

The Democratization of Higher Education: An Historical Overview and Prospects for the Future

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The United States system of higher education, including colleges and universities, technical/vocational schools and community colleges, is comprised of over four thousand schools with enrollment of almost sixteen million students.¹ “Prestigious and knowledgeable observers have said that this system is ‘the most advanced in the world,’ ‘the envy of the world,’ and ‘the most effective system of higher education the world has ever known.’”² In addition to the primary mission of preparing students for success in their chosen endeavors, these institutions annually produce research and scientific discovery across a broad range of topics. However, there are a growing number of critics who feel that as the number of students increases, programs at all levels of higher education are reducing quality. This paper will examine the development of higher education including landmark legislation, the impact of that legislation in making a college education more accessible to the masses, and the changing attitudes and expectations of students over time. Finally, it examines the system’s prospects for the future which contemporary trends suggest—that a college education has become a commodity rather than an intellectual experience.

There is growing concern that under current operational standards, undergraduate students are being “ripped off.”³ As college tuition and financial aid burdens increase for individual students, these students are not being held to high enough standards necessary for success in their field. Institutions are collecting tuition and allowing students to enter college with minimal preparation but are not providing programs to narrow the obvious basic skills gap. A homogenization is occurring, based on factors bearing little relationship to learning ability and permitting students to achieve above average grades with only minimal effort. According to Zachary Karabell, in his 1998 book entitled *What’s College For?*, “as the United States enters the twenty-first century, a quiet revolution is occurring.” Almost two-thirds of high school graduates now go to college. Of the almost sixteen million students, thirteen million of them are undergraduates. Fifty-five percent of them are women, many of them attending part-time, many of them “mature” students in their thirties and forties.⁴ Karabell takes a strong stance, arguing that higher education is becoming mass education and in the process is being “radically democratized,” resulting in lessened expectations.

As access to education began to change, the numbers and types of students to enter college reflected that change—higher education became available to students of all economic backgrounds. The first important legislation to have an impact upon American colleges and universities occurred after World War II. An initiative by the Truman administration to provide educational opportunities (and just as importantly, prevent unemployment) for soldiers returning to the U.S. led to the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, which is commonly known as the

¹ Infoplease, <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0908742.html>, March 6, 2005.

² Scarlett, Dr. Mel, as quoted in *The Great Rip-Off in American Education: Undergraduates, Underserved* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2004), 22.

³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴ Zachary Karabell, *What’s College For? The Struggle To Define American Higher Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), x-xi.

G.I. Bill. It provided veterans with funding for college tuition, allowing them to seek job training and career paths through universities, creating the modern surge in enrollment that lasted well into the 1950s.⁵

Prior to the G.I. Bill, wider access to higher education and ability to attend college was mostly restricted to those who had the necessary financial resources. While this bill led to significant increases in enrollment, one of the most sweeping pieces of educational legislation in American history was not passed until 1965. The Higher Education Act dramatically changed the ability of the mass general public to consider opportunities in higher education. This was the first federal measure to provide a broad permanent program of financial aid to both public and private colleges as well as to individual college students. The major emphasis of the act was to create a coordinated program to aid the undergraduate student and to cope with the problems created for undergraduate colleges not only by rising enrollments, but also by the rising aspirations of young people from every social class.⁶ As part of the “Great Society” under President Johnson, this act embodied, for the first time, an explicit federal commitment to equalizing college opportunities for needy students. Programs were designed to identify the college-eligible poor and facilitate their access with grants, replacing the contribution their families could not afford to make.⁷

The commitment to needy students manifest in the Higher Education Act was accompanied by a surge of students entering college as the baby-boom population reached maturity, continuing through the 1970s and not leveling off until the 1980s.⁸ The growing number of high school graduates in the post-World War II era is attributable to two distinct influences: the restoration of the family wage, which permitted parents to encourage their children to finish school rather than seek full-time employment, and the shortage of well-paying industrial and service jobs in the late 1950s and 1960s.⁹ The influence of the baby-boom generation entering college cannot be overstated. In the fall of 1957, 2.3 million young people reached the age of eighteen. By 1964, it jumped to 2.8 million, and to 3.8 million by the fall of 1965. While students and their parents were trying to find ways to pay for their education, colleges and universities were scrambling to construct new facilities and recruit new faculty members to deal with this unprecedented growth.¹⁰ But more than just enrollment increases, society began to recognize the important contributions of higher education during World War II. Recognition led to reliance and beliefs that colleges and universities could be instrumental in resolving other national problems.¹¹

As idealistic as the early proponents of higher education were, it quickly became apparent to the general public and most importantly, to students, that a college degree was the gateway to a better life—the better the credential, the better the chances of a good job, career success, and a happy life. Students and parents alike became motivated by this facet of a college degree—more than any other in the 1970s—and this belief continues to the present time. This was reinforced in

⁵ Philip G. Altbach and Robert O. Berdahl, *Higher Education in American Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Prometheus Books, 1987), 109.

⁶ John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition: A History of American Colleges and Universities, 1636-1976* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 235-236.

⁷ Altbach, 160.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁹ Stanley Aronowitz, *The Knowledge Factory: Dismantling The Corporate University and Creating True Higher Learning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 113.

¹⁰ Altbach, 111.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

the 1980s by the Reagan administration and their report, *A Nation At Risk*. This report focused mainly on elementary and secondary education, calling for the development of new performance standards at improving the nation's competitive position. Shortly after this report was issued, a series of similar reports were produced focusing on higher education. These reports called for a renewed emphasis on quality, a sharpened focus on institutional missions, and greater attention to student learning.¹²

In his article, "Shock Wave II: An Introduction to the Twenty-First Century," Clark Kerr identifies a key period in the development of higher education. He labels the period from 1940 to 1970 as Shock Wave I, which forced higher education to respond to several powerful forces—the acceptance of responsibility for scientific research and development, universal access for all high school graduates, and the demands of politically restless students—all at once. He identifies it also as a period of unprecedented success: creation of the research university, expansion of the community college (thus increasing access), and a movement of modern American society to organize around technological, information, and service economies.¹³

Although Kerr defines this period as highly successful, it was also fraught with flaws. In 1967, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching formed the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education to look at those problems. The Commission conducted independent investigations into the major issues facing higher education during the rest of the century.¹⁴ The reports were widely read and discussed and had considerable influence on several aspects of higher education in the United States. One of the Commission's major goals was to suggest ways in which everyone who can benefit from attendance at a college or university—and who has the motivation to go—could be guaranteed a place. The Commission believed that by 1976, the economic, curricular, and information barriers to higher education could be eliminated, and that by the year 2000, all barriers should be removed so that ability, motivation, and individual choice would become the only factors that determine college attendance.¹⁵

The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education Commission also advocated strong growth of two-year schools. During the 1960s, the junior-college movement created an atmosphere of "open admissions." These colleges were urged by the Commission to adopt an "open door" policy admitting all high school graduates and otherwise qualified individuals. It was believed that these "comprehensive" junior colleges were best matched to such lowered entrance barriers, providing both academic and vocational, transfer and terminal programs.¹⁶

But the Carnegie Commission went one step further, stating that admissions requirements were too detailed. In *Continuity and Discontinuity*, the Commission's report stated that the traditional "college-prep" program in high school had become outdated and that every student could find a place in college, regardless of his or her high school program. It acknowledged that good skills in reading, writing, and mathematics were essential for every high school graduate, but beyond those skills, colleges and universities should not require or suggest a particular course of study in high school unless it is *directly* related to that college's own program. Finally, it stated that students' scores on standardized tests weighed too heavily in college admissions decisions and that too much emphasis was given to these results. The Commission believed that

¹² *Ibid.*, 115.

¹³ Clark Kerr, "Shock Wave II: An Introduction to the Twenty-First Century," ed. Steven Brint, *The Future of the City of Intellect: The Changing American University* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 2.

¹⁴ Scott C. Wren, *The College Student and Higher Education Policy: What Stake? What Purpose?* (Washington, D.C.: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1975), vii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁶ Brubacher, 260.

relying heavily upon these test scores implied a precision in evaluating students that could not exist, noting,

“The more reliance placed upon a single test taken on a single day, without any other record that might possibly give a different picture of the student’s total performance over years of schooling, the more unfair the process is to the students, the greater the anxiety, and the less comprehensive the picture of the student’s ability.”¹⁷

The interest in evaluation and assessment did not wane in spite of this admonition. In fact, there began to be an increased concern about quality in both college and high school based on these kinds of assessments. In the early 1980s, many states raised admissions requirements for public colleges, hoping to force a higher quality of education in secondary schools. A question of individual talents and abilities was raised around this time in addition to the questions about institutional quality. The decline in the number of persons in that generation (now defined as Generation X) meant that the number of people with high innate talent would drop by the same twenty-three percent that the age cohort decreased. In addition, test scores of developed ability of students leaving high school and headed for college declined on the order of five to ten percent by 1980 since its high point in the early 1960s; they had only inched up slightly in the 1980s. About half of that decline could be attributed to the larger number of persons taking the tests, many of them from groups in society that had not in the past participated in higher education, but test scores dropped for all groups.¹⁸

Today, the SAT or ACT standardized test scores are still the most important factor for colleges and universities regarding admissions of potential students. High SAT scores are imperative for admission to an elite school. But poor performance on the SAT does not close the door to higher education, unlike such tests in other countries. It simply prevents a student from attending colleges like Harvard, Yale, or Berkeley. The federal government has traditionally sponsored the “standardization” of higher education, believing that economic competitiveness and college education are somehow connected. Yet leaders from every sector of American life are concerned about the “cognitive ability” of workers to learn, think, and then act. These skills do not just occur naturally because a person obtains a two-letter suffix following their name. John Smith, B.A., is not necessarily any more capable than John Smith. It is not the degree that provides some sort of magical advantage, but rather it is the skills that the person who receives the degree ought to have acquired.¹⁹

College entrance is the basic issue in an era of “mass” higher education. More than sixty percent of all high school graduates now enter colleges and universities, most of them in public schools. According to Stanley Aronowitz in *The Knowledge Factory*, approximately forty-six percent of those high school graduates have failed one or more sections of placement or admissions tests. He notes that some critics favor restricting all college admissions to those who, in addition to holding a high school diploma or a GED, are able to read and calculate at a tenth- or eleventh-grade level. Additionally, when measured by standardized tests, students should be able to write discursively and grammatically at some length and know how to produce a research paper. Needless to say, these standards would exclude many students past and present, in all

¹⁷ Wren, 5.

¹⁸ Altbach, 132-133.

¹⁹ Karabell, 215-216.

manner of postsecondary institutions. In fact, underlying the controversy is the sometimes tacit argument that college is not for everybody and should not be a “right.”²⁰ This point is reinforced by Zachary Karabell in his book, *What’s College For?*:

“Professors teaching their first class in English composition or introductory history at most colleges in the United States usually come away from the experience dismayed and astonished. ‘They can’t write!’ ‘They can’t read!’ ‘They can’t think!’ These problems might be expected of students whose first language isn’t English, whose cognitive abilities are fine but whose capacity to express these in a foreign tongue are hampered by limited vocabulary or poor syntax. What truly surprises most first-time professors is the number of English-speaking college students who don’t know how to think, read, or write.”²¹

However, not everyone blames the students for their apparent lack of knowledge and writing ability upon college entrance. Some link the educational deficits of many college students to the physical and intellectual conditions in high schools. In many cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Detroit, state-mandated requirements for academic diplomas in languages, sciences, and mathematics cannot be fulfilled because of teacher shortages, the absence of science laboratories, and an antiquated infrastructure. One of the consequences of this lack of preparation by America’s high schools is that many students must devote an increasing portion of their college careers to catching up to what they have failed to learn elsewhere. Even in the three hundred so-called elite universities and colleges, a sizeable minority of students experience difficulty mastering the curriculum because of reading or writing problems, regardless of their scores on standardized tests and high grade point averages.²²

These problems are exacerbated by what many perceive to be false advertising on the part of many colleges and universities. A report by the Boyer Commission in 1995 entitled *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America’s Research Universities* identified several criticisms of the college system. Recruitment materials for undergraduates feature glowing descriptions of world-famous scholars, exciting research in splendid facilities and the excellence of the education provided. When students get to campus, they find that they rarely see “world-famous” scholars, except possibly in a very large (several hundred to one thousand or more students) lecture class, and they have little or no contact with exciting research projects. Faculty are likely to give major emphasis and most of their time to research—to the detriment of their teaching of undergraduates. Much of this teaching, especially in the first two years, is done by graduate assistants who usually have little if any teaching experience, and whose primary concerns are their own graduate programs. Finally, how could undergraduates be expected to get an “excellent education” when the professors’ Ph.D. programs provide expertise in ever-narrowing subject areas and highly developed research skills, but rarely any preparation for teaching? The same report further stated that “many students graduate having accumulated whatever number of courses is required, but still lacking a coherent body of knowledge or any inkling as to how one sort of information might relate to another. All too often they graduate without knowing how to think logically, write coherently, or communicate clearly. The

²⁰ Aronowitz, 102-103.

²¹ Karabell, 216.

²² Aronowitz, 105-106.

university has given them too little that will be of real value beyond a credential that will (may) help them get their first jobs.”²³

What are the prospects for the future of higher education in America? A significant factor in considering this question is the economic growth and number of those involved in higher education. At this time, there are approximately sixteen million students enrolled, and today’s college students are different from the students who attended universities in years past. Secondly, enrollment patterns have changed. The majority of students are attending school part-time, and most undergraduates work concurrent to their college attendance. In addition, transfer and dropout rates have risen appreciably. In short, today’s students are more mobile, less tied to a single institution, and college is a less central part of their lives.²⁴

In the late 1960s and 1970s, there was a sense among undergraduates that their world was falling apart. The struggle for civil rights, the Vietnam War, scandals in government, and the threat of nuclear war fueled their dark outlook on the future. Today’s students are less pessimistic, but most are still apprehensive about their futures. The area in which anxiety remains very high is the job market: three out of four students are worried about their job prospects upon graduation. The work-world anxiety is also matched by an increasing concern with obtaining the material rewards of life. The overwhelming majority of college students say it is essential or very important not only to be well off financially, but to be *very* well off. All of this translates into a unique brand of politics for the current generation. It could be characterized as the politics of me—students want a chance to achieve their individual and personal dreams.²⁵ Karabell, in his 1998 book, *What’s College For?* supports these points, verifying that not much has changed since the late 1980s, indeed since much before that. He states,

“Of the hundreds of students I taught at Harvard and Dartmouth, I’m relatively sure that it never occurred to a single one of them not to go to college. Whether they are the product of prep schools or of public high schools, all were high achievers who were told by parents, teachers, college guidance counselors, or their friends that college lay on the other side of their high school diploma. For these select thousands, college is simply the next in a series of stages leading to membership in productive society. For many, undergraduate years are themselves preparatory to some form of graduate school whether in law, business, medicine or academia. For these students, college is just what one does, as automatic as sex, marriage, child rearing, and buying a home.

For millions of others, however, college is a choice. It is not a natural choice, not a choice parents made or friends are making, not a choice available in their country of origin, and it is not a choice without sacrifice – of time, of pride, and most of all, of money, which means that many of these students are working, some at full-time jobs. They take evening classes, one or two at a time, in order to earn their bachelor’s degrees in five or six years. They juggle family, job and school. They have mortgages to pay, and they have decided to spend some of their money to acquire skills, job skills. For these students, college is a commodity.”

²³ Scarlett, 23-25.

²⁴ Altbach, 267.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 268-269.

Karabell goes on to state that in the 1990s alone, the average debt burden for a college student grew from \$8,200 to \$18,800. Considering that most will only earn between \$20,000 and \$30,000 a year upon graduation, those debts are heavy.²⁶

As Karabell points out, the issue for most students is not getting into a college or university, it is staying in—meaning the ability to pay up to do so. And students who view their education as a commodity have an expectation that they are buying a product—their degree. In order to obtain that degree, they have to receive a passing grade, usually a C or above. The result, according to Karabell, is predictable. When students do not receive the grade they need to pass, they often hold the professor and then the administration responsible. Students have been known to march into a dean’s office and demand that a particular teacher be fired for giving grades that are “too low.” They also give poor teacher evaluations for “assigning too much reading.” Although there are no reliable studies on the reading workload of students, anecdotal evidence suggests that students are doing less reading than ever before.²⁷ The customer model has slapped higher education in the face.

In discussing prospects for the future of higher education, Clark Kerr’s essay “Shockwave II” is appropriate. Kerr states that over the next thirty years (2000-2030), an enormous set of powerful forces will lead to extensive changes in higher education. He includes the following among these forces:

- The new electronic technology and prospects for long distance learning;
- The DNA revolution and advancement of research in the biological sciences;
- New demographic realities and the rising numbers of historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups;
- Competition for public sector resources, namely funding;
- Competition for students from the For-Profit Sector, i.e. University of Phoenix;
- Responsibility for improving primary and secondary education;
- Globalization of the economy, and
- Contention over models of the university – postmodernist views versus those of the Enlightenment model.²⁸

Kerr goes on to state that “regardless of the institutional setting in which they are found, the part of higher education that will change most will likely be schools of education. They will be placed under enormous pressures from state governments to take more responsibility for the performance of primary and secondary education—to develop new models and new policies for the schools.²⁹ We are already seeing this across the United States with the latest governmental legislation from the Bush II administration called “No Child Left Behind.” Kerr summarizes by saying that it may become increasingly difficult to talk about the future of higher education. There will be many quite different segments, each with its own future. He believes institutions in the different segments will not know or care much about each other and that if segmentation

²⁶ Karabell, 5-6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

²⁸ Kerr, 2-5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

continues along the lines he outlines, new classifications of higher education institutions will emerge:

- Research universities
- Professional school universities
- Liberal arts colleges (holistic education)
- Market I colleges (polytechnic)
- Market II colleges (special job advancement)
- Market III colleges (retirees)
- Community colleges³⁰

The challenges facing higher education currently and for the foreseeable future may seem overwhelming, but it has responded to events in the political and social world for hundreds of years, including wars, depressions, pestilence, and the plague. Internal dissensions and the crisis of confidence, as during the Vietnam War and the concurrent student movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, are just the more dramatic examples of recent decades.

Today, the “value” of an education is calculated in a more straightforward way: in terms of lifetime dollars and cents potentially to be earned. Both working-class and middle-class parents are now regularly spending or borrowing \$50,000 to \$100,000 per child to give their children the benefits of a college education because they know that without the degrees, their child’s life opportunities will be severely restricted.³¹ More importantly, Karabell states that students also determine the value of their education—they are not passive recipients. They are more aggressive in attempting to shape what goes on in the classroom, what is taught, and how much they will spend. In their efforts—individually and collectively, intentionally and inadvertently—to mold the classroom and the university to meet their needs, they see the diploma as a credential that will lead to a better job.³² In a country attached to notions of advancement based on merit, people perceive education as the path to success. The impressions of a college degree may be self-fulfilling. If one cannot get a good job without college, then college must be what gets one a good job. If the most successful people have graduated from college, then college must be the avenue to success.³³

Beyond the attitudes and perhaps disillusioned beliefs of students, a larger problem is financing for higher education. Colleges and universities, especially in the public sector, have suffered unprecedented budget cuts in the current decade, even as they are being asked to accommodate larger numbers of students (“doing more with less” is the administrative rubric). At the same time, students and parents are being forced to take on a larger proportion of increased educational costs, even as wage levels have stagnated or, for some, declined.³⁴ So, if the country continues on the track it is on, it is going to end up with an educational system that looks a lot like the healthcare system: terrific services for the people who can afford them, and whatever everybody else can cobble together.³⁵

³⁰ Ibid., 10.

³¹ Karabell, vii. Note that these are 1998 dollars.

³² Ibid., 1-2.

³³ Ibid., 214.

³⁴ Michael Berube and Cary Nelson, *Higher Education Under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 78.

³⁵ Ibid., 165.

Karabell and Scarlett, the most recent of the literature examined here, make two important points. Karabell states,

“The literature on the crisis of American schools is vast. While some suburban schools succeeded brilliantly, public schools in urban and rural areas have not been able to achieve basic goals of student competency. Within the literature, there are substantial disagreements about who or what is responsible for the state of our schools. Fingers are pointed at incompetent teachers, lazy kids, crumbling buildings, corrupt school boards, powerful custodial unions, misguided superintendents, and morally weak parents. Everyone agrees that there is a problem, but consensus about why has proved elusive.”³⁶

In his book, Scarlett talks about the importance of reform and refers to a 1994 Wingspread report to make his point:

“A disturbing and dangerous mismatch exists between what American society needs of higher education and what it is receiving. Nowhere is the mismatch more dangerous than in the quality of undergraduate preparation provided on many campuses. The American imperative for the 21st Century is that society must hold higher education to much higher expectations or risk national decline.

Education is in trouble, and with it our nation’s hopes for the future. America’s ability to compete in a global economy is threatened. The American people’s hopes for a civil, humane society ride on the outcome. The capacity of the United States to shoulder its responsibilities on the world stage is at risk.”³⁷

There are no easy answers as to the future of higher education. Most would agree that wider access to education for the American people (and those immigrants who are increasingly diversifying our society) is imperative and a fundamental right of every citizen. Yet it also appears that not everyone is being equally prepared for college nor can everyone equally afford the costs of a college degree. There is a predominant view that the future of the country rides on those who are able to think critically and have a modern perspective on the nation’s role in a global economy. If a college degree were really the guaranteed path to success and happiness, what person would not want that? In the past, these academic dreams have been fueled by government intervention in the form of equalizing legislation. The question now rapidly falls on the twin issues of preparation and cost.

Can the country provide a higher education for all? The United States is trying mightily; more than any other nation in history. The coming decades will reveal whether the democratization of this important social tool was a successful venture and whether the promise of the current “No Child Left Behind” legislation becomes reality. Only time will tell, but it is probable that the promise of higher education will not lose its allure, no matter the cost or sacrifice.

³⁶ Karabell, 217.

³⁷ Scarlett, 225.