With American power in relative decline, debates over the meaning of the American experience assume new urgency. Those looking for “American exceptionalism” can scarcely find a better example than its colleges. They are remarkably visible institutions. Bumper stickers, window decals, and T-shirts proclaim college loyalties. Prominent highway signs directing motorists to campuses are testimony that colleges are places of public interest. Gaining admission to and paying for college is a primary concern of most upper middle-class American families. Colleges are also conspicuous in popular culture. Campuses have been a favorite Hollywood setting since the 1920s. Millions watch college football and basketball teams perform rites complete with popularly recognized anthems and totems. College football bowl games and parades are the center of attention on New Year’s Day. Many who have never attended a college feel pride in the athletic, architectural, or academic prowess of “their” college or university.

The cultural prominence of American higher education is unparalleled. By contrast, the British institutions that spawned the first American colleges are relatively invisible to the public. Except for an annual boat race, even Oxford and Cambridge receive little public exposure and remain obscured in mystique. Higher education, remote to most Europeans, feels familiar to most Americans.

The visibility of American colleges reflects the reality that middle-class American youths come of age differently from their counterparts in other industrialized countries. Whereas the average European youth leaves school by the age of seventeen, almost half of American youths go on to higher education, and about one-third of
twenty- and twenty-one-year-olds are still enrolled. UNESCO figures show nearly twice as many “college-age” youths attending the “third level of education” in the United States than in any European country.

The visibility and accessibility of American colleges play an important ideological role. Secondary and higher education has been promoted as an antidote to radical reform of the distribution of power and wealth. The myth that accessible education combined with private enterprise guarantees equal opportunity dates back to the writings of Horace Mann. Successive social groups seeking access to the “American dream” have applied Mann’s formulation beyond the “common school,” leading them either to seek access to existing colleges or to create their own. Visible and accessible colleges have been an important ingredient in the American middle-class consensus that “the system works” for them and will continue to work for their children.

The history of higher education offers particularly fruitful social insights in the United States. In Europe the relatively small number of institutions of higher education were shaped primarily by central governments for national purposes. In contrast there was little federal support for American higher education until the mid-twentieth century. Competition among local, regional, racial, gender, and ethnoreligious groups led to the founding of thousands of colleges across the United States. Americans created a unique institution based on the intellectual tradition of the European university but with a significantly different institutional structure. Within decades of independence, colleges dotted the young republic and attracted children of the elite as well as a surprising number of young Americans from farming and small-business families. Financial sponsorship was inspired primarily by localism or ethnoreligious affinity.

After the Civil War, urbanization and industrialization created forces that challenged the local and denominational groups that had founded the colleges. The late nineteenth century witnessed dramatic changes at all levels of American education that reflected the competing visions and ambitions of many Americans. By World War I a clearly articulated educational system was established in which colleges played a prominent part and research universities were the capstone.

More than two decades ago, when I first became interested in the history of American higher education, the canon of the field told a
triumphant story of enlightened educational reformers overcoming entrenched conservatives between the Civil War and World War I. The traditional college was portrayed as an obstacle to progress, and the research university was the jewel in the reformers’ crowns. But at a time when the “military-industrial-university complex” was wreaking havoc in Southeast Asia, all powerful institutions seemed suspect; the university had become the locus of powerful forces rather than an island of rationality. I began to question a history that focused upon the university and ignored the “losers” and the roads not taken. If community and small institutions were being lost in modern America, might the triumph of the university have been part of the impersonalization, and the defeat of traditional colleges part of the loss? That story took on immediate significance. While the urgency of twenty years ago has faded, fears about the states of education and community in the United States remain. It is an intriguing American saga.