

College: What Is It Good For?

by

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I want to say up front that I'm here under false pretenses. I'm not a Dewey scholar or a philosopher; I'm a sociologist doing history in the field of education. And the title of my lecture is a bit deceptive. I'm not really going to talk about what college is good for. Instead I'm going to talk about how the institution we know as the modern American university came into being. As a sociologist I'm more interested in the structure of the institution than in its philosophical aims. It's not that I'm opposed to these aims. In fact, I love working in a university where these kinds of pursuits are open to us: Where we can enjoy the free flow of ideas; where we explore whatever issue in the sciences or humanities that engages us; and where we can go wherever the issue leads without worrying about utility or orthodoxy or politics. It's a great privilege to work in such an institution. And this is why I want to spend some time examining how this institution developed its basic form in the improbable context of the United States in the nineteenth century.

My argument is that the true hero of the story is the evolved form of the American university, and that all the good things like free speech are the side effects of a structure that arose for other purposes. In fact, I will argue that the institution – an intellectual haven in a heartless utilitarian world – depends on attributes that we would publicly deplore: opacity, chaotic complexity, and hypocrisy.

I will tell this story in three parts. I start by exploring how the American system of higher education emerged in the nineteenth century, without a plan and without any apparent promise that it would turn out well. By 1900, I show how all the pieces had come together. This is the historical part. Then I show how the combination of these elements created an astonishingly strong, resilient, and powerful structure. I look at the way this structure deftly balances competing aims – the populist, the practical, and the elite. This is the sociological part. Then I veer back toward the issue raised in the title, to figure out what the connection is between the form of American higher education and the things that it is good for. This is the vaguely philosophical part. I argue that the form serves the extraordinarily useful functions of protecting those of us in the faculty from the real world, protecting us from each other, and hiding what we're doing behind a set of fictions and veneers that keep anyone from knowing exactly what is really going on.

In this light, I look at some of the things that could kill it for us. One is transparency. The current accountability movement directed toward higher education could ruin everything by shining a light on the multitude of conflicting aims, hidden cross-subsidies, and forbidden activities that constitute life in the university. A second is disaggregation. I'm talking about current proposals to pare down the complexity of the university in the name of efficiency: let online modules take over undergraduate teaching; eliminate costly residential colleges; closet research in separate institutes; and get rid of football. These changes would destroy the synergy that comes from the university's complex structure. A third is principle. I argue that the university is a procedural institution, which would collapse if we all acted on principle instead of form. I end with a call for us to retreat from substance and stand shoulder-to-shoulder in defense of procedure. s

Historical Roots of the System

The origins of the American system of higher education could not have been more humble or less promising of future glory. It was a system, but it had no overall structure of governance and it did not emerge from a plan. It just happened, through an evolutionary process that had direction but no purpose. We have a higher education system in the same sense that we

have a solar system, each of which emerged over time according to its own rules. These rules shaped the behavior of the system but they were not the product of Intelligent Design.

Yet something there was about this system that produced extraordinary institutional growth. When George Washington assumed the presidency of the new republic in 1789, the U.S. already had 19 colleges and universities. By 1830 the numbers rose to 50 and then growth accelerated, with the total reaching 250 in 1860, 563 in 1870, and 811 in 1880. To give some perspective, the number of universities in the United Kingdom between 1800 and 1880 rose from 6 to 10 and in all of Europe from 111 to 160. So in 1880 this upstart system had 5 times as many institutions of higher education as did the entire continent of Europe. How did this happen?

Keep in mind that the university as an institution was born in medieval Europe in the space between the dominant sources of power and wealth, the church and the state, and it drew its support over the years from these two sources. But higher education in the U.S. emerged in a post-feudal frontier setting where the conditions were quite different. The key to understanding the nature of the American system of higher education is that it arose under conditions where the market was strong, the state was weak, and the church was divided. In the absence of any overarching authority with the power and money to support a system, individual colleges had to find their own sources of support in order to get started and keep going. They had to operate as individual enterprises in the competitive economy of higher education, and their primary reasons for being had little to do with higher learning.

In the early- and mid-nineteenth century, the modal form of higher education in the U.S. was the liberal arts college. This was a non-profit corporation with a state charter and a lay board, which would appoint a president as CEO of the new enterprise. The president would then rent a building, hire a faculty, and start recruiting students. With no guaranteed source of funding, the college had to make a go it on its own, depending heavily on tuition from students and donations from prominent citizens, alumni, and religious sympathizers. For college founders, location was everything. However, whereas European universities typically emerged in major cities, these colleges in the U.S. arose in small towns far from urban population centers. Not a good strategy if your aim was to draw a lot of students. But the founders had other things in mind.

One central motive for founding colleges was to promote religious denominations. The large majority of liberal arts colleges in this period had a religious affiliation and a clergyman as president. The U.S. was an extremely competitive market for religious groups seeking to spread the faith, and a college was a key way to achieve this end. With a college, a church could prepare its own clergy and provide higher education for its members; and these goals were particularly important on the frontier, where the population was growing and the possibilities for denominational expansion were the greatest. Every denomination wanted to plant the flag in the new territories, which is why Ohio came to have so many more colleges than New York. The denomination provided a college with legitimacy, students, and a built-in donor pool but with little direct funding.

Another motive for founding colleges was closely allied with the first, and that was land speculation. Establishing a college in town was not only a way to advance the faith, it was also a way to raise property values. If town fathers could attract a college, they could make the case that the town was no mere agricultural village but a cultural center, the kind of place where prospective land buyers would want to build a house, set up a business, and raise a family. Starting a college was cheap and easy. It would bear the town's name and serve as its cultural

symbol. With luck it would give the town leverage to become a county seat or gain a station on the rail line. So a college was a good investment in a town's future prosperity.

The liberal arts college was the dominant but not the only form that higher education took in nineteenth century America. Three other types of institutions emerged before 1880. One was state universities, which were founded and governed by individual states but which received only modest state funding. Like liberal arts colleges, they arose largely for competitive reasons. They emerged in the new states as the frontier moved westward, not because of huge student demand but because of the need for legitimacy. You couldn't be taken seriously as a state unless you had a state university, especially if your neighbor just established one.

The second form of institution was the land grant college, which arose from federal efforts to promote land sales in the new territories by providing public land as a founding grant for new institutions of higher education. Turning their backs on the classical curriculum that had long prevailed in colleges, these schools had a mandate to promote practical learning in fields such as agriculture, engineering, military science, and mining.

The third form was the normal school, which emerged in the middle of the century as state-founded high-school-level institutions for the preparation of teachers. It wasn't until the end of the century that these schools evolved into teachers colleges; and in the twentieth century they continued that evolution, turning first into full-service state colleges and then by midcentury into regional state universities.

Unlike liberal arts colleges, all three of these types of institutions were initiated by and governed by states and all received some public funding. But this funding was not nearly enough to keep them afloat, so they faced similar challenges as the liberal arts colleges, since their survival depended heavily on their ability to bring in student tuition and drawn donations. In short, the liberal arts college established the model for survival in a setting with a strong market, weak state, and divided church; and the newer public institutions had to play by the same rules.

By 1880, the structure of the American system of higher education was well established. It was a system made up of lean and adaptable institutions, with a strong base in rural communities, and led by entrepreneurial presidents, who kept a sharp eye out for possible threats and opportunities in the highly competitive higher-education market. These colleges had to attract and keep the loyalty of student consumers, whose tuition was critical for paying the bills and who had plenty of alternatives in towns nearby. And they also had to maintain a close relationship with local notables, religious peers, and alumni, who provided a crucial base of donations.

The system was only missing two elements to make it workable in the long term. It lacked sufficient students, and it lacked academic legitimacy. On the student side, this was the most overbuilt system of higher education the world has ever seen. In 1880, 811 colleges were scattered across a thinly populated countryside, which amounted to 16 colleges per million of population. The average college had only 123 students and 14 faculty and granted 17 degrees per year. As I have shown, these colleges were not established in response to student demand, but nonetheless they depended on students for survival. Without a sharp growth in student enrollments, the whole system would have collapsed.

On the academic side, these were colleges in name only. They were parochial in both senses of the word, small town institutions stuck in the boondocks and able to make no claim to advancing the boundaries of knowledge. They were not established to promote higher learning, and they lacked both the intellectual and economic capital required to carry out such a mission.

Many high schools had stronger claims to academic prowess than these colleges. European visitors in the nineteenth century had a field day ridiculing the intellectual poverty of these institutions. The system was on death watch. If it was going to be able to survive, it needed a transfusion that would provide both student enrollments and academic legitimacy.

That transfusion arrived just in time from a new European import, the German research university. This model offered everything that was lacking in the American system. It reinvented university professors as the best minds of the generation, whose expertise was certified by the new entry-level degree, the Ph.D., and who were pushing back the frontiers of knowledge through scientific research. It introduced graduate students to the college campus, who would be selected for their high academic promise and trained to follow in the footsteps of their faculty mentors.

And at the same time that the German model offered academic credibility to the American system, the peculiarly Americanized form of this model made university enrollment attractive for undergraduates, whose focus was less on higher learning than on jobs and parties. The remodeled American university provided credible academic preparation in the cognitive skills required for professional and managerial work; and it provided training in the social and political skills required for corporate employment, through the process of playing the academic game and taking on roles in intercollegiate athletics and on-campus social clubs. It also promised a social life in which one could have a good time and meet a suitable spouse.

By 1900, with the arrival of the research university as the capstone, nearly all of the core elements of the current American system of higher education were in place. Subsequent developments focused primarily on extending the system downward, adding layers that would make it more accessible to larger numbers of students – as normal schools evolved into regional state universities and as community colleges emerged as the open-access base of an increasingly stratified system. Here ends the history portion of this account. Now we move on to the sociological part of the story.

Sociological Characteristics of the System

When the research university model arrived to save the day in the 1880s, the American system of higher education was in desperate straits. But at the same time this system had an enormous reservoir of potential strengths that prepared it for its future climb to world dominance. Let's consider some of these strengths. First it had a huge capacity in place, the largest in the world by far: campuses, buildings, faculty, administration, curriculum, and a strong base in the community. All it needed was students and academic credibility.

Second, it consisted of a group of institutions that had figured out how to survive under dire Darwinian circumstances, where supply greatly exceeded demand and where there was no secure stream of funding from church or state. In order to keep the enterprises afloat, they had learned how to hustle for market position, troll for students, and dun donors. Imagine how well this played out when students found a reason to line up at their doors and donors suddenly saw themselves investing in a winner with a soaring intellectual and social mission.

Third, they had learned to be extraordinarily sensitive to consumer demand, upon which everything depended. Fourth, as a result they became lean and highly adaptable enterprises, which were not bounded by the politics of state policy or the dogma of the church but could take advantage of any emerging possibility for a new program, a new kind of student or donor, or a

new area of research. Not only were they able to adapt but they were forced to do so quickly, since otherwise the competition would jump on the opportunity first and eat their lunch.

By the time the research university arrived on the scene, the American system of higher education was already firmly established and governed by its own peculiar laws of motion and its own evolutionary patterns. The university did not transform the system. Instead it crowned the system and made it viable for a century of expansion and elevation. Americans could not simply adopt the German university model, since this model depended heavily on strong state support, which was lacking in the U.S. And the American system would not sustain a university as elevated as the German university, with its tight focus on graduate education and research at the expense of other functions. American universities that tried to pursue this approach – such as Clark University and Johns Hopkins – found themselves quickly trailing the pack of institutions that adopted a hybrid model grounded in the preexisting American system. In the U.S., the research university provided a crucial add-on rather than a transformation. In this institutionally-complex market-based system, the research university became embedded within a convoluted but highly functional structure of cross-subsidies, interwoven income streams, widely dispersed political constituencies, and a bewildering array of goals and functions.

At the core of the system is a delicate balance among three starkly different roles for higher education. These three roughly correspond to Clark Kerr's famous characterization of the American system as a mix of the British undergraduate college, the American land-grant college, and the German research university. The first is the populist element, the second is the practical element, and the third is the elite element. Let me say a little about each of these and make the case for how they work to reinforce each other and shore up the overall system. I argue that these three elements are unevenly distributed across the whole system, with the populist and practical parts strongest in the lower tiers of the system, where access is easy and job utility are central, and the elite is strongest in the upper tier. But I also argue that all three are present in the research university at the top of the system. Consider how all these elements come together in a prototypical flagship state university.

The populist element has its roots in the British residential undergraduate college, which colonists had in mind when they established the first American colleges; but the changes that emerged in the U.S. in the early nineteenth century were critical. Key was the fact that American colleges during this period were broadly accessible in a way that colleges in the U.K. never were until the advent of the red-brick universities after the Second World War. American colleges were not located in fashionable areas in major cities but in small towns in the hinterland. There were far too many of them for them to be elite, and the need for students meant that tuition and academic standards both had to be kept relatively low. The American college never exuded the odor of class privilege to the same degree as Oxbridge; its clientele was largely middle class. For the new research university, this legacy meant that the undergraduate program provided critical economic and political support.

From the economic perspective, undergrads paid tuition, which – through large classes and thus the need for graduate teaching assistants – supported graduate programs and the larger research enterprise. Undergrads, who were socialized in the rituals of football and fraternities, were also the ones who identified most closely with the university, which meant that in later years they became the most loyal donors. As doers rather than thinkers, they were also the wealthiest group of alumni-donors. Politically, the undergraduate program gave the university a broad base of community support. Since anyone could conceive of attending the state university, the institution was never as remote or alien as the German model. Its athletic teams and

academic accomplishments were a point of pride for state residents, whether or not they or their children ever attended. They wore the school colors and cheered for it on game days.

The practical element has its root in the land-grant college. The idea here was that the university was not just an enterprise for providing liberal education for the elite but that it could also provide useful occupational skills for ordinary people. Since the institution needed to attract a large group of students to pay the bills, the American university left no stone unturned when it came to developing programs that students might want. It promoted itself as a practical and reliable mechanism for getting a good job. This not only boosted enrollment, but it also sent a message to the citizens of the state that the university was making itself useful to the larger community, producing the teachers, engineers, managers, and dental hygienists that they needed.

This practical bent also extended to the university's research effort, which was not just focusing on ivory tower pursuits. Its researchers were working hard to design safer bridges, more productive crops, better vaccines, and more reliable student tests. For example, when I taught at Michigan State I planted my lawn with Spartan grass seed, which was developed at the university. These forms of applied research led to patents that brought substantial income back to the institution, but their most important function was to provide a broad base of support for the university among people who had no connection with it as an instructional or intellectual enterprise. The idea was compelling: This is your university, working for you.

The elite element has its roots in the German research university. This is the component of the university formula that gives the institution academic credibility at the highest level. Without it the university would just be a party school for the intellectually challenged and a trade school for job seekers. From this angle, the university is the haven for the best thinkers, where professors can pursue intellectual challenges of the first order, develop cutting edge research in a wide array of domains, and train graduate students who will carry on these pursuits in the next generation. And this academic aura envelops the entire enterprise, giving the lowliest freshman exposure to the most distinguished faculty and allowing the average graduate to sport a diploma burnished by the academic reputations of the best and the brightest. The problem, of course, is that supporting professorial research and advanced graduate study is enormously expensive; research grants only provide a fraction of the needed funds.

So the populist and practical domains of the university are critically important components of the larger university package. Without the foundation of fraternities and football, grass seed and teacher education, the superstructure of academic accomplishment would collapse of its own weight. The academic side of the university can't survive without both the financial subsidies and political support that come from the populist and the practical sides. And the populist and practical sides rely on the academic legitimacy that comes from the elite side. It's the mixture of the three that constitutes the core strength of the American system of higher education. This is why it is so resilient, so adaptable, so wealthy, and so powerful. This is why its financial and political base is so broad and strong. And this is why American institutions of higher education enjoy so much autonomy: They respond to many sources of power in American society and they rely on many sources of support, which means they are not the captive of any single power source or revenue stream.

The Power of Form

So my story about the American system of higher education is that it succeeded by developing a structure that allowed it to become both economically rich and politically

autonomous. It could tap multiple sources of revenue and legitimacy, which allowed it to avoid becoming the wholly owned subsidiary of the state, the church, or the market. And by virtue of its structurally reinforced autonomy, college is good for a great many things.

At last we come back to our topic. What is college good for? For those of us on faculties of research universities, they provide several core benefits that we see as especially important. At the top of the list is that they preserve and promote free speech. They are zones where faculty and students can feel free to pursue any idea, any line of argument, and any intellectual pursuit that they wish – free of the constraints of political pressure, cultural convention, or material interest. Closely related to this is the fact that universities become zones where play is not only permissible but even desirable, where it's ok to pursue an idea just because it's intriguing, even though there is no apparent practical benefit that this pursuit would produce.

This, of course, is a rather idealized version of the university. In practice, as we know, politics, convention, and economics constantly intrude on the zone of autonomy in an effort to shape the process and limit these freedoms. This is particularly true in the lower strata of the system. My argument is not that the ideal is met but that the structure of American higher education – especially in the top tier of the system – creates a space of relative autonomy, where these constraining forces are partially held back, allowing the possibility for free intellectual pursuits that cannot be found anywhere else.

Free intellectual play is what we in the faculty tend to care about, but others in American society see other benefits arising from higher education that justify the enormous time and treasure that we devote to supporting the system. Policymakers and employers put primary emphasis on higher education as an engine of human capital production, which provides the economically relevant skills that drive increases in worker productivity and growth in the GDP. They also hail it as a place of knowledge production, where people develop valuable technologies, theories, and inventions that can feed directly into the economy. And companies use it as a place to outsource much of their needs for workforce training and research-and-development.

These pragmatic benefits that people see coming from the system of higher education are real. Universities truly are socially useful in such ways. But it's important to keep in mind that these social benefits only can arise if the university remains a preserve for free intellectual play. Universities are much less useful to society if they restrict themselves to the training of individuals for particular present-day jobs, or to the production of research to solve current problems. They are most useful if they function as storehouses for knowledges, skills, technologies, and theories – for which there is no current application but which may turn out to be enormously useful in the future. They are the mechanism by which modern societies build capacity to deal with issues that have not yet emerged but sooner or later are certain to do so.

But that is a discussion for another speech by another scholar. The point I want make today about the American system of higher education is that it is good for a lot of things but it was established in order to accomplish none of these things. As I have shown, the system that arose in the nineteenth century was not trying to store knowledge, produce capacity, or increase productivity. And it wasn't trying to promote free speech or encourage play with ideas. It wasn't even trying to preserve institutional autonomy. These things happened as the system developed, but they were all unintended consequences. What was driving development of the system was a clash of competing interests, all of which saw the college as a useful medium for meeting particular ends. Religious denominations saw them as a way to spread the faith. Town fathers saw them as a way to promote local development and increase property values. The

federal government saw them as a way to promote the sale of federal lands. State governments saw them as a way to establish credibility in competition with other states. College presidents and faculty saw them as a way to promote their own careers. And at the base of the whole process of system development were the consumers, the students, without whose enrollment and tuition and donations the system would not have been able to persist. The consumers saw the college as useful in a number of ways: as a medium for seeking social opportunity and achieving social mobility; as a medium for preserving social advantage and avoiding downward mobility; as a place to have a good time, enjoy an easy transition to adulthood, pick up some social skills, and meet a spouse; even, sometimes, as a place to learn.

The point is that the primary benefits of the system of higher education derive from its form, but this form did not arise in order to produce these benefits. We need to preserve the form in order to continue enjoying these benefits, but unfortunately the organizational foundations upon which the form is built are, on the face of it, absurd. And each of these foundational qualities is currently under attack from the perspective of alternative visions that, in contrast, have a certain face validity. If the attackers accomplish their goals, the system's form, which has been so enormously productive over the years, will collapse, and with this collapse will come the end of the university as we know it. I didn't promise this lecture would end well, did I?

Let me spell out three challenges that would undercut the core autonomy and synergy that makes the system so productive in its current form. On the surface, each of the proposed changes seems quite sensible and desirable. Only by examining the implications of actually pursuing these changes can we see how they threaten the foundational qualities that currently undergird the system. Unfortunately, the system's foundations are so paradoxical that mounting a public defense of them would be difficult indeed. Yet it is precisely these traits of the system that we need to defend in order to preserve the current highly functional form of the university. In what follows, I am drawing inspiration from the work of Suzanne Lohmann, a political scientist at UCLA, who is the scholar who has addressed these issues most astutely.

One challenge comes from prospective reformers of American higher education who want to promote transparency. Who can be against that? This idea derives from the accountability movement, which has already swept across K-12 education and is now pounding the shores of higher education. It simply asks universities to show people what they're doing. What is the university doing with its money and its effort? Who is paying for what? How do the various pieces of the complex structure of the university fit together? And are they self-supporting or drawing resources from elsewhere? What is faculty credit-hour production? How is tuition related to instructional costs? And so on. These demands make a lot of sense.

The problem, however, as I have shown today, is that the autonomy of the university depends on its ability to shield its inner workings from public scrutiny. It relies on opacity. Autonomy will end if the public can see everything that is going on and what everything costs. Consider all of the cross subsidies that keep the institution afloat: undergrads support graduate education, professional schools support the humanities, adjuncts subsidize professors. Consider all of the instructional activities that would wilt in the light of day; consider all of the research projects that could be seen as useless or politically unacceptable. The current structure keeps the inner workings of the system obscure, which protects the university from intrusions on its autonomy. Remember, this autonomy arose by accident not by design; its persistence depends on keeping the details of university operations out of public view.

A second and related challenge comes from reformers who seek to promote disaggregation. The university is an organizational nightmare, they say, with all of those institutes and centers, departments and schools, programs and administrative offices. There are no clear lines of authority, no mechanisms to promote efficiency and eliminate duplication, no tools to achieve economies of scale. Transparency is one step in the right direction, they say, but the real reform that is needed is to take apart the complex interdependencies and overlapping responsibilities within the university and then figure out how each of these tasks could be accomplished in the most cost-effective and outcome-effective manner. Why not have a few star professors tape lectures and then offer Massive Open Online Courses at colleges across the country? Why not have institutions specialize in what they're best at – remedial education, undergraduate instruction, vocational education, research production, graduate student training? Putting them together into a single institution is expensive and grossly inefficient.

But recall that it is precisely the aggregation of purposes and functions – the combination of the populist, the practical, and the elite – that has made the university so strong, successful, and, yes, useful. The combination creates a strong base both financially and politically and allows for forms of synergy than cannot happen in a set of isolated educational functions. A key organizational element that makes the university so effective is its chaotic complexity. The fact is that this institution can't be disaggregated without losing what makes it the kind of university that students, policymakers, employers, and the general public find so compelling.

A third challenge comes not from reformers intruding on the university from the outside but from faculty members meddling with it from the inside. The threat here arises from the dangerous practice of acting on academic principle. Fortunately, this is not common in academe. But the danger is lurking in the background of every decision about faculty hires. Here's how it works. You review a finalist for a faculty position in a field not closely connected to your own, and you find to your horror that the candidate's field of work seems absurd on the face of it (how can anyone take this type of work seriously?) and the candidate's own scholarship doesn't seem to be legitimate. So you decide to speak against hiring the candidate and organize colleagues to support your position. But then you happen to read a paper by Suzanne Lohmann, who points out something very fundamental about how universities work.

Universities are structured in a manner that protects the faculty from the outside world (that is, protecting them from the forces of transparency and disaggregation), but it's also organized in a manner that protects the faculty from each other. The latter is the reason we have such an enormous array of departments and schools in universities. If every historian had to meet the approval of geologists and every psychologist had to meet the approval of law faculty, no one would ever be hired.

The simple fact is that part of what keeps universities healthy and autonomous is hypocrisy. Because of the Balkanized structure of university organization, we all have our own protected spaces to operate in and we all pass judgment only on our own peers within that space. To do otherwise would be chaos. We don't have to respect each other's work across campus, we merely need to tolerate it. You pick your faculty, we'll pick ours. Lohmann calls this core procedure of the academy "log-rolling." If we all operated on principle, if we all only approved scholars we respected, then the university would be a much diminished place. Put another way, I wouldn't want to belong to a university that consisted only of people I found worthy. Gone would be the diversity of views, paradigms, methodologies, theories, and world views that makes the university such a rich place. The result is incredibly messy, and it permits a lot of quirky – even ridiculous – research agendas, courses, and instructional programs. But in aggregate, this

libertarian chaos includes an extraordinary range of ideas, capacities, theories, and social possibilities. It's exactly the kind of mess we need to treasure and preserve and defend from all opponents.

So here is the thought I'm leaving you with. The American system of higher education is enormously productive and useful, and it's a great resource for students, faculty, policymakers, employers, and society. What makes it work is not its substance but its form. Crucial to its success is its devotion to three formal qualities: opacity, chaotic complexity, and hypocrisy. Embrace these forms and they will keep us free.