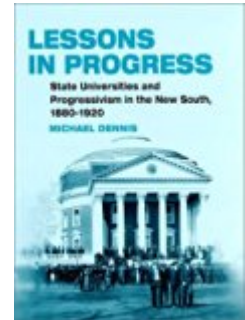


Michael Dennis. *Lessons in Progress: State Universities and Progressivism in the New South, 1880-1920.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001. ix + 272 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-02617-1.



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Charles Dabney, Walter Hill, Samuel Mitchell, Edwin Alderman, and the Making of the Modern University in the South: An Essay Review

If we believe state universities and their fiscal fortunes to be beleaguered at the hands of state legislatures, governors, and taxpayers today, historian Michael Dennis's book begs us to visit the turn of the century American South when the usual state support for higher education involved charters and land gifts save affection and annual appropriations. In *Lessons in Progress: State Universities and Progressivism in the New South, 1880-1920*, Dennis discerns just when and how the historic southern state colleges began to transform into modern universities and their prospects changed for the better. To this end, Dennis contributes significantly to the study of higher education and southern history by exploring regional variations on the emerging American university[1] and extending our collective knowledge and detail on the development of southern universities after the Civil War.[2]

Some readers of *Lessons in Progress* will be challenged by its presentation and others will be

delighted, in that it is not an extended story narrative. Rather, eight essays and an epilogue constitute this volume that explicates the thinking and leadership experiences of Dennis's historical subjects: presidents Charles Dabney at the University of Tennessee, Samuel Chiles Mitchell at the University of South Carolina, and Edwin Alderman at the University of Virginia, and Chancellor Walter Barnard Hill at the University of Georgia. After an introductory and overview chapter, chapters 2 and 3 explore the thinking of these university leaders and their like-mindedness on the topics of modernization and progressivism, and black education respectively.

To students fresh to the study of educational history, these particular essays bring to life progressive educator ideals of reform, professional expertise, and bureaucratic efficiency that mixed with the "New South" vision of industrialization, economic development, and increased racial tolerance moderated by white supremacy and separation. Finding important support from northern philanthropists such as George Peabody and Roger Ogden through participation on the South-

ern Education Board (SEB), together these executives assumed paternalistic responsibility for southern social advancement and economic development through an emphasis on practical education and university service to their states. On this level, Dennis's work may be used as a primer about "the impact of progressivism and the New South 'creed' on the southern university" (p. 2). To scholars more familiar with the context of progressive education and higher education history, particularly the study of the "Great American Universities" and their presidents at the turn of the century, the true prize of Dennis's volume is the four chapters on Dabney, Hill, Mitchell, and Alderman (chapters 4-6 and 8).[3] While the higher education community shares common understandings about Charles Eliot of Harvard, Benjamin Ide Wheeler of California, or Charles Van Hise of Wisconsin and their institutions in the early-twentieth century, for example, heretofore we have known collectively very little, if anything, about southern university presidents or their institutions in the same era. Worse, we have assumed that the southern presidents could not have been very effective or interested in university ideas or social change else their institutions would have been more advanced. A fruitful product of tedious inquiry, Dennis effectively demonstrates the specific "corporate management" techniques (p. 120) and activities such as summertime institutes for teachers and farmers, departmentalization of faculty, and aggressive public relations campaigns orchestrated by Dabney, Mitchell, Alderman, and Hill to increase their institutions and, eventually, put them on the state's tab. That these contemporaries of Eliot, Wheeler, and Van Hise worked simultaneously and successfully to expand southern state universities in a very different economic and political climate that valued decentralized authority and local control, and long resisted governmental responsibility for roads, sanitation, and the like, certainly deserves attention. On this score, Dennis thoroughly convinces.

Dennis's narrative excels when he compares, contrasts, and critiques his beloved subjects. Please consider the following to provide a glimpse into his work and a small snapshot of these intriguing characters and their universities. For example, of the four executives, Dennis calls Charles Dabney, the Virginia-born experiment station director turned president of the University of Tennessee, the "philosopher of service-oriented education for the South" (p. 67). Walter Bernard Hill, the lawyer elected University of Georgia chancellor, compares to William Rainey Harper of Chicago and Andrew White of Cornell as a "captain of erudition," and was a politically astute leader who fully "embraced the values of efficiency and rationality" (p. 117) first in the study of law and then for his whole university. The Mississippi-born Samuel Chiles Mitchell, president of the University of South Carolina, emerges as the "missionary" activist albeit "besieged" by "political scandal and localist hostility" (p. 6). Last, Dennis illuminates the University of Virginia's Edwin Alderman, a well-known North Carolina-born and -educated man who was also a former Tulane president, as the most successful and "grand" of his colleagues in "transforming the university into an instrument of state service" (p. 217). Yet these presidents also had their shortcomings. Take into account Charles Dabney who championed the study of agriculture as a means to economic rejuvenation and "disproportionately" funded the college of agriculture, despite its embarrassingly small enrollments, while he disparaged the high enrollments in the College of Engineering (p. 89). Dennis correctly points out that Dabney's superficial approach failed to consider the serious problems of the South's plantation economy. Also, had Dabney looked to Minnesota at the time (1898), he would have found a similarly strong preference for engineering over agriculture.[4] Dennis's analysis could have been strengthened by additional critiques of these historical characters.

For scholars interested in the study of educational philanthropy, Dennis's chapter on black ed-

ucation and the literature used in its preparation (chapter 3) misses the influential new book on philanthropy and black education in the South by Anderson and Moss, *Dangerous Donations*.^[5] As a result, Dennis sometimes overstates the influence of northern philanthropy on southern universities in this early part of the century without the necessary detail and critique to back his assertions. However, an interesting "bonus" chapter (chapter 7) mitigates this weakness and offers scholars of educational philanthropy an investigation and courtroom-style drama among South Carolina's President Mitchell, Governor Coleman Blease, Peabody Fund agent Wickliffe Rose, and the South Carolina General Assembly that rivals contemporary courtroom television.

In the year prior to assuming South Carolina's presidency, while employed at Brown and attending educational conference in Atlanta, Mitchell, somewhat unaware of the political climate regarding race in South Carolina, signed a petition acknowledging benefactor George Peabody's desire that funds remaining after distribution were to go to black teacher education (p. 201). Chapter 7 excavates the populist attack of South Carolina's Governor Coleman Blease on President Mitchell for allegedly re-directing Peabody funds intended for "the education of white women" at South Carolina's Winthrop normal college "to the education of black men." Mitchell's innocence in the implementation of the "Peabody Fund's biracial granting policy" mattered little to Governor Blease and Winthrop Professor D. B. Johnson who were stirring controversy and race-baiting for their own respective political and institutional gains. Yet the entire drama underscores a statewide misunderstanding of philanthropy and donor intentions as well as the salience and political cachet derived from racism and outright resistance to black education at the time.

Finally, Dennis caps his strong collection of essays with an epilogue summarizing his argument and introducing the years after his study

when federal programs initiated through the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and the work of Howard Odum and the Institute of Research in the Social Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, accelerated university research and graduate education in the South. As with any strong volume, Dennis's study raises questions even as it answers them. For example, I found Dennis's use of archival records from the Southern Education Board impressive and significant, indicating that southern state university presidents were collaborating and actively engaged in looking beyond their own institutions for answers to important questions. However, I wanted to know more about executive and institutional participation in the Land-Grant College Movement led by Pennsylvania State University's George Atherton, for example.^[6] Also, I have questions about the precise nature of Dabney, Hill, Mitchell, and Alderman's intention to emulate Northern "research" universities--as clarity often comes in retrospect and these executives were involved participants in the University Movement as it happened. Thus, to our benefit Michael Dennis in his *Lessons in Progress* leaves the door open at the same time it raises the bar for the continued exploration and forthcoming chapters in the saga of the emerging university in the American South.

Notes

[1]. Laurence Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

[2]. Joseph M. Stetar, "In Search of Direction: Southern Higher Education after the Civil War," *History of Education Quarterly* 25 (Fall 1985): pp. 341-367.

[3]. Edwin Slosson, *Great American Universities* (New York: Arno Press, 1910; reprint 1977).

[4]. *Ibid*, p. 276.

[5]. Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *Dangerous Donations: Northern Philanthropy*

and *Southern Black Education, 1902-1930* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

[6]. Roger L. Williams, *The Origins of Federal Support for Higher Education: George W. Ather-ton and the Land-Grant College Movement* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

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