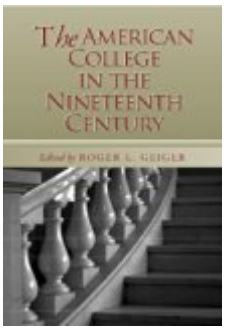
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Roger L. Geiger, ed.. *The American College in the Nineteenth Century.* Vanderbilt Issues in Higher Education. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000. ix + 363 pp. $49.95, library, ISBN 978-0-8265-1336-6.



Reviewed by Robert Emmett Curran

Published on H-Education (April, 2003)

A New History of Higher Education in Nineteenth Century America: A Prolegomenon

Roger L. Geiger, editor of the *History of Higher Education Annual*, advises in his introduction to this collection of essays, that the volume arose out of a certain frustration with the failure of scholars of higher education in nineteenth-century America to develop broad interpretive studies from their groundbreaking scholarship over the past three decades. Indeed, he finds that the apologetic character of the revisionist scholarship has, intentionally or not, led the revisionists into positing a portrait of the nineteenth-century college as static and monolithic as the older scholars who presented the "old-time college" as unpopular and hide-bound in curriculum and discipline. Geiger has chosen this baker's dozen of essays to show the dynamism and diversity of these colleges to illuminate themes that some future comprehensive study can build upon. Twelve of the thirteen essays originally appeared in the *History of Higher Education Annual*, all but one of them since Geiger became editor in 1993. Geiger himself is the author or co-author of five of them, plus the introduction.

Geiger sees four connecting themes in the essays: the profound transformation of student life during the century from regimentation in curriculum-dominated institutions, to the rise of a student estate in which students controlled a pervasive extracurriculum; the sharp distinctions that separated colleges in the Northeast from those in the South and Middle West by the 1830s and that persisted to the end of the century; the quarter century from 1850 to 1875 as a distinct, transitional period in the history of higher education in which most of the innovations associated with the post Civil War years--colleges for women, scientific schools, practical courses in agriculture and engineering--had their beginnings; and, the emergence of the American university, not from foreign sources but from its indigenous collegiate roots and the challenge that new educational entity posed for the colleges.

Of these four themes, the latter two receive much more "illumination" than the former. Of the two essays that deal with the transformation of

student life, only Leon's Jackson's "The Rights of Man and the Rites of Youth" offers any substantial insight into the process by examining student dissent at Harvard during the half century from 1776 to 1826 and the emergence of Phi Beta Kappa as an antidote to student violence and lack of identity. Geiger's and Julie Ann Bubolz's "College As It Was in the Mid-Nineteenth Century" is but a cursory review of a memoir of two 1850s students at Princeton, which asserts more than shows that the text "provides evidence for the hard-won autonomy of the student estate in formerly repressive institutions--the precondition for the budding high-collegiate era" (p. 90).

Regarding regional differences, the South led the way in the antebellum period as the site of thriving state colleges, such as South Carolina, whereas institutions of higher education in the northeast were evolving from a quasi-public to private status, with the typical college being a denominational college sponsored by local churches. Unlike their Northern counterparts, the Southern colleges catered to the social and political elite of the region. The only article to deal with the South, Michael Sugrue's revealing piece on South Carolina College, shows well the role the college played in shaping the political thought and culture, not only of the state's aristocracy, but of the many elite emigrés to the Southeast who became prominent in the antebellum decades. In the West, denominational colleges, supported by local communities as well as the denominations, were the norm. The women's colleges, which developed from the 1840s to the 1890s, showed regional variation as well, with the northern ones specializing in the training of teachers, the southern ones--surprisingly constituting the majority of higher educational institutions for women--providing liberal refinement for future gentry wives, and the western ones serving as multi-purpose colleges.

The major theme of the collection--not least because nearly all of Geiger's essays pursue it--is the importance of the third quarter of the century as a distinctive period for American higher education and its development. (Actually, by Geiger's own evidence, the four decades from 1850 to 1890 cohere better as a distinctive era.) First of all, the period marks an unprecedented rise in the founding and enrollments of American colleges. Traditionally the late antebellum period has been seen as an apex in the proliferation of American colleges, but, as Geiger notes, the culmination came not before, but after the Civil War. By 1875 there were three-quarters more colleges, both male and female, in the country than there had been in 1860. This growth would continue into the mid-1890s. Most of the new colleges were denominational. By the 1880s nearly 80 per cent had formal church ties. The overwhelming majority of new colleges were the products of denominational outreach to developing areas working in concert with the boosterism of local communities seeking educational institutions as a hallmark of culture and progress. The typical college of the period, because of its relatively isolated, local support, and limited means, tended to serve several functions, from preparatory education through classical and commercial courses. This "multi-purpose college," Geiger contends, "is the missing link in the evolution of American higher education," a transition from the classical college of the early nineteenth century to the segmented, specialized institutions that emerged by the end of the century.

This period was also characterized by the accommodation of women into higher education, from the establishment of multi-purpose, denominational colleges in the antebellum and Reconstruction eras to that of the well-endowed, classically rigorous Seven Sisters in the late nineteenth century. A further major transition of the period was the introduction of schools and institutes for science and other useful knowledge, presented here as the result of technological and scientific advancements that were creating the need for an alternative to classical education. By the 1850s three distinct institutions for scientific, technical

education had developed: schools of science attached to colleges or universities, such as the Lawrence School at Harvard and Sheffield at Yale; colleges of agriculture; and, polytechnics, such as RPI and MIT. All of these enterprises, either by design or practice, focused largely on the training of the industrial classes. Gradually, as Geiger traces in his article on "The Rise and Fall of Useful Knowledge: Higher Education for Science, Agriculture, and the Mechanic Arts, 1850-1875," the focus changed from the education of mechanics to the higher training of engineers and other scientific professionals. Inherent in this development was the essential integration of a liberal arts component into the curriculum of the schools of science and polytechnics, a change initiated at Harvard and Yale by Charles Eliot and Daniel Coit Gilman respectively, and eventually adapted elsewhere. Ironically, Geiger concludes, the Morrill Land-Grant Act which funded institutions devoted to education in agriculture and the mechanical arts, provided an inadvertent template for this integrated curriculum by calling for "liberal" as well as "practical education" of the "industrial classes." By the end of the century, scientific and mechanical education was no longer regarded as an inferior or separate form of education, and in this newly integrated world of higher education it served the professional, not the industrial classes.

In the same quarter century that scientific and mechanical education was being integrated into the mainstream of higher education, the American university was born, not as a transplant from abroad, Geiger and his contributors argue, but as the child of the American college. The founders of the university movement, they contend, did not import a German institution but incorporated elements of German advanced learning within the structure of American higher education as part of a long struggle to redefine the college. In the process--in different ways at Michigan, Hopkins and Chicago--they institutionalized the German ideal of research but not its educational program, introducing a distinction between undergraduate and graduate education that knew no counterpart in Germany. "Out of the cocoon of the old-fashioned American college," James Turner and Paul Bernard conclude from their investigation into the serpentine origins of graduate education at Michigan, "emerged that strange schizophrenic native to the New World, the American university" (p. 240). The university creators "took the German invention of highly specialized professorial research--not properly speaking, a part of German university education at all--and built on it the advanced segment of American university education. Precisely because specialized research training made no sense for most university students, such advanced education had to be split off from the ordinary university course. This division [then] compounded the irony of stealing the ordinary German degree for the use of the graduate school" (p. 241).

In a concluding essay, Geiger visits the crisis in which the traditional, multi-purpose colleges found themselves in the 1890s. The growth of cities, along with the high schools and professional schools that they spawned, constituted the main challenge to the hegemony of the colleges. The colleges found themselves caught between the high schools, curricular specialization, and professional schools. The first innovation competed severely with the preparatory departments of the traditional colleges; curricular proliferation, epitomized by the elective system, required a faculty expansion that most colleges could not afford; virtually no professional schools of this period required college as preparation. The upshot was the increasing irrelevance of the colleges. Indeed it marked the end of the college as an educational capstone, but hardly the end of the American college. By 1900, the American college was poised to become "the inescapable platform for both doctoral and professional education" (p. 33). The formation of the American Association of Universities in 1900 set the standards for the colleges as propaedeutic institutions of higher learning. In the next generation the colleges' degrees would

become prerequisites for expectant professionals. Thus in the twentieth century, Geiger concludes, the American college would be a far cry from its nineteenth-century counterpart but still the centerpiece of American higher education, albeit now in a preprofessional role.

All in all, even though some of the essays, notably Peter Dobkin Hall's piece on "Noah Porter Writ Large," do not seem to illuminate substantially the quartet of themes, this collection is a valuable window on a preview of the ideas that one hopes Roger Geiger is in the process of developing into a new comprehensive history of American education in the nineteenth century, or at least, the last half of that century.