

# H-Net Reviews

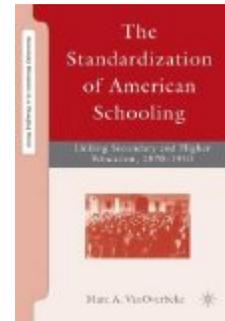
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marc A. VanOverbeke. *The Standardization of American Schooling: Linking Secondary and Higher Education, 1870-1910*. Secondary Education in a Changing World Series. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. xiv + 224 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-60628-9.

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## The Beginnings of the Secondary School: College Accommodation in the United States

The title of this informative, well-documented, and well-written book, *The Standardization of American Schooling*, reflects the largely unsuccessful attempts to bring a highly standardized education system to the United States, while the subtitle, *Linking Secondary and Higher Education, 1870-1910*, reflects the successful development of regional accreditation for secondary schools and colleges. In the preface, Barry M. Franklin and Gary McCulloch, series editors for the Palgrave Macmillan Secondary Education in a Changing World series, state that the book is Marc A. VanOverbeke's "account of the efforts of a host of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century education reformers ... to develop a system of accreditation to connect the work of the secondary school with that of the university" (p. x). The book builds on VanOverbeke's dissertation in education policy studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; the 35 pages of notes to 178 pages of text reflect his command of the relevant secondary and primary (e.g., reports and speeches) literature. Although enrollment data are sprinkled throughout the text, a few strategic tables and figures containing enrollment data for the 1870-1910 period would have made it easier for the reader to follow the narrative.

VanOverbeke begins in 1870 and describes the relationship between secondary and higher education as "a flat or horizontal structure, where the secondary schools and colleges competed for students." By 1910, this relationship "was becoming hierarchical, with the high

schools leading up to the colleges and the colleges funneling students to graduate programs and universities" (p. 3). His formidable task was to demonstrate how this hierarchy emerged from the conflicts and accommodations of two separate structures with their own organizational and regional interests, histories, and traditions. As an aside, given the controversy over the offering of basic skills and preparatory courses in colleges and universities today, it is informative to read that at the beginning of the period under study, "America's universities and colleges yearned to be free from the constraints of preparatory training" (p. 22).

Article X of the amendments to the Constitution of the United States (the Bill of Rights) states: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people." Hence, there is a decentralized state system of licensure and a voluntary regional accreditation system for such educational institutions. One of the largely unsuccessful attempts to address the lack of standardization across the nation was the 1892 National Education Association-appointed Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies. The Committee of Ten was chaired by Charles W. Eliot, Harvard University's president, and comprised members from both secondary and higher educational institutions. The committee was aided by ninety experts who were to address all aspects of secondary school subjects, including questions concerning curricula and promising practices. The hope

was to develop a set of principles and requirements that would be adopted nationwide. Although the Committee of Ten did not have nationwide success, its report highlighted the educational uniformity that was developing within states and regions. And, in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching was more successful in setting national requirements for colleges, such as four years of secondary school as preparation and, for secondary schools, the “unit” as a common course measurement.

The University of Michigan and its president, James Angell (1871-1909), played the pioneering role in establishing the first statewide program linking secondary schools and universities. The year prior to Angell’s appointment, the university adopted acting president Henry Frieze’s model of high school inspection and accreditation. When Angell became president, he argued that in order to build the university into a research university equal to those in Europe, students entering the university had to be better prepared academically. At the time, most high schools were small, had few teachers, and were responsible for a majority of students who were there to be prepared for life and a minority who were there to be prepared for college. To ensure the academic quality of students who were to enter the university, professors, in teams of two, visited and inspected high schools throughout the state. They attended lectures, met with administrators, reviewed course and library materials, sometimes quizzed students, and examined laboratories.

Schools that received favorable reports that were accepted by the university faculty earned a place on the university’s list of accredited schools. Graduates from such schools were then able to enter the university without having to take the formal entrance examination. The university could now assume a certain level of preparation among entering students and could raise its entrance standards and the requirements for first-year coursework. Secondary schools benefited in a number of ways. Administrators did not have to spend time preparing students for the entrance examination, students interested in college enrolled in accredited high schools, and these schools acquired more influence over which of their students moved on to the university. However, perhaps the most important consequence was that “the University of Michigan was establishing itself at the top of an educational system and making higher education—not secondary education—the terminus or final stage of education” (p. 58).

Within a few years, the University of Michigan model of inspection and accreditation, often with modifications, spread throughout the Midwest and the United States. For the Midwest, this soon meant that students in accredited schools could enter most universities in the region. The University of California adopted a more rigorous accreditation program based on subject matter evaluations; accredited schools in the state increased from thirty-one in 1892 to over one hundred in 1901. The American Civil War left the South with poor and rudimentary educational standards at all levels. Of course, “the educational situation was even more precarious for black students and their schools” (p. 73). Although no consistent articulation system developed prior to 1910, various accreditation and evaluation programs were developed between universities and secondary schools in the South.

The educational conditions in New England differed from those in the Midwest and the South. This region was not only the home of the country’s oldest and most prestigious universities, most notably, Harvard and Yale, but also the home of superior schools and academies, such as Exeter, Phillips Andover, and Boston Latin. These universities and preparatory schools had long-established relationships with universities. However, other colleges in the region were, like the colleges in the Midwest, dependent on public secondary schools for their students. Such schools were likely to follow the University of Michigan model of accreditation. Although President Eliot of Harvard opposed this model, he came to support a rigorous inspection model for schools and an examination model for all students.

The path for the universities to the top of the education system was not free of resistance from the secondary schools. For instance, secondary schools “effectively pressured higher education to recognize as admission requirements the modern subjects commonly taught in the high schools and to create degree programs that aligned with these courses” (p. 93). Gradually, modifications were made in the admission requirements. Latin, Greek, and mathematics and such “modern subjects” as modern languages, history, and English grammar and composition were accepted by the universities as prerequisite courses. Through their resistance, teachers and principals in secondary schools appear to have led universities in preparing students for the emerging and changing professional and personal skills required for the twentieth century.

On the level of theory, VanOverbeke has demonstrated that for the 1870-1910 period, changes in educa-

tion may be understood through an analysis of the conflict of interests between secondary schools and universities. He has also demonstrated that the curriculum must be understood within a particular timeframe and setting. In terms of specific content, the importance of his work

and this period are reflected in the fact that one hundred years later, the university has been well established as the apex of the educational system and that what were once emerging regional accreditation associations are equally well established.

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