Conclusion

On 2 April 1917, former college professor and president Woodrow Wilson declared war. The four colleges' enthusiastic response to American entry into World War I exemplified their cultural convergence. So many students volunteered that all four colleges were strained financially. When the government established the Student Army Training Corps (SATC) program, the authorities at all four colleges eagerly applied to host branches on their campuses.

Princeton leapt into the war effort with particular enthusiasm. President John G. Hibben, former intimate and colleague of Wilson, fervently promoted "preparedness." As a member of the Advisory Committee of University Presidents, he became a national spokesman for the Plattsburg System and established courses in military training at Princeton in 1915. Several of his faculty served on national committees supporting the war effort. History professor Robert McElroy chaired the National Security League Committee on Patriotism, leading an unscholarly attack on the University of Wisconsin's loyalty.¹ At Bucknell, so many male students joined the armed forces in the nine months before it established a branch of the SATC that faculty had to be retrenched.²

More ambivalence toward the war might have been expected at the other two campuses. Franklin and Marshall's affiliation with the German Reformed church and its German heritage might have

dampened enthusiasm. Instead, enrollment plummeted from 319 in September 1916 to about 200 the following fall and to 50 in September 1918 due to military service. Since the draft age was twenty-one, most departing students must have been volunteers. The surnames of Franklin and Marshall's casualties indicate an even mixture of Anglo and Germanic descendants. The ambivalence of a few students is suggested by President Apple's announcement that "students who left for the army or to work on farms" would be promoted to the next class. But in all other ways Franklin and Marshall authorities actively promoted the patriotic reputation of their German Reformed college. They boasted that Franklin and Marshall was making the highest per capita contribution to the armed forces of any college in Pennsylvania. The only faculty member who publicly questioned American intervention was dismissed (see Chapter 7). Count Bernstorff, the former German ambassador, was stripped of his honorary doctor of laws degree in absentia. Establishing a branch of the SATC enhanced the image of loyalty and prevented further erosion of enrollments and finances.3

Swarthmore's Quaker heritage presumably should have ruled out military training. Pacifist sentiments dominated the campus until the

American entry into the war. Then, while some faculty and alumni continued to oppose military training, President Swain and most students turned into ardent supporters. In the spring of 1918 most male undergraduates signed a petition demanding compulsory military training on campus. After debate, the divided board of managers agreed to voluntary training and allowed Swain to apply for a SATC branch (see Chapter 6), although the board held out against permitting arms on the campus until a few days before the armistice.4

When 140,000 students on 516 campuses were inducted into the first SATC units on 1 October 1918, Woodrow Wilson told them that they had "ceased to be merely individuals . . . [and had joined] with the entire manhood of the country."5 It would have been more accurate if Wilson had said that college students were part of an elite subculture. The way these colleges embraced the war, sometimes with unseemly haste, suggested the extent to which they had converged on a national, Anglo-Protestant culture and had abandoned the identities that separated them half a century earlier. Their homogeneity undercut the basis for independent inquiry that might have enabled faculty and students to avoid rushing to judgment. Instead, these colleges led the stampede.6

After World War I, all four colleges enhanced their social and educational reputations. With the departure of President John Harris in 1919, Bucknell dispensed with his autocratic procedures, strict discipline, and vocational curricular tracks. Bucknell quickly adopted a curriculum and a campus style more like the other three. Harris had greatly expanded the college, but his fixation with growth and vocationalism eventually sullied Bucknell’s reputation. Exclusivity, selectivity, stability, and liberal arts were becoming the hallmarks of elite colleges. Franklin and Marshall gained more autonomy from the German Reformed church and created alumni trustees, broadening its fund-raising base and improving its finances. Both Bucknell and Franklin and Marshall solidified their regional reputations. Princeton and Swarthmore enjoyed national prominence and the attention of the elite. Swarthmore moved into the national spotlight

5. Quoted in Gruber, 213. See also 231 n. 40 on Haverford.
in the 1920s with the implementation of President Aydelotte’s pioneering “honors program.” This combined with its growing social reputation among the eastern elite to make Swarthmore one of the most prestigious colleges in the country. Princeton’s doctoral programs and research, especially in science and mathematics, established its reputation in academia as a leading research university, an achievement that differentiated its faculty from those of the other three colleges. For undergraduates and alumni Princeton remained a college, truly a “university college,” and augmented its collegiate reputation with winning football teams and completion of a handsome Gothic campus.

New dormitories, chapels, stadiums, gymnasiums, and dining halls made all four into residential colleges on picturesque, bucolic campuses. Enrollments were limited to assure residential facilities for all students and to preserve the social homogeneity of the campus. Limits on both size and heterogeneity distinguished them from urban colleges and state universities. Each further loosened its denominational tie while remaining respectably Protestant and observing religious formalities.

Movies, novels, and athletic events spread the romantic image of the residential college broadly across American society. At the same time as the comprehensive high school was starting to provide an all-embracing social as well as educational life for adolescents, some colleges were offering an almost complete “life” to a privileged minority. These four colleges were among the institutions that helped shape this archetype and, in turn, were poised to benefit from personifying it.

These four private, Protestant, white, dominantly male, eastern colleges represent a numerically small but very influential segment of American higher education. Limiting the study within these parameters focused attention on the formation of an institution by the


8. The leading book on interwar American higher education is David O. Levine, The American College and the Culture of Aspiration, 1915–1940 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). Levine shares the prevailing stereotype of pre–World War I colleges and thus exaggerates the war as a watershed for colleges. But he does an excellent job of analyzing the increasing social distinctions among colleges in the 1920s.
dominant cultural group of the period. Examining four institutions avoided the limitations of a case study while permitting institutional comparisons built on careful analysis of the interaction of collegiate interests. But these boundaries limit generalizing from the findings to a national context.

Fortunately, there have been multiple case studies of New England, midwestern, and southern colleges that provide some basis for comparison. These studies suggest similar patterns of development along a regional continuum following economic maturation. Many changes detailed in this study had occurred in New England colleges about a decade earlier. In turn, developments in these four colleges in the Middle Atlantic states preceded those in similar midwestern institutions. This order may have been determined by the pace of the decline of agricultural communities and the rise of urban professional and corporate cultures that enabled college authorities to finance their desires to eliminate secondary and normal programs and develop their campuses around collegiate work stressing liberal arts. There was one noticeable gender difference: the liberal arts curriculum was less popular among men in the Midwest, where it had a feminine connotation.

In the South, colleges faced a tenacious evangelical denominationalism as well as economic underdevelopment. Ira Read found a number of underfunded colleges that were legally bound to denominations which provided little financial support. Their situation mirrored that at Franklin and Marshall and at early Swarthmore; but the southern colleges were poorer, and their denominational connections persisted well after World War I. They depended on individual gifts from members of their denominations. Few qualified for money from Rockefeller’s General Education Board and the Carnegie Foundation. Even Vanderbilt had to fight until 1914 to break free from the control of Methodist bishops. Governing boards often passed up potential funds to remain true to their traditional religious mission.


All of these multiple case studies find considerable intellectual liveliness in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colleges. These were not the intellectual backwaters often invoked as straw men by university spokesmen and later by historians. Most colleges interacted intelligently with their communities, often experimenting with a variety of responses to new social and intellectual developments, and had strong local and regional roots.

Some colleges in these studies (especially those in the South) later developed more formal denominational ties, but the fundamentalism of the 1920s should not be read back upon the earlier period. Protestant evangelicalism was relatively optimistic and open to new ideas in the late nineteenth century. It perpetuated some prejudices that limited inquiry, but those were generally held by the majority of Americans. Some colleges resisted the siren calls of urban wealth and modernism, or found pockets of wealth willing to underwrite an alternative vision; but they did not become militantly defensive institutions until the 1920s. Most colleges adopted mainstream Protestantism and jockeyed for prestige among the Protestant professional and business class like the four in this study.

All of the studies found college spokesmen juxtaposing “college” and “university” as they sought a role for their institutions. Their emerging self-definition invariably stressed the “whole man,” liberal arts, and a moral environment as the colleges’ unique attraction. The rhetoric exaggerated the universities’ threat to their existence but successfully created an image that socially well-connected colleges could use to gain support. George Peterson reported that New England colleges had found secure roles by 1900. The colleges in this study took a little longer. Joan Zimmerman detected midwestern private colleges reaching the same level of confidence in the 1920s. A new generation of college case studies that are much more sensitive to social context than most existing “house histories” promises to enrich our understanding of colleges in the next few years.

This study is part of a growing body of literature that is molding a new understanding of the social and educational role of higher ed-

ucation, and particularly of colleges, between the Civil War and World War I. My work supports the general direction of revisionist scholarship of the 1980s, especially that of Colin Burke and Louise Stevenson. This study suggests five guidelines for revising older interpretations of the subject and integrating recent and future research into a broader conceptual framework.

First, colleges were actors in their own destinies. The colleges did not merely react to demand; college authorities actively sought sponsorship to promote their institutions and visions, while clients sought the status, identity, and credentials that colleges could offer. The reflexive vocabulary that talks of colleges “responding to society” should be replaced with a more interactive language.

Second, the dysfunctions within institutions of higher education need to be kept in mind. Generational issues in particular need more attention as a source of competing interests and unintended outcomes. Parents were attracted by different visions of the college experience than their children. Younger faculty in the late 1800s often collaborated with students against college presidents and governing boards. In the 1900s faculty, especially younger ones, started living in a world shaped by “university” training and values, while students and alumni were shaping a “collegiate” culture. We must avoid the functionalist assumption that institutions always act rationally, and be more sensitive to contradictions.

Third, we must resist the temptation to anachronistically read later social and economic conditions backward, assuming that “modernization” was inevitable and overdue. For decades historians believed that colleges should have responded to a presumed demand for education pent up by conservative curricula and repressive social rules. This study finds that such demand largely did not exist before 1900. Most communities and denominations were more interested in secondary and vocational programs than in collegiate work, let alone the intellectual freedom and specialization of universities. The university reformers, too often quoted as omniscient observers, had little to offer most educational consumers of the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Most colleges were not discrete institutions until the

Conclusion

twentieth century. Not until after the turn of the century did college study become a common requirement for the professions and business management. Colleges could only take their modern form as patterns of coming of age, ethnoreligious identity, class formation, and professionalization changed. Reforming curricula and campus rules alone would not have attracted many more youths.

Fourth, we should examine institutions within their actual communities and not impose later definitions of “society.” If higher education is judged solely from a national perspective, localism and regionalism are obscured and nineteenth-century colleges are inevitably judged failures. A national perspective misses a fundamental point: colleges served local, denominational, and regional communities created by agrarian and early industrial economies. Colleges had not “endured in increasing isolation and obscurity,” in Lewis Perry’s words;¹³ rather, they related quite closely to their own communities—as opposed to universities, which were often quite isolated from their immediate communities and regions while participating in a national and international scholarly community.

Finally, higher education between the Civil War and World War I needs to be understood not only in terms of the triumph of modern ideas but also in the context of the ascendancy of a national corporate economy and accompanying changes in the upper and upper-middle classes. Especially in the East, the residential private college became a functional and romantic tool that helped separate affluent Protestant youths from those in other ethnoreligious groups, races, genders, and classes. The academic values that characterize the word “university” defined the subculture of professional academics and the small minority of students who went on to graduate school. The universities sponsored research that has come to have momentous economic, military, social, and cultural impacts. But for most upper- and upper-middle-class Americans, higher education meant a college education and a collegiate social life.

The American college is unique. No European educational system has a similar institution. Even Britain and Germany, the two societies from which Americans have drawn most heavily for educational practices, organize higher education quite differently. Events after the

Civil War might have fashioned a system in the United States more similar to that of other Western societies. The small, private liberal arts college could have been reduced to a minor institution by high schools, large universities, urban commuter colleges, normal schools, and professional schools. Instead, certain colleges and university colleges emerged as social arbiters serving the winners of the early rounds of industrialization.

The significance of the four colleges in this study lies less in their typicality than in their roles as leaders in the development of an important institution in higher education—one that brokers considerable power in this country, especially in the East. Outside the Northeast, private colleges have been less prominent, but the model influenced public colleges and universities across the country as intercollegiate athletics, collegiate Gothic architecture, fraternities and sororities, and other collegiate trappings spread west. Thus, this study analyzes the forging of a model that has accrued substantial social power.

Once institutionalized by the most powerful social groups in industrializing America, the collegiate model was adopted by others. An important sign of "making it" in the United States has been access to such colleges. Affluent Americans excluded on racial, religious, ethnic, or gender lines either sought access to the established colleges or created colleges based on a similar model. Jewish families concentrated on gaining access to the Protestant institutions, while Catholics and African Americans tended to build parallel institutions. Women did both. Since World War II religious and racial barriers have been lowered, and traditionally female, Catholic, and African-American colleges increasingly participate in a monolithic prestige structure topped by many of the older, formerly Protestant colleges.

Whereas the college helped homogenize Protestant denominations at the turn of the century, in the late twentieth century it has become a homogenizer across the Protestant-Catholic-Jewish "triple melting pot" and even across racial lines. Its main gatekeeping role has shifted to separating youth by their class origins and destinations. Broadening application pools have further increased the selectivity, and thus the prestige, of colleges like these four. In the late twentieth century, their names remain near the top of academic and social rankings of American colleges.

The accessibility of American colleges, their commitment to a broad
education, and their personal attention to students are admirable. Their numbers have helped create unprecedented accessibility to higher education and a public sense of involvement. The private liberal arts colleges have become more meritocratic since World War I, mixing the most academic offspring of the affluent with the most academically successful from less affluent families. The most prestigious colleges have maintained their social and academic reputations by severely limiting their enrollments, thus accentuating their power as gatekeepers.

Colleges play a paradoxical role in American education. They created a popular image of higher education that has encouraged a proportion of youths unmatched in any other country to continue their education. But the most desirable colleges regulate and dispense privilege. As when Daniel Webster defended private privilege through sentimental attachment, for each college “there are those who love it.”