

# ★ CONTENTS ★

## PREFACE

IX

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

XV

## PROLOGUE: AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION AND WORLD WAR II

XVII

## ★ PART I ★ AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION, 1945–1957

### 1

#### THE GI BILL AND BEYOND: HIGHER EDUCATION, 1945–1955

3

The GI Bill 4

Ghosts of the New Deal: The President's Commission on Higher Education 8

General Education and Liberal Education 16

Defining Postwar America: The Cold War and McCarthyism 28

### 2

#### HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE IN THE CONSERVATIVE 1950s

39

Who Should Go to College? 43

The Expansion of Public Higher Education 49

Private Colleges and Universities in the 1950s 61

Postwar Universities 72

★ PART II ★  
THE LIBERAL HOUR, 1957–1968

3

THE ASCENDANCY OF THE UNIVERSITY

91

- The Federal Research Economy 94  
Foundations and University Research 98  
The Academic Revolution 107  
Universities and American Society 119

4

EXPANSION AND TRANSFORMATION

129

- A Tidal Wave of Students 129  
Mass Public Higher Education 136  
Desegregation in the South, Diversity in the North 153  
Curriculum, Quality, and Mass Higher Education 165

★ PART III ★  
THE UNRAVELING AND THE NEW ERA, 1965–1980

5

THE UNRAVELING, 1965–1970

179

- SDS and the Growth of Student Radicalism 180  
Academic Armageddon: The 1968 Era, 1967–1970 190  
Aftermath and Beginning of a New Era 203

## 6

### SURVIVING THE SEVENTIES

217

- The Federal Government and Higher Education 217
  - The Rise of Women 228
  - The Inversion of the Seventies: Students 240
  - The Inversion of the Seventies: Institutions 251

### ★ PART IV ★

### THE CURRENT ERA IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

## 7

### THE DAWN OF THE CURRENT ERA, 1980–2000

269

- Universities and Economic Relevance: Revival of the Research Mission 270
  - Privatization: Public and Private Higher Education and the Selectivity Sweepstakes 281
  - The Culture Wars 299

## 8

### AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

313

- The \$1,000,000,000,000 Debt 314
  - Bifurcation Revisited 324
  - Returns to Higher Education 329
  - The Learning Conundrum 338
- University Culture in a Polarized America 345
- Research Universities and the Knowledge Society 354
- American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century 362

### INDEX

369



## THE GI BILL AND BEYOND: HIGHER EDUCATION, 1945–1955

FOR THE UNITED STATES, THE YEARS AFTER WORLD WAR II were anything but a return to “normalcy.” Politically, Congress and the president faced an enormous workload in legislating the transition from a war economy and the foundations of a new peacetime order. Liberals envisioned building on the legacy of the New Deal to advance the social and economic commitments of the federal government and to promote world peace through American-led internationalism. But such expectations were frustrated in the postwar years by an increasingly conservative mood in the country, by labor unrest, and by the onset of the Cold War. Political life was soon dominated by an escalating confrontation with the Soviet Union, an anti-communist crusade at home, and the Korean War. Not until 1955 did the rhetoric and passions generated by these developments begin to diminish, allowing the country to dwell on more mundane domestic affairs.

Conditions in American higher education traced a similar path. The Harvard report *General Education in a Free Society* (aka the Redbook) and the President’s Commission on Higher Education were the most publicized manifestations of an intellectual ferment over the structure, purpose, and curricula of collegiate education. Postwar institutions struggled to accommodate the flood of veteran students enrolling under the GI Bill. Universities were next drawn into the trauma of the anti-communist witch hunt. The Korean War then cast a pall of uncertainty over government policies affecting students. For colleges and universities too, the armistice in Korea and the attenuation of McCarthyism finally offered the relative tranquility to focus on institutional development. However, for Americans inside or outside of the higher education system, the dominant influence during the postwar decade was what the historian James Patterson called the “Booms”: “Economic growth was indeed the most decisive force in the shaping of attitudes and expectations in the postwar era.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 61; the following draws from pp. 61–81; and John Patrick Diggins, *The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace, 1941–1960* (New York: Norton, 1988), 177–88.

## CHAPTER 1

In the twenty five years following the war, the United States experienced one of the longest periods of sustained economic growth the world had seen. Consumer spending and the standard of living began rising almost immediately, and by the late 1940s this growth affected a broad swath of the population. By the end of the decade, Americans on average were nearly twice as affluent as the next wealthiest countries, and the rapid rate of economic growth continued with scarcely a pause. Moreover, this prosperity was widely shared. Poverty, which may have affected 30 percent of Americans, slowly declined. For the majority of Americans, life was materially improved by a cornucopia of consumer goods—household appliances, automobiles, and televisions, among others. Fifteen million new homes were constructed from 1945 to 1955, mostly in Levittowns and their like, which gave new homeowners their own turf in burgeoning suburbs. American consumers by no means lived lavishly; the original Levittown house consisted of a living room, kitchen, two bedrooms and a bathroom. America's emerging middle class advanced from a constrained to a comfortable life style. In the process, middle-class families sought more education for their children, which first buoyed high school graduation rates and then affected colleges.

But first, higher education faced a series of postwar challenges, which are considered in this chapter: accommodating a surge of veteran students; responding to the radical recommendations from a presidential commission; and reacting to the threat of McCarthyism. Chapter 2 then details the elaboration of a post-war system of American higher education.

## THE GI BILL

The Serviceman's Readjustment Act that Roosevelt signed on June 22, 1944—the GI Bill—had its origins in conventional thinking about the place of higher education in American society, but its eventual impact altered higher education's status and conventional thinking too. The 1942 election returned the most conservative Congress that Roosevelt would face in his presidency. Republicans and conservative Southern Democrats quickly eviscerated New Deal activism by terminating the National Resource Planning Board—the locus of New Deal visions for social reconstruction. Roosevelt kept the ghost of the New Deal alive in 1944 with a speech outlining an “economic bill of rights” for Americans, with the last being “the right to a good education.”<sup>2</sup> More pressing, and overhanging the vast mobilization then underway, was the issue of how to treat the veterans; specifically, how to prevent social disruption following demobilization and how to re-

2 Diggins, *Proud Decades*, 21–22; Cass Sunstein, *The Second Bill of Rights: FDR's Unfinished Revolution and Why We Need It More Than Ever* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

## THE GI BILL AND BEYOND

integrate servicemen into American society while avoiding the neglect and subsequent resentment experienced by World War I veterans. Multiple bills were introduced dealing with one or more aspects of this challenge. Roosevelt then proposed a comprehensive plan that, among other things, would provide one year of educational or vocational training for all veterans and possible additional years for those “with exceptional ability and skills.” Thus, the first iteration of veteran’s benefits assumed that a full college education should be reserved for a small minority of ex-servicemen who were exceptionally smart.<sup>3</sup>

At this point the issue was joined by the American Legion, whose chief goal was to maximize veteran benefits and who possessed the means to promote their cause. The legion rewrote the original proposal, extending educational benefits to four years for all who had served. It then used its grassroots network to garner support across the country—and in Congress—for what it dubbed the GI Bill of Rights. The conservative legion allied with anti–New Deal members of Congress, who above all wished to prevent New Deal federal agencies from transforming GI benefits into wider social programs. To exclude these agencies, administration of the GI Bill was entrusted to the Veteran’s Administration and its implementation to the states. In addition, Congress was assured that few ex-servicemen and women would want or need the generous provisions for attending college. At first this seemed to be the case, as few of the soldiers demobilized in 1944 and 1945 used their educational benefits—or the other benefits of the bill for that matter. In December 1945, Congress responded by increasing students’ monthly stipend, removing eligibility restrictions on older students, and including correspondence courses. An unanticipated boom in veteran enrollments soon followed, with an impact on the colleges and universities that will be described below. For the next five years, colleges and universities would be linked with the federal treasury through the Veterans Administration.

Although the GI Bill would bolster the finances of American colleges and universities, the immediate postwar years were dominated by the strains of accommodating the deluge of veterans. Some 2,232,000 veterans attended college under Title II of the GI Bill from 1945 to 1954, or less than 15 percent of eligible servicemen.<sup>4</sup> Another 36 percent received on-the-job training or vocational education under the educational provisions of the act, programs that were riddled with fraud and waste. However, the GI Bill has always been identified chiefly

3 Suzanne Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* (New York: Oxford, 2005), quote p. 20; Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *The GI Bill: A New Deal for Veterans* (New York: Oxford, 2009); Kathleen J. Frydl, *The GI Bill* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

4 Keith W. Olson, *The G.I. Bill, the Veterans, and the Colleges* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 41–56, 76.

## CHAPTER 1

with those veterans who went to college, how this opportunity transformed their lives, and how this most enlightened of public investments enlarged the nation's intellectual capital.<sup>5</sup>

For the 1946–1949 academic years, an average of 1 million veterans enrolled, compared with a total prewar enrollment of 1.4 million. For the first two of these years the veterans comprised almost half of all students, 70 percent of males. The \$500 they were allowed for expenses covered tuition at private or public schools, and a slight majority enrolled in the private sector. Unconstrained by costs, veterans preferred the best known and academically strongest institutions. Still, the largest number enrolled in convenient, local urban universities (mostly private), followed by state flagship universities and prominent liberal arts colleges. These institutions were deluged with applications and typically expanded by 50–100 percent while still rejecting many applicants. Teachers colleges, junior colleges, and the smaller private colleges, on the other hand, had room to spare. At the favored schools, the tide of veterans created acute crowding. Instruction was expanded more readily than housing, through larger lectures, expanded class schedules, and year-round operations. Congress assisted the colleges with supplemental appropriations and provision of army-surplus buildings. The greatest problem was presented by the half of veterans who were married and the one-half of those who had children. Universities created vast trailer parks for these families. Serendipitously, this created supportive communities of highly motivated students. Married students achieved higher average grades than single veterans, who in turn had better grades than regular students.

The veterans were by all accounts exceptionally diligent students. Harvard president James Conant, who had been an initial sceptic, called them “the most mature and promising students Harvard has ever had.”<sup>6</sup> In an era when grading was often done on a curve, regular students complained about the competition. Starting at an average age of twenty-five, veterans on the whole were mature, serious, motivated, and in a hurry. In fact, they were self-selected from the 15 million eligible servicemen, which reflected social ambition as much as initial aptitude. Too, their dominant presence on campus created an atmosphere conducive to focused academic efforts. All these factors, no doubt, account for the fact that 79 percent of GI students graduated, compared with a graduation rate of 55 percent for regular students. Legend has it that the veterans flocked to vocational and professional majors, but no comprehensive data exist. Large numbers clearly stud-

5 Fraud and waste in vocational education and on-the-job training is covered in Altschuler and Blumin, *GI Bill*; and Frydl, *GI Bill*. Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens*, is based on a large survey of surviving GI Bill beneficiaries, emphasizing their contributions to civic life.

6 James B. Conant, *My Several Lives: Memoirs of a Social Inventor* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 373.

## THE GI BILL AND BEYOND

ied engineering, but the numbers of business majors are less certain. Departments of business, or commerce, were not well developed across American universities, and veterans seeking business careers could attend short courses at one of the many proprietary schools. Records from the University of Wisconsin show the largest portion (38 percent) of veterans studying liberal arts, compared to one-quarter of nonveterans. Aside from a predilection for engineering, the veterans seem to have spread themselves across the curriculum.<sup>7</sup> The presence of mature veterans caused the demise of quaint college customs, as well as tolerance of cigarette smoking, but they had little lasting impact on academics. But GI tuitions significantly bolstered the exhausted treasuries of colleges and universities.

How did the college provisions of the GI Bill affect the United States? To what extent did it inspire additional college graduates and augment the educational stock of the country? These questions were first posed as the original bill was winding down. At that time, a representative survey concluded that 10 percent of veteran students would not have attended without the GI Bill and “another ten per cent probably would not have.” This 20 percent figure suggests that four-fifths of veteran students either had already begun college studies or would have attended college if the war had not intervened. Polls taken at individual institutions, or much later, yield much higher numbers of additional students, closer to 50 percent. More recently economists have sought to refine these figures. Although the findings are estimates, they suggest substantial effects. Among the older half of WW II veterans, those born before 1921, few used the GI Bill to attend college. The chief beneficiaries belonged to the 1923–1927 birth cohorts, whose college participation was increased by 20–50 percent. The high graduation rates also suggest a net increase greater than 20 percent. In terms of social mobility, despite abundant anecdotes of indigent or working-class veterans attaining college degrees and successful careers, the largest gains were registered by GIs from the fourth income quintile—what was then the middle-middle class, where potential new students might be expected to be found.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, when other factors are considered, the magnitude of effects from the GI Bill appears even larger. Given the fact of war, many prewar expectations of college attendance would not have been realized. The elevated graduation rate of veterans meant that more earned degrees than would have had they attended earlier as civilians. That one-half of veteran students were family heads would have precluded full-time attendance (and diminished completion) without the

7 Olson, *GI Bill*, 87.

8 Marcus Stanley, “Education and the Midcentury GI Bills,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118, 2 (May 2003): 671–708; also, John Bound and Sarah Turner, “Going to War and Going to College: Did World War II and the G.I. Bill Increase Educational Attainment for Returning Veterans?” *Journal of Labor Economics* 20, 4 (October 2002): 784–815.



## CHAPTER 1

bill. And, for those students who had already started college, the GI Bill provided the resources to persist and, for many, to obtain graduate and professional degrees. Hence, the consensus that the GI Bill accelerated the educational advancement and deepened the intellectual capital of the country is not mistaken. According to the Veteran's Administration, degrees were earned under the GI Bill by "450,000 engineers, 180,000 doctors, dentists and nurses, 360,000 school teachers, 150,000 scientists, 243,000 accountants, 107,000 lawyers, [and] 36,000 clergymen."<sup>9</sup>

### GHOSTS OF THE NEW DEAL: THE PRESIDENT'S COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION

The New Deal of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt initially attacked the woes of the Great Depression "in innumerable directions," "a chaos of experimentation."<sup>10</sup> By his second term, New Deal liberalism emerged as a commitment to compensate for the failures of capitalism by expanding the institutions of the welfare state. But higher education was an experiment not attempted, a direction not taken. George Zook, Roosevelt's first commissioner of education, reportedly resigned in 1934 because of this neglect (and a budget cut). The following year, needy students became eligible for work-study assistance, not as students but through Emergency Relief offered by the National Youth Administration (NYA). At the peak year, nearly 140,000 students received an average of \$12 per month for performing work assigned by 1,651 participating institutions. But this was the extent of New Deal aid for higher education. The American Youth Congress considered these provisions inadequate, with moral support from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. They lobbied unsuccessfully for the American Youth Act in 1936, which would have provided additional benefits for a larger number of students.

University leaders had been eager to promote a New Deal for science. They achieved at least a voice with the appointment of the Science Advisory Board (1933–1935). There MIT president Karl Compton led a campaign for federal appropriations to support nongovernmental scientific research. Although Roosevelt was initially sympathetic, the plan became fatally embroiled in the bureaucracy when the social sciences demanded to be included. Higher education remained on the periphery in the 1930s even as the New Deal itself evolved. From

<sup>9</sup> Olson, *G.I. Bill*, 109; Michael J. Bennett, *When Dreams Came True: The GI Bill and the Making of Modern America* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1996), 277–310.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Brinkley, "The New Deal and the Idea of the State," in Steve Fraser and Gery Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 85–121.

## THE GI BILL AND BEYOND

1937, political support waned in Congress while New Dealers in the administration focused on social welfare issues. Both of these dynamics persisted into and through the war years, when higher education and research became part of the war effort.<sup>11</sup>

Higher education's absence from the New Deal agenda can be ascribed to its public image and relative well being. The rapid expansion of enrollments after World War I had been greeted with alarm among much of traditional higher education. The principal concern had been intellectual qualifications—the belief that many newcomers did not possess the intelligence required for college-level work. This mindset was evident in efforts to steer junior colleges toward terminal programs, to exclude the liberal arts from teachers colleges, and in versions of “general education” that emphasized life skills. Higher education largely embraced traditional social and economic values. Demographically, one-half of young people were completing high school by 1940, but only one-third of graduates continued on to college. These students may have struggled to cope with the hardships of the Depression, but only 12 percent qualified for the work-study programs of the NYA. College students were better off than most. In the election of 1936, students voted Democratic for the first time, favoring Roosevelt and the New Deal by a slight margin; but professors and administrators were still largely conservative, especially at private institutions. The American Council on Education (ACE), which was supported by dues-paying institutions, devoted its energies to exempting higher education from New Deal legislation, successfully keeping colleges and universities out of social security. ACE and other higher education bodies basically represented the interests of their membership and in fact were laggards in connecting higher education to larger national purpose. Hence, the most momentous developments for higher education came not from New Deal liberalism or the foresight of the university community but from the war itself.

Although the GI Bill had an enormous impact in repopulating (overpopulating) American colleges and universities, in 1946 there was still no model, policy, or vision for a federal role in American higher education. Into this void stepped the President's Commission on Higher Education.

The idea for the commission came from liberal advisors in the Office of War Mobilization and Reconversion who believed that a greater federal role in higher education was needed to enhance social welfare. This initiative was the product of an internal, New Deal mentality. It was hatched before the deluge of GI Bill

11 Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Random House, 1995); Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, “Regimes and Regime Building in American Government: A Review of Literature on the 1940s,” *Political Science Quarterly* 113, 4 (1998–99): 689–702.

## CHAPTER 1

recipients swamped postwar campuses and without input from the higher education community.<sup>12</sup> Several close presidential advisors to President Truman appealed to his liberal inclinations to sell the idea of a thorough inquiry into the role that higher education could or should play in American society. The president's charge asked the commission to examine expansion of educational opportunity, curricula "in the fields of international affairs and social understanding," the feasibility of "intermediate technical institutes," and higher education finance especially for expanding facilities. The commission would take considerable liberty in pursuing these topics. Its membership was carefully managed by its instigators. Chairman George Zook represented both public and private institutions as head of ACE, but he was also known to favor federal aid. Zook and other appointees were sympathetic toward John Dewey's instrumentalist interpretation of general education. The twenty-eight blue-ribbon members were outwardly representative of both sectors, but they had been carefully selected to support the tacit agenda. The administration was assured that "a majority is clearly committed to the principle of the extension of public education through the collegiate level."<sup>13</sup>

The commission began deliberations in July 1946 with abundant staff support and access to data from federal agencies. It reported its findings in December 1947 in some four hundred pages in six slim volumes, released sequentially so that each issue would receive separate public notice. *Higher Education for American Democracy* emphatically defended as its principal findings four controversial positions: the chief purpose of American higher education was the building and strengthening of democracy; enrollments should be greatly expanded; this growth should occur in public institutions, including community colleges; and federal financial assistance was needed and appropriate to achieve these ends. These four objectives were logically related, but the lynchpin of the commission's case was its conception of democracy.

In a horrific war against authoritarian regimes, the United States embraced democracy as its wartime banner and the rationale for postwar world leadership. Every political faction claimed some version of democracy for its cause, and the commission was no different. It envisioned an idealistic reshaping of American

12 This initiative was foreshadowed by a 1943 report from the soon-to-expire National Resources Planning Board, *Equal Access to Education*, which argued the crucial importance of doubling higher education enrollments: John Douglass, *The California Idea and American Higher Education* (Berkeley: University of California University Press, 2000), 190–91.

13 Janet Kerr-Tener, "From Truman to Johnson: Ad hoc Policy Formulation in Higher Education," PhD diss. (University of Virginia, 1985), 50–118, quotes pp. 73, 69. On New Deal authors and the controversy over membership, see Nicholas Strohl, "A Road Not Taken: The Truman Commission as an Alternative Vision of US Higher Education Policy" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the History of Education Society, St. Louis, MO, November 5–8 2015).

## THE GI BILL AND BEYOND

society, declaring that the primary purpose of education should be to instill the democratic ideal in citizens in order to transform society into a higher form of democratic community. Thus, for colleges and universities, “education for democratic living . . . should become . . . a primary aim of all classroom teaching and, more important still, of every phase of campus life.” In the rhetoric of the report, democracy assumed an almost mystical quality, essential to confront “the worldwide crisis of mankind,” and to guide American leadership in developing “World Citizenship.” This vision of transforming society by inculcating democratic ideals through higher education reflected the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey, although he was not mentioned in the report.<sup>14</sup> His notion of a community unified through democracy was the foundation for the practical recommendations of the President’s Commission on Higher Education.<sup>15</sup>

The commission’s notion of *general education* was the means to bring about the transformation to a democratic society. Although there were several contemporary versions of this term (discussed below), the commission argued for Dewey’s conception of education for human living: “nonspecialized and nonvocational learning which should be the common experience of all educated men and women.” The report listed eleven specific objectives, including “ethical principles consistent with democratic ideals,” “satisfactory emotional and social adjustment,” to “understand and enjoy . . . cultural activities,” to develop “knowledge and attitudes basic to a satisfying family life,” and “skills and habits involved in critical and constructive thinking.” General education would thus be the “means to a more abundant personal life and a stronger, freer social order.” Remarkably, all the usual functions of higher education were subordinated to general education for democracy. Manpower considerations, which had dominated government thinking during the war, were barely mentioned. Vocational training was less important than the orientation toward work derived from general education. Social mobility was potentially harmful to community unity; in fact, “through education society should come to recognize the equal dignity of all kinds of work, and so erase distinctions based on occupational castes.” The advancement of specialized knowledge was described as the bane of the college curriculum, and liberal education dismissed as “aristocratic.” Basic research was recognized as a necessary role for universities, but the report emphasized social science research

14 Newton Edwards, consultant for vol. I, was a founding member of the John Dewey Society (1935), as was commission member George Stoddard, president of the University of Illinois: Ethan Schrum, “Establishing a Democratic Religion: Metaphysics and Democracy in the Debates over the President’s Commission on Higher Education,” *History of Education Quarterly* 47, 3 (August 2007): 277–301, esp. 293.

15 Schrum, “Establishing a Democratic Religion”; Gary E. Miller, *The Meaning of General Education: The Emergence of a Curriculum Paradigm* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), chaps. 4, 7.

## CHAPTER 1

to advance social reconstruction, and it advocated that federal research support be channeled largely through students.<sup>16</sup>

General education as conceived by the commission was eccentric to the central traditions of American higher education. The approach was staunchly defended nonetheless by T. R. McConnell, an author of the section quoted above. McConnell was the chancellor of the University of Buffalo but had formerly been at the University of Minnesota, where the General College was the most prominent prewar experiment in this type of general education. This unit was created to teach life skills to students who did not qualify for admission to the university's regular programs, and this controversial model had been actively promoted by its organizers. It presaged the commission's vision of higher education serving an expanded pool of terminal two-year students as well as its conception of general education.<sup>17</sup>

A democratic society implied equality of educational opportunity, which was far from the case in postwar America. Socioeconomic factors accounted for the failure of many youth to complete high school, let alone attend college. Large regional discrepancies existed in wealth and educational investment. And the President's Commission on Higher Education directly attacked existing discrimination against Jewish students and segregation in the South.<sup>18</sup> It also criticized the traditional emphasis of colleges on "verbal skills and intellectual interests." In order to estimate the proportion of young people having the ability to benefit from college, the commission turned to the Army General Classification Test—an intelligence test that had been administered to more than 10 million inductees. It determined reference points by comparing these scores with those of entering college students on the ACE psychology tests. This method yielded figures far larger than any previous projection of college attendance: "At least 49 percent of our population has the mental ability to complete 14 years of schooling"; and "at least 32 percent [could] complete an advanced liberal or specialized professional education." These figures were announced as goals for the year 1960—in all 4 million undergraduates compared with 1.5 million students in 1940 and a projected 2.7 million if the prewar growth trend alone persisted. Hence, the commission's

16 President's Commission on Higher Education, vol. I, *Establishing the Goals* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1947), quotes pp. 49, 51–57; Schrum, "Establishing a Democratic Religion," 286–88.

17 T. R. McConnell, "A Reply to the Critics," in Gail Kennedy, ed., *Education for Democracy: The Debate over the President's Commission on Higher Education* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1952), 105–15; Roger L. Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

18 President's Commission on Higher Education, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, vol. II, *Equalizing and Expanding Individual Opportunity* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1947), 25–44. Four commission members from southern institutions inserted a note recognizing the inferior educational provisions for Negroes but disagreeing with the recommendation to terminate segregated schooling: 29n.

## THE GI BILL AND BEYOND

recommendations aspired to fill by 1960 this substantial “education gap” between projected enrollments and the number of students intellectually qualified for college study.<sup>19</sup>

Community colleges played a key role in the commission’s plan, providing a terminal education for one-sixth of all youth. The term “community college” was deliberately substituted for “junior college” because these institutions were envisioned as the means for building democratic communities. The commission wanted free public education to be extended to the thirteenth and fourteenth years because “the complex demands of social, civic, and family life call for a lengthened period of general education for a much larger number of young people.” Any vocational instruction was intended to be fully integrated with general education, and community colleges were charged as well with providing adult education—another area recommended for expansion.<sup>20</sup>

Volume V, *Financing Higher Education*, addressed how to pay for this expansion. The cost of providing the first two years free at public institutions would have to be financed by states and localities, but the commission looked to the federal government for the other additional expenditures. These included a national program of scholarships similar to GI-Bill benefits for up to 20 percent of civilian college students, federal support for general educational expenditures funneled through the states, and capital for the expansion of physical facilities. These last two forms of aid would be provided only for public institutions, a specification that provoked a lengthy dissent from two commission members from private universities. The commission somewhat disingenuously assumed that all enrollment growth would occur in public institutions, since the private sector had expressed no intention of expanding. Nor could it imagine privately controlled institutions accepting the equation of democracy with general education. In fact, it ominously warned that acceptance of public funds implied “the right of the people as a whole to exercise review and control of the educational policies and procedures of that institution.” The tacit agenda of the commission was to bring the New Deal to higher education: “The time has come,” it declared, “for America to develop a sound pattern of continuing Federal support for higher education.”<sup>21</sup>

*Higher Education for American Democracy* was both a forward- and backward-looking document. In positing social reconstruction as a rationale for federal intervention, it mirrored the unrealized aspirations of the late New Deal. By

19 President’s Commission on Higher Education, *Establishing the Goals*, 32, 41.

20 President’s Commission on Higher Education, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, vol. III, *Organizing Higher Education* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 1947), 5–15.

21 President’s Commission on Higher Education, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, vol. V, *Financing Higher Education* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 1947), quotes pp. 58, 54; Schrum, “Establishing a Democratic Religion,” 282–85.



## CHAPTER 1

invoking general education to instill Deweyan democracy, it invoked doctrines with waning currency even in an atmosphere of postwar idealism. However, the issues were real: the federal government had already assumed a role in higher education—but to advance specific national interests (agriculture, health, national defense) rather than the general social welfare. And by the time the report appeared, the country was engaged in a massive natural experiment through the GI Bill, which seemed to demonstrate (at least in retrospect) that a greater portion of the population could succeed in and benefit from higher education. These and other issues raised by the commission would loom large in the immediate future. The strictures against segregation in education dovetailed with the 1947 report of the President's Commission on Civil Rights and the 1948 desegregation of the armed services. The call for a substantial increase in properly trained faculty was an undeniable need. And community colleges would not only assume the title conferred by the President's Commission on Higher Education but also in time some of the roles it envisaged.<sup>22</sup> In other respects, *Higher Education for American Democracy* was hopelessly out of the mainstream of American higher education: the slighting of specialized academic knowledge, the dismissal of the liberal arts as aristocratic, the disregard of academic merit, the demeaning attitude toward the private sector—all ran counter to the prevailing nature and values of American colleges and universities.

In 1949 George Zook could point to general public approval of certain recommendations—a substantial expansion of facilities for higher education, some program of national scholarships, and strengthening the preparation of college faculty. However, the widespread discussion stimulated by the report disputed far more.<sup>23</sup> The two perennial arguments against educational expansion—which have perennially proved false—are that additional students lack the intellect for higher studies and that additional graduates would not find suitable employment. The commission anticipated the first objection by basing its projections on Army testing and sidestepped the second by (unrealistically) elevating democracy above careers.<sup>24</sup> But critics instead argued that lower-middle-class and working-class youth—whose education gap was largest—lacked the motivation to go to college

22 Philo Hutcheson, "The 1947 President's Commission on Higher Education and the National Rhetoric on Higher Education Policy," *History of Higher Education Annual* 22 (2002): 91–109; President's Commission on Higher Education, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, vol. IV, *Staffing Higher Education* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 1947).

23 James G. Harlow, "Five Years of Discussion," *Journal of Higher Education* 24, 1 (January 1953), 17–24; Gail Kennedy, ed., *Education for Democracy: The Debate over the President's Commission on Higher Education* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1952).

24 The section "The Professional Schools" endorsed limited manpower planning by estimating and publicizing needs in various professions, and also emphasized that professionals should receive general education: President's Commission on Higher Education, *Establishing the Goals*, 75–84.

## THE GI BILL AND BEYOND

even if financial barriers could be overcome. In the late 1940s it appeared that low participation by such groups had possibly caused the prewar growth trend to level off and that baseline college enrollments might actually decline after the GIs departed. The Harvard economist Seymour Harris swayed many with a plausible empirical case for the second objection—that suitable jobs would not be available for enlarged cohorts of college graduates.<sup>25</sup>

The most vehement opposition to the report came from the slighted private sector. Its two dissenting members of the commission criticized not just the denial of federal funds (which never materialized) but also the unalloyed statism and the implication that private colleges did not serve the public interest. Beyond these issues lay a huge philosophical gulf, as private institutions strongly identified with intellectual goals, the search for truth, and liberal education. Presidents of private universities—Harold Dodds of Princeton, Charles Seymour of Yale, and Robert Maynard Hutchins of Chicago—defended high intellectual standards and limited social participation. But this general mission was particularly important for the National Catholic Education Association, whose members provided mass higher education to non-elite students. In fact, the commission's desire for free public education for the first two years of college posed a grave threat to the private sector that was not unintentional. The instigator of the commission had originally considered the "struggle between public and private education" to be "the most controversial question," and hence the rationale for a public bias.<sup>26</sup> However, this controversy had been most evident in K-12 education before the war. Insofar as it existed in higher education, the conflict was largely fanned by the commission. In fact, one unforeseen consequence of the commission was to galvanize private sector defenses.

Consideration of the future federal role in higher education extended beyond abstract arguments to politics and policy. The proposal for federal scholarships and fellowships may have received the most favorable reception, being welcomed by institutions in both the private and public sectors. Disagreement existed over whether they should be awarded solely for financial need or for intellectual merit—a controversy that was ultimately moot. President Truman was never enthusiastic about federal initiatives for higher education and failed to exert his (waning) influence for legislation. Proposals for implementing the commission's goals were developed by White House staff. First drafts incorporated the commission's generous recommendations for student scholarships, but they were progressively whittled down as the political climate chilled; and provisions were added for student loans, which the commission had explicitly rejected. Legislation to this

25 Kennedy, *Education for Democracy*, 68–72.

26 Kerr-Tener, *From Truman to Johnson*, 87–103, quote p. 69.



## CHAPTER 1

effect was submitted to Congress in August 1950, two months after the outbreak of the Korean War. There it languished, never emerging from committee.<sup>27</sup>

The President's Commission on Higher Education was a product of the evanescent postwar atmosphere of optimism, idealism, and ambitions for the future.<sup>28</sup> Posterity has deemed it prescient for advocating subsequent developments—the expansion of enrollment, federal student financial aid, and the proliferation of community colleges, but there was no direct connection between the commission's report and these later phenomena, as will be evident in later chapters. American colleges and universities shared the postwar euphoria of boundless possibilities, including idealism toward many of the issues considered by the commission. But prevailing beliefs pulled in a different direction. For American colleges, a compelling challenge of postwar education was to formulate a philosophy of liberal education for undergraduate students.

### GENERAL EDUCATION AND LIBERAL EDUCATION

Developing a cultural consensus on the nature and role of liberal education was the unfinished business of American higher education between the wars. After 1900 the term “liberal culture,” as used by Woodrow Wilson and Abbott Lawrence Lowell, implied a rehabilitation of the liberal arts heritage of the defunct classical course and its implicit social distinctions as well. With the coming of mass higher education after World War I, new initiatives attempted to break with the dominant trend and rekindle the spirit of liberal education. Now, prophets and their projects tended to embrace inclusiveness, advocating practices that claimed to enhance the educational experiences of all students. By the 1930s, would-be reformers preferred the term “general education,” in keeping with a consensus that the first two years of college should be oriented to common learning. The majority of colleges, judging from the official publications of institutional associations, still identified with liberal education, however defined. Depictions of liberal and general education overlapped considerably, and both camps harbored contradictory interpretations. Often the same language was used

27 John D. Millett, *Financing Higher Education in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 434–38. In addition, a commission-inspired report of the Office of Education recommended federal support to states to develop plans for community college systems: Kerr-Tener, *From Truman to Johnson*, 95–97, 103–18. Created in an atmosphere of postwar idealism (1946), the commission's reports appeared at the end of 1947 as the Cold War began to dominate American politics and the presidency.

28 Perhaps most evident in the report's endorsement of internationalism: “American institutions of higher education have an enlarged responsibility ... to help our own citizens as well as other peoples to move from the provincial and insular mind to the international mind”: President's Commission on Higher Education, *Establishing the Goals*, 14–20, quote p. 15.

## THE GI BILL AND BEYOND

for entirely different purposes, and each invoked “baskets” of attributes.<sup>29</sup> But beneath this confusion lay the crucial issue of the future nature of American collegiate education. The World War II raised the ideological stakes.

What liberal and general education had in common was aversion to specialization and vocationalism, two of the most prominent trends of the interwar years.<sup>30</sup> “Specialization” was the pejorative term for the relentless advance of academic knowledge coupled with an elective system that allowed students to choose most of their own courses. Critics recognized these realities and argued further that esoteric academic knowledge had little relevance for collegians in the first two years of college, or even in a four-year bachelor’s course. Similar arguments sought to place the study of practical fields for specific careers after general education. What they favored was the desirability of common learning to overcome the fragmentation of the elective system. However, curricular reformers faced the hurdle of existing practice. Many colleges equated liberal education with the mastery of advanced knowledge in academic disciplines and sought to extend their capacity to teach such knowledge. In the median college, barely more than one-third of faculty held PhDs, and only 15 percent of institutions had faculties with one-half or more PhDs. Yet, American science and scholarship had made striking advances prior to the war, and nearly all colleges struggled to catch up by hiring additional faculty with doctorates. Moreover, in 1940 only 43 percent of bachelor’s degrees were awarded in the liberal arts and sciences. Despite an outpouring of writing on liberal and general education, American higher education was primarily engaged in teaching the disciplines and professions.

The onset of war kindled an intense focus on democracy and freedom, which carried over into the postwar years. Their survival in the world was truly at issue, along with much else. Colleges and universities were especially fixated on these ideals, which to them embodied the essence of the struggle as it affected their mission. Although heavily engaged with technical instruction for the war effort, institutions soon began pondering how liberal education might best be harnessed to these ends. These efforts generated extensive writings throughout the 1940s. A 1944 bibliography of liberal education contained 289 entries; two bibliographies of general education also appeared, the second with 237 entries.<sup>31</sup> Liberal

29 Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986), 192–99; Geiger, *History of American Higher Education*. For a critique of contemporary trends and defense of liberal education, see Norman Forester, *The Future of the Liberal College* (New York: Arno Press, 1969 [1938]).

30 Earl J. McGrath issued a manifesto for general education in the first issue of the *Journal of General Education*: “The General Education Movement,” 1, 1 (October 1946): 3–8.

31 Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers*, 203; Commission on Liberal Education, *Liberal Education: Ends and Means, Partial Bibliography, 1943–44* (New York: Association of American Colleges, 1944); Earl J. McGrath, “A Bibliography on General Education,” *Educational Record* 21 (1940): 96–118; William

## CHAPTER 1

arts colleges were particularly invested in liberal education (which only appears to be a truism in retrospect, since most offered vocational majors). The Association of American Colleges, which represented them, sponsored the Commission on Liberal Education, which produced several wartime reports, including the aforementioned bibliography. The American Council of Learned Societies, which spoke for the humanities, published *Liberal Education Re-examined* in 1943. The more ecumenical ACE sponsored two committees on general education. These speculations and pronouncements were prompted not just by the dangers of wartime but also by widespread perception that America and civilization had entered a new era.<sup>32</sup>

In this atmosphere, James Conant in 1942 commissioned a faculty committee to consider the matter of general education not only at Harvard but also for the entire educational system. Conant was a chemist known for his advocacy of research and meritocracy at Harvard and at that moment was teamed with Vannevar Bush to mobilize American science for the war. But he reflected the concerns of the times. He called general education “essential if our civilization is to be preserved.” In his oration for the tercentenary of Harvard (1936), he had identified the need for a “modern equivalent” to the former common classical course. While hardly disparaging specialized and professional education, he asserted that they must be complemented by the liberal arts to form an educated person. But the Harvard committee differed from contemporary writings in key respects. It had a concrete mandate to recommend a general education curriculum for Harvard College, and it had to produce a cogent document acceptable to President Conant and the Harvard faculty. Published in the summer of 1945, *General Education in a Free Society* presented a forceful but intellectually nuanced case for requiring a limited number of dedicated general education courses.<sup>33</sup>

The report, known as the Redbook from its crimson cover, summarized five prewar approaches to the problem of general education: “(1) distribution requirements, (2) comprehensive survey courses, (3) functional courses, (4) a great books curriculum, and (5) individual guidance.” The first characterized most colleges and universities, including Harvard: a major field of study with electives moderated by some requirement for taking courses in other specified areas. The committee took pains to defend the major field of specialized concentration: “An impressive battery of educational machinery is arrayed in its support: the teach-

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Nelson Lyons, “A Further Bibliography on General Education,” *Journal of General Education* 4, 1 (October 1949): 72–80.

<sup>32</sup> Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers*, 195–204.

<sup>33</sup> Conant, *My Several Lives*, 363–68, 651–58; Paul H. Buck et al. *General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1945).

## THE GI BILL AND BEYOND

ing departments, prescribed courses, the system of honors, the tutorial system, and the General Examination [for graduation].” The problem was the failure of the elective system to provide general education: for distribution, “the student take[s] two or three courses of something—almost anything.” Harvard’s four-hundred-some courses taught bits of specialized knowledge but did not provide students with any common learning. As an approach to liberal or general education, the same could be said for elective distribution requirements elsewhere.<sup>34</sup>

Some institutions had addressed the weakness of the elective system by creating survey courses intended to provide students with comprehensive coverage of broad swaths of the humanities, social or natural sciences. Most acclaimed was the Columbia course Contemporary Civilization that evolved from the War Issues course. In 1926 it had been extended to two years, with the first devoted to the history of Western civilization. Other schools instituted similar courses in the following years, and its growing popularity was evidenced by the publication of eight Western Civ textbooks prior to the war (1937–1941).<sup>35</sup> Surveys provided the breadth that specialized electives allegedly lacked, but they were often considered too superficial to elicit the deeper learning goals of liberal/general education. The Redbook felt “a general survey is apt to be a dreary and sterile affair, leaving little residue in the minds of students.”<sup>36</sup>

The committee termed the teaching of life skills courses a “functional” approach to general education, also called instrumentalist. It sacrificed intellect to unity and practicality. This was the version of general education subsequently advocated by the President’s Commission on Higher Education. The Redbook explicitly repudiated the pragmatism of Dewey and William James as present-minded and incapable of appreciating the Western heritage that informed our civilization. Dewey confirmed this dichotomy as late as 1944, equating the liberal arts with an “older literary and metaphysical point of view” that was inappropriate for modern scientific, technological society. The Harvard committee, on the other hand, insisted on interpreting modernism within the context of Western cultural heritage.<sup>37</sup>

At the opposite pole from Dewey, great books had achieved contemporary notoriety when Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr installed a fixed, four-year curriculum entirely based on great books at struggling St. John’s College in 1937.

34 Buck et al., *General Education*, 181, 189, 190.

35 Daniel A. Segal, “‘Western Civ’ and the Staging of History in American Higher Education,” *American Historical Review* 105, 3 (June 2000): 770–805, 781n; Gilbert Allardyce, “The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course,” *American Historical Review* 87, 3 (June 1982): 695–725.

36 Buck et al., *General Education*, 215.

37 *Ibid.*, 181, 47–51; John Dewey, “The Problem of the Liberal Arts College,” *American Scholar* 13, 4 (Autumn 1944): 391–93.

## CHAPTER 1

As originally devised at Columbia University by John Erskine, a great books course was intended to provide students “the advantage of knowing the contents of great books and of discussing them intimately” while also “knowing the same books and . . . reading them at the same time.” The pedagogy was and remained a distinctive feature. For each two-hour class, two instructors led a Socratic dialogue focused on the meaning and appreciation of a single work without regard for historical context or authorial intent. However, the books were inescapably equated with liberal culture, just as Charles Eliot’s five-foot shelf of *Harvard Classics* had promised earlier to provide a liberal education. At the University of Chicago, Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler publicized a more dogmatic version of great books, the approach subsequently employed by Buchanan and Barr. By 1940, Hutchins was dismissed by many as attempting to restore a “medieval curriculum,” but Erskine’s course, revived in 1937 by his successors, Lionel Trilling and Jacques Barzun, became a fixture for its signature contribution to general education at Columbia College.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, “individual guidance” referred to the experimental approaches of Bennington, Sarah Lawrence, and Black Mountain Colleges, which encouraged students to explore and develop their creativity and personal interests—what would later be called the “aesthetic-expressive ideal.”<sup>39</sup> Such approaches required close interactions between students and faculty and could only be implemented on a fairly small scale.

Given these examples to avoid, the committee recommended that Harvard College students take six of their sixteen year-long courses in classes specifically designed for general education in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. In the first two, a single specially designed course would be required of all students; in the sciences, students would take either of two new courses, Principles of Physical Science or Principles of Biological Sciences. The required humanities course would adopt an Erskine-like approach of intensive reading to “Great Texts of Literature.” It would “allow the work to speak for itself,” eschewing matters covered by literary scholarship. Other humanities offerings in general education might draw from literature, philosophy, or the fine arts. Supplemental courses in the sciences had to differ from specialized introductory courses. President Conant later showed the way by teaching *The Growth of Experimental Science*, first offered in 1947.<sup>40</sup> However, it was the social sci-

38 Katherine E. Chaddock, *The Multi-Talented Mr. Erskine: Shaping Mass Culture through Great Books and Fine Music* (New York: Macmillan, 2012), 81–100, quote p. 87; Alex Beam, *A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise, Fall, and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).

39 Gerald Grant and David Riesman, *The Perpetual Dream: Reform and Experiment in the American College* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 21–24.

40 Buck et al., *General Education*, 204–30, quotes p. 205; Conant, *My Several Lives*, 372–73.

## THE GI BILL AND BEYOND

ence course that embodied the central objectives of *General Education in a Free Society*.

The social science course recommended for all students was Western Thought and Institutions, a selective historical consideration of the Western heritage from the Greeks to the present day. The course would be “not unlike” Contemporary Civilization at Columbia but would cover fewer topics and use longer portions of fewer books. The “primary emphasis in the course should be placed upon the evolution of such institutions as representative government and the reign of law, the impact of the Reformation . . . the growth of religious toleration . . . natural rights philosophy, the growing confidence in the power of reason . . . humanitarianism, the rise of laissez-faire philosophy, etc.” In other words, those aspects of the Western heritage that provided the ideological foundation for democratic citizenship. However, the Redbook called for studying these topics “as great expressions of ideas which emanated from certain historical backgrounds.” This implied an objective, scholarly consideration of these issues in their historical contexts. The contradiction between abstract ideas and historical circumstance was not appreciated in 1945, but it was latent in Harvard’s conception of general education and in the predominant interpretation of Western Civ that swept American higher education.<sup>41</sup>

The Harvard Redbook sold 40,000 copies and was widely read and discussed. It was credited with strongly influencing the postwar curriculum, an influence that was ascribed to the prestige of its source. Both contentions are exaggerations. The popularity of the Redbook was due, above all, to the fact that other institutions of higher education were preoccupied with the same issues: providing college students with a common core of learning and instilling an ideological foundation for democratic citizenship. These concerns dominated discussions of general education emerging from the Depression and war, and they were soon reinforced by the onset of the Cold War. To address them, the Redbook was an indispensable source—intelligent, sophisticated, and nuanced in its treatment but also consistent with the prewar dialogue. Although it stated at one point, “General and liberal education have identical goals,” it posited a vision of general education that avoided the exclusive or “aristocratic,” connotations of liberal education as well as the anti-intellectual stance of general education functionalists. It embraced the democratic ideals of the country and sought to enhance the educational system as a whole. The specific recommendations for Harvard courses were a different matter. Each institution reevaluated its curriculum in light of existing curricula, faculty resources, and the common aims of general education. The result was different combinations of core or survey courses. Most colleges

41 Buck et al., *General Education*, 213–17.



## CHAPTER 1

and universities reduced electives and expanded common learning in some form in the decade following the war.<sup>42</sup>

Harvard itself illustrated the vagaries of this process. After lengthy deliberations, the Faculty of Arts and Science overwhelmingly approved the report. A trial period followed in which general education courses, like Conant's, were developed and debuted. These efforts depended on the initiatives of individual professors and, given the deep talent pool, produced offerings that were novel, cross-disciplinary, and intellectually challenging. However, this meant that gen-ed courses were shaped as much by professorial idiosyncrasies as by the Redbook. The general education requirement was officially adopted in 1950 for the class of '55, but instead of single prescribed courses, freshmen were given a choice of two to four beginning courses in each of the three basic areas, and a larger list of more advanced courses for their other three gen-ed courses. Over time, the number of items on these menus inexorably grew.<sup>43</sup>

The most distinctive contribution of general education to the postwar curriculum was a required course in the history of Western civilization. Introducing students to the heritage of the West, either in something like *Western Thought and Institutions* or in *Western Civ*, spoke directly to the aspiration to form citizens of a liberal democracy. Although it had prewar antecedents, the postwar *Western Civ* survey was specifically tailored for this purpose. The direction of change was typified at Columbia, where historical continuity in the course *Contemporary Civilization* was deemphasized in favor of reading and discussing original works. At the University of Chicago, *Western Civ* was added to general education in 1948 despite President Hutchins's dislike of the subject, but only as a succession of historical case studies. Harvard's adaptation was the most complex, while reflecting, at least initially, the spirit of the Redbook. By 1950 it offered four freshman courses (*Social Sciences 1-4*), each covering Western history from a different perspective and taught, respectively, by a historian, political scientist, economic historian, and sociologist. *Social Sciences 1*, *Introduction to the Development of Western Civilization*, provided somewhat more historical context than the others, but it too stressed ideas and institutions rather than events.<sup>44</sup> With this emphasis on the foundational ideas underlying democratic societies,

42 Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers*, 233; Alston Chase, "The Rise and Fall of General Education, 1945-1980," *Academic Questions* 6, 2 (Spring 1993): 21-37; Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), 258-62.

43 Conant, *My Several Lives*, 370-71; Morton Keller and Phyllis Keller, *Making Harvard Modern: The Rise of America's University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 44-46. The general education menu grew to such length that it was scrapped in 1966.

44 Allardyce, "Rise and Fall," 712-15; David Owen, "Harvard General Education in Social Science," *Journal of General Education* 5, 1 (October 1950): 17-30.

## THE GI BILL AND BEYOND

and sometimes amalgamated with social science, Western Civ quickly became the most widely taught history course in American colleges and was typically required of freshmen. Hailed as general education, it was actually a repudiation of the instrumentalist interpretation championed by Dewey and the President's Commission. Although it provided common learning and was justified with presentist arguments, it was ultimately rooted in the stuff of history that they had disparaged.<sup>45</sup>

Given the impetus of the Redbook and the President's Commission on Higher Education, the years 1945–1950 were the heyday of the general education movement. Institutions of all types began marching under the banner of general education, but they often marched in different directions.<sup>46</sup> Curricular reforms, extending into the 1950s and beyond, tended to establish various forms of structured core curricula. They divided the undergraduate course into lower and upper divisions, created basic colleges to teach broad surveys of humanities, social sciences and natural sciences, and required some version of Western Civ. They sought to ensure that all students would share some common learning, be exposed to broad coverage of the major fields of knowledge, and acquire an intellectual foundation for citizenship.<sup>47</sup> What they did NOT institute was education for life. The Deweyan instrumentalist version of general education was largely moribund after 1950, despite continued advocacy by dedicated followers in lower schools.<sup>48</sup> The reason was inherent in the make-up of colleges and universities: departments of biology, chemistry, economics, English, history ... and zoology did not teach life skills. They were somewhat willing, given the postwar spirit of reform, to direct their intellectual technologies into new configurations of core, survey, or interdisciplinary courses, especially if it justified hiring more faculty. However, the sine qua non of these endeavors was valuing the intellectual substance of these fields. This was increasingly justified under the rubric of liberal education.

45 Cf. Earl J. McGrath et al. *Toward General Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1949). This suggested curriculum consigns pre-modern thought to philosophy, and dismissed “swiftly moving, superficial survey courses, so productive of manifest evil.” Beginning with the Renaissance, it held that the purpose of history is to demonstrate “the present is the product of the past”: 143–44. McGrath was founding editor of the *Journal of General Education* (see note 29) and a member of the President's Commission.

46 For examples, see Russell Thomas, *The Search for a Common Learning: General Education, 1800–1960* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962); and Willis Rudy, *The Evolving Liberal Arts Curriculum: A Historical Review of Basic Themes* (New York: Teachers College, 1960).

47 Chase, “Rise and Fall of General Education”; Rudolph, *Curriculum*, 256–59. Most authors (Alardyce, Chase, Rudolph) are more concerned with the unraveling of these reforms after 1955, a subject for Chapter 2.

48 Miller, *Meaning of General Education*, 139–42; of course, general education never “died”: 143–80.



## CHAPTER 1

THE COMMISSION ON FINANCING HIGHER EDUCATION. After 1950 the dialogue on higher education reverted toward traditional roles and away from the more idealistic postwar formulations. Concerns for democracy, internationalism, expansion, and general education were still prominent, and programs still initiated to advance these aims; but the influence of the academic mainstream increasingly predominated. This perspective was articulated in 1952 by the Commission on Financing Higher Education (CFHE). The commission dates from November 1947—the month the President’s Commission reported—when the Rockefeller Foundation appointed an exploratory committee to consider these issues. The committee expanded to become the commission eighteen months later, organized under the Association of American Universities and funded by the foundation and the Carnegie Corporation. The commission represented the research universities; it included Harvard Provost Paul Buck and the presidents of Johns Hopkins, Caltech, Stanford, and Brown. The commission’s large staff documented the realities of American higher education in eight studies and technical papers, which were condensed into *Financing Higher Education in the United States*—a compendium of the state of higher education at the start of the 1950s. This material was then summarized in the commission’s report to the public, *Nature and Needs of Higher Education*.<sup>49</sup> These writings referenced the President’s Commission (PC) and addressed the same issues, but largely from the perspective of the research universities and the private colleges. The CFHE sought to counter the PC report on issues central to the development of American higher education.

HOW MANY SHOULD GO TO COLLEGE? Intellectual qualification was posited as the primary criterion for college attendance, and here *Financing Higher Education* repeated the critics’ objections to the generous PC estimates. The CFHE applied a slightly higher cutoff on the Army intelligence test and concluded that 25 percent of youth were intellectually qualified to attend and complete college. This still left an enormous “education gap”: only 40 percent of those students started college, and just 54 percent of them graduated. These figures were derived from empirical studies by the Commission on Human Resources and Advanced Training, which presented a disturbing picture of American education. Just 28 percent of students with the highest 10 percent of test scores were graduating from college; and for the top 2 percent, the figure was 42 percent. At the other end, half of students entering college fell *below* the top quartile, and one-third of those students managed to graduate anyway. The CFHE urged higher

49 Millett, *Financing Higher Education*; Commission on Financing Higher Education (CFHE), *Nature and Needs of Higher Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952).

## THE GI BILL AND BEYOND

education to emphasize recruitment of top-quartile students, especially the most intelligent. However, it failed to acknowledge that factors other than intellectual qualification seemed to determine college-going in America. Worse, it asserted,

Our colleges and universities enroll a wide representation of American youth.... They promote ... the ideal of the classless society and of careers open to talent. Colleges and universities are among the least discriminatory institutions of American society in so far as race, religion, and nationality are concerned.<sup>50</sup>

This Panglossian view from the commission ignored blatant discrimination against African Americans, as well as a more detailed analysis in *Financing*, based on a commission study. A substantial literature documented the influence of social class on educational attainment, which was cited in the commission study by Byron S. Hollinshead, *Who Should Go to College?* Hollinshead called the phrase “equality of educational opportunity ... more demagogic than rational.” The CFHE’s avoidance of any potentially negative content reflected the new Cold War mentality.<sup>51</sup>

The uncritical views in *Nature and Needs* reflected contemporary thinking about education in American society. Foremost was IQ determinism—the conviction that tested intelligence was the most important criterion for college attendance and for developing the nation’s intellectual resources. Social influences, like parental education and socioeconomic status (SES), were relegated to factors of motivation. The lower participation of women (40 percent of enrollments) was also ascribed to motivation. Hence, “motivation is not just the product of environment, of society and culture. The individual has his own choice to make.” Supposedly, individual free will determined whether or not an individual chose to go to college, thus justifying the commission’s false assertion of “equality of educational opportunity.” Its preferred vision: “A basic challenge to higher education and to our whole society is to interest more of the top students in intellectual promise in attending college.”<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Millett, *Financing Higher Education*, 42–57; CFHE, *Nature and Needs*, 45–54, quote 45–46. Dael Wolfe, director of the Commission on Human Resources and Advanced Training, reported findings in several publications: “America’s Intellectual Resources,” *NAASP Bulletin* 36, 183 (January 1952): 125–35. Wolfe endorsed the PC figure of 33 percent of youth intellectually qualified for college.

<sup>51</sup> Byron S. Hollinshead, *Who Should Go to College?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 74. The mention of race with non-discrimination reveals a perverse, even mendacious blindness to segregation, which had been criticized by the President’s Commission. See Chapter 4.

<sup>52</sup> Millett, *Financing Higher Education*, 50–54.

## CHAPTER 1

Although the recommended 25 percent participation of the CFHE was somewhat below the 32 percent PC figure, its focus solely on that population muffled arguments for expanding higher education. In fact, it hopefully suggested that greater attendance from the top 25 percent might discourage attendance by “many of those who now go, but fall below that general level of intelligence.” *Financing* discussed the goals of the PC under “the dangers in mass higher education,” especially the lowering of intellectual standards. Junior colleges were disparagingly excluded from consideration as having a largely terminal vocational mission.<sup>53</sup>

**PUBLIC AND PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS.** The CFHE sought to counter the PC’s negative portrayal of the private sector by emphasizing the value of institutional diversity. *Nature and Needs* called diversity the key to freedom: offering students a multitude of choices, enabling the access of large numbers of students, strengthening institutions through competition, and guaranteeing academic freedom. The two sectors exerted mutually beneficial influence upon one another, such that “our society would be impoverished by the decline in vigor of either.”<sup>54</sup> The two sectors were roughly equivalent at this time, but the CFHE addressed the implicit threat to private colleges of public expansion.

**FEDERAL SUPPORT FOR HIGHER EDUCATION.** The CFHE presented a thorough account and analysis of existing forms of federal support for higher education, which included student support not just for veterans but also for ROTC and some medical students; grants and loans for facilities for veterans and medical schools; grants for research and services for federal agencies; and support through land-grant legislation. While acknowledging the benefits derived from these funds, the commission concluded unanimously that no new federal programs of direct financial aid to colleges and universities should be enacted. Federal funds, it argued, inevitably brought greater control (as advocated by the PC), which in turn would stifle diversity, “and the freedom of higher education would be lost.” Additional funds were certainly needed to address the financial plight of higher education: the need created by inflation, capital expansion and modernization, and quality upgrades, especially for private institutions. Enrollment growth would also be a factor when the larger birth cohorts began arriving in the next decade. But the CFHE rather optimistically looked to private philanthropy

53 Ibid., quotes pp. 44, 50–51.

54 Ibid., 44–51; CFHE, *Nature and Needs*, 31–42.

## THE GI BILL AND BEYOND

(coupled with economy measures) to address the financial needs of mainly private colleges and universities.<sup>55</sup>

DEMOCRACY AND LIBERAL EDUCATION. The CFHE clearly distinguished its position from that of the PC. Intellectual content was the common denominator: “The liberal arts properly conceived and taught . . . is the heart of all higher education.” The decadence of liberal education in the 1930s gave rise to the ambiguous notion of general education. However, the PC vision of teaching a “common core” for citizenship and democracy would relegate grades 13 and 14 to the status of high school instruction. The CFHE endorsed the Harvard report’s curriculum as a preliminary base of common learning, but it idealized a traditional conception of liberal education as a higher form of learning, fundamental to a free society. Individual freedom was the touchstone, best achieved through the “understanding of man’s cultural heritage, an appreciation of the great ennobling sentiments and thoughts of philosophers and scholars, [and] a grasp of the ways in which man’s knowledge has accumulated and how it advances.” The CFHE thus offered a synthesis of general and liberal education that was perhaps superficial in a philosophical sense, but it privileged the liberal learning that liberal arts colleges and universities now embraced for undergraduate education, and it rationalized that position for contemporaries by identifying liberal education, and the institutions that purveyed it, with freedom.<sup>56</sup>

The copious materials gathered by the CFHE documented conditions in American higher education at the beginning of the 1950s, but the commission’s message provided another kind of documentation. Funded by two great foundations, organized by the club of research universities, with membership including university and corporate leaders, the commission spoke for the higher education establishment at the onset of the Cold War. The iterations of *free society* and *freedom* in higher education echoed the identification of the United States as leader of the Free World. The Panglossian assumption about equality of educational opportunity reflected a conscious or unconscious absorption of the preferred self-image of American society, and possibly self-censorship against acknowledging social problems even to the extent that the President’s Commission had. The focus on traditional undergraduate education in the liberal arts and a tentativeness

55 CFHE, *Nature and Needs*, 58–89, 150–65, quote p. 159; Millett, *Financing Higher Education* contains an exhaustive analysis of costs, income sources, and possibilities for future finances.

56 CFHE, *Nature and Needs*, 16 & passim.; Millett, *Financing Higher Education*, 11–19, 42–47; Richard Hofstadter and C. DeWitt Hardy, *The Development and Scope of Higher Education in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 207–25 (a publication of the Commission on Financing Higher Education).

## CHAPTER 1

toward federally funded research elevated and in a sense rehabilitated the central historical function of American higher education. *Nature and Needs*, in sum, sanctified the status quo. It identified possible threats to this fundamentally sound system but pointed the way for private actors—not the federal government—to meet these challenges and further strengthen this system. The writings of the CFHE thus signify a transition from the tumultuous postwar debates over the roles and direction of American higher education to an emerging consensus on the “American way of life.” Thus, they reflected larger developments within the institutions and in American society.

### DEFINING POSTWAR AMERICA: THE COLD WAR AND MCCARTHYISM

James Patterson stated that the end of WWII was met with “grand expectations”: “Americans, having fought to win the war, expected to dominate the world order to come. . . . The future promised a great deal more than the past. In this optimistic mood . . . Americans plunged hopefully into the new postwar world.”<sup>57</sup> It was soon apparent, however, that formidable fault lines crossed these expectations, domestically and internationally. At home, there was the unsettled legacy of the New Deal. The reform momentum of the New Deal had been blocked by Congressional opposition since 1937, but a reinvigorated coalition, inspired by the scope and authority of the government’s wartime powers, envisioned new measures to promote social welfare and regulate capitalism. However, Congress was still dominated by conservatives and anti-New Dealers, who looked to private enterprise to maintain the vitality of the wartime economy. Internationally, strong currents of idealism foresaw a peaceful and cooperative international order under the aegis of American power in conjunction with the newly organized United Nations. Against these internationalist aspirations, United States foreign policy resisted concessions on national sovereignty and national interests, focusing instead on countering the threat of Soviet aggrandizement. The left-liberal position in both these spheres was gradually undermined by a growing opposition to communism—to the actions and influence of the domestic Communist Party and to the hostile policies of the Soviet Union. Anti-communism and the Cold War would both have an immediate impact on American universities and their faculty members. Longer term, these developments exerted a pervasive influence on American higher education in the postwar era.

Official intolerance of communists dated from the Red Scare following World War I. In the public mind, communism was *un-American* and scarcely deserving

57 Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 8–9.

## THE GI BILL AND BEYOND

of the protection of civil liberties. But zealots carried such fears much further, applying the label to any groups that advocated enhanced government social programs. In 1938 the House of Representatives established the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) under Texas representative Martin Dies. In the political culture of Texas, “New Deal communist” was a single phrase, with “homosexual” often added for greater odiousness.<sup>58</sup> The Dies Committee targeted labor unions and New Deal Democrats and also inspired “little HUACs” in several states, which sometimes targeted higher education.

The purging of communists from American society passed through three phases. The Dies Committee may be said to have inaugurated the first phase, sometimes called the Second Red Scare. It was led by political entrepreneurs who no doubt genuinely despised communism but also harnessed this issue to discredit enemies and advance their own political ends. The second phase followed the Republican landslide in the 1946 elections. The president soon responded to Soviet provocations by announcing the Truman Doctrine, which committed the United States to opposing Soviet expansion and officially signaled the onset of the Cold War. Domestically, loyalty boards were established to purge the federal government of communists and sympathizers. Suspicion of disloyalty on the part of anyone with present or past associations with communism thus became federal policy, replicated (if not anticipated) in a number of states. Senator Joseph McCarthy only entered the lists of the anti-communist crusaders in 1950, touching off the third and most virulent phase. His sensational charges exacerbated the national paranoia and intimidated reasonable opposition until his downfall in 1954.<sup>59</sup>

The first phase corresponded with a growing wave of anti-communism from the end of the Popular Front in 1939 to the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union, when the Communist Party made expediting the war effort its top priority. The Dies Committee issued charges of alleged communists in federal agencies, and in 1940 the Smith Act criminalized membership in any organization that advocated the violent overthrow of the government. In this atmosphere, little HUACs threatened higher education in several states, but the only consequential investigation occurred in New York City. The state legislature empaneled the Rapp-Coudert Committee in 1940, which sought to expose communists in the city’s schools. Like future HUACs, it assumed that exposure was sufficiently damning that other entities, in this case the New York City Board of Education,

58 Susan R. Richardson, “Oil, Power, and Universities: Political Struggle and Academic Advancement at the University of Texas and Texas A&M, 1876–1965,” PhD diss. Pennsylvania State University, 2005, 149–52.

59 Larry Ceplair, *Anti-Communism in Twentieth-Century America: A Critical History* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011).

## CHAPTER 1

would impose appropriate punishments. Active communists were not hard to find in New York City, where at least one-third of party members resided. The committee focused on the College of the City of New York. Using informants to identify party members, it then called them to testify before the committee. In this initial confrontation the accused compounded their peril by denying they were party members. In protracted proceedings, the board of education dealt harshly with confirmed party members: twenty were dismissed and another eleven resigned under pressure (1941–1942). In addition to lying to the committee and the board, the grounds were that party membership was, ipso facto, incompatible with the responsibilities of a faculty member. No attempt was made to show that party membership had a prejudicial effect on their teaching or students.<sup>60</sup>

At the end of the war, the American Communist Party resumed an aggressive posture, and anti-communist fervor was also reenergized. The election of 1946 signaled a tipping point. Dramatic Republican gains were followed by increasing red-baiting, perhaps most fatefully in Richard Nixon's election to Congress (where he joined HUAC). President Truman reacted to charges that he was soft on communists in government by creating Loyalty Review Boards to vet federal employees. These boards performed the most far-reaching and systematic purge of the entire Red Scare: "During the program's peak between 1947 and 1956, more than five million federal workers underwent loyalty screening, and at least 25,000 were subject to the stigmatizing 'full field investigation' by the FBI. An estimated 2,700 federal employees were dismissed, and about 12,000 resigned."<sup>61</sup> With loyalty enforcement now official policy in Washington, anti-communist initiatives were launched throughout the states.

The anti-communist crusade employed three principal tactics—hearings of legislative investigative committees intended to expose former communists or sympathizers, various forms of loyalty oaths, and communist-control laws, including direct prosecution of party leaders under the Smith Act or the more punitive McCarran Act (1950). By the late '40s, forty-two states had imposed some form of oath on employees that required them to attest to their loyalty, their disinclination to forcibly overthrow the government, and/or their non-membership in the Communist Party. Only in California did a loyalty oath disrupt the university; but the little HUACs during this second phase were drawn to investigate higher education.<sup>62</sup>

60 Ellen W. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 75–83.

61 Landon R. Y. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2.

62 M. J. Heale, *McCarthy's America: Red Scare Politics in State and Nation, 1935–1965* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).



## THE GI BILL AND BEYOND

The first, pattern-setting investigation occurred at the University of Washington. The Canwell Committee was created in 1947 and investigated the university the next year. Eleven faculty members identified as having communist connections were called to testify before the committee. It was left to the university and its new reforming president, Raymond Allen, to deal with the committee's revelations. The university chose to consider actions against six faculty members—three who admitted to having been party members but refused to “name names” of former associates, and three who had refused to cooperate with the committee. These cases were considered by the university in lengthy, judicious proceedings. President Allen made the final decision to dismiss the three noncooperators and to place the three ex-communists on two-year probation. Two dismissed professors were party members, and the third could accurately be described as a fellow traveler (a much-abused term).<sup>63</sup>

When critics charged a violation of academic freedom and civil liberty, Allen justified the dismissals with a paradigmatic argument in the article: “Communists Should Not Teach in American Colleges.” Starting with a paean to freedom, “the keystone of . . . the American way of life,” he asserted that “a member of the Communist Party is not a free man.” The university is based on the “free and unfettered search for truth,” while a party member “must believe and teach what the party line decrees.”<sup>64</sup> This last phrase was a quote from Sidney Hook, the foremost spokesman for this position. This issue was vigorously debated in 1949. Accused professors sometimes claimed that they freely accepted communist viewpoints, so that freedom of conscience was the issue at stake. Both the American Civil Liberties Union and the Association of American University Professors (AAUP) held that communists should not automatically be excluded from teaching, but the educational community, including university faculty, overwhelmingly endorsed the Allen-Hook position that they were unfit to teach. The National Education Association (NEA) voted almost unanimously to back this position. Even faculty at leading universities valued anti-communism over civil liberties. In a secret ballot at the University of California (UC) in 1950, the faculty endorsed the prohibition of communists by four to one, and a 1949 poll of Harvard faculty produced a similar result. Only one in seven Washington faculty protested their colleagues' firings.<sup>65</sup>

63 Jane Sanders, *The Cold War on Campus: Academic Freedom at the University of Washington, 1946–64* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979); Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 94–104.

64 Raymond B. Allen, “Communists Should Not Teach in American Colleges,” *Educational Forum* 13, 4 (May 1949): the last quote is taken from Sidney Hook, the best-known exponent of this view.

65 Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 106–12; Clark Kerr, *The Gold and the Blue: A Personal Memoir of the University of California, 1949–1967; Volume Two, Political Turmoil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 42.



## CHAPTER 1

Long after the fact, Clark Kerr, who had been a new faculty member at the University of Washington before the war, noted in his memoir that the same three individuals had harassed him for refusing to join “what was obviously a ‘front’ organization,” calling him a “social fascist.” When Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, the same individuals switched overnight from isolationists to interventionists: “They saluted Moscow in unison.”<sup>66</sup> Of course, some party members were only nominal communists. Later, as chancellor of the Berkeley campus, Kerr quietly obtained the resignations of three such faculty members, as required by university statute. One remained in the party because his wife, a rabid communist, would break up his family if he left. The other two remained out of fear that the party would expose them if they resigned, leading to a HUAC summons. Still, the majority of American faculty sided with Allen in rejecting communists as colleagues.<sup>67</sup>

The Washington cases were regarded as a victory for the anti-communist forces and as a model purge. Although the Canwell hearings had some of the circus features of the big and little HUACs, the university had given the accused extensive due process and reached reasonable judgments—in fact retaining those faculty with past communist associations, alleged or actual.

The legislative committees investigating un-American activities all operated from the same playbook. They made extensive use of the testimonies of informants, often of “professional anti-communists,” that were sometimes dubious or fabricated. Behind all these investigations was J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI, with voluminous files on memberships, associations, and alleged subversive activities of hundreds of thousands of Americans, as well as often-fanciful lists of “front” organizations. This information allowed the committees to dredge up and confront witnesses with long-past incidents, especially from the Popular Front era, when the Communist Party had been in the forefront of progressive causes.<sup>68</sup> Questioned about actual or alleged party membership, witnesses who admitted past membership were then pressured to identify former associates. With the proceedings so stacked against them, many resorted to the Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination as the only means to avoid acquiescing to these vile tactics. The legality of “taking the Fifth” was contested, but in the

66 Kerr, *Gold and the Blue: Volume Two, Political Turmoil*, 40–41.

67 Ibid., 32, 58.

68 Communist Party membership was characterized by rapid turnover, large fluctuations, and uncertain totals. Maximum membership seems to have been about 80,000, which was reached in 1939, 1944, and 1947, with 33–40 percent in New York City: David A. Shannon, *The Decline of American Communism: A History of the Communist Party of the United States since 1945* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham Book-seller, 1959), 91–97; Guenter Lewy, *The Cause That Failed: Communism in American Political Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 307–8.

## INDEX

- Aaron, Henry, 126  
Abbott, Andrew, 110, 124  
academic ability, 5, 12, 43–44, 47–48, 63, 65–69, 130–31, 134–36, 138, 147, 150, 168, 218, 240, 255–56, 290, 330n, 339  
*Academically Adrift* (2009), 341, 344  
academic disciplines, 110–11, 123–24  
academic enclosure, 106  
academic freedom, 35–38, 69, 104, 209–10  
academic Left, 209, 300–302, 345–47, 366  
academic preparation, 162–64, 242–44, 269, 283, 317, 330n, 324–28, 337  
academic revolution, 71, 107–19, 124, 134, 165–66, 170–71, 175, 203–4, 262, 269, 362  
admissions, 56, 58, 162–64, 284–85; affirmative, 226–27, 291n57, 308–9; gridlock in, 291; at Harvard, Yale and Princeton, 64–69, 291–92; selective, 47–49, 63, 70–71, 255–56  
adult education, 247–49  
affirmative action, 217, 222–28; reactions to, 308–9  
African Americans, 44, 153–65, 179, 223, 247, 283–84, 301, 314, 352, 362; and Black Power, 187–88, 192, 196–97, 202; and urban higher education, 147. *See also* desegregation; integration, at northern universities  
Allen, John, 53–54, 60  
Allen, Raymond, 31  
alumni, 61, 70–71, 253–54  
American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC), 55, 149, 151, 246  
American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), 137–40  
American Association of University Professors (AAUP), 31, 36–37, 210–11  
American Council of Learned Societies, 18, 305  
American Council on Education (ACE), xvii–xix, 9–10, 18, 46, 116, 246  
American Federation of Teachers, 196n37, 210–11  
American Legion, 5  
American Talent Initiative, 334  
American way of life, 61, 63, 71, 92, 179, 182, 299; defined, 39–43  
Amherst College, 62, 169, 237  
anti-communism, 40–41. *See also* McCarthyism  
anti-war movement, 179, 185–86, 188  
area studies, 99, 104–5  
Arizona, University of, 86, 339  
Arizona State University, 85–86, 357–58  
Arum, Richard, 341–43  
Asian Americans, 291n, 301, 308, 314  
assessment, 339–40, 344  
Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (IAAW), 238–39  
Association of American Colleges and Universities, 18, 316  
Association of American Universities (AAU), 24, 34–35, 73, 85  
athletics, intercollegiate, 221–22; women's, 238–40  
Autor, David, 336, 338  
Aydelotte, Frank, 166  
Baker, David, 329, 361  
*Bakke* decision, 227, 305, 316  
Ball State University, 54–55, 258–59  
*Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*, 324  
Basic Education Opportunity Grants. *See* Pell Grants  
Bayh-Dole Act, 270–71  
Bell, Daniel, 125–28, 171, 354–55  
Berelson, Bernard, 101, 112  
Bender, William, 65–66  
Bennett, William J., 303–5  
Bennington College, 20, 238  
Berman, Elizabeth Popp, 271  
Bethe, Hans, 81  
biotechnology, 270–73  
Black Mountain College, 20  
black studies, 196–98, 202, 205, 234  
Bloom, Allan, 198n39, 304–5  
Bok, Derek, 200, 225, 272, 277, 281n, 333  
Bound, John, 326–27  
Bowdoin College, 170  
Bowen, William, 333  
Boyer, Ernest, 248, 339  
branch campuses. *See* extension education  
Breneman, David, 257, 293  
Brewster, Kingman, 163, 235, 253–54  
Brinkley, Alan, 41  
Brint, Steven, 316, 339, 343, 357, 361  
Brockport State University (SUNY Brockport), 54–55  
Buck, Paul, 24  
Buckley, William F., Jr., 69–70, 310  
Buffalo, University of (SUNY Buffalo), 141–42, 173; student protest at (1968–1970), 194–95, 202

## INDEX

- Bundy, McGeorge, 66, 68–69, 105–6  
Bush, President George H. W., 307  
Bush, Vannevar, 18, 74, 94, 277  
business education, 102–3, 134, 215, 240, 244, 257–58  
Butterfield, Victor, 63–64, 169
- California: Master Plan for Higher Education in, 58–59, 120, 139–40, 147–48, 294; paradigm of, 56–60, 137  
California Institute of Technology (Caltech), 73–74, 80, 237, 356  
California State Colleges (Universities), 139–40, 211, 294  
California, University of (UC), 31–33, 57–59, 73–74, 140, 279n27, 294–95, 343; affirmative action at, 308–9  
—UC Berkeley, 78–80, 85, 106, 117, 120, 225; free speech movement at, 184–85; student protests at, 180–81, 189–90, 200, 202  
—UC Davis, 227  
—UCLA, 264, 351–52  
—UC Santa Cruz, 173–74  
Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 137, 140, 144, 149, 213–15, 220, 246  
Carnegie Corporation, 24, 98–100, 167  
Carnegie-Mellon University, 102, 117, 122  
Carr, Cynthia, 357  
Cartter, Allan M., 115–18  
Catholic higher education, 15, 141, 165  
centers and institutes. *See* organized research units  
Chamberlain, Mariam K., 233  
Chicago, University of, 20, 22, 51, 73–74, 80, 101–2, 106, 117, 122, 124, 171, 315, 349, 356  
Clark, Burton R., 56, 150  
Clemson University, 157  
Clotfelter, Charles, 324–25, 332, 334  
cluster colleges, in universities, 172–75  
coeducation, at single-sex institutions, 235–38. *See also* Princeton University; Yale University  
cognitive learning, 339, 341, 345  
Cohen, Joseph, 166–68  
Cold War, 28–29, 40, 42, 179, 182–83  
Coleman, James, 126  
college for all, 212–13, 246, 316–17, 320, 342  
college training programs, World War II, xix–xxi  
Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), 340–43  
Colorado, University of, 166  
Columbia University, 73, 102, 106, 117, 122; Contemporary Civilization course of, 19–20, 22, 171; student protest at (1968), 191–94  
Commission on Financing Higher Education (CFHE), 24–28, 39, 50, 62, 76, 84, 99  
Communist Party, 28–32, 35, 37, 40  
community colleges, 13–14, 55–59, 93, 147–52, 240–41, 244, 328, 330; vocational track in, 56–60, 151–52  
Conant, James, 6, 18, 20, 55, 65, 68, 75–76  
Connerly, Ward, 308, 311  
consumerism, in higher education, 241, 300, 313, 343, 347, 365  
Cornell University, 34, 73, 80–81, 123, 163, 232; student protest at (1969), 197–99, 202, 304  
counterculture, 173, 188, 195, 200, 203, 207, 249  
critical thinking, 340, 343  
Crow, Michael, 357  
culture wars, 299–308, 345
- Dartmouth College, 237  
Day, Edmund Ezra, 80–81  
democracy, and higher education, 10–11, 27, 183, 339  
desegregation, 153–60, 175  
Dewey, John, 10–11, 23  
Diamond, Nancy, 278, 281n  
Dies, Martin, 29, 33  
discrimination, 12, 25, 42, 64n52, 70–71, 161–63, 217, 221, 223–24, 228, 230–31, 353; reverse, 227, 291, 305  
disidentification, with the United States, 299–302, 341, 347, 353  
diversity, 88, 160–65, 227, 304n85, 307, 309, 316, 339, 348, 351–53; bureaucracy for, 350–51  
Dodds, Harold, 15, 68  
Douglass, John, 309  
Draper, Hal, 185  
Drucker, Peter, 124  
D'Souza, Dinesh, 306–8  
Duke University, 158–59, 225, 237, 280  
Dunham, Alden, 137–38  
Dykstra, Clarence, xxi
- earnings, of college graduates, 42, 242–43, 245, 329–38, 365  
economics, 100, 111, 122, 124  
Education Amendments of 1972, 217, 220–22, 228, 246, 281, 320. *See also* Title IX  
Eisenhower, Milton, 86  
egalitarianism, 204, 207, 212–15, 269, 282

## INDEX

- Emory University, 158–59, 280, 357  
employment, of college graduates, 131–33, 147, 245, 329–32  
engagement, 339–41, 365  
English literature, 110–11, 301, 353–54  
Enlightenment, 300–301, 346  
enrollments, in higher education, xix–xx, 9, 12–15, 24–25, 43–45, 49, 93, 129–38, 147–48, 152, 159–60, 164, 241, 283, 314; of women, 45–47, 130–32, 241–42  
expansion, of higher education, 245–47  
extension education, 51, 247–48, 257; branch campuses, 151–52; urban, 144
- faculty, xx–xxi, 17, 61, 63, 66, 82, 102–3, 138–39, 170, 203, 205, 207–10, 224–26, 230–31, 302–4, 340; in 1960s, 110–18, 124; adjunct, 297–98, 342, 360–61; in McCarthy era, 31–36; politics of, 346–47; salaries of, 93, 103, 252, 263, 279; unionization of, 210–12  
Fass, Paula, 45  
feminism, 229–35, 301, 346, 352  
finance, of higher education: in 1970s, 251–65; federal, 13, 26–27, 94–98, 136, 148; by states, 292–98, 316–18, 364  
financial aid, for students, 13, 15–16, 217, 318–19; loans, 269–70, 281–83, 285–87, 298, 319–22, 364; by states, 221, 319. *See also* GI Bill  
Finley, Moses, 34  
Ford Foundation, 52, 81, 84, 100–107, 110, 114, 233; behavioral sciences, 100–101; business education, 102–3, 122; graduate education, 106; for private colleges and universities, 103–4; private research universities, 104; programs in area studies, 104–5; urban studies, 105–6, 144  
for-profit sector, 320–23  
Foucault, Michel, 301–2  
Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), 349nn99 and 103  
foundations, 98–107  
Franklin, H. Bruce, 209–10  
Franklin and Marshall College, 169, 255  
fraternities, 64, 71, 352  
Freeman, Richard B., 245  
Friedan, Betty, 45, 47, 229
- Galbraith, John Kenneth, 92, 124  
Gates Foundation, Bill and Melinda, 317  
general education, 11–14; and liberal education, 16–23, 170–72
- General Education in a Free Society* (Harvard Redbook, 1945), 18–23, 27, 171  
Georgia, University of, 156–57, 296  
Georgia Tech University, 157, 357–58  
Gibbons, Michael, 355  
GI Bill, xx, 3–9, 14, 362  
Gitlin, Todd, 186, 301, 307  
Glazer, Nathan, 224  
Goheen, Robert, 68–69  
Goldin, Claudia, 335  
Gordon, Robert J., 245, 335  
governance, of higher education, 204–5  
grades, inflation of, 135, 342  
graduate education, 73, 85, 95, 103–4, 106–10, 112–19, 213, 251, 281, 359–60  
graduates, college, 44, 130–32; rates of, 135–36, 241, 330; of veterans, 6–8  
Graham, Hugh Davis, 227, 278  
great books, 19–20, 63  
Greeley, Andrew, 165  
Griswold, A. Whitney, 67, 70, 81  
Gross, Neil, 310, 345n88, 347, 353  
Gumpert, Patricia, 234
- Haber, Al, 181  
Harnwell, Gaylord, 82  
Harper, William Rainey, 315  
Harris, Seymour, 15  
Hartman, Andrew, 299  
Harvard University, 6, 18–23, 73–76, 84, 99, 101–2, 106, 117, 163, 189, 224–25, 234–35, 273, 289, 353; in 1950s, 64–69; student protest at, 199–200, 202, 206  
Havinghurst, Robert, 130–31  
Hawaii, University of, 211  
Hayden, Tom, 161, 181–83  
Heald, Henry, 60, 101  
Henry, David Dodds, 51–52, 93  
Heyck, Hunter, 123  
Higher Education Act (1965), 144, 149, 162, 179, 218, 340. *See also* Education Amendments of 1972  
*Higher Education for American Democracy* (1947–1948). *See* President's Commission on Higher Education  
“high-tuition/high-aid,” 285–87  
Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), 50, 153–54, 160, 164, 183, 214, 218  
Hollinshead, Byron S., 25  
honors programs, 99, 166–69, 344, 366

## INDEX

- Hook, Sidney, 31  
Horowitz, David, 345  
House Unamerican Activities Committee (HUAC), 29, 33–35, 38, 181  
Howe, Florence, 231–32  
Hoxby, Caroline, M., 47–48, 72, 256, 289–90, 315, 324–25, 332–33  
HUACs (little), in states, 29–33, 38; in California, 33; in New York, 29–30; in Washington, 31  
human capital, 313, 335, 365  
humanities, 303–6, 353, 359  
human rights, 300, 347  
Hutchins, Robert Maynard, 15, 20
- identity groups, politics of, 240, 301–3, 306–8, 347, 350, 366  
Illinois, University of, 73, 117, 161, 279; at Chicago, 51–52, 85, 141  
Indiana University, 106  
individualism (human agency), 300, 346  
industry-university research centers (IURCs), 274–75  
inequality, 214, 291–92, 363–65; economic, 329–38, 347; educational, 333–37; institutional, 324–28  
innovation, university mission of, 270–76  
integration, at northern universities, 160–65  
Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS), 167–68  
*Involvement in Learning* (1984), 338  
Iowa State University, 85  
IQ determinism, 25–26, 43, 133, 362  
Ivy League, 64n50, 163, 291, 333n51, 363
- Jackson State University, 201  
Jencks, Christopher, 107–8, 112, 165, 229  
Johns Hopkins University, 73, 80, 104, 237, 356  
Johnson, President Lyndon Baines, 91, 96, 117, 126, 180, 217  
junior colleges, xx, 6, 13, 43, 50, 55–56. *See also* community colleges
- Kamen, Martin, 33  
Karabel, Jerome, 64, 66  
Katz, Lawrence, 335  
Kean, Melissa, 158  
Kennedy, Donald, 210n70, 272, 304  
Kennedy, President John F., 91, 95, 126, 163  
Kent State University, 200–201  
Kernan, Alvin, 111
- Kerr, Clark, 58–59, 79, 119–24, 128, 144, 149, 165, 173–74, 183, 185, 204, 213, 220, 354–55; *The Uses of the University* (1963), 119–20  
Kimball, Roger, 306  
knowledge, advancement of, 108–13, 251; university, 127–28, 173, 250, 329, 355, 361–62, 366–67  
knowledge society, 125–28, 355, 361, 366–67
- land-grant universities, 85; advocacy for urban, 144  
Lattimore, Owen, 34  
Lawrence, E. O., 79  
Lederman, Leon M., 277  
Lewis, Lionel, 36–37  
liberal arts and sciences, 17, 27, 43, 113–14, 215, 244, 284; ideal of, 53, 60–61, 134, 170, 203, 338  
liberal arts colleges, xix–xx, 6, 49–50, 112, 168–71, 214, 280; in 1970s, 254–57  
liberal education, 11, 71, 166, 168–75, 214, 304–5, 366; and general education, 16–23, 27; in private colleges, 62–64; for women, 46–47  
“Liberal Hour,” 128, 175; defined, 91–93  
liberalism, 91–92, 113–14, 160, 205, 218–19; academic, 345–47; cold war, 37, 40; corporate, 180, 186  
London, Howard, 150–51  
Lyman, Richard, 209
- Marginson, Simon, 294, 315, 324  
Maryland, University of, 326  
Massachusetts, University of, at Boston, 142–43  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), 73–74, 77–78, 84, 117, 202; Center for International Studies, 78, 126  
mass higher education, 56, 120, 133, 136, 218, 362; public institutions for, 136–53, 363  
Mayhew, Lewis, 204  
McCarthy, Joseph, 29, 33–34, 38  
McCarthyism, 28–38, 41, 70, 354  
McCaughey, Robert, 101, 107  
McConnell, T. R., 12  
Meredith, James, 156–57  
merit aid, 287, 296, 299; HOPE Scholarships as, 296  
meritocracy, 55, 64, 168, 204, 214, 363; in research, 87–88, 97  
Meyer, John W., 127nn79 and 80, 134n12, 245–46, 300, 346, 361

## INDEX

- Meyerson, Martin, 142, 194–95
- Michigan, University of, 73, 81, 85, 99, 101, 106, 117, 122, 161, 173, 180–82, 211, 224, 263, 279, 295–96, 309, 351
- Michigan State University, 106, 167–68, 172–73, 211, 263
- Middlebury College, 348–49, 354
- middle class, 4, 7, 41–42, 44, 130–31, 133, 136, 282–84, 299
- Middle Income Student Assistance Act (MISAA, 1978), 269, 282
- Mills, C. Wright, 182
- Minnesota, University of, 12, 51, 73, 279
- minorities, 219, 223–28, 305–6, 334; federal definition of, 223
- Mississippi, University of, 156–57
- Missouri, University of, 348
- Morrison, Philip, 33
- multiculturalism, 305–7, 351
- National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), 94–96
- National Defense Education Act (NDEA, 1958), 93, 105, 114
- National Education Association (NEA), 31, 210n73, 211
- National Institutes of Health, 74, 95–96, 262, 271, 280
- National Merit Scholarship Examination, 47–48, 99, 123
- National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students (NSSFNS), 162–63
- National Science Foundation (NSF), 74–75, 98, 261–62, 274, 276
- National Women's Studies Association (NWSA), 234–35
- New Deal, 3–4, 8–9, 13, 28, 37, 40
- New Depression in Higher Education* (1971), 219–20
- New Left, 180–90, 203, 207–8, 229, 234, 299, 301
- Newman Report, 212–13, 220–21, 246
- New York, City University of, (CUNY), 30, 60, 141, 210–11; open admissions crisis at, 259–61
- New York, State University of (SUNY), 59–61, 142, 248
- New York University, 51
- Nixon, President Richard M., 30, 126, 180, 200, 217
- nontraditional movement, 246–51
- North Carolina, University of, 101, 154–55
- Northeastern University, 143, 146
- Northern Illinois University, 139
- Notre Dame University, 104
- nuclear physics, 79–81, 96
- Obama, President Barack, 316, 322, 348
- Oberlin College, 285
- objectivity, 127, 300–302, 305, 366
- Office of Naval Research (ONR), 74–75, 84
- Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD), 74–75
- Ohio State University, 263, 326
- online higher education, 323, 361
- open sector, of higher education, 71, 297, 299, 315, 324–28
- Open University, 248n76
- Oppenheimer, J. Robert, 79
- organized research units, 79, 100, 120–24, 277–81
- Parsons, Talcott, 123
- patenting, by universities, 271–74
- Patterson, James, 3, 28, 179
- peers, influence of student, 48, 289
- Pell Grants, 218, 220, 281–83, 318, 321
- Pennsylvania, University of, 51, 73, 82–83, 356; Wharton School at, 82
- Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, 326
- Pennsylvania State University, 85–87, 151–52
- Perkins, James, 163, 198–99, 205
- PhDs, 109–10, 112–19, 124–25, 139, 170, 262, 359–60
- Phoenix, University of, 321, 323
- Pinker, Steven, 346
- political correctness, 306–8, 349–52, 366; and bias in scholarship, 352–53
- Posner, Eric, 347
- postindustrial society, 125–26
- postmodernism, 300–302
- “postsecondary” education, 213, 221
- Potts, David, 169
- President's Commission on Higher Education, 8–16, 19, 23–27, 40, 43, 55, 128, 218, 362
- President's Science Advisory Committee (PSAC), 94, 96
- Price, Derek de Solla, 124–25
- Princeton University, 73, 117, 225, 289, 356; in 1950s, 64–70; coeducation at, 235–37; eating clubs at, 69

## INDEX

- private higher education, 15, 26, 103–4, 220, 241, 284–87; in 1950s, 61–72
- private universities, 15, 103, 252n84, 264, 279–80, 328
- privatization, 269, 281–99; in public higher education, 292–98
- Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competence (PIAAC), 342–43
- Project Hindsight, 97
- propinquity effect, 54, 56
- public higher education: in 1950s, 49–63; in the 1970s, 257–64
- public universities, 85, 119, 263–64, 278–80, 292–98, 326–28, 344
- Purdue University, 85
- Pusey, Nathan, 68, 200, 205
- RAND Corporation, 122, 126
- rankings, of colleges, 288
- ratings of research universities: by Keniston, 83, 85, 117, 264; in 1965, 116–18, 120, 124, 265; in 1970, 118–19; in 1982, 262–64; in 1995, 278
- Raymond College, University of the Pacific, 172, 174
- Reagan, President Ronald, 269, 274, 282
- Reardon, Sean F., 336
- regional state universities, 137–40, 257–59, 325–26; in California, 56–59, 139–40, 326. *See also* teachers colleges
- regulation, federal, 222–28
- research: ideology of basic, 94–98, 203; university-industry, 272–76
- research, academic, 72–88, 107–19, 213, 215, 355; autonomous role of, 76, 79, 281, 362; capacity of universities for, 97; classified, 76–78, 199; critics of, 276–77, 310; by undergraduates, 280n30, 344
- research economy, 73, 75–77, 275–78, 355–56; and defense establishment, 94, 96–98; federal, 94–98, 261–62; as self-organizing system, 87–88
- research universities, 124, 354–61, 362, 367; in 1970s, 261–65; postwar, 72–88; private, 99, 104, 106, 279–80; public, 279, 328, 364; urban, 146. *See also* ratings of research universities
- Reserve Officers' Training Program (ROTC), xviii3, xix, 193, 195, 199, 201–2
- re-sorting, of higher education, 47, 49, 65, 72, 256, 315
- Rice University, 158–59
- Riesman, David, 53, 107–8, 112, 165, 229
- rights revolution, 219, 221–22, 224, 242; of minorities, 227–28
- Rizzo, Michael, 293, 298
- Rockefeller, Nelson, 60
- Rockefeller Foundation, 24, 80, 82, 98, 100, 167
- Roksa, Josipa, 341–43
- Roosevelt, President Franklin D., xviii–xix, 4–5, 8, 74
- Rostow, W. W., 123, 126
- Rudd, Mark, 191–93, 196, 202
- Rutgers University, 34, 51, 211
- Ruthven, Alexander, 81
- Sale, Kirkpatrick, 191
- Salovey, Peter, 348
- Sander, Richard, 334
- San Diego State University, 139, 232
- Sandler, Bernice, 224
- San Francisco State College, 195–97, 202
- San Jose Junior College, 56
- Sarah Lawrence College, 20, 238
- Savio, Mario, 184–85
- Schlesinger, Arthur, Jr., 40, 306
- Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), 47, 134–35, 244, 255–56, 285n41, 287, 317, 324–27
- Schrecker, Ellen, 35–37
- Schrum, Ethan, 121
- Seaborg Report (1960), 94–95, 110, 117
- Searle, John, 205–6
- segregation, in Southern higher education, 12, 14, 153, 160. *See also* desegregation
- selective sector, 288–89, 324–28, 362, 364
- “selectivity sweepstakes,” 287–92, 297–98, 324, 332, 336, 363–64
- Serviceman's Readjustment Act (1944). *See* GI Bill
- Seymour, Charles, 15, 67
- Shapiro, Harold, 295
- Simon, Herbert, 122–23
- Skrentny, John, 228
- Slosson, Edwin, 72
- Smith, Ronald A., 240
- Smith College, 238
- Soares, Joseph, 65, 291–92
- social demand for higher education, 44, 133–36, 218, 242–43
- social inclusion, 70, 209, 214, 316–17, 320, 363
- social sciences, 98–100, 121–28, 276, 346–47
- socio-economic status, and higher education, 7, 43–44, 71, 130–31, 138, 218–19, 242–43, 283, 336–37, 362



## INDEX

- South Carolina, University of, 157  
South Florida, University of, 53–54, 141, 357–58  
Southwest Louisiana, University of, 155  
Sproul, Robert Gordon, 57, 78  
Sputnik, 48, 92–93, 128, 362  
Stanford University, 73, 80, 83–85, 101, 106, 117, 209–10, 273, 276, 356; culture war at, 303–4; student protest at, 199, 202  
Sterling, Wallace, 83–84  
Stoddard, George, 51  
Stratton, Julius, 77  
Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), 156, 181, 187, 229  
student protests, 1968 Era, 190–203. *See also individual universities*  
students, 24–25, 206–7; in 1950s, 43–49; “iGen” as, 348; learning of, 165, 338–45, 365; politics of, 205–7, 307, 348–52; during World War II, xviii–xxii. *See also* GI Bill  
Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), 181–90; *Port Huron Statement* (1962), 181–83, 186, 229  
Swarthmore College, 166  
Syracuse, University of, 339  
  
Taylor, Stuart, 334  
teachers colleges, xx, 6, 54–56, 59–60, 137–38, 363  
technology transfer, 273–75, 362  
Terman, Frederick, 80, 83–84  
Texas, University of, 153–54, 279  
Thurow, Lester, 132–33  
“Tidal Wave,” of baby-boom cohorts, 93, 129–36, 218, 315  
Title IX: Education Amendments of 1972, 217, 221–22, 224, 228, 238–40  
Trow, Martin, 133, 148, 152, 315  
Truman, President Harry S., 10, 15, 29–30, 74  
Trump, President Donald, 349n101, 354  
tuition, 6, 50, 72, 137–38, 236, 254–55, 258, 279, 281–90, 299, 318; discounting of, 285–87, 298, 319, 364; in public higher education, 292–98  
Tulane University, 158–59  
  
universal higher education, 152, 213–14, 314–15, 323, 362  
urban studies, 105–6, 121, 145–46  
urban universities, 6, 51–54, 214; in Ohio, 143; public, 140–46  
  
Vanderbilt University, 104, 158–59  
Vassar College, 238  
Veysey, Laurence, 109  
Virginia, University of, 237  
  
wage premium. *See* earnings, of college graduates  
Walker, Eric, 86  
Wallenstein, Peter, 153–54  
Washington, University of, 31–32, 106  
Washington University, 33  
Waterman, Alan, 75, 94  
Wayne State University, 51–52, 247; Monteith College at, 52–53, 61, 141  
Wellesley College, 238  
Wesleyan University, 63–64, 163, 169–70  
Western Civilization, 250, 300–305, 366; course on, 19–23, 62–63, 171, 175  
Willits, Joseph, 82, 100  
Winston, Gordon, 289–90  
Wisconsin, University of, xxi, 7, 73, 106, 117, 180, 279; student protest at, 190, 203  
Wolffe, Dael, 44  
women, xviii, xxi, 135, 221–26; rise of, 228–40; women’s liberation, 230–32, 234; women’s movement, 224, 229–35  
women’s colleges, 237–38  
women’s studies, 233–35  
world society, 245–46, 300  
World War I, xvii, 5, 9, 39  
  
Yale University, 73; in 1950s, 64–70, 81, 99, 117, 163–64, 348; coeducation at, 235–37; finances of, 252–54, 289, 291–92  
  
Zhang, Liang, 332  
Zook, George, xviii, 8, 10, 14