“It is, Sir, as I have said, a small College. And yet, there are those who love it.” Daniel Webster’s sentimental defense of Dartmouth College before the Supreme Court contained an essential truth. Nineteenth-century American colleges were valued vehicles of prestige for many communities, and of identity for ethnoreligious groups, classes, and the genders. Struggles to control the destinies of colleges reflected important social and cultural divides. Americans increasingly turned to colleges to perpetuate their cultural values and social position in the next generation.

The social role of the American college has received relatively little attention from historians, especially for the period between the Civil War and World War I. This book argues that colleges of the period were at the intersection of powerful social forces and emerged as one of the winners in the resulting changes. Colleges began the period as agents of ethnoreligious subcultures and local boosterism. The rapid growth of industrial wealth and the white-collar professional and business class, however, produced students and donors with different worldviews. The resulting conflicts challenged the traditions of many colleges while fueling their ambitions.

By World War I the most materially successful colleges catered to the urban Protestant upper and upper-middle classes, drawing on their new wealth to build their institutions. These colleges successfully positioned themselves on the path to the most desirable professional positions; gentlemen had to be scholars too. Urban wealth, Protestant

culture, and collegiate ambitions combined to create institutions indebted to colonial traditions and university innovations, but with a unique role shaped by dramatic social, economic, cultural, and educational changes under way at the turn of the century. By 1917 a small number of private colleges had forged a model that continues to influence American higher education and society.

Scholarship on higher education between the Civil War and World War I emphasizes newly founded universities and the few colleges that added large professional and graduate schools and became universities. But the overwhelming majority of institutions remained colleges, and even the lives of most undergraduates in universities remained “collegiate” in many senses of the word. Disproportionate attention to a few institutions has distorted our understanding of the forces that shaped American higher education.

For several decades most historians depicted colleges of the period as sectarian institutions that obstructed progress until being swept away by the refreshing winds of the “academic revolution.” Quite the reverse of Webster’s loving imagery, colleges were portrayed as isolated and unpopular institutions. This version of history portrayed post-Civil War benefactors and reformers meeting a pent-up demand for practical, democratic institutions capable of responding to the economic needs of a modernizing society. Only racial, ethnoreligious, and gender discrimination flawed the triumph.

The fate of colleges during this “age of the university” was left in a historical vacuum. Even Laurence Veysey’s masterful work, _The Emergence of the American University_, maintains that “the only course of action which these men could urge was to hold on, perhaps making minor concessions, and hope that their institutions would be able to survive.”2 The lack of explicit coverage left the impression that most colleges continued in the path of their ante bellum predecessors, slowly surrendering to university reforms and barely surviving into the twentieth century. Colleges were not given a distinct role again until histories reached the 1920s.

This interpretation developed in the 1950s and early 1960s, a time of severe criticism of higher education. Conservative critics like Wil-

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liam Buckley defended traditional colleges and attacked the academic revolution for supposedly undermining religion, patriotism, and lassizefaire.³ To academics defending their professional world against McCarthyism and other enemies of academia, the image of the “old-time college” became a negative backdrop against which “progress” could be measured. In this atmosphere a history that promoted the modern academic profession and the research university was articulately crafted by historians, particularly Richard Hofstadter, who molded it into an attractive paradigm of the history of American higher education.⁴

In addition to defending mainstream academia, Hofstadter and others raised the history of higher education to academic respectability. They chronicled the meteoric success of research universities, detailing the rise of academic freedom, Germanic scholarship, curricular reforms, academic disciplines, professional organizations, and the new student culture in highly literate, professional works. The history of higher education was transformed from an arcane avocation of elderly faculty into a professional inquiry. Unlike the traditional antiquarian college “house histories,”⁵ the new works fit the history of higher education into the dominant theoretical model of 1950s history: functionalist modernization. The academic revolution was explained in terms of differentiation of function, specialization, and bureaucratization. The university’s role in promoting intellectual progress and social change without major conflict placed higher education neatly within the dominant “consensus history” that functionalism encouraged. Publication of Veysey’s *Emergence of the Amer-

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ican University in 1965 raised “the age of the university” literature to a new level and showed how far the history of higher education had come since Buckley wrote *God and Man at Yale.*

Over two decades later the interpretive framework perfected by Veysey still dominates the vision of historians and academic policymakers. Its persistence in nonspecialist historical literature is illustrated by Lewis Perry’s depiction of late nineteenth-century colleges in his highly respected survey of American intellectual history: “While most of the old religiously oriented colleges and seminaries endured in increasing isolation and obscurity, a few raised new funds, discarded the traditional lockstep curriculum, created new departments and specialized schools, and attracted larger faculties and student bodies.” The best-selling American history textbook, *The American Nation,* depicts colleges as irrelevant institutions teaching little but classical languages.

The paradigm also continues to dominate the historical understanding of policymakers in American higher education. A poll of leaders in American higher education by *Change* magazine in the mid-1980s asked them to name the “best book [they] ever read about higher education.” The result was a tie between Veysey’s *Emergence of the American University* and Christopher Jencks and David Reisman’s *Academic Revolution,* a sociological analysis of American higher education crafted within the same historical framework. Both chronicle the academic revolution brilliantly and deserve the plaudit, but they

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6. Veysey’s use of irony and conflict posed implicit criticisms of the academic order that tested the outer limits of consensus. His work continues to give insightful and innovative direction to the field, but his *Emergence of the American University* is so dominant that it has inhibited exploration of some of the intriguing themes he introduced as they relate to colleges. As he later pointed out, he was writing before the “new” social history and wrote essentially an intellectual history. Laurence R. Veysey, “The History of Higher Education,” *Reviews in American History* 10 (December 1982): 288.


stereotype and virtually ignore colleges between the Civil War and World War I. When the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies began its influential study of curricula, it commissioned Frederick Rudolph, author of the standard survey of the history of American higher education, to write its historical volume. The result was an often-quoted book written wholly within the dominant interpretation. Even comparative works are shaped by it. Fritz Ringer’s widely praised *Education and Society in Modern Europe* draws almost entirely on the above mentioned books for its comparison of American and European higher education.\(^9\)

The continuing influence of these works testifies to the quality of their scholarship and writing. However, an interpretive tradition that initially provides insight eventually becomes heuristically restrictive. Since the early 1970s, specialists in the history of higher education have been trying to break out of the limitations of the tradition. Much of the resulting research on colleges has focused on antebellum higher education, thoroughly revising our understanding of that period. Most recent scholarship agrees that antebellum colleges were accessible and flexible institutions with a viable intellectual life despite financial limitations. Hofstadter’s depiction of “the great retrogression” has been largely discredited among specialists.

Revision of the history of post—Civil War colleges is less advanced. It started in an interpretive vacuum. A few pioneer universities still dominate histories of Gilded Age and Progressive Era higher education. The lack of attention given to colleges leaves the impression that they remained wedded to antebellum traditions. In Veysey’s words, they could only “hold on” until finally converted to university values in the twentieth century. Even two recent outstanding books on higher education invoke this one-dimensional image of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colleges.\(^10\) Historians have been trapped by the dichotomous assumption that the “old-time college”


and the research university were the only alternatives for nineteenth-century higher education.\(^\text{11}\) Instead of confronting an explicit interpretation clearly rooted in time, historians of the post–Civil War college have to deal with implicit, elusive images.

The work of revising the history of colleges began in the early 1970s.\(^\text{12}\) The dominant theme was that colleges had to be understood in their social context rather than judged in terms of the rhetoric of university founders and the assumed demands of modernization. The "new" social history provided ways to explore the intersection of social change, beliefs, and the institutional ambitions of American colleges. By the 1980s, new scholarship on the history of American colleges in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era started to appear. Pioneering books by Colin Burke and Louise Stevenson showed that colleges were neither as socially marginal nor as intellectually barren as previously depicted.\(^\text{13}\) Other books and articles contributed new insights, especially on women's higher education, academic professionalization, and student life.\(^\text{14}\)

There is still no comprehensive interpretation of post–Civil War American colleges. Constructing one requires combining the insights of recent scholarship with institutional studies. Toward that end, this

11. Compounding the conceptual vagueness has been sloppy vocabulary. Prevalent terms such as "old-time college" and "denominational college" defy clear periodization and analysis. Too often a conservative/reformer dichotomy has been employed, usually assumed to be synonymous with the college/university distinction. Thus, such clearly "collegiate" developments as the rise of intercollegiate athletics are awkwardly stuffed into the "age of the university." Rudolph writes vividly about "the collegiate way" and Veysey provides insightful images of collegiate and university values in conflict, but they subsume them within the "university" catchall.


14. Among the most significant books on women's colleges have been Barbara M. Solomon, In the Company of Educated Women (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); and Lynn D. Gordon, Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era (New Haven:
book is based upon a multiple case study of four colleges within a region. This methodology provides a perspective that is lost in single case studies. As Laurence Veysey pointed out about a book published for the 350th anniversary of Harvard, "Any history of an individual institution, no matter how well done, is by its nature provincial and limited. What we need above all are comparative studies, or at least studies of several institutions side by side, so that the single campus, such as Harvard's, automatically reveals its peculiarities when juxtaposed against the record of others." In addition, national syntheses tend to obscure the fundamentally local and regional nature of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century higher education.

I selected institutions attended by the dominant social groups of late nineteenth-century America: private colleges controlled by white, male Protestants. I limited the study to one economically mature area to eliminate frontier development as a variable. New England was excluded because it has excessively influenced interpretations of the history of higher education. The postbellum South lay in ruins and faced unique problems. I chose the Middle Atlantic states, which were rapidly industrializing and urbanizing but whose colleges have rarely been studied. For convenience, I limited my search to eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

There are fifteen private, white, Protestant, male or coeducational

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16. Burke, chap. 2, critiques the historiographic damage done by excessive generalizing from the New England experience.
institutions that conducted baccalaureate programs in 1870 in eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey and continue to operate today. I chose four on the basis of denominational variety and archival resources: Bucknell University, Franklin and Marshall College, Princeton University, and Swarthmore College.\(^\text{17}\)

The institutional titles raise an obvious question. Why do two of the colleges bear the name “university”? Bucknell’s use of the term dates back to the founders’ unfulfilled dream of adding law and medical schools to the undergraduate college. The result was “a college miscalled a university.”\(^\text{18}\)

Princeton’s inclusion raises larger questions. The College of New Jersey was renamed Princeton University in 1896, anticipating creation of a graduate school that did not mature until the 1910s. Pre–World War I Princeton remained “an institution very similar to the New England College.”\(^\text{19}\) In spite of that, studies of “the age of the university” often include Princeton, an anachronism based on the university structure that later evolved there. At the beginning of the period, Princeton was the largest of the four colleges but had many similarities to the other three. Ascertaining what eventually enabled Princeton to take a different institutional form than the others highlights some of the forces that shaped American higher education. Nineteenth-century “Colleges” were multilevel, multipurpose institutions that often included preparatory schools, normal schools, and graduate programs. The institutional changes that led to precise, nationally accepted labels are part of the phenomena examined in this study.

I chose a conventional periodization of history, from the Civil War to World War I. These wars remain useful demarcations in American higher education. The Civil War disrupted all four colleges, spurring drastic changes in the 1860s. American involvement in World War I was shorter, but it also had a traumatic impact on the colleges. The 1920s saw major changes at Bucknell and Swarthmore and significant

17. The other eleven colleges were Dickinson College, Gettysburg College, Haverford College, Lafayette College, Lebanon Valley College, Lehigh University, Lycoming College, Moravian College, Muhlenberg College, Rutgers University, and Ursinus College. In the pursuit of denominational variety, several colleges were mutually exclusive (e.g., Lafayette and Princeton).
19. Peterson, 201.
innovations at Franklin and Marshall and Princeton, all of which set that decade apart.

The book weaves together events on individual campuses, comparisons among the four, and broader social forces, looking for both uniqueness and commonality. Chapter 1 examines the traditions and forces that defined each college in the late 1860s. The events of the following half-century are divided by the 1890s, a watershed decade that serves as the break between Part One and Part Two. Both parts examine the relationships between the colleges and their communities and their impact on faculty, curriculum, and student life. Part Three examines the broader implications of these case studies for understanding American educational and social development between the Civil War and World War I.

Most students, faculty, administrators, and trustees of these Middle Atlantic colleges were from the dominant social group of the period: male “WASPs,” in modern parlance. But the study’s importance extends well beyond those demographic boundaries. This group shaped a model of higher education that influenced leading women’s colleges. The newly affluent from other ethnic, religious, and racial groups also adapted the model to their purposes. The study of these four colleges not only illuminates an important educational institution, but also sheds light on cultural identity and class formation in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America.