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Higher education in America is against the ropes. Almost weekly, a new book is published, a report released, an address delivered, or a documentary premiered declaring colleges and universities to be in a state of crisis. To some critics, these institutions are no better than playgrounds, coddling students for four, five, even six years before sending them into the real world, adrift with few skills or job prospects.¹ To others, these same colleges and universities have bent too far in a different direction—they have become too modern, too accommodating, so enamored of emerging thought as to follow each academic fad. They forgo the classics in favor of lightweight and trendy subjects, leaving graduates wanting for the fundamentals of a liberal education. Still other critics believe that the problem with these institutions is not what they teach but whom they enroll: poor and middle-class students are being squeezed out of higher education, they assert, leaving colleges with an ever-shrinking educated elite who enjoy exclusive access to some of the world's best professional and cultural opportunities. And while these divergent opinions come from across the political spectrum, all seem to agree that American higher education has simply become unaffordable, as colleges and universities cling to an inefficient and unsustainable financial model. From the editorial boardroom to the kitchen table, Americans are asking: How has a college education become so expensive and yet so deficient?

Are the critics right? Have colleges and universities become frivolous, inaccessible, ineffective, and overpriced? Is higher education no longer worth the investment? Might college, as one critic has recently asserted, be coming to an end?²

The answers depend, in large part, on what we compare contemporary higher education to. Before observers can justly accuse colleges and universities of having become unresponsive to the demands of their stakeholders, they should know to what extent these institutions have responded over time to the inclinations of students, parents, trustees, government officials, corporations, donors, and a range of other interested groups. Likewise, they cannot legitimately criticize them for being inaccessible without understanding who has—and has not—gained entry to the wide variety of higher-education institutions established in the United States over the past two centuries. In short, we can't know why higher education functions as it does in the present without fully comprehending what it was in the past.

This book resolves that problem.

For the Common Good examines more than two hundred years of American higher education, beginning with the late eighteenth century and ending with the turn of the twenty-first. Providing a comprehensive historical analysis through which to assess higher education's current strengths and shortcomings, the book also engages a fundamental question with which colleges and universities have been grappling since the nation's founding: How does higher education contribute to the common good?

Over time, as Americans established colleges and universities across the nation, they stridently declared these institutions' commitment to advancing the public good. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, for instance, South Carolina's governor announced the establishment of a state-supported college in the capital city, Columbia, in order to foster "the good order and the harmony of the whole community."³ Just months later and over a thousand miles north, in the town of Brunswick in the present-day state of Maine, Bowdoin College's first president proclaimed that "literary institutions" were "founded and endowed for the common good, and not for the private advantage of those who resort to them for education."⁴ Meanwhile, the clergy who founded the United States' first Roman Catholic college—Georgetown—and located it near the nation's future capital, maintained that the purpose of their institution was "to promote more effectually the grand interests of society."⁵

And so it continued. Decade after decade, as a wide range of institutions opened their doors to an array of students, they proclaimed promoting the common good as a principal aim. Yet as distinguishing an institutional mission as this has been, we know surprisingly little about how colleges and universities have achieved it over time, if at all.⁶

This book takes a new approach to informing our understanding of American higher education. It investigates the founding decades of eleven very different colleges and universities and explains how these institutions' characteristics both

reflected and responded to changes in American society. In doing so, it answers key questions such as: Why did colleges and universities extol promoting the public good as a central purpose? How did higher-education leaders articulate this objective? What forces influenced its adoption? How did policies and curricula evolve to help schools achieve it? How did students respond, if at all, to assertions that they were obliged to use higher learning for the benefit of the public good? And, perhaps most importantly, what challenges have colleges and universities confronted in maintaining this commitment?

For the Common Good illustrates the ways in which four socially widespread preferences and attitudes—civic-mindedness, practicality, commercialism, and affluence—proved influential in shaping US colleges and universities between the late eighteenth and early twenty-first centuries, especially their dedication to the common good.⁷ Present in American society from early in the nation's history, each ethos came to predominate over the others during one of the four chronological periods examined here, informing the character of institutional debates and telling the definitive story of its time. This book, then, serves as a historical compass, distinguishing changes in higher education's orientation toward the nation's prevailing social ethos over the course of two centuries.

This book begins during the early national period, when widespread attitudes rewarding civic virtue and a dedication to the public good fostered an ethos of civic-mindedness.⁸ “No phrase except ‘liberty,’” historian Gordon S. Wood writes, “was invoked more often by the revolutionaries than the ‘public good.’ It expressed the colonists’ deepest hatreds of the old order and their most visionary hopes for the new day.”⁹ Forged in the fire of revolution and imbued with reformed-Protestant social and moral norms, the common good “enjoyed preeminence over the immediate interests of individuals,” according to political scientist Barry Shain. “Local communities catered little to the particular wants of individuals and the autonomous self was thought to be at the core of human sinfulness. . . . The priority of the public good was a value that eighteenth-century Americans did not question.”¹⁰

As dominant as an ethos of civic-mindedness was during the early national period, the rise of an urban, industrial, class-stratified society soon began transforming the United States. Over the next two centuries, with citizens increasingly seeking private advantage in a more aggressively competitive environment, the individual slowly became preeminent. Consequently, social institutions' authority to influence human behavior weakened over time. As this occurred, many realigned their goals to parallel a growing societal disposition toward personal gain. This transformation involved the nation's social ethos reorienting away from civic-mindedness and toward practicality during the antebellum and Civil War eras, commercialism in the period from Reconstruction through the Second

World War, and affluence during the postwar era. In response, entirely new forms of higher education and, correspondingly, new institutional types arose in the United States. Beginning with the all-male denominational college, higher education expanded to include agricultural and “normal” schools, women’s colleges and Historically Black institutions, and research universities and junior colleges. Indeed, what we conveniently call “higher education” today is in actuality a composite of institutional types that developed over the course of two hundred years.

Yet throughout this time, amidst dramatic institutional reform and adaptation, American higher education remained committed to the public good. The form this commitment took surely changed over the years and college and university officials undoubtedly employed the rhetoric of the public interest while simultaneously advancing policies and practices that did little to advance it. Nevertheless, the archival record informing this study reveals a broad array of higher-education institutions demonstrating a continuing dedication to the common good even while broader social, political, and economic forces undermined, if not directly opposed, that aim.

In the Shadow of Laurence Veysey

In 2015, education writer Kevin Carey published a biographical essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* under the title “Meet the Man Who Wrote the Greatest Book about American Higher Ed.”¹¹ The man was the late Laurence Veysey, a long-time professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Although Carey surprised some readers with his depiction of an elderly Veysey living out his years as a tattooed nudist in Hawaii, the essay underlined something quite remarkable in the annals of American scholarship: that the volume that continues to assert the greatest interpretive influence in the field of higher-education history was published over fifty years ago.

In *The Emergence of the American University*, Veysey offered a broad interpretation of what he claimed were revolutionary changes that transformed higher education between the years 1865 and 1910.¹² Published in 1965, the book compelled scholars to reconceptualize college and university history by offering competing purposes for American higher education in the decades following the Civil War: “discipline and piety” (which Veysey ascribed to the classical colleges) and “utility,” “research,” and “culture” (which he associated with the university). This landmark work effectively moved the field of higher-education history away from its parochial origins. Prior to Veysey, much scholarship on colleges and universities took the form of celebratory studies that were descriptive rather than analytical and asserted close alignment among

institutional mission, administrative efforts, and curricular and cocurricular programming. Most of these accounts were written about single institutions; some were called “house histories” because an employee of the featured college or university authored the work. Laurence Veysey turned that model of scholarship on its head, comparing and contrasting institutions in ways that demonstrated higher education as incorporating multiple and sometimes conflicting ambitions. The book became required reading on college and university syllabi as well as a standard entry on graduate student oral examination lists, leading future scholars to adopt it as a touchstone in their own intellectual development. Furthermore, *The Emergence of the American University* inhibited potential scholars from writing on the subject, at least in part because Veysey’s work dominated the field for decades. As historian Julie Reuben has observed, only somewhat facetiously, “Why write when Veysey has already said anything that could be possibly said?”¹³

As with much higher-education scholarship published over the last fifty years, *For the Common Good* owes Laurence Veysey a debt of gratitude. Yet a half-century following the appearance of *The Emergence of the American University*, the book you now hold—the first comprehensive historical analysis of higher education published since Veysey’s that is both thesis-driven and grounded in original archival research—also seeks to bring the field of higher education out from under his shadow.

Although Veysey’s work was authentically groundbreaking, scholars increasingly concur that it was limited in fundamental ways, both interpretively and methodologically. Reuben, for instance, notes that the three categories making up Veysey’s conceptual framework for the university’s growth were anachronistic. “In the late nineteenth century,” she writes, “no university reformer thought of seeking one rather than another. Only from the perspective of the twentieth-century rejection of the ideal of unity do these seem to be three separate goals of education.”¹⁴ Moreover, Veysey’s focus on relatively elite universities during the period from Reconstruction through the Progressive Era resulted in his slighting, if not completely disregarding, entire segments of American higher education. He wrote little about women’s colleges and Historically Black universities, for instance, although his period of analysis was one of significant growth for both. He also characterized the “old-time” liberal-arts college as fixed and inert. Borrowing a well-established interpretation anchored in university-booster claims, Veysey used the collegiate ideal as a kind of historical straw man against which to compare the spirited birth of the university. As a number of scholars have since demonstrated, however, classical colleges were capable of significant institutional adaptation, with many modifying courses of study and expanding extracurricular programs in ways that rivaled the emerging universities.¹⁵

Equally important, because Veysey wrote during the early 1960s about an era that had ended fifty years earlier, *The Emergence of the American University* is silent on higher education's transformation in the decades following World War II. From the standpoint of the twenty-first century, this period, characterized as it was by skyrocketing student enrollments, massive increases in expenditures, the remaking of the curriculum, and an unprecedented expansion of public colleges and universities, probably eclipses the so-called revolution Veysey described. A case in point: at the time he completed his manuscript, two-year junior and community college enrollments were growing faster than any segment of American higher education—ever.¹⁶ In fact, student demand was so high that over the next four years, more than one new community college campus opened every week.¹⁷

Most significantly for the field of higher-education history, Veysey greatly underestimated the dynamic and pliable nature of American higher education. Although describing the university during its emergence as having a generous capacity for innovation and modernization, he characterized higher-education institutions prior to 1865 as static, if not torpid, and claimed that the university's evolution came to an end as early as the first decade of the following century. "By 1910," he wrote, "the structure of the American university had assumed its stable twentieth-century form," adding provocatively, "Few new ideas have been advanced on the purpose of higher education since 1900, and there have been few deviations in its basic pattern of organization."¹⁸

In dramatic contrast, *For the Common Good* offers a new historical interpretation, one that reveals American higher education both prior to and following the university's establishment engaged in a continual process of institutional modification, revision, and renewal. With the prevailing social ethos reflecting the political, economic, and social changes that prompted transformation among existing colleges and universities—as well as the establishment of entirely new kinds of institutions—higher education in the United States was refashioned over time in essential and often vibrant ways.

This book investigates a wide range of institutional types, including public, private, parochial, single-sex, coeducational, racially segregated, racially integrated, and two- as well as four-year colleges and universities. It focuses on eleven institutions established over the course of two centuries and represents the major regions of the mainland United States. Of course, none of these colleges and universities are representative of all higher-education institutions at any moment in time; they are illustrative only. Yet thoughtfully chosen cases can inform our understanding of decisive periods in the history of higher education. To that end, this volume offers instructive insight into the ways that changes in the nation's prevailing social ethos fostered new visions of what higher education could, and should, accomplish. This process continues today as a dominant ethos

of affluence compels colleges and universities to again reconsider their aims and methods.

Higher Education and the Common Good

In the modern day, according to economist Henry Levin, the term “common good” has become closely associated with seventeenth-century British philosopher John Locke, who devoted his *Second Treatise* on government to the concept and its implications. Locke argued that by entering into a social contract, people sacrifice some liberties to acquire the protection of a broader set of rights and freedoms. A society comprising individuals united by a shared or common good, Locke observed, guarantees rights that would not exist in a “pre-social” setting.¹⁹ Accordingly, the notion of the common good has often been applied to the development of educational systems and institutions. Beyond the private advantages one may reap by acquiring an education, including knowledge and understanding, as well as increased social status and income, Levin notes that society benefits from “the forging of a population with a common language, civic behavior, economic participation, means of resolving disputes, participation in legal and political institutions, and so on.”²⁰ In other words, as individuals gain from becoming educated, so does the broader society in which they live.

During the early national period, a social ethos of civic-mindedness informed higher education’s dedication to the common good. Bowdoin, South Carolina, and Georgetown Colleges, for instance, derived their central aims from civic-mindedness while simultaneously seeking to cultivate it among students. Adopting a classical curriculum, pedagogical methods such as memorization and recitation, and codes of conduct designed to severely regulate student behavior, the three colleges sought to inculcate mental discipline and integrity. College officials expected that students would, consequently, become virtuous members of the liberal professions and contribute to the stability and maintenance of the new republic.

While sharing overarching similarities, the three colleges also differed in important ways. Bowdoin, although affiliated with the Congregational Church, struggled to obtain the resources necessary to become financially secure during its first decade. Chartered in 1794 by the General Court of Massachusetts, it did not open its doors to students until eight years later. Alternatively, South Carolina College (the present-day University of South Carolina) was the first state-sponsored higher-education institution in the United States to receive ample political and financial support. With Governor John Drayton championing the college’s founding and the state’s General Assembly providing a generous appropriation, the institution opened in less than half the time it took Bowdoin.

The founding of Georgetown College (present-day Georgetown University) in 1788 predated that of both Bowdoin and South Carolina Colleges. Yet the Roman Catholic priests who established it as their first higher-education institution in America failed to obtain any legislative approval to operate until the US Congress granted it the nation's first federal charter in 1815.

Ultimately all three colleges prospered. Yet no sooner had they become firmly established than changes to America's political economy began reorienting its social ethos away from civic-mindedness and toward practicality. With the growth of economic development in industry and commerce "reshaping American culture," as historian Jack Lane describes, "winds of cultural change . . . brought challenges to the traditional concept of liberal education."²¹ During the antebellum and Civil War eras, a social ethos of practicality was institutionalized through the creation of colleges and universities devoted to the study of agriculture, mechanics, mining, and the military (later abbreviated as "A&M"), as well as teacher training.

Established in 1855 as the first four-year college in America to teach "scientific agriculture," the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan (present-day Michigan State University) provided a prototype for what became the nation's land-grant universities. Although the state had founded a university as early as 1817, it established its "agricultural school" in the decade prior to the Civil War to generate increased agricultural productivity through experimental research as well as to provide greater access to higher learning for the sons of farmers. When US Representative Justin Morrill sought a model on which to base the land-grant act that would bear his name, he looked to Michigan. Practicality also catalyzed the creation of "normal schools" dedicated to teacher training. In 1862, the California legislature founded the California State Normal School (present-day San José State University) as the first public higher-education institution on the West Coast. Women students especially benefited by gaining access to a form of postsecondary education they would not otherwise have had. The same social ethos of practicality that led to the democratic expansion of higher education also privileged the nation's economic growth over its political and social development, effectively diminishing the obligation that colleges had earlier ascribed to students to advance the public good through their life pursuits. Consequently, the tension between students' use of higher education as a mechanism for personal advancement and as a means to foster the common good intensified. The field of teacher education provided a vivid example. Women who hoped to become teachers through normal-school training prized the salary—and the promise of independence—such work provided, yet they also believed they might better society by educating the rising generations.

Even as practicality achieved preeminence, the transformation of society resulting from political, economic, and social upheaval accompanying the Civil

War began reorienting higher education toward a social ethos of commercialism. From Reconstruction through the Second World War, commercialism reflected what historian Alan Trachtenberg calls the “influence of corporate life” on America. “Any account of that influence,” he explains, “must include subtle shifts in the meaning of prevalent ideas, ideas regarding the identity of the individual, the relation between public and private realms, and the character of the nation.”²² That is to say, although commercialism continued to emphasize the nation’s economic growth, it also promoted private advantage as a deserved and rightful goal. In keeping with this ethos, colleges and universities began to embrace students’ personal success as an institutional priority.

When Leland and Jane Stanford, who personified the rise of commercialism through their remarkable accumulation of wealth, established a university in northern California in their son’s memory (and granted it the largest endowment of any higher-education institution at that time), they distinguished between their university’s purpose, which they stated was “to promote the public welfare,” and its object, “to qualify students for personal success.”²³ Believing that a university degree provided an advantage in obtaining employment in an increasingly competitive marketplace, Stanford students responded enthusiastically to the emphasis that commercialism placed on professional status and personal advancement.

While further reorienting higher education away from its dedication to the common good, commercialism nevertheless did not extinguish it. As Stanford’s two-part mission suggests, colleges and universities established during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries maintained a commitment to the public good even as commercialism moved the nation in an opposing direction. The founders of Smith College, for instance, drew on an ethos of civic-mindedness to justify their institution’s unique commitment to women’s higher education. Similarly, Howard University, established during Reconstruction and dedicated to the higher education of emancipated people, harnessed the civic-minded ideal when it implemented a course of study modeled on the collegiate programs of institutions such as Bowdoin College. Both Smith and Howard further contributed to higher education’s democratization by expanding access to higher learning to previously marginalized groups. Yet, as at Stanford, both Smith and Howard students found commercialism’s emphasis on professional status and personal advancement enticing; it firmly influenced their reasons for enrolling as well as their postgraduate life trajectories.

As the twentieth century ushered in a period of economic expansion, collapse, and war, America’s social ethos underwent a final reorientation, the one that continues to tell the definitive story of *our* time. As economist John Kenneth Galbraith described in his 1958 work *The Affluent Society*, US postwar prosperity,

rather than satisfying Americans' needs and wants, had the paradoxical effect of creating an ever-greater consumer impulse. "Because the society sets great store by ability to produce a high living standard," Galbraith observed, "it evaluates people by the products they possess. The urge to consume is fathered by the value system, which emphasizes the ability of the society to produce. The more that is produced, the more that must be owned in order to maintain the appropriate prestige."²⁴

A social ethos of affluence had profound consequences for higher education. With increasing numbers of Americans viewing a college degree as a ticket to the good life and the federal government providing the financing to enroll (through the GI Bill, Pell Grants, and subsidized student loans), higher-education participation exploded. Students increasingly sought a diploma for the occupational and financial benefits it promised, while colleges and universities, no less influenced by an ethos of affluence than the students they enrolled, sought institutional wealth and status in an increasingly competitive "higher-education marketplace."²⁵ Consequently, the final decades of the twentieth century witnessed a dramatic escalation in the tension between civic-mindedness as manifested in the ideal of a liberal education and students' increasing vocational orientation.

Scholars have dubbed the years between 1945 and 1970 a "golden age" in American higher education because of the massive institutional growth and dramatic enrollment increases that occurred during the period. The University of South Florida (USF) provides a useful example. When the university first opened in 1960, it had an annual budget of \$2.4 million, ten buildings, 341 employees (including 109 full-time faculty), and fewer than two thousand students. A decade later, USF's budget was \$38.4 million per year and it had 73 buildings, over 1,700 employees (834 full-time faculty), almost eighteen thousand students, and a branch campus in St. Petersburg.²⁶ Initially, growth of this kind combined with increasing state appropriations to attenuate the rift between liberal education and vocationalism by creating the capacity for colleges and universities to satisfy both aims. Following 1970, however, the nation's retrenchment, accelerated by the recession that began three years later, sent institutions scrambling for resources and students for job security, giving rise to what the *Chronicle of Higher Education* termed "the new vocationalism." Nowhere was this transformation more visible than in junior and community colleges. Established to serve "nontraditional" and first-generation students, these institutions came to prioritize occupational training programs that provided students with opportunities to achieve vocational ambitions and acquire wealth, ultimately resulting in some adopting slogans such as "Career Dreams Begin Here" and "Learn More. Earn More." Accordingly, although the term "affluent" has rarely been used to describe public higher education, especially colleges and universities that have

for decades confronted the challenge of declining state support, the current study demonstrates that a social ethos of affluence has had a powerful effect on these institutions.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century American higher education maintained its commitment to advancing the common good despite pressures resulting from an ethos that prioritizes individual gain. Why? As this book illustrates, although the United States borrowed extensively from European models of higher education—including British residential colleges, Prussian agricultural institutes, French teacher-training schools, and German research universities—the best way to understand American higher education’s historic commitment to the public good is to contrast it with its European predecessors. Although English universities emphasized the production of gentlemen and German research universities the production of scholars, US colleges and universities sustained at their institutional core a fundamental obligation to educate students for active lives of service.²⁷ Reaching back to the early national period, this commitment—informed as it was by an ethos of civic-mindedness—established such a powerful precedent that even today, as some for-profit enterprises have recently learned, colleges and universities that dismiss it as outmoded do so at their own risk.

From research that benefits the public welfare to the active recruitment of students from marginalized populations to sustained efforts to cultivate civic competence, colleges and universities continue to advance the common good in the twenty-first century. As has been the case for over two hundred years, however, civic-mindedness, practicality, commercialism, and affluence remain in tension on campuses across the nation. A heightened awareness of this tension—ever-present and fully embedded in higher education’s historical development—as well as its implications for colleges and universities today, is essential if we are to assess with any degree of accuracy the characteristics of the so-called crisis many Americans believe higher education currently confronts. Achieving that awareness is this book’s primary aim.

