



Glimpses of American Higher Education's Past

A Review of

Essential Documents in the History of American Higher Education

by John R. Thelin

Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 358 pp. ISBN 978-1-4214-1421-8 (hardcover); ISBN 978-1-4214-1422-5 (paperback); ISBN 978-1-4214-1423-2 (e-book). \$59.95, hardcover; \$29.95, paperback

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0038194>

Reviewed by

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The history of American psychology and the history of higher education in America are closely related. From the Scottish Common Sense psychology taught by philosophers in the 19th-century denominational colleges to the elaborate laboratories of the 21st-century psychology and cognitive science departments in research universities, the fortunes of the two have been intertwined. It is unimaginable that our discipline would have developed the way it has outside the college and university environment.

John Thelin's new book *Essential Documents in the History of American Higher Education* is a collection of documents that illustrate the history of American higher education. It is designed to supplement the second edition of his history of American higher education (Thelin, 2011). The 46 documents are mostly primary sources, but there are also articles from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and excerpts from books. The history of higher education in California gets special emphasis. So do research universities, although the community colleges and state colleges get a little more attention here than in his textbook. The primary purpose of this collection is to provide illustrative material for readers of the textbook, but because of the nature of the documents, the book is of interest in its own right.

The Nature of the Documents

The book is chronologically organized in parallel with the textbook, but it could just as easily have been organized by document type. I will highlight the book's content by discussing the kinds of documents included.

College charters. The charters of The College of Rhode Island (1764), University of Georgia (1785), and Mount Holyoke (1836) explicitly reveal the values of the founders. Those values

reflect the founders' views that education is about the influence of minds and character, not private profit or economic development. There is no suggestion that education should be vocational preparation except for the primacy of preparation for the ministry for male students and for the roles of wife and mother for the women. Of course, these charters are not representative of all early postsecondary higher education. For example, Thelin could have included a charter for one of the 19th-century normal schools that would have revealed specific preparation for teachers even though most of the graduates of those schools wanted more education, not a job as a teacher (Ogren, 2005).

Legislation. Among the legislative documents excerpted here are several of the most important in the history of American education. The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 provided the basis for the growth of the great land grant universities and the historically Black colleges and universities. Especially in the Midwest, the land grant universities became places where psychology thrived (e.g., Illinois, Minnesota, and Wisconsin). The 1944 Serviceman's Readjustment Act (better known as the GI Bill) transformed the country's colleges and universities in the years after World War II and sent many young adults into psychology, growing it as a science and profession (Baker & Benjamin, 2000). The legislation that funded what became known as Pell Grants also shows that federal support could broaden the reach of universities to students whose need would have otherwise excluded them from higher education.

Reports. The generation of reports was a frequent activity of higher educators throughout the 20th-century, and that proclivity has continued into this century. Although critics might call much of the reporting navel-gazing, the existence of the reports is rich material for historians. Thelin has included Flexner's 1910 report on medical education that called for university-based preparation combined with significant field experiences and Vannevar Bush's 1945 report on the government's role in encouraging basic research that led to the rapid expansion of the research universities. Also included are the 1971 Newman Report and the 1981 report of the California Postsecondary Education Commission on the role of the community colleges, both of which raised issues of access that are still being debated today. Indeed, many of the reports that Thelin has chosen reflect timeless tensions such as that between research and teaching and access and cost.

Perhaps the tension most visible to the general public has been that between academics and intercollegiate athletics (one of Thelin's particular areas of expertise). There are excerpts from the 1929 Carnegie Foundation for Teaching reports by Howard Savage and from the 1991 and 2010 Knight Commission reports. Each of the reports raised questions about costs, academic integrity, alumni participation, and presidential control. None of the reports adequately addresses the question asked by Savage's hypothetical European visitor to an American football game: "What relation has this astonishing display to the work of an intellectual agency like a university?" (p. 174). We can anticipate more reports in the future.

Memoirs. No matter how important, the legislative acts and reports can be dry. The memoirs that Thelin has selected serve to give a more evocative sense of what it was like to be a student, professor, or professor's wife in various periods. The 1905 memoir of a small college professor's wife reveals details about the difficulties of the life of an academic's family when the purchase of books was a luxury and the family's clothes were sewn by hand at home.

The student memoirs are largely written by individuals who became well known rather than by typical students. The humorist Robert Benchley, in his 1927 "What College Did to Me," is funny, and James Thurber's 1933 story about being a freshman at Ohio State is colorful. Lyman Bragg's description of Yale in the 1870s, John Kenneth Galbraith's fond reminiscences of being a graduate student at Berkeley in the 1930s, and Steven Kelman's story of political activism in the 1960s at Harvard each capture the tenor of a period. Rosa Maria Pequeros's 1995 report of a life as an outsider in education provides a touching and insightful perspective on students' struggles with a system that often seemed bent on marginalizing women, students of color, and the children of immigrants. Many readers will find the memoirs to be the heart of the collection.

Speeches and miscellaneous documents. Like the memoirs, the speeches and other documents enliven the collection. President Thomas Dew's address to the students entering the College of William and Mary in 1836 probably seemed interminable to the students, but his scolds, warnings, and setting of high expectations are a rich source for the historian interested in the difficulties of dealing with the version of rebellious adolescents of Dew's day. Mario Savio's protest speech at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964 reflects a different kind of unrest in its communication of student alienation from the impersonal modern multiversity.

Some of the artifacts in the collection convey the view of college students in the popular culture (e.g., an 1897 magazine article about Smith, a "girl's college"; a poster for the Marx Brothers' 1932 satire on the role of athletics in colleges, *Horsefeathers*). Others reveal behavioral expectations (the College of Rhode Island's 1787 *Laws of the College and Code of Conduct*) or show how expectations for male and female students were not the same long into the 20th century (the University of Kentucky's 1955–1956 *Handbook for Women in Residence*).

Psychology and American Higher Education

None of the documents included in Thelin's collection are directly related to psychology. What documents would be candidates for inclusion in a collection specifically focused on psychology's relation to the development of American higher education? Certainly documents from the battles between individual psychologists and academic administrations would reflect changing views of academic freedom and tenure. They might include James McKeen Cattell's barbed exchanges with the president of Columbia University, Nicholas Murray Butler, over governance and academic freedom (Rosenthal, 2006). Also apt would be documents about James Mark Baldwin and John B. Watson's self-inflicted difficulties at Johns Hopkins concerning their personal behavior (Buckley, 1989; Wozniak & Santiago-Blay, 2013) or documents related to Edward Tolman's response to the University of California's imposition of a loyalty oath in 1950 (Carroll, 2012), a landmark in the history of academic freedom.

Many autobiographies of psychologists also could be informative about changes in higher education. Especially informative are those provided by psychologists who spent much of their careers in academic administration (e.g., Angell, 1930). Perhaps some of psychology's most important contributions to the history of higher education can be found in the reports of meetings of psychologists to discuss issues of curriculum and pedagogy at the undergraduate and graduate levels (Buxton et al., 1952; Raimy, 1950).

Selective Documentation

Are the author's choices *the* essential documents in the history of American higher education? Thelin does not even try to make the case. Histories are always selective reconstructions of the past. Although selective, the collection will be of interest to many historians. Moreover, it provides, especially in the memoirs, a window on the changing nature of higher education that anyone working in a college or university would find informative and even amusing. Many things have changed. Students and professors have more freedom, their lives are easier in terms of material comforts, and the development of minds and character has often lost out to vocational preparation. But some things seem never to change. Tensions between adolescents and adults, between teaching and research, between athletics and academics, between academic freedom and institutional control, between access and costs, between town and gown, and between professors and administrations are always with us.

These documents provide only a glimpse of the raw material behind the history textbook. Yet glimpses of raw material can be very revealing.

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