

College Archives as Windows on American Society

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THE FOLLOWING THOUGHTS reflect encounters with college and university archives over a period of fifteen years. My research on nineteenth-century higher education in America has taken me from Colby College during a Maine winter to Mercer University during a Georgia summer, from the venerable repositories of Harvard University to the modern facilities of Franklin College in Indiana, and to more than a dozen other college and university archives along the way. These efforts have been directed primarily toward understanding the many ways in which collegiate enterprises intersect with the development of American society. College archives have been my windows on the history of this nation from 1800 to 1930.

An increasing number of historians have occupied the same vantage point during the last decade or so. Unlike the vast majority of educational historians who preceded them, currently active scholars rarely limit their efforts to carefully chronicling the history of a single institution. They are likely to study groups of institutions and to approach the history of higher education with broader questions concerning particular periods or regions. They place difficult demands upon the resources of archives and upon the resourcefulness of archivists who want to assist serious visiting scholars as well as official institutional historians and curious alumni.

A demanding but key task for archivists who want to provide maximum encouragement and support for this new wave of wide-ranging scholarship is to understand the basic questions educational historians are asking. The materials or data in an archives are not there, of course, to reside peacefully in an inert state. They await scholars who, by their questions, will turn them into active agents for the construction of interesting interpretations. The archivist deciding which materials to preserve, what additional sources to seek, and how to arrange them for maximum accessibility, must keenly sense the questions that historians may bring to his or her particular repository. The archivist's art at its highest level of development would, I assume, base both day-to-day decisions and long-range plans on skillful anticipation of the answers various data might yield to as yet *unasked* questions. Archivists, in this sense, operate at much closer proximity to the future than to the past. They must have much better foresight than those of us who are historians.

Although by trade a backward-looker, I hope in this paper to make some contributions to the forward-looking practiced by my scholarly colleagues who are archivists. My discussion of some outward-looking questions historians are bringing to college and university archives is intended to stimulate several beneficial results. First, archivists might check their state of readiness to serve current scholarship. Secondly, they could, by reflecting on the current frontiers of historical

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inquiry, sharpen sensitivities employed in anticipating yet-to-be-opened frontiers. In this second area we can at least develop a deeper sense of the immense scope for potential use of college and university archives by scholars investigating American social and cultural history. Finally, this emphasis on extensive, wide-ranging use of archives may provide a foundation for long-range planning in archival development.

Archivists seeking to facilitate the development of scholarship on higher education will encounter some fascinating and important questions being posed by cultural historians. Even before we entered the current period of doubt and debunking with regard to the value of higher education, historical attention was directed to the origins and early nature of the extraordinary faith that Americans had once placed in colleges. Why did Americans "get hooked" on higher education? To what extent did social forces prompt an increasing portion of the population, especially after 1890, to see a vital relationship between colleges and personal and social progress? Did the colleges themselves play a major role in stimulating the demand for higher education?

Certain archival materials are particularly helpful in exploring such questions. The accounts, reports, and pleas of college agents, for example, can be employed in ways that go far beyond the internal institutional history of college finances or of curious and sometimes heroic individuals. Before colleges had graduated enough classes to compose a substantial body of alumni donors, or had begun to enjoy income from accumulated endowment funds, they relied to a great extent on continuous fund-raising by agents soliciting the general public. The same traveling agents also recruited students, largely within a forty to sixty-mile radius of the college. A writer in the mid-1850s described the efforts of these door-to-door salesmen for higher education as follows:

Denominational colleges . . . derive their existence in the first instance from efforts made among the people; and their endowments are raised, and their patronage secured and continued, by employment of just such means as must necessarily increase the number of educated men. Agents are sent out from time to time to secure students, who talk at the public gatherings and around the firesides of the masses of people. They enlist by their explanations and persuasions men who not appreciating education themselves would never have sent [sons] to any College, but for these efforts. They raise their endowments by free will offerings, which when made, secures their interest, and to obtain which requires a discussion on the subject of education in all its bearings. Many additional minds are thus enlisted by appeals to their patriotism, their benevolence, and their interests—those perhaps who never dreamed of educating their sons before such efforts were made.¹

Primary sources on college agent activities are very rare, and the discovery of detailed diaries or similar sources would be of immense value to research on how colleges shaped public attitudes toward education.

Presidential documents relating to off-campus activities are useful for similar reasons. The best example of a scholar using such materials is found in Hugh Hawkins's book based on the papers of Charles W. Eliot. During his forty-year presidency of Harvard University, Eliot played a major role in shaping public perceptions of the university's "privileged place in society." In this picture of a president "nurturing a university in a changing, sometimes hostile social environment," Hawkins tells us a great deal about the "religious, equalitarian, and

¹ "The Comparative Advantages of Denominational and State Colleges Reviewed," *Biblical Recorder*, July 12, 1855.

utilitarian traditions of Americans" in the late nineteenth century.² Even when dealing with presidents of lesser prominence, future historians are likely to find extensive use for any data on the external affairs of an institution.

The study of sports is now a distinct field within American history, and collegiate athletics are likely to receive continued and increasing attention within this relatively new body of scholarship. By the mid-1890s, the Princeton-Yale football game had become a major social event in New York City. Such public happenings are of great interest to investigators of social class behavior in urban America. A recent article in the area of women's studies finds a link between attitudes toward athletics and attitudes toward women with reference to Wesleyan University's decision in 1909 to terminate a forty-year period of coeducation. Frederick Rudolph demonstrates a close relationship between intercollegiate athletics and the progressive movement. He also shows the way in which sports assumed a key role in late nineteenth-century relations between campus and society, a theme more fully developed for a later period by John Thelin.³ In the hands of cultural historians, sports memorabilia can make valuable contributions to our understanding of public beliefs and enthusiasms.

A final source in what could be a much longer list concerning the development of public attitudes toward education is newspapers. In addition to campus publications, archives should attempt to make readily available the complete files of appropriate local and denominational newspapers and periodicals. In some cases these are on microfilm and can be purchased; other situations will require more difficult acquisitions programs or cooperative arrangements with local and/or denominational historical societies. As one who has surveyed over five hundred years of periodical files, I can render a bleary-eyed testimony to the rich returns for a cultural historian.

Questions about the nature and consequences of localism in the pre-twentieth-century portion of American history define a second major area where there can be extensive collaboration between college archivists and American historians. Studying the role of colleges in hundreds of nineteenth-century towns offers insights ranging from trends in religious beliefs to characteristics of economic growth. To what extent were local institutions viewed as denominational or sectarian agencies? Was the "local boosterism" identified by Daniel Boorstin so strong and pervasive that it even provided the primary support for almost all denominationally affiliated colleges? Could local land speculation be an important source of support for cultural institutions? These questions relate to those on faith in education because both explore the local dynamics through which values were forged and institutional patterns developed prior to the hegemony of national mass media and national institutional integration.⁴

² Hugh Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America: The Educational Leadership of Charles W. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. vii-viii and passim.

³ Guy Lewis, "The Beginning of Organized Collegiate Sport," *American Quarterly* 22 (Summer 1970): 222-29; Lucy Knight, "The Prestige Factor," *Wesleyan University Alumnus* 60, no. 2 (Winter 1976): 21-23; Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), pp. 375-77; John R. Thelin, *The Cultivation of Ivy: A Saga of the College in America* (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1976).

⁴ Some of these questions are discussed in my "American Colleges in the Nineteenth Century: From Localism to Denominationalism," *History of Education Quarterly* 11 (Winter 1971): 363-80. They contribute to the still broader interpretation of antebellum colleges in David B. Potts, "'College Enthusiasm!' as Public Response, 1800-1860," *Harvard Educational Review* 47 (February 1977): 28-42.

Financial records of a college assume special significance in this historical context. Only a very few studies currently exist to tell us of interactions between a college as a "local industry" and American cultural/economic development.⁵ How much revenue was brought into a town by a local educational enterprise, and how was that revenue distributed? Where were contributions coming from, and with what expectations for "returns"? What were the costs of going to college, and who in the vicinity of the college was capable of meeting these costs? Dusty ledgers sometimes still residing in the basement or attic of the treasurer's office provide data for some answers to these questions.

To the fullest extent that resources permit, a college archives should seek and preserve materials relevant to local and county history. If there are active historical societies at these levels, close cooperation is needed to facilitate the optimum use of limited time available to visiting scholars. Published town and county histories, city directories, gazetteers, and similar books are most useful if copies are located in the archives itself. Archival resources developed in this fashion can yield excellent historical results. An outstanding example of this approach is found in the close collaboration of G. Wallace Chessman and William Utter in producing, respectively, histories of Denison University and Granville, Ohio.⁶

Connections between colleges and their immediate surroundings can also be examined through material held in denominational and foundation archives. Local association minutes, for example, may tell much about the contacts between a Baptist-affiliated college and nearby churches. Holdings of the General Education Board at the Rockefeller Archive Center⁷ may, for any of the hundreds of colleges seeking grants in the early twentieth century, include proposals which offer a substantial self-description detailing local services provided by that college. At least a descriptive survey of such off-campus resources might be compiled for consultation by users of a college archives. And when possible, copies of documents and printed sources should be obtained to fill any gaps in a college's collection.

Questions probing patterns of individual mobility, occupational choice, and the development of professions form a third area of current concern in which American historians can find college archives very helpful. At what point did higher education begin to function in substantial measure as a means for upward social and economic mobility? For success-minded students and parents, what was the relationship between going to college and selecting an occupation? What role did undergraduate education come to play in recruitment for and control of access by the various professions? What do enrollment patterns tell about public perceptions of higher education and its various curriculums?⁸

Beginning with the last question, it should first be noted that there is a wealth of data still to be compiled from college catalogs just to obtain reasonably accurate national enrollment totals. We currently lack this basic data for almost the entire

⁵ Margery S. Foster, *Out of Smaller Beginnings: An Economic History of Harvard College in the Puritan Period, 1636-1712* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); Beverly McAnear, "The Raising of Funds by Colonial Colleges," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 38 (March 1952): 591-612; David B. Potts, "Baptist Colleges in the Development of American Society, 1812-1861" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1967), chapters 3-5.

⁶ G. Wallace Chessman, *Denison: The Story of an Ohio College* (Granville, Ohio: Denison University, 1957); William F. Utter, *Granville: The Story of an Ohio Village* (Granville, Ohio: Granville Historical Society, Denison University, 1956).

⁷ Rockefeller Archive Center, Hillcrest, Pocantico Hills, North Tarrytown, New York 10591.

⁸ For a survey of recent and current work in this area see David B. Potts, "Students and the Social History of American Higher Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 15 (Fall 1975): 317-27.

nineteenth century. Catalogs for this time period usually contain a roster of students. A research project which I directed recently made substantial progress in surveying major catalog collections in Washington and Chicago as the foundation for a national census of college students from 1800–1910. Some of our older colleges lack a complete set of their own catalogs. Not only is it important to fill any gaps in a file, but it would also be highly desirable for at least the nineteenth-century catalogs of each institution to be microfilmed. This would, of course, make them readily available to scholars, through a loan arrangement.

Matriculation registers as well as catalogs are sources of student addresses. These, used in conjunction with decennial manuscript federal population censuses and other biographical sources, can help establish the family backgrounds of students. David Allmendinger's recent book employs such techniques in finding that a substantial and increasing number of boys from small towns in New England viewed colleges as a means for occupational and geographical mobility.⁹

Published alumni records with career-route data and manuscript alumni files are extremely valuable for testing the degree to which these perceptions were realistic. If circumstances dictate that files must remain in an alumni office, some working arrangement should be established to service archival researchers. Only with extensive career-line studies will we be able to start thinking about control groups and the extent to which colleges contributed to the professional success of those who attended.

Various developments in American professional and political life can also be studied by using college archives. A careful study of antebellum faculty, in their campus and consulting activities, has yielded new perspectives on early stages in the growth of the American scientific community. Several analyses are now available on the connections between course content and subsequent political behavior of college graduates. Faculty papers and student notebooks thus can be put to many historical uses going well beyond the internal history of a particular college.¹⁰

All three of the question areas identified so far can be subsumed within a general historical curiosity about how the American middle class formed and defined itself. This major theme in nineteenth and early twentieth-century American history has received considerable attention from revisionist historians of elementary and high school education. Only brief and scattered references to the theme have appeared in works on higher education. The concept of gentlemanliness is explored in several portions of Laurence Vesey's *The Emergence of the American University*, a sense of class identity is noted in David Allmendinger's *Paupers and Scholars*, and suggestions of status anxiety which appear in the writings of college publicists for Baptist-affiliated institutions have been uncovered in my own research.¹¹ Faith in educa-

⁹ David F. Allmendinger, Jr., *Paupers and Scholars: The Transformation of Student Life in Nineteenth-Century New England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975).

¹⁰ Stanley M. Guralnick, *Science and the Ante-Bellum American College* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1975); Wilson Smith, *Professors and Public Ethics: Studies of Northern Moral Philosophers Before the Civil War* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1956); James McLachlan, "American Colleges and the Transmission of Culture: The Case of the Mugwumps," *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial*, Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, eds. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974); Paul Buck, ed., *Social Sciences at Harvard, 1860–1920: From Inculcation to the Open Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965); Laurence R. Vesey, "A Scholar's View of University Archives," *University Archives: Papers Presented at an Institute Conducted by the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science, November 1–4, 1964*, Roland E. Stevens, ed. (Champaign: Illini Union Bookstore, 1964), pp. 82–88.

¹¹ Laurence R. Vesey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 188–91 and passim; Allmendinger, chap. 6; Potts, "Baptist Colleges," pp. 228–40.

tion, as manifested at the local level and expressed in terms of retaining or attaining a particular level of occupational and social status, is an essentially middle-class phenomenon.

Promotional literature for colleges is an excellent source for historians probing the rational and emotional content of notions held by the middle class and those aspiring to this social position. Stressing that "knowledge is power and wealth and influence," college promoters were quite candid about the role of higher education in the rapidly changing society of the 1840s and 50s. One noted "the immense influx of the laboring population of Europe" and the resulting "displacement of American manual labor." Parents from the middle ranges of society were advised to begin "increasing the intellectual cultivation of their sons . . . to qualify them for *directing* and *using* this manual labor." And since "the mass swells up from the bottom . . . woe to those who are on top unless they keep their balance well."¹²

Mental discipline provided by the curriculum could impart the insight and agility to stay on top of the masses and move upward in the ranks of the middle class. But attention to social polish as well as mental skills might also be viewed as important. Here the records of fraternities take on significance for the social and cultural historian. As Rudolph has observed, the message of the early fraternity movement was clear: "among the barbarians we are the Greeks."¹³ For reasons of security and preservation as well as wider usage, old fraternity records should reside in college archives—not the meeting-room closet of a chapter house.

Photographs of students and their rooms can also be used to delineate the notions of a middle-class life style. They can tell us a great deal about dress, furnishings, and other appearances by which differentiation was achieved from the "lower orders" of society. The full meaning of dormitory versus rooming-house student residences has yet to be explored, and any materials bearing on this topic might become useful to an imaginative historian.

Records of student discipline also have potential extending beyond the quaint and amusing aspects of institutional history. Rules and their enforcement can indicate behavior norms having roots not only in religious beliefs and practicalities of institutional order but also in norms of behavior appropriate to a social class. Violations and the identity of violators can be used to test many assumptions about middle-class needs for and attitudes toward higher education.¹⁴ Changes in the content of regulations, modes of supervision, and degree of control may be very important to the historian of middle-class America who focuses on adolescence, parent-child relationships, and similar topics.

Most of the suggestions I make are neither new nor startling. Yet I hope their cumulation in this paper will make a persuasive case regarding the potential for use of college archives by American historians and for the crucial role of archivists in supporting these scholarly activities. Since my observations up to this point have been largely directed to current and future possibilities for historians, I would like to conclude with emphasis on what at least one historian holds as the ideal behavior pattern for a college archivist.¹⁵

¹² "Education," *Baptist*, June 29, 1844; "Educate Your Sons and Daughters," *New York Recorder*, January 2, 1850.

¹³ Rudolph, p. 146.

¹⁴ Allmendinger, chap. 7; Kathryn M. Moore, "The War with the Tutors: Student-Faculty Conflict in the 18th Century," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 21, 1976.

¹⁵ For a recent discussion of this topic from a somewhat different vantage point, see Edith James Blendon, "University Archives: A Reason for Existence," *American Archivist* 38 (April 1975): 175–80.

As a historian of higher education, I am acutely aware of the limited sample of institutions upon which even some of the major generalizations in the existing secondary sources are based. Among the many needs for scholarly development in the field, two right at the top of my list are broadly conceived institutional histories and more good studies of groups of institutions. The same kind of archival planning and resources are necessary for both. They both require an archivist who develops his or her facility with a constant eye for promoting first-rate scholarship.

In almost all cases the basic unifying objective for archival policies and programs should be a long-range plan for an institutional history which will be a significant contribution to scholarship. An archivist should be an active promoter of such a project the completion date of which should be determined by the need to reexplore and rethink the institution's history every generation as well as the need to observe landmark dates with reference to the college's founding. Long-range planning in higher education today makes increasing sense in areas of finances and curriculum; it makes equally good sense in giving a clear sense of purpose to college archives. All too many institutional histories have been initiated and rushed to completion under pressure of an impending anniversary deadline.

An active acquisitions drive is the most obvious element in a carefully conceived long-term institutional history program. Appeals for materials in alumni attics and an oral history project should be added to the other suggestions made earlier in this paper. One might even consider a "house-to-house" sweep of the campus in search of long-forgotten or overlooked primary materials. A collection of the best secondary sources in the history of higher education should be added to the reference guides already mentioned. This collection should include the most imaginative and wide-ranging scholarship found in general histories, monographs, institutional histories, and even dissertations. An archivist should keep current in the bibliography of higher education.

With these resources available, the archives is in a position to encourage research on selected aspects of the institution's history, research not only by established scholars but also by interested undergraduates and graduate students. The archives would be a place where one could get to a frontier of historical research with maximum efficiency. Research papers could represent not only a convenient first-hand experience with primary sources, but also valuable building blocks for a future full-scale history of the college. And student research might yield immediate gains for alumni publications and scholarly journals.

The atmosphere of serious, nonprovincial, scholarly enterprise thus created would be a beneficial influence on the crucial choice of who would write the volume or volumes for which all this preparation is made. A further step in the long-range plan might be a stipulation that such a selection would be made with the guidance of outside consultants. Here the goal would be to find someone knowledgeable with reference to the most interesting and promising questions recently and currently being asked by scholars and someone capable of formulating new questions relevant to a particular institution. With the appointment of and proper subsequent support for this person, the college could reasonably anticipate a history which would illuminate its role in the broad context of our nation's history. An achievement of this sort would be the ultimate in objective criteria by which an archivist could measure his or her success. And in the best tradition of forward-looking scholarship it would then be time to launch another project, designed to produce an even better institutional history two or three decades hence.