The Land-Grant Act Begins A Revolution In American Higher Education

Land-Grant College Centennial Observance Address

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Readers of two recent and excellent surveys will note the author's heavy dependence upon them: Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University; A History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962) and Allan Nevins, *The State Universities and Democracy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962). Behind his reaction to them lies the large influence of the many writings of Merle Curti on the intellectual in America, an influence that is also reflected in his own work on the "service intellectual."

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Richard S. Kirkendall

The Civil War promoted many changes in American life, and from at least some of them Americans are still enjoying great benefits. In these centennial years of the War, we should recall that it amounted to more than tragic slaughter on the battlefields and included also such features as the great Emancipation Proclamation of 1862. Associated with that Proclamation and representing the same liberal democratic philosophy was the Land-Grand College Act, signed by President Lincoln on July 2, 1862. "The central idea behind the land-grant movement," Allan Nevins has written, "was that liberty and equality could not survive unless all men had full opportunity to pursue all occupations at the highest practicable level." The Act, just like the Proclamation, sought to remove restrictions and enlarge opportunities for millions of people.

The Act was both a symbol of various forces at work in the middle years of the nineteenth century and an active agent helping to promote significant changes in American higher education. Symbolizing the forces of discontent with the orthodoxy of the colleges, the legislation provided means to change their ways. Under the terms of the Act, land passed from the federal government to the states to encourage them to establish schools that would depart from the emphasis upon the classics sanctioned by orthodoxy. Land was then the most valuable resource controlled by the federal government, and with the people eager to acquire land, the states obtained something they could convert into funds needed to enlarge the operations of existing institutions and to create new ones.

A Yale Report of 1828 had expressed the traditional view with clarity and vigor, putting the weight of a great college behind things as they were and providing the opponents of change with a gospel that they called upon over and over again. Protesting against suggestions "that our colleges must be new-modeled; that they are not adapted to the spirit and wants of the age; that they will soon be deserted, unless they are better accomodated to the business character of the nation," the report argued that colleges must adhere to the ancient subjects as they were the ones most certain to discipline and most worthy to furnish a balanced mind. Boys hoping to become farmers or businessmen needed the same education as prospective clergymen or lawyers--the classical course, not a special "practical" one. "Is it not desirable," the report asked, that the new men of wealth and influence being created by American abundance "should be men of superior education, of large and liberal views, of those solid and elegant attainments, which will raise them to a higher distinction, than the mere possession of property; which will not allow them to hoard their treasures, or waste them in senseless extravagance; which will enable them to adorn society by their learning, to move in the more intelligent circles with dignity, and to make such an application of their wealth, as will be most honorable to themselves, and most benefical to their

country?" To employ a term of a later generation, the aim of higher education in relation to potential men of wealth was to prevent them from becoming "robber barons."

While a little science and some modern literature and history had been moving into the course of studies, the emphasis lay elsewhere. Stressing the passing on of traditions, orthodoxy did not encourage a spirit of inquiry among students and professors. Teaching methods emphasized assignments in textbooks and classroom recitations in which the student demonstrated that he had read the text and committed it to memory. He was not encouraged to explore a rich library and read the sources and conflicting interpretations. "The diversity of statement in these," to quote the report once more, "will furnish the student with an apology for want of exactness in his answers." "You read books," Mark Hopkins, one of the most famous academicians of the period, said to a colleague. "I don't read books, in fact I never did read any books."

As the Yale Report indicated, critics of the established ways had already appeared. The democratic and scientific spirits had been on the rise for many years, and to many Americans, the colleges seemed deplorably aristocratic and impractical. More than a century before 1828, young Ben Franklin complained that wealthy parents sent their sons to Harvard "where, for want of a suitable Genius, they learn little more than to carry themselves handsomely, and enter a Room genteely ...." And in the same decade as the report, a Governor of Kentucky denounced state support for higher education in the following terms: "The State has lavished her money for the benefit of the rich, to the exclusion of the poor; ... the only result is to add to the aristocracy of wealth, the advantage of superior knowledge." A few years later, an Illinois legislator, opposed to the chartering of a college, announced proudly, and to the satisfaction of many in his audience: "[I was] born in a briar thicket, rocked in a hog trough, and ... never had ... [my] genius cramped by the pestilential air of a college." And one young man who had been exposed to such air--Princeton, to be precise--complained that he and his friends were being provided with an education "about as fit for the station they ... [were] to occupy through life as the military tactics of the Baron de Steuben for fighting Blackfoot Indians among the passes and glens of the Rocky Mountains."

If an American was not actively hostile to higher education, he might at least be indifferent to it. "The commercial spirit of our country, and the many avenues of wealth which are opened before enterprise," an educator observed early in the 1850s, "create a distaste for study deeply inimical to education. The manufacturer, the merchant, the gold-digger, will not pause in their career to gain intellectual accomplishments. While gaining knowledge, they are losing the opportunities to gain money." As Daniel Drew expressed it: "Book learning is something, but thirteen million dollars is also something, and a mighty sight more." And according to a Georgia newspaper in 1857: "We are living in a different age, an age of practical utility, one in which the State University does not, and cannot supply the demands of the State. The times require practical men, civil engineers, to take charge of public roads, railroads, mines, scientific agriculture, etc."

The colleges had chosen to adhere to a course of studies that appealed only to one class in society. Great numbers of Americans either hoped for the

collapse of such institutions or paid no attention to them. To men who believed that higher education could and should benefit the masses, changes seemed necessary, "We have produced an article for which the demand is diminishing. We sell it for less than cost, and the deficiency is made up by charity. We give it away, and still the demand diminishes," Francis Wayland of Brown observed in 1850. Then this leading critic of orthodoxy went on to ask: "Is it not time to inquire whether we cannot furnish an article for which the demand will be, at least, somewhat more remunerative?" "What," he asked further, "could Virgil and Horace and Homer and Demosthenes, with a little mathematics and natural philosophy, do towards developing the untold resources of this continent?" Throughout the 1840s and '50s, Wayland struggled, with but limited success, to shape a curriculum at Brown that students would buy because they could see its utility.

Any list of advocates of change in higher education before the Civil War should include Jonathan Baldwin Turner. This educator from Lincoln's Illinois not only proposed new types of schools but also, beginning in 1852, advocated means to establish them. He called for federal land grants to the states as the best means of developing "a general system of popular Indistrial education, more glorious in its design and more beneficent in its results than the world has ever seen before."

Congressman Justin Morrill from rural Vermont, a Lincoln-type product of a mobile society, emerged as the political representative of the critics. As early as 1848, he protested against the leading tendencies of the colleges, and by 1857 he had a bill designed to promote change. Southerners provided much of the opposition to the proposal, and President Buchanan greeted it with an exercise of the veto power. Thus the bill did not become law until after the South seceded and Lincoln replaced Buchanan. Then the federal government was authorized to grant to each state public land or scrip equal to 30,000 acres for each of its congressmen. Over seventeen million acres changed hands, bringing to the states eventually an average of $1.65 per acre. Under the terms of the law, the sums were to be used for support in every state of at least one college "where the leading object shall be, without excluding scientific or classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life." In time, nearly seventy institutions benefited directly from the federal program, a program that Congress expanded as the years passed. Some of these schools, like the University of Missouri, had operated prior to 1862, while others came into existence as a consequence of the program.

Looked at from the point of view of the institutions of the higher learning, the Act represented an effort to make them more scientific and democratic, more practical in the eyes of the American masses. Looked at from the viewpoint of the individual and his aspirations, the Act amounted to an attempt to provide him with the means he needed for social and economic advance. From a social vantage point, the legislation sought to provide the nation with tools required to develop the resources of a rich continent.

The legislation, of course, did not do its work without assistance. No significant historical change takes place as a consequence of the working of only

one force. Many individuals and groups with little or no connection with the land-grant movement worked to promote change in the schools as a consequence of unhappiness with the major features of the old system. Jefferson of Virginia, Wayland of Brown, Tappan of Michigan, and Eliot of Harvard provide major examples.

Nor did the law work its wonders over-night. Important changes in history require more than the stroke of a president's pen. This use of Lincoln's pen produced little public enthusiasm, and many states were slow to accept the terms of the new program. Land acquired by the states, while not always managed wisely, was translated into funds much more quickly than those funds were transformed into professors, classrooms, and equipment. Part of the problem was the difficulty of deciding what a land-grant school should do. While some participants in the system in the early days insisted that the traditional subjects, the basic sciences, the new social sciences, and modern literature and history should be included, other people, believing that such a curriculum would betray the purposes of the Act and treat agriculture as an inferior occupation, argued that, to quote one of them, "instead of introducing the student of agriculture to a laboratory and chemical and physical apparatus, we would introduce him to a pair of heavy neat's leather boots and corduroy pants, and learn him how to load manure."

At the University of Missouri in the 1870s, a trustee warned that "too much in practical education should not be expected, as the main purpose is to develop the social and mental nature of the students." "That is good," retorted a member of the state board of agriculture, "but what are they going to do about hog cholera?" To the teacher of agriculture at the University, traditional courses in ethics and philosophy seemed unnecessary for the farm boy: "He communes with nature so much that his moral powers are better developed. Few crimes are perpetrated by farmers." But who was to teach the new subjects, subjects that barely existed in the 1860s and '70s? Finding faculty members and supplying courses in scientific agriculture provided the new schools with major problems.

Furthermore, new educational activities got under way sooner than many people became converted to the notion that their tax monies should be used to carry on the work initiated by the land sales. Part of the difficulty here was that many people believed that no additional money was needed. "Most members of the legislature," a post-Civil War professor at the University of Illinois recalled, "seemed to think that the university was so richly endowed from the Federal land grant that it was unparadonable presumption to ask for anything more." In addition, countless people still had doubts about the value of higher education. (One should add that many of them had doubts about the value of any type of education and thus the new schools had trouble finding students with high school training and had to promote the development of high schools at the same time that they were trying to promote themselves.) Many of the advocates of the Act had believed that it could help to check the flow of population to the city by providing farmers with know-how needed to operate more successfully. Morrill had argued that the new colleges would "induce the farmer's sons and daughters to settle and cluster around the old homesteads." But farmers were slow to conclude that the land-grant schools had any ideas superior to the ones gained from experience on the farm. "All of the agriculture colleges between here and the setting sun," one Yankee protested, "will not convert the rocky hills of New Hampshire into Gardens

of Eden." And one rural legislator argued that he had never "seen a man who could write a nice essay or make a good agricultural speech who could make corn enough to feed himself and a bob-tailed mule until the first day of March." Some of the farmers also feared the consequences of sending their sons to the city, even small ones like Ames, Madison, or Columbia, believing that a stay there might corrupt a young man or encourage him to move into an urban occupation. One Wisconsin agrarian complained that "absence from home, the fascination and allurements of professional and business life" weaned the children of the farmer "from the old love and enthusiasm for calves and colts and lambs and growing crops, harvesting, haying, hard toil, horny hands ...." Only a few farm boys attended the handful of agricultural courses offered in the early days.

The Act did not check the movement of Americans off the farms. In fact, the Act itself, by emphasizing engineering as well as farming, looked forward to an urban industrial America as well as back upon a rural America, and the land-grant colleges, by helping to make farming more productive, stimulated the migration. "We will teach the science of high production," the dean of Missouri's College of Agriculture had promised early in its career.

If the Act failed to prevent the nation from becoming urban, the developing programs of the schools worked at least to change people's minds about the value of higher education. The activities of the scientists soon produced results of obvious utility, and the efforts of those scientists and other members of the college communities acquainted farmers and others, even those who did not come to the campuses, with those results. "The cow," one friend of the University of Wisoncsin exclaimed early in the twentieth century, "is one of the many by-products of higher education in Wisconsin. For the University saved the dairy industry and brought it to a high-degree of efficiency." Consequences such as these converted groups like the Grange from foes to friends, and by 1912 one administrator could write that "most of the better agricultural colleges are over-flowing with students, and many of them are discussing the best methods of limiting attendance." By this time, services of the land-grant institutions were not limited to the interests of farmers nor the work of physical scientists. Schools for every profession had developed, and social scientists were active, advising political leaders like Robert LaFollette, staffing the new administrative agencies produced by the progressives, and playing other roles of this kind. A special type of intellectual--a service type--had taken shape, emphasizing attention to all kinds of problems of pressing importance in the eyes of people outside the academy.

By helping to make college education something of great utility to large numbers of Americans, the Land-Grant Act helped to make higher education something of great interest to them. Thereby the Act helped the schools to develop the ability to play the many roles of the American university of the second half of the twentieth century. Acceptance as a useful member of society assisted the university in its efforts to become a distinguished member.

The University of Missouri, and other institutions like it, is a product of more than the Land-Grant College Act. The modern university owes something to the old orthodoxy. Complete breaks with the past never take place. The modern American university reflects the very large influence of the leading German universities of the nineteenth century. But the Act was one of the important

forces making the land-grant colleges and universities, at least the best of them, more interesting and useful places for more students, institutions of great intellectual stimulation and freedom for faculty members, and better servants of the non-academic world than the old colleges were. Thus, many Americans have good reasons to pay their respects to a piece of legislation signed by President Lincoln on July 2, 1862. In dealing with the educational needs and opportunities of our day, we are the beneficiaries of the imaginative men associated with that Act. Perhaps, as Allan Nevins suggests, we face the same fundamental question that faced them: "what can the state universities and land-grant institutions ... do for democracy? How can they equip the rising generation for the free access of talent to appropriate callings and thus maintain an open society?"