

a history of american higher education

****A History of American Higher Education: From Colonial Beginnings to Modern Innovations****

a history of american higher education is a fascinating journey that mirrors the social, political, and economic evolution of the United States itself. From its modest colonial origins to the sprawling network of universities and colleges today, American higher education has undergone transformative changes that continue to shape the fabric of the nation. Whether you're a student, educator, or simply curious about how American colleges came to be, understanding this history offers valuable insights into why higher education functions the way it does now.

The Colonial Roots of American Higher Education

The story of a history of American higher education begins in the early 17th century, deeply intertwined with religious motivations. The first institution of higher learning, Harvard College, was established in 1636 in Massachusetts Bay Colony primarily to train clergy. This was a clear reflection of the Puritan settlers' priorities—education was a means to ensure religious and moral leadership in the community.

Soon after, other colonial colleges followed, such as William & Mary (1693), Yale (1701), and Princeton (1746). These early colleges were small, often church-affiliated, and focused heavily on classical studies, theology, and philosophy. The curriculum was rigorous but narrow, emphasizing Latin, Greek, and religious doctrine rather than practical or scientific knowledge.

The Role of Religion and Early Curriculum

Religion was at the core of early American education. Most colleges were founded by religious denominations seeking to create educated ministers who could lead congregations. This meant that the curriculum was steeped in theological study, with little room for secular subjects.

However, as the colonies grew more diverse, so did the educational landscape. The Enlightenment brought new ideas about science and reason, gradually influencing some institutions to broaden their curricula.

The Expansion and Democratization of Higher

Education

Moving into the 19th century, a history of American higher education reflects a period of rapid expansion and democratization. The United States was no longer just a collection of religious settlements; it was becoming a nation focused on innovation, industry, and civic participation.

The Morrill Land-Grant Acts and Practical Education

One of the most significant milestones was the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862. This legislation provided states with federal land to finance the establishment of colleges specializing in agriculture, engineering, and military science. The idea was to make higher education more accessible and aligned with the practical needs of a growing industrial society.

Land-grant universities like Michigan State University and Cornell University became centers for research and applied sciences, moving away from the purely classical education of earlier centuries. This shift also opened doors for students from more diverse social and economic backgrounds.

The Rise of Public Universities and Accessibility

The 19th century also saw the rise of public universities, which dramatically increased access to higher education. As states established their own institutions, education became less of a privilege reserved for the elite and more of a public good.

Furthermore, the establishment of normal schools (teacher training colleges) contributed to educational reform and expansion, especially for women and minorities. The seeds of inclusivity were being planted, albeit slowly.

The 20th Century: Transformation and Innovation

A history of American higher education in the 20th century is characterized by unprecedented growth, diversification, and transformation. The century witnessed the rise of research universities, the GI Bill, and the gradual inclusion of women and minority groups.

The GI Bill and Mass Higher Education

After World War II, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill, revolutionized American higher education. It provided

returning veterans with funding for college education, leading to a dramatic surge in enrollment.

This influx not only democratized education but also stimulated economic growth by creating a more educated workforce. Universities expanded their campuses, faculty, and programs to accommodate this new wave of students.

Research Universities and Academic Specialization

The 20th century also marked the rise of the American research university model, influenced heavily by the German educational system. Institutions like Johns Hopkins University pioneered the integration of research and teaching, emphasizing graduate education and specialized knowledge.

This period saw an explosion of academic disciplines, professional schools, and doctoral programs. Universities became hubs of innovation, scientific discovery, and cultural development, contributing significantly to the country's global leadership.

Challenges and Progress in Diversity and Inclusion

Although progress was made in expanding access, higher education in the 20th century grappled with issues of racial segregation and gender inequality. Landmark decisions like *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Civil Rights Movement paved the way for the desegregation of colleges and universities.

Simultaneously, women's colleges and coeducation became more prominent, leading to increased female participation in higher education. Affirmative action policies later sought to address historical inequities, although debates about access and representation continue today.

Contemporary Trends and the Future of American Higher Education

In exploring a history of American higher education, it's impossible to ignore the rapid changes taking place today. The 21st century has brought challenges such as rising tuition costs, student debt, and debates over the value of a college degree. At the same time, innovation and technology are reshaping how education is delivered.

The Digital Revolution and Online Learning

Technology has transformed the landscape of higher education. Online courses, digital resources, and virtual classrooms have made learning more flexible and accessible. Institutions are increasingly adopting hybrid models that blend in-person and online instruction.

This shift not only expands access for non-traditional students but also encourages lifelong learning and continuous skill development, which are crucial in a fast-changing job market.

Rising Costs and Student Debt Crisis

One of the most pressing issues facing American higher education today is affordability. Tuition fees have soared over the past few decades, leading to a student debt crisis that affects millions.

This financial barrier raises important questions about the sustainability of the current system and has sparked movements advocating for free community college, loan forgiveness, and more transparent pricing.

Emphasis on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Modern institutions continue to grapple with ensuring their campuses are diverse and inclusive. Efforts to recruit and support underrepresented minorities and first-generation college students have intensified, reflecting a broader commitment to social justice.

Universities are also addressing systemic barriers and creating support systems to help all students thrive academically and personally.

Key Takeaways from a History of American Higher Education

Looking back, the history of American higher education is a story of adaptation and resilience. From its religious and classical roots to its modern role as an engine of innovation and social mobility, the system has continually evolved to meet the needs of the nation.

Understanding this history can offer valuable perspective for students and educators navigating today's complex educational landscape. It highlights the importance of access, practical learning, research, and inclusivity as cornerstones of American higher education.

Whether you're planning your academic future or simply interested in educational history, appreciating the journey of American colleges and

universities enriches how we view the present and envision the future.

Frequently Asked Questions

What were the origins of American higher education?

American higher education began in the colonial period with the establishment of Harvard College in 1636, originally intended to train clergy and promote religious values.

How did the Morrill Land-Grant Acts impact higher education in the United States?

The Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890 provided federal land to states to fund the creation of colleges focused on agriculture, engineering, and military science, significantly expanding access to higher education.

What role did the G.I. Bill play in shaping American higher education?

The G.I. Bill, passed in 1944, provided returning World War II veterans with funding for college education, leading to a dramatic increase in college enrollment and the expansion of universities.

How has diversity in American higher education evolved over time?

Initially dominated by white male students, American higher education has progressively become more inclusive, with increased enrollment of women, racial minorities, and international students, especially after the Civil Rights Movement and affirmative action policies.

What is the significance of community colleges in the history of American higher education?

Community colleges emerged in the 20th century as accessible, affordable institutions providing vocational training, associate degrees, and pathways to four-year universities, playing a crucial role in democratizing higher education.

How has the rise of online education transformed American higher education?

Online education has expanded access to higher education by offering flexible, remote learning opportunities, especially benefiting non-

traditional students and responding to technological advancements and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additional Resources

****A History of American Higher Education: Evolution, Challenges, and Impact****

a history of american higher education reflects a complex interplay of cultural values, economic demands, and social transformations that have shaped the United States' educational landscape over centuries. From its colonial beginnings rooted in religious instruction to its current status as a global leader in research and innovation, the trajectory of higher education in America reveals critical shifts in access, purpose, and governance. This article delves into the origins, developments, and ongoing challenges within American colleges and universities, providing an analytical perspective on the forces that have influenced their growth and the implications for future generations.

Origins and Early Development

The inception of American higher education dates back to the early 17th century, during the colonial era. Institutions such as Harvard College, founded in 1636, were originally established to train clergy and perpetuate religious orthodoxy. This early emphasis on theology and classical education set a precedent for many colonial colleges, which were often affiliated with specific denominations.

However, these early establishments were limited in both scope and accessibility. Higher education was predominantly reserved for white, male elites, reflecting broader societal hierarchies. Curricula were narrowly focused on Latin, Greek, rhetoric, and religious studies. Despite these limitations, colleges laid the groundwork for intellectual inquiry and community leadership.

The Shift Toward Secular and Practical Education

The 19th century marked significant transformations in American higher education. The Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890 catalyzed the expansion of public universities by allocating federal lands to states to fund institutions emphasizing agriculture, science, and engineering. This legislative initiative reflected a growing recognition of the need for practical education aligned with the country's industrializing economy.

Consequently, many land-grant universities broadened their missions beyond classical studies. They introduced applied sciences and fostered research,

which contributed to technological advancements and economic growth. This period also witnessed the rise of coeducation and the gradual inclusion of women and minorities, although full integration remained elusive for decades.

The Rise of Research Universities and Diversification

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the emergence of research universities modeled after the German system, prioritizing original scholarship alongside teaching. Institutions like Johns Hopkins University pioneered this approach, emphasizing graduate education and scientific inquiry.

This era also saw the establishment of specialized professional schools in fields such as law, medicine, and business. The diversification of academic offerings responded to societal demands for expertise and helped elevate the status of American higher education on the global stage.

Impact of the GI Bill and Post-War Expansion

Following World War II, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944—commonly known as the GI Bill—dramatically increased college enrollment by providing veterans with tuition assistance. This democratization of access transformed higher education from an elite privilege into a mass enterprise.

Between 1945 and 1965, the number of college students in the U.S. surged, prompting the expansion of existing campuses and the creation of community colleges. These two-year institutions became critical gateways for underserved populations, offering affordable and accessible educational opportunities.

Contemporary Challenges and Trends

In recent decades, American higher education has confronted a series of challenges that complicate its mission and sustainability. Rising tuition costs and student debt have sparked debates about affordability and equity. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, average undergraduate tuition and fees at public four-year institutions nearly tripled between 1990 and 2020, outpacing inflation and wage growth.

Simultaneously, the landscape has been reshaped by increasing diversity among students, advances in technology, and shifting labor market demands. Institutions grapple with balancing traditional liberal arts education with vocational training and online learning platforms.

Accountability, Rankings, and Funding Pressures

The growing prominence of college rankings and accountability measures influences institutional priorities, sometimes incentivizing research output and reputation over teaching quality or community engagement. Public universities face fluctuating state funding, compelling them to rely more heavily on tuition and private sources.

Private institutions, while often better funded, must navigate competitive admissions and donor expectations. Across the board, there is ongoing debate about the role of higher education in promoting social mobility versus perpetuating socioeconomic disparities.

Key Milestones in the History of American Higher Education

- **1636:** Founding of Harvard College, the first American institution of higher learning.
- **1862:** Passage of the Morrill Land-Grant Act, enabling the establishment of numerous public universities.
- **1880s:** Introduction of research-oriented graduate programs inspired by European models.
- **1944:** GI Bill expands access to higher education for returning World War II veterans.
- **1960s:** Growth of community colleges and affirmative action policies increase diversity and access.
- **1990s-present:** Rise of online education, internationalization, and debates over cost and value.

The Role of Higher Education in American Society

American higher education has traditionally served multiple roles: preparing citizens for civic participation, fostering innovation, and driving economic development. The sector's evolution mirrors the nation's broader social and cultural shifts—whether through the integration of marginalized groups or the adaptation to new technological realities.

At the same time, the system's complexity and fragmentation raise questions about coherence and equity. While elite research universities continue to dominate global rankings, many institutions face challenges related to enrollment declines, funding shortages, and the imperative to serve diverse student populations with varying needs.

The ongoing dialogue about the future of American higher education involves stakeholders from policymakers to students, each advocating for reforms that balance quality, access, and sustainability.

Through this lens, a history of American higher education is not only a record of institutional milestones but also a reflection of evolving democratic ideals and economic imperatives that will shape the country's trajectory for decades to come.

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In this updated edition of *A History of American Higher Education*, John R. Thelin offers welcome perspective on the triumphs and crises of this highly influential sector in American life. Exploring American higher education from its founding in the seventeenth century to its struggle to innovate and adapt in the first decades of the twenty-first century, Thelin demonstrates that the experience of going to college has been central to American life for generations of students and their families. Drawing from archival research, along with the pioneering scholarship of leading historians, Thelin raises profound questions about what colleges are—and what they should be. Covering issues of social class, race, gender, and ethnicity in each era and chapter, this new edition showcases a fresh concluding chapter that focuses on both the opportunities and problems American higher education has faced since 2010. The essay on sources has been revised to incorporate books and articles published over the past decade. The book also updates the discussion of perennial hot-button issues such as big-time sports programs, online learning, the debt crisis, the adjunct crisis, and the return of the culture wars and addresses current areas of contention, including the changing role of governing boards and the financial challenges posed by the economic downturn. Anyone studying the history of this institution in America must read Thelin's classic text, which has distinguished itself as the most wide-ranging and engaging account of the origins and evolution of America's institutions of higher learning.

a history of american higher education: *An Analytical History of American Higher Education* Paul Westmeyer, 1997

a history of american higher education: *Higher Education in Transition* John Brubacher, 2017-07-05 At a time when our colleges and universities face momentous questions of new growth and direction, the republication of *Higher Education in Transition* is more timely than ever. Beginning with colonial times, the authors trace the development of our college and university system chronologically, in terms of men and institutions. They bring into focus such major areas of concern as curriculum, administration, academic freedom, and student life. They tell their story with a sharp eye for the human values at stake and the issues that will be with us in the future. One gets a sense not only of temporal sequence by centuries and decades but also of unity and continuity by a review of major themes and topics. Rudy's new chapters update developments in higher education during the last twenty years. *Higher Education in Transition* continues to have significance not only for those who work in higher education, but for everyone interested in American ideas, traditions, and social and intellectual history.

a history of american higher education: *The History of American Higher Education* Roger L. Geiger, 2016-09-06 This book tells the compelling saga of American higher education from the founding of Harvard College in 1636 to the outbreak of World War II. The author traces how colleges and universities were shaped by the shifting influences of culture, the emergence of new career opportunities, and the unrelenting advancement of knowledge. He describes how colonial colleges developed a unified yet diverse educational tradition capable of weathering the social upheaval of the Revolution as well as the evangelical fervor of the Second Great Awakening. He shows how the character of college education in different regions diverged significantly in the years leading up to the Civil War - for example, the state universities of the antebellum South were dominated by the sons of planters and their culture - and how higher education was later revolutionized by the land-grant movement, the growth of academic professionalism, and the transformation of campus life by students. By the beginning of the Second World War, the standard American university had taken shape, setting the stage for the postwar education boom. The author moves through each era, exploring the growth of higher education.

a history of american higher education: *The American College and University* Frederick Rudolph, 2011-07-01 First published in 1962, Frederick Rudolph's groundbreaking study, *The American College and University*, remains one of the most useful and significant works on the history of higher education in America. Bridging the chasm between educational and social history, this book was one of the first to examine developments in higher education in the context of the social, economic, and political forces that were shaping the nation at large. Surveying higher

education from the colonial era through the mid-twentieth century, Rudolph explores a multitude of issues from the financing of institutions and the development of curriculum to the education of women and blacks, the rise of college athletics, and the complexities of student life. In his foreword to this new edition, John Thelin assesses the impact that Rudolph's work has had on higher education studies. The new edition also includes a bibliographic essay by Thelin covering significant works in the field that have appeared since the publication of the first edition. At a time when our educational system as a whole is under intense scrutiny, Rudolph's seminal work offers an important historical perspective on the development of higher education in the United States.

a history of american higher education: The Land-Grant Colleges and the Reshaping of American Higher Education Roger L. Geiger, 2017-07-05 This work provides a critical reexamination of the origin and development of America's land-grant colleges and universities, created by the most important piece of legislation in higher education. The story is divided into five parts that provide closer examinations of representative developments. Part I describes the connection between agricultural research and American colleges. Part II shows that the responsibility of defining and implementing the land-grant act fell to the states, which produced a variety of institutions in the nineteenth century. Part III details the first phase of the conflict during the latter decades of the nineteenth century about whether land colleges were intended to be agricultural colleges, or full academic institutions. Part IV focuses on the fact that full-fledged universities became dominant institutions of American higher education. The final part shows that the land-grant mission is alive and well in university colleges of agriculture and, in fact, is inherent to their identity. Including some of the best minds the field has to offer, this volume follows in the fine tradition of past books in Transaction's Perspectives on the History of Higher Education series.

a history of american higher education: A History of Education in Kentucky William Ellis, 2011-06-01 Kentucky is nationally renowned for horses, bourbon, rich natural resources, and unfortunately, hindered by a deficient educational system. Though its reputation is not always justified, in national rankings for grades K-12 and higher education, Kentucky consistently ranks among the lowest states in education funding, literacy, and student achievement. In *A History of Education in Kentucky*, William E. Ellis illuminates the successes and failures of public and private education in the commonwealth since its settlement. Ellis demonstrates how political leaders in the nineteenth century created a culture that devalued public education and refused to adequately fund it. He also analyzes efforts by teachers and policy makers to enact vital reforms and establish adequate, equal education, and discusses ongoing battles related to religious instruction, integration, and the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). *A History of Education in Kentucky* is the only up-to-date, single-volume history of education in the commonwealth. Offering more than mere policy analysis, this comprehensive work tells the story of passionate students, teachers, and leaders who have worked for progress from the 1770s to the present day. Despite the prevailing pessimism about education in Kentucky, Ellis acknowledges signs of a vibrant educational atmosphere in the state. By advocating a better understanding of the past, Ellis looks to the future and challenges Kentuckians to avoid historic failures and build on their successes.

a history of american higher education: American Higher Education Transformed, 1940-2005 Wilson Smith, Thomas Bender, 2008-04-11 This long-awaited sequel to Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith's classic anthology *American Higher Education: A Documentary History* presents one hundred and seventy-two key edited documents that record the transformation of higher education over the past sixty years. The volume includes such seminal documents as Vannevar Bush's 1945 report to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Science, the Endless Frontier*; the U.S. Supreme Court decisions in *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Sweezy v. New Hampshire*; and Adrienne Rich's challenging essay *Taking Women Students Seriously*. The wide variety of readings underscores responses of higher education to a memorable, often tumultuous, half century. Colleges and universities faced a transformation of their educational goals, institutional structures and curricula, and admission policies; the ethnic and economic composition of student bodies; an expanding social and gender membership in the professoriate; their growing allegiance to and

dependence on federal and foundation financial aids; and even the definitions and defenses of academic freedom. Wilson Smith and Thomas Bender have assembled an essential reference for policymakers, administrators, and all those interested in the history and sociology of higher education.

a history of american higher education: American Higher Education Since World War II

Roger L. Geiger, 2021-05-25 Geiger provides an in-depth history of the remarkable transformation of higher education in the United States in the decades after World War II, taking readers from the GI Bill and the postwar expansion of higher education to the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, desegregation and coeducation, and the challenges confronting American colleges today. Shedding light on the tensions and triumphs of an era of rapid change, the author shows how American universities emerged after the war as the world's most successful system for the advancement of knowledge, how the pioneering of mass higher education led to the goal of higher education for all, and how the selectivity sweepstakes for admission to the most elite schools has resulted in increased stratification today. Geiger identifies 1980 as a turning point when the link between research and economic development stimulated a revival in academic research--and the ascendancy of the modern research university--that continues to the present. Sweeping in scope, this book demonstrates how growth has been the defining feature of modern higher education, but how each generation since the war has pursued it for different reasons. It provides the context we need to understand the complex issues facing our colleges and universities today, from rising inequality and skyrocketing costs to deficiencies in student preparedness and lax educational standards. --From publisher description.

a history of american higher education: The History of Higher Education

Association for the Study of Higher Education, 1997 The History of Higher Education combines classic readings with the most recent research on the history of American colleges and universities. This book covers five historical periods in the evolution of higher education from the time of the American colonies to the 1970s. The goal of this informative reader is to build a working historical knowledge base of the opportunities and problems confronting American higher education.

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a history of american higher education: The Shaping of American Higher Education

Arthur M. Cohen, Carrie B. Kisker, 2009-11-19 THE SHAPING OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION SECOND EDITION When the first edition of *The Shaping of American Higher Education* was published it was lauded for its historical perspective and in-depth coverage of current events that provided an authoritative, comprehensive account of the history of higher education in the United States. As in the first edition, this book tracks trends and important issues in eight key areas: student access, faculty professionalization, curricular expansion, institutional growth, governance, finance, research, and outcomes. Thoroughly revised and updated, the volume is filled with critical new data; recent information from specialized sources on faculty, student admissions, and management practices; and an entirely new section that explores privatization, corporatization, and accountability from the mid-1990s to the present. This second edition also includes end-of-chapter questions for guidance, reflection, and study. Cohen and Kisker do the nation's colleges and universities a much needed service by authoring this volume. The highly regarded histories of

American higher education have become badly dated. They ignore the last quarter century when American higher education was transformed. This volume provides comprehensive information on that era. — Art Levine, president, Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, and author, *When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Student* The second edition of *The Shaping of American Higher Education* is a treasure trove of information and insight. Cohen and Kisker provide us with astute and straightforward analysis and commentary on our past, present, and likely future. This book is invaluable to those seeking to go to the heart of the issues and challenges confronting higher education. — Judith S. Eaton, president, Council for Higher Education Accreditation Arthur Cohen and his collaborator have now updated his superb history of American higher education. It remains masterful, authoritative, comprehensive, and incisive, and guarantees that this work will stand as the classic required resource for all who want to understand where higher education came from and where it is going. The new material gives a wise and nuanced perspective on the current crisis-driven transformations of the higher education industry. — John Lombardi, president, Louisiana State University System *The Shaping of American Higher Education* is distinguished by its systematic approach, comprehensive coverage, and extensive treatment of the modern era, including the first years of the twenty-first century. In this second edition, Arthur Cohen and Carrie Kisker are especially adept at bringing historical perspective and a balanced viewpoint to controversial issues of the current era. — Roger L. Geiger, distinguished professor, The Pennsylvania State University, and author, *Knowledge and Money*

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life by students. By the beginning of the Second World War, the standard American university had taken shape, setting the stage for the postwar education boom. Breathtaking in scope and rich in narrative detail, *The History of American Higher Education* is the most comprehensive single-volume history of the origins and development of higher education in the United States.

a history of american higher education: *The History of U.S. Higher Education - Methods for Understanding the Past* Marybeth Gasman, 2013-10-14 The first volume in the Core Concepts of Higher Education series, *The History of U.S. Higher Education: Methods for Understanding the Past* is a unique research methods textbook that provides students with an understanding of the processes that historians use when conducting their own research. Written primarily for graduate students in higher education programs, this book explores critical methodological issues in the history of American higher education, including race, class, gender, and sexuality. Chapters include: Reflective Exercises that combine theory and practice Research Method Tips Further Reading Suggestions. Leading historians and those at the forefront of new research explain how historical literature is discovered and written, and provide readers with the methodological approaches to conduct historical higher education research of their own.

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a history of american higher education: *History of American Higher Education* Margaret Cain McCarthy, 2011 *History of American Higher Education* documents the fascinating evolution of American colleges and universities, touching on the historical events that shaped them, from the colonial era through the early twenty-first century. Throughout history, higher education has played an important role in the transmission of cultural identity from one generation to the next. This book outlines how, as the colonists transitioned from English rule to independence, a unique American culture began to develop and institutions of higher education evolved to prepare leaders with the intellectual and practical skills necessary to build a nation. Eventually, faith in science created an expansive knowledge industry, and the notion that an educated citizenry was required for an effective democracy expanded and diversified educational opportunities. Complete with a bibliography, this primer is an excellent and comprehensive source of information on the history and organization of higher education in the United States.

a history of american higher education: *American Academic Cultures* Paul H. Mattingly, 2017-11-23 At a time when American higher education seems ever more to be reflecting on its purpose and potential, we are more inclined than ever to look to its history for context and inspiration. But that history only helps, Paul H. Mattingly argues, if it's seen as something more than a linear progress through time. With *American Academic Cultures*, he offers a different type of history of American higher learning, showing how its current state is the product of different, varied generational cultures, each grounded in its own moment in time and driven by historically distinct values that generated specific problems and responses. Mattingly sketches out seven broad generational cultures: evangelical, Jeffersonian, republican/nondenominational, industrially driven, progressively pragmatic, internationally minded, and the current corporate model. What we see through his close analysis of each of these cultures in their historical moments is that the politics of higher education, both inside and outside institutions, are ultimately driven by the dominant culture of the time. By looking at the history of higher education in this new way, Mattingly opens our eyes to our own moment, and the part its culture plays in generating its politics and promise.

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