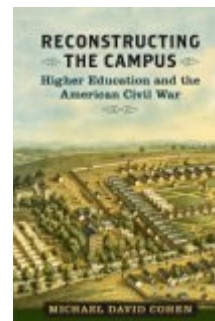


**Michael David Cohen.** *Reconstructing the Campus: Higher Education and the American Civil War.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012. xi + 273 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-3317-7.



**Reviewed by** Elizabeth Talbot

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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Michael Cohen David's monograph, *Reconstructing the Campus*, investigates the Civil War's immediate and long-term effects on the American higher education system. Cohen argues that the consequences of the sectional crisis "promoted major educational reform" as the federal government became more involved in the nation's higher education system (p. 12). By connecting educational history with Civil War and Reconstruction historiography, Cohen illuminates how the war "was a watershed for higher education" that changed universities, civilian life, and the legacy of the United States' education system (p. 189). While discussing the sectional crisis's influence on education, Cohen shows that the Civil War ultimately spurred academic change that created the modern higher education system.

*Reconstructing the Campus* is organized thematically, as each chapter details the Civil War's impact on a distinct aspect of higher education. Cohen describes how battles changed campus populations as male students left to engage in battle while more women enrolled in college. Despite

these substantial effects, colleges contributed to the war effort by providing "military service, hospital work, and clothing production" (p. 51). Furthermore, Cohen states that the Civil War encouraged Southern colleges to emulate the Northern model of higher education, which resulted in "the emergence of the Southern university" (p. 73). The federal government supported higher education when, on July 2, 1862, President Lincoln signed the Land-Grant College Act, mandating that each state receive thirty thousand acres to fund a college that would provide courses in agriculture, mechanic arts, classical studies, and military strategy. As the first half of Cohen's account demonstrates, the Civil War affected curriculum, tuition prices, and civilian campus life.

The latter half of Cohen's account details the sectional crisis's influence on universities' general student bodies. Cohen states that the Civil War enabled large numbers of lower-class students, women, and African Americans to attend college. Therefore, the higher education system no longer contained only a "distinctive elite" student body

(p. 127). Additionally, rather than traveling far away for education, Cohen claims that “most did not attend colleges in other states” as more universities were created and sectional tensions increased (p. 138). Following the Civil War, universities established outreach programs to connect to surrounding communities, which became a foundation of postbellum curriculum. Furthermore, the federal government established the Bureau of Education in 1867 to set national standards for educational institutions. Cohen concludes that the national government and the Civil War shaped the modern higher education system that carried over into the mid-twentieth century.

Cohen’s account engages with previous scholarship but also provides new insights to the vast historiographies of the Civil War and the United States’ education system. Cohen agrees with Merle Curti’s study, “The American Scholar in Three Wars,” in which Curti argues that wars remove societal barriers “between intellectuals and the general public” (p. 11).[1] Cohen supports this assertion as he details the use of campuses to work for the war effort, the federal government’s noticeable presence and funding of universities, and how the curriculum changed to include military education. However, Cohen challenges previous historians—like Laurence R. Veysey and Christopher J. Lucas—who determined that the Civil War was not an agent of change for the United States’ higher education system.[2] As the first study to show the Civil War’s many effects on higher education, Cohen laid the foundation for future historians to investigate different aspects of education during different military conflicts.

Cohen’s analysis of the social, economic, and political transformations of the United States’ higher education system is a notable strength of his scholarship. His gendered analysis of women’s universities and women’s increased college attendance during the Civil War is another great asset of this account. Furthermore, Cohen’s examination of different universities—including Harvard

University, the College of California, Wesleyan Female College, Cornell College, and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary—allows readers to understand that the Civil War was not a monolithic experience in terms of education. Additionally, Cohen’s investigation reveals that most of the change occurred in the South, showing regional differences as well. Throughout *Reconstructing the Campus*, Cohen proves that the Civil War transformed every aspect of higher education—including curriculum, the makeup of student populations, and the physical layout of college campuses.

Cohen illuminates the centrality of the Civil War to academia throughout *Reconstructing the Campus*. Pertinent to the new trend in Civil War historiography that investigates widespread effects of the sectional crisis, Cohen asserts that the war reformed higher education. This drastic transformation ultimately created the modern education system. By detailing the social, political, economic, geographic, and educational changes fostered by the Civil War, Cohen’s account is a vital contribution to the historiography of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

#### Notes

[1]. Merle Curti, “The American Scholar in Three Wars,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 3, no. 3 (1942): 241-64.

[2]. Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); and Christopher J. Lucas, *American Higher Education: A History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Publishing, 1994).

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<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

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