Historians must become more comfortable in highlighting, even pursuing, connections between past and present; but, at the same time, they must welcome and converse with other scholars—even those not trained in history—who apply elements of historical analysis to contemporary concerns. This approach never diminishes disciplinary inquiry but gains the added strength of extending the increasingly vital field of higher education research. Through such discussion, historians join disciplinary colleagues in economics, philosophy, law, psychology, and anthropology who intentionally apply their interpretive skills and methodological approaches to higher education.

Conclusion

It has taken some time for historians to recognize the fertile ground that higher education offers as a site for their analyses. Likewise, the field of higher education needed to mature before it fully appreciated the value of applying historical assessments to contemporary concerns. However, some traditional historians became intrigued with using higher education as a setting to examine their concerns, for example, with class mobility. Other times, higher education analysts turned to the tools and data of history to clarify their understanding, for example, of the power of athletics on collegiate campuses. Once the two approaches conjoined after the 1960s, a deeper understanding began to inform higher education's view of access, mobility, student populations, curriculum, institutional diversity, policymaking, and financing, to name only a few significant contributions.

The value of turning a historical lens on these concerns—whether it

comes from asking a question specific to history or is generated by contemporary practice—is that practitioners and policymakers gain a fuller, more wide-angled view of the higher education enterprise. Worries about women’s growing predominance as undergraduate students, for instance, can be clarified by learning the history of how and why they pushed for access to an identifiably equal collegiate curriculum. Or the complicated negotiations faced by many contemporary gay and lesbian students can be illuminated by understanding the treatment they experienced in the post-World War II era. Higher education—still a relatively young field—needs disciplinary contributions to stretch its analyses, both conceptually and methodologically. And, for the foreseeable future, higher education promises to offer a potent site for disciplinary inquiry, as the example of history promisingly demonstrates.

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