ABSTRACT
From Democracy to Diversity:
The Politics of American Higher Education in the Twentieth Century

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At the dawn of the twentieth century, state builders and university builders began to think about their institutions in national, indeed global, terms. Although the growth of “big government” and “big education” occurred in fits and starts, academic leaders and federal policymakers turned to one another with increasing frequency. In so doing, they forged a durable partnership that significantly enhanced the reputation and reach of both institutions. During economic booms and busts, and in wars hot and cold, the nation’s plural system of colleges and universities served as a repository of expertise, a locus for administrative coordination in the federal government, and a mediator of democratic citizenship. The high tide of the partnership between American higher education and the American state occurred between World War I and the rights revolution of the 1970s. From Democracy to Diversity tells this story.

To date scholars have only captured a sliver of the relationship between higher education and the American state. By focusing on the American state’s multifaceted partnership with higher education in the twentieth century, this dissertation advances the literature on the emergence of the American university beyond the rise of the federal-academic research matrix. Without question, the ascendance of research radically altered the nature of federal-academic relations, and it is exhibit A in the birth of what some scholars call the "proministrative state." But the emphasis on big science, and the handful of elite institutions that produced it, has concealed other developments in American higher education that occurred outside federally funded labs both before and after World War II.

That the nation’s decentralized higher education system contributed so much to American political life in the twentieth century should come as little surprise. After all, in an American political culture well known for its fear of centralized authority, higher education has played an indispensable role in state building since well before World War II—indeed, since well before even the nation’s founding. Within six years of settling Massachusetts Bay, Puritan leaders founded Harvard College in 1636—the first of nine colleges to open prior to 1776. Following the Revolutionary War college-building expanded rapidly due to the central government’s use of “land grants” to pay down the nation’s war debt and promote higher education and territorial expansion west of the Appalachian Mountains. Later the Civil War Congress built on this earlier precedent and passed the historic Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862, which stimulated the establishment of the country’s public higher education system. Additional federal legislation, for agricultural research stations and the general development of the land-grant system itself, upped the government’s financial stake in the operation of the nation’s emerging constellation of educational institutions. Add to this the construction of privately financed German-style research universities, such as Johns Hopkins University opened in 1876, and by the close of the nineteenth century the plural arrangement of the country’s decentralized, public/private higher education system was complete. The only thing missing was students.
From Democracy to Diversity picks up where this earlier story ends. It examines the role of higher education in twentieth-century state building—when higher education finally got “big.” I argue that World War I precipitated a long period of bureaucratic reinvention—both inside the university and between the university and the state—that ultimately converted higher education into a key adjunct of the New Deal administrative state. The effects of this new institutional arrangement on the meaning of democratic citizenship surfaced during World War II when opinion leaders and expert psychologists discovered that educated citizens were better citizens—a point seemingly substantiated by veterans’ surprising success under the G.I. Bill of 1944. Convinced that higher education created prosperous, civic minded, psychologically adjusted democratic citizens worthy of special rights and privileges, cold war policymakers embarked upon a global education strategy culminating in the National Defense Education Act of 1958.

Yet the state’s reciprocal understanding of democratic citizenship, in which educational opportunity was granted to individuals in return for national service, proved impossible to contain. By the 1960s, the state’s rigid conception of the educated citizen, which had been constructed around the memory of the hero citizen-soldiers of World War II, exploded under pressure from black and women students and their advocates in university administration, on Capitol Hill, and in the White House. Provoked by the alienation of the modern bureaucratic university and by what they perceived as an imperialist, racist, and sexist bureaucratic state, these students incited a national debate about the uses of the university in a democratic society. The ensuing political struggle between students and administrators—galvanized by civil rights legislation and the Great Society’s Higher Education Act of 1965—altered the reciprocal relationship between democratic citizenship and higher learning. Swept up by the rights revolution of the early 1970s, students advanced a rights-based definition of the educated citizen that was closely tied to a new animating principle in higher education. Diversity became the watchword to ensure an educated citizenry prepared to meet future challenges. The rapid formation of black and women’s studies programs combined with the passage of the Higher Education Amendments of 1972 served as harbingers of the ascendant diversity regime. Together they signaled the arrival of a new rights-based, issue-group campus political order that mirrored in miniature the political organization of the American state itself.

I believe American higher education, existing as it does at the crossroads of state-society relations, is an ideal locale to study politics in the twentieth century and that a sophisticated understanding of American political development (APD) is crucial to doing so. In the past twenty-five years, a community of scholars from political science, sociology, and history has resituated the study of American politics within a polity-centered frame that conceives the state as an evolving, time-bound amalgamation of institutions and ideas. On a theoretical level, APD posits that a combination of public, private, and voluntary institutions—from executive branch agencies to the military to big business and charitable foundations—is what gives the American state a physical form across space and time; while historically contingent ideas about the appropriate scale and scope of the American state—whether strong or weak, big or small—determines the particular institutional arrangement deployed at a given moment in time. For the purposes of this project higher education serves as a main institution of the American state and as an idea that helped policymakers and the American people define the very meanings of democratic citizenship in the twentieth century.
Specifically, From Democracy to Diversity considers the role of higher education in state building from four overlapping perspectives. First, I examine American higher education from an organizational perspective. My interest in the organizational evolution of higher education stems from my belief that historians have a poor understanding of the nature of organizational change in higher education on the one hand, and of the role of higher education as an organizational component of the American state on the other. Historians’ examination of organizational change in higher education has tended to focus upon change within a single institution (e.g., Harvard, Stanford, or MIT) and then typically from the point-of-view of top administrators, or a single disciplinary community, or both. In this study I view organizational change as a dynamic, unpredictable process involving multiple stakeholders located inside and outside the institution. Administrators remain important, but so too faculty and students as well as state policymakers and educational boosters from the philanthropic sector. These actors helped shape the organizational structure of higher education by altering, in dramatic and subtle ways, the social context and intellectual content of higher learning in the twentieth century.

Historians’ study of higher education as an organizational component of the American state has likewise been narrowly drawn. Most studies of universities’ role in state development begin in World War II and end in the Cold War, focusing on the rise and maturation of the federal-academic research matrix. From Democracy to Diversity seeks to change this by examining instead higher education’s role in educating citizens. Over the course of the twentieth century, state policymakers joined hands with academic administrators and helped turn the nation’s colleges and universities into multi-purpose institutions that provided not only turnkey research discovery, but also delivered government programs and educational opportunities to millions of Americans. In a political culture leery of federal power, state builders such as Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson used colleges and universities as “intermediary institutions” to connect with the American people, and to connect the American people with their government.

Second, I follow the stream of federal policies that solidified the partnership between the federal government and higher education. From World War I to the New Deal, and from World War II through the Cold War, I examine the ways in which the federal government partnered with higher education to stave off economic depression and emotional anomie, to build better soldiers, to fight communism, and to make superior citizens. But I pay close attention to more than the “big three” higher education policies of the past century: the 1944 G.I. Bill, the 1958 National Defense Education Act, and the 1965 Higher Education Act. While truly monumental pieces of public policy, they do not alone define the extent of the federal government’s role in higher education policymaking. Taking my lead from political scientists, my project examines the incremental policy developments that bracketed those transformative legislative moments. My use of “policy feedback”—the idea that the relationship between policies and politics is dynamic—provides a more complete examination of the origins and outcomes of federal higher education policy. Instead of serving as mere markers in what is typically depicted as the triumphant march of American higher education in the twentieth century, I place the G.I. Bill, the NDEA, and the Higher Education Act in historical context. These policies remain turning points in the story that I tell, but without the air of inevitability of previous studies that have failed to explore how wars, economic crises, and campus upheavals, at different times in the past
century, pushed American higher education to its breaking point. This dissertation thus seeks to restore a dimension of ambiguity to the existing account of the history of American higher education that has been distorted by an infatuation with purely quantitative measures of institutional vitality, such as the growth in student enrollments, federal research support, and endowment size.

Third, I account for the experiences of students, faculty, and administrators by exploring their lives in and outside bounded campus settings, studying at home and around the world, as civilians and soldiers, as political actors and citizens. To capture the complexity of the relationship between the state and higher education in the twentieth century accurately requires looking at educational experiences that occurred away from brick-and-mortar collegiate settings: in the American countryside and on the battlefronts, in foreign countries and in suburban households, and in a whole host of other spaces located beyond campus borders. During the New Deal, for example, the Roosevelt Administration and the Department of Agriculture tapped the land-grant university extension system, and its force of three thousand county agricultural agents, to implement the Agricultural Adjustment Act and other New Deal programs. During World War II, the U.S. Army partnered with higher education to deliver educational programs before, during, and after combat to millions of G.I.’s. During the height of the Cold War, higher education experimented with educational television (ETV) and supported study abroad as a featured part of the undergraduate academic experience. And during the 1960s, teach-ins, consciousness raising groups, and student-run experimental education programs provided students with a parallel but alternative educational universe to explore ideas about race, feminism, sexuality, war, and politics not included in official undergraduate course directories.

Exploring the outer reaches of organized higher education provides a significant corrective to those scholars who have tended to draw rigid boundaries between different types of higher education institutions and the services those institutions provide. I place the institution in a capacious framework. Although universities and colleges rest at the heart of this analysis, I also track the role of administrators, faculty, and students teaching and learning in other institutional settings. By delving into all the ways that higher education reached up and down the education ladder and insinuated itself into other institutions not concerned primarily with education, this project shows the myriad and surprising ways higher education shaped the state and touched citizens’ lives in the twentieth century. While it is true that such an approach elides the real differences between and among distinctive types of higher education institutions, it also allows a wide-ranging analysis of what is arguably higher education’s core social function: educating citizens for life in a democracy.

Unearthing the social functions of higher learning presents a real challenge. Getting at the private, day-to-day experiences of students and professors is not easy and good source material is meager. But if we are to make sense of higher education in the twentieth century, then we must try to capture the iterative relationship between policymakers in Washington, DC, and professors and students living and learning in a variety of different institutional settings elsewhere. Federal education data and reports, presidential papers, government documents, military records, and congressional testimonies combined with surveys, opinion polls, and newspapers have been tapped to reconstruct higher education at the national level; campus newspapers, student letters, institutional studies and surveys, and administrative records have been used to illustrate the role
of higher education in state building and in defining citizenship at the campus level. Because the objective of this study is to reveal hidden aspects of American political development, the evidence that I use draws upon a broad range of social-and not simply political-relationships. It is this combination of “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches that distinguishes this work from most work on higher education.

Finally, I uncover the importance of professional psychology in the organizational, political, and social transformations that drive my story. Sometimes referred to by scholars as the “therapeutic ethos,” this dissertation considers the ways in which professional psychologists, and their allies in other branches of the social and behavioral sciences, shaped Americans’ perception of their government, their interaction with their government, and their understanding of themselves as citizens in the twentieth century. This dissertation builds upon a voluminous body of scholarship that has linked the rise of the therapeutic ethos to the spread of consumer capitalism during the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. The broad consensus among these scholars is that a therapeutic mode of self-understanding—denoted by a belief in dynamic personhood and penchant for conspicuous self-referencing and narcissism-offered individuals a way to cope with the psychological challenges of modern life. The standard story carries a powerful critique of the vanishing public sphere as it was eclipsed by self-absorbed efforts to adapt to a heartless world. Rather than focusing on the therapeutic as merely a source of individual, private transformation, however, this project also traces the different ways in which psychological expertise became institutionalized within higher education and the American state, changing the organizational structure of universities and colleges and the meanings of citizenship in the twentieth century.

I examine different professional communities of psychologists as they moved between academe and the state during World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. As historians Ellen Herman and James Capshew have shown, warfare offered psychologists an especially propitious arena in which to demonstrate the utility of their expertise in solving organizational and human problems; and because wartime disrupted colleges and universities as much as any institution, they proved particularly susceptible to psychological understandings of problems and prescriptions for rehabilitation. After World War I, for example, university leaders turned to personnel specialists—the first community of psychologists that I examine—for guidance in accommodating the intellectual and emotional needs of their students. Having honed their techniques in the U.S. Army during the war, personnel specialists returned from battle with new ways of helping large-scale organizations “adjust” to the various demands of the individuals who populated them. For colleges and universities this meant not only changing the way that knowledge was packaged and delivered to students, but also increasing the immediacy of college administrators and professors in students’ lives. Even as historian Laurence Veysey correctly pegged the emergence of the American university to the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, the in loco parentis institutional structure of the university that students experienced for most of the twentieth century dated back to the 1920s when personnel management first penetrated higher education.

Personnel specialists insisted that their approach to the management of humans in bureaucratic settings considered individuals’ preferences and tastes and thus was truly democratic. But it was not until World War II and the arrival of a new generation of social
psychologists that the measurement of individual preferences (i.e., attitudes) using opinion survey technologies was widely deployed. Social psychologists migrated to the military from positions in academe and, not surprisingly, they arrived there with an idealized conception of human behavior—which they described in shorthand form as “personal adjustment”—that was closely tied to educational attainment. Psychologists’ investigations yielded copious evidence that linked education to healthy psychological adjustment. This finding not only prompted the military to join forces with higher education to bring educational opportunities to soldiers during the war, it also shaped the G.I. Bill of 1944. The G.I. Bill consecrated the relationship between education and psychological adjustment and moved American higher education closer to the center of democratic citizenship. In the wake of World War II, democratic citizens were, by definition, educated.

During the Cold War a third community of psychologists—public opinion specialists—deepened and complicated the relationship between education and democratic citizenship originally exposed during World War II. As a measurement of psychological adjustment writ large, public opinion was tracked with feverish intensity during the Cold War crisis. Opinion polling offered intimate knowledge of citizens’ private lives and political beliefs and thus presented state policymakers with a new means of democratically governing a distended polity. Significantly, just as social psychologists’ study of psychological adjustment in World War II linked better citizenship to educational attainment, public opinion researchers established a similar causal relationship between informed opinion and education. College educated citizens, research showed, articulated the most sophisticated understanding of Cold War politics and global affairs. This finding strengthened policymakers’ belief that higher learning could improve national security and convinced academic leaders that the study of the global cold war should be incorporated into the college curriculum. Both of these developments served as an important prologue to the passage of the National Defense Education Act of 1958. The psychological edifice around higher education and citizenship finally cracked in the 1960s. Students revolted against the organizational structure of the modern university—the “multiversity”—challenged the institution’s ideological and instrumental uses during the Cold War. After the dissolution of the New Left into competing student issue groups in the late 1960s, black and women student groups pressed for an educational and political order that at least approximated the nation’s racial, ethnic, and gender diversity. Through their efforts, race and gender moved to the center of national politics and black and women’s studies programs were incorporated into the academic enterprise. These new disciplines represented diversity incarnate and seemed to confirm rights-conscious students’ belief that they not only had a right to attend college, but also a right to an education all their own.

Student protesters, however, did not discard the psychological premises that suffused the modern university and politics. Rather they modified and harnessed psychological language and praxis for their own ends. In this regard, black and women’s student groups—in their effort to overcome alienation, achieve authenticity, secure identity, and make politics personal—shared much in common with the “expert” communities of psychologists whose ideas about human behavior, racial and gender norms, and organizational development they sought to overturn. This was ironic because the New Left, Black Power, and the women’s liberation movements all considered the psychological a tool of oppression, not freedom. Among campus protesters, in particular, the psychological evoked an endless litany of negative associations: personnel
management with in loco parentis; personal adjustment with corporate automation; personality with plasticity; public opinion with politics-as-usual; interest groups with narcissistic self-interest. Yet in attempting to overcome their own inner alienation, student protesters found it impossible to resist completely the allure of the psychological. They mined their inner emotions and private knowledge, often in small group settings, to recover personal, often painful experiences for political purposes; in turn, they discovered that politics and education were personal and that the path to self-discovery required self-knowledge and introspection. At the end of the day, black and women student groups, like the expert psychologists before them, also believed that psychological insights could help make America’s higher education system and politics, and the citizens who participated in both, democratic.

Admittedly, the relationship between higher education and democratic citizenship explored here was not entirely new to the twentieth century. Throughout American history higher learning had always been closely linked to better citizenship. One of the major goals of the old-time denominational college, which dominated the nation’s education landscape before the Civil War, was to train citizens for a life of public service in the new nation. This belief was likewise imbedded within the educational mission of the ascendant university model after the Civil War. Even as the new university moved well beyond the classical curriculum, offering students courses of study in all manner of practical and scientific fields, citizenship training remained a core function. “All the colleges boast of the serviceable men they have trained,” wrote Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard, in 1908, “and regard the serviceable patriot as their ideal product. This is a thoroughly democratic conception of their function.”

If higher learning and citizenship have always been closely connected, how does this study advance our understanding of that relationship? It does so in three ways. First, and most importantly, full citizenship, like college going, was sharply divided along racial and gender lines in the nineteenth century, the near-exclusive right of well-off, white men of Protestant faith. It was not until the twentieth century that the state extended full citizenship and educational opportunity to everyone else. Second, this study brings the state back into the history of American higher education, and in a new way. While citizens have always been trained to serve the state, it was only in the 1930s that the state began to take an active interest in training citizens. Finally, this study brings psychology into the history of democratic citizenship. Social scientists offered up new ways to think about and measure American citizens’ political and personal behavior that simultaneously changed how the state thought about its citizens, and citizens about themselves. After political activity at all levels became infused with therapeutic potential, how higher education policy was framed and the very meaning of citizenship changed dramatically. As we shall see, during the twentieth century higher education policy, and the meanings of citizenship that it helped define, were worked out between citizens and the state.