CHAPTER 9

The Changing Exasperations of Higher Education

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Introduction

In Geiger's "The Ten Generations of American Higher Education" (2005), 400 years of the history of America's colleges and universities is examined, from the Colonial era and founding of Harvard to the present day. Higher education, especially more recently, has encouraged the façade of being post-racial through the rise of multiculturalism and a convenient lapse in memory with regard to higher education's colonial roots. Even a cursory examination of this history, clearly illuminates early US colleges and universities were built for white people, on land stolen from First Nation peoples, by enslaved Africans. The first chapter of Geiger's book focuses on the peculiarities of higher Education, and necessitates looking at it through two lenses: (1) the institution of higher education as a system, and (2) as individual institutions that function within that system (Corces-Zimmerman et al. 2020). Though Geiger covers a wide range of topics, he does little to explain why students, the

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K. R. Roth and Z. S. Ritter (eds.), *Whiteness, Power, and Resisting Change in US Higher Education*, Palgrave Studies in Race, Inequality and Social Justice in Education,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57292-1_9

primary consumers of higher education, chose to enroll and participate in the first place. In interrogating how US higher education might address its historical and contemporary scaffolding of Whiteness, it is important to understand the changing motivations of students over time. Not only do these motivations reflect the social and historical influences driving the major transformations of higher education and the nation in general, but students have played and continue to play an integral role in advocating for change—change at the institutional level, change at the system level, and change to society as a whole.

In this chapter, I discuss the different forces historians have identified as inspiring students to engage higher education, focusing on a few major eras which connect to contemporary issues. The US Colonial Era provides the earliest context for framing the developments that follow. In the University Transformation Era, students' increasing focus on social aspects of higher education hint at its role in perpetuating elitism. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (or GI Bill) implemented during the Mass Higher Education Era invited a student population unlike any previous era, with completely new perspectives on reasons for engaging in higher education. I continue my examination by highlighting the factors impacting students, and how institutions have responded, most notably through the development of student affairs. In Chapter 1 of this book, Corces-Zimmerman et al. outline four dimensions of Whiteness in higher education—racial composition, physical structures, social/cultural norms, and organizational/curricular norms (2020). By reflecting on these select time periods, I propose ways in which higher education can learn from historical mistakes and address these four dimensions toward positive change. This chapter is meant to realistically consider the current context of higher education, and with it the challenges to advocating for change to a system that already is stretched by increasingly seeking to appeal to both public and private interests. In light of the unprecedented changes to higher education unfolding as a result of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the question whether higher education can meet these challenges is examined.

Whiteness and Social Stratification Through Higher Education

The Colonial Era—Perpetuating an Elite Class

During the Colonial Era, the purpose of higher education was conceptualized by founders who were almost exclusively religiously motivated. For the most part, this had very little to do with developing occupational skills and more to do with carrying out religious missions. For example, in his sermon *Model of Christian Charity*, Winthrop (1630) expressed the desire to create a refuge which later became Harvard College, where students felt they were called by God to be an example within an ideal society. Harvard was meant to be a beacon on a hill providing an example to the rest of the world. Within a few generations, however, American higher education abandoned this standard and focused more on student outcomes achieved through taking part in higher education.

The very few colonial colleges (nine by the end of the Colonial Era in 1789) were attended by so few students, they barely made a dent in the general population. Of the 3 million free colonists, only about 1,000 students were enrolled in college by 1789 (Cohen and Kisker 2010). Students, during this time, were "a relatively privileged group of [white] young men who were expected to be serious about their studies and their religion," (Thelin 2011, p. 24). But for the most part, not only did the Colonial Era college movement "fail to become as popular as the religious awakening," it also failed to "compete with the early discovery the American frontier was a potential and remarkably accessible source of material abundance," which is echoed in the small impact of higher education during this time (Rudolph 1990, p. 19). The colonists did not view college as a pathway to success because the open frontier provided more opportunities without the existing elitism of higher education. This view of college seems relatively far-fetched compared to today's popular opinion higher education is the primary gateway to social mobility; but for a time, a main purpose of education was "to identify and ratify a colonial elite," (Thelin 2011, p. 25).

Many would claim college students at the time (wealthy white men from prominent families) constituted a group that did not need education at all. The students of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton were from "mercantile wealth" and students almost assuredly had a stable and prosperous future without education (Thelin 2011, p. 24). However, after

the American Revolution, Rudolph (1990) claims there was a widely held belief higher education was now serving a new responsibility to a newly formed nation: "the responsibility to prepare young men who were to be responsible for citizenship, in a republic that must prove itself" and "the preparation for lives of usefulness of young men who also intended to prove themselves," (p. 40). These statements emphasize the entangling of student motivations, the evolving purpose of higher education, and the emerging social contract.

At a time when many abroad waited in earnest for the fledgling United States to fail as an independent nation, the evolving system of colleges took up the duty of educating men of potential influence in directing the nation toward stability. Unsurprisingly, the higher education system reflected the hegemony of other US institutions, serving white Anglo Protestant ideologies. In addition to the obvious representation of Whiteness through racial makeup of those in power, the budding political and economic structures of the nation actively incorporated policies scaffolding Whiteness. For example, discussions of the morality, purpose, and consequences of American slavery went, at least officially, uninterrogated and left for future generations to wrestle with. Although, the role of colleges and universities as a tool for social welfare were sown at this time, broadening the purpose of higher education in ways that persist today.

Lessons from the Colonial Era. First and foremost, to make any meaningful progress on dismantling Whiteness in higher education, institutions and the system as a whole must acknowledge institutional origins during the Colonial Era, that were established and bound by colonial ideas and practices. It is undeniable that virtually all higher education institutions have been built on land looted from First Nation Peoples, and any institution built before the 13th Amendment, ratified in 1865, more than likely was built by labor of enslaved Africans. For far too long, the system has pushed these histories into the shadows, hiding behind centuries of blurred narratives and strategically named buildings. Adding to the difficulty with openly recognizing the white supremacist roots of higher education is that institutions themselves do not seem ready to take the needed steps to remedy their historical injustices. While the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic is changing higher education's physical infrastructure to an unprecedented (and many assume, temporary) level, the move toward remote learning has provided opportunity to not only restructure, but to actually recreate spaces to move higher education away from perpetuating white supremacy. With that said, as institutions

assume the unprecedented undertaking to respond to the pandemic by accommodating spaces (both virtual and physical) in equitable ways, the imagination required to develop new and equitable spaces demands all constituents have input, including students, staff, faculty, administration, and even community members. And, even if the reorganization of higher education takes decades, beginning the process while including the perspectives of multiple constituents will at least provide the tools to begin to address higher education's history of glaring mistakes.

The University Transformation Era—Beyond Academics

The state of affairs regarding higher education between the end of the Civil War and World War II provides students with a rather dreary outlook. Academic standards were extremely lacking, and for the most part students were more focused on social networking and acquiring social capital. Upon enrollment, students learned they were not "seriously pressed by prevailing academic standards," (Rudolph 1990, p. 287), so one might ask why did they seek out higher education in the first place?

On the one hand, college during this time promised young people a chance to pursue the American dream, with widening access demonstrated by the trend of developing parallel colleges specifically for women beginning in the mid-1800s, and later for Black Americans (Harwarth, 2005). Still, college-going was seen as "a dream reserved first and foremost, though not exclusively, for male children of those who already enjoyed economic and social benefits," (Thelin 2011, p. 254). On the other hand, surveys of the vocational intentions of students and their socio-economic backgrounds during the 1920s and 1930s suggest "students aspired to the types of college training that connoted higher status than their parents enjoyed at the time," (Levine 1986, p. 117). This attention to intergenerational upward mobility indicated students did recognize the value of higher education as a vehicle for achieving that goal. According to an editorial in the *Daily Illini* entitled, "9.796 Students—Why Are They Here?", family prosperity and professional training were important [college-going] factors, as was "the opportunity to increase one's social prestige, particularly at home, was the chief reason for attendance," (Levine 1986, p. 116).

As a result, colleges and universities were forums for young people to participate in "fraternity initiations, weekend parties, homecoming extravaganzas, and football bowl games" that "reinforced established norms of

getting ahead in American society," (Thelin 2011, p. 254). These "wild activities" associated with undergraduate life solidified "the popular belief that 'going to college' was a rite of passage into the prestige of the American upper-middle class," (Thelin 2011, p. 254). Students embraced the idea going to college was "the modish, fashionable, acceptable thing to do," (Levine 1986, p. 116). Middle-class families during this time operated under the social pressure to send their children to college as an indicator of good parenting as opposed to encouraging the acquisition of knowledge (Levin 1986, p. 118). Thelin asserted the "social function of college coexisted with an increasingly potent albeit vague economic function," in that job applications asked to list if one had ever been to college, but nothing about whether one graduated or got a degree, as if simply attending in some manner was the extent of the value of higher education (2011, p. 254).

Student life on campus during this era greatly reflected these social motivations. Veysey notes a motto appropriately summed up the widely held view about education at the time adorns the walls of dorm room fraternity houses: "Don't Let Your Studies Interfere with Your Education," (1965, p. 272). Students, and families to some extent, believed academics had a place separate from, and not as important as, the real purposes of going to college. Professors and administration, however, seemed to feel differently, indicating a major disconnect between students and institution officials at this time. Some prominent university presidents like Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia, Daniel Coit Gilman of Johns Hopkins, and Stanford's David Starr Jordan warned academic standards "were threatened by an increasing number of socially motivated students," (Levine 1986, p. 115). Colleges and universities tried survey courses, honors programs, and similar activities in an attempt to strengthen academic life, but for the most part, they were largely unsuccessful. Overall, the social motivation for college-going was "more influential than ever before," (Levine 1986, p. 115). Before this period, the premise of attending college for the purpose of attaining knowledge thinly veiled the unmistakable social motivations.

Lessons from the University Transformation Era. Essentially, the social/cultural dimensions of higher education have existed alongside the academic dimension for most of its existence. Unsurprisingly, the norms of higher education reflect the white supremacist norms of the greater society. The social currency of taking part in higher education and adopting certain norms has long been touted as being as important

or even integral to the higher education experience. As stated before, any recommendation to dismantle Whiteness in higher education requires realistically appraising current circumstances. Thus, a call to reflect and remove all elitist practices at the university is simply idealistic and ignores the fact white supremacist norms flourish in all types of institutions. Alternately, higher education needs to invest financially and diligently in active practices to uplift Students of Color toward more equitable outcomes—both academically and socially. In addition to supporting more research on equitable outcomes, individual institutions should invest in campus-based research to identify inequities and develop solutions suitable for their campus population. Along with this introspection, campuses need to dismantle Whiteness particularly through security and patrol forces that consistently over-police Students of Color, reinforcing white as the norm. Similarly, curricular investment must reflect more equity. For instance, an endowed professorship in History should be matched with a similar position in Ethnic Studies; alumni donations to benefit historically white fraternities should earmark a percentage of such donations to be distributed to other non-white or multicultural fraternities; and general education curricula should include options that interrogate and highlight non-Western paradigms.

The GI Bill Era—A Whole New Student Population

Between 1945 and 1975, enrollment in higher education increased by more than 500%, growing from about 2 million to 11 million students (Cohen and Kisker 2010, p. 208). Students who previously could not afford higher education were taking advantage of financial aid available through the GI Bill as well as through federal and state grant and loan programs. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill) was passed by Congress to avert massive unemployment and subsequent civil unrest when millions of servicemen returned home after World War II. Nearly half of the 15 million returned veterans participated in the higher education programs (Cohen and Kisker 2010, p. 194). For the first time, a very different population of student was entering colleges and universities at an extremely high volume. Having served in World War II, and later during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, servicemen were older and had a greater span of time between high school and post-secondary education. Because of this, servicemen clearly had different expectations and motivations for going to college than the typical high school graduate.

GIs were typically depicted as “worldly and experienced” and “impatient with the juvenile features of college life” which was a swift and dramatic change from the socially-oriented students from the pre-war era (Thelin 2011, p. 266). Simply by the overwhelming presence of former servicemen, colleges and traditional activities had to be re-conceptualized. Moreover, GIs were portrayed as “pragmatic, hardworking, and in a hurry to complete their degrees,” (Thelin 2011, p. 266). In addition to veering away from certain extracurricular activities (but demonstrating rather active participation in activities such as varsity sports), these students focused on using higher education for the pursuit and acquisition of academic knowledge and degree attainment. This difference in perspective led many servicemen to “employable fields such as business administration and engineering,” (Thelin 2011, p. 266).

Thelin describes an interesting scenario regarding an economics class made up mostly of GI students: when learning about the inequities of the tax code in favoring wealthier families and business corporations, rather than considering changes in tax codes, many felt compelled to go into business as a profession and take part in the advantages of the tax code themselves (2011, pp. 266–267).

For the most part, the GI Bill was written and carried out without fully considering unintended consequences for colleges and universities, which had to adjust accordingly to massive spikes in enrollments, and to a new kind of student. At the institutional level, colleges and universities focused on recruitment strategies to attract former servicemen, who arrived along with college revenue in the form of federal dollars. Because many of these students were first-generation college enrollees coming from families that had “little experience with or expectation of a college education,” colleges and universities edited recruitment brochures to appeal to servicemen of “serious purpose” who “mean business,” (Thelin 2011, pp. 264, 266). They also adjusted admissions criteria to be more flexible to allow students advanced standing by demonstrating previous achievement. The large influx of predominantly male students also “masculinize[d] the postwar campus,” and what was considered male-appropriate and female-appropriate areas of study became more defined.

Although I’ve focused on institutional impacts based on GI Bill recipients, this time of mass higher education touched virtually the entire American population for the first. Popular opinion at the time argued

anyone who did not want to go to college was "misguided and in need of special encouragement," (Cohen and Kisker 2010, p. 209).

Lessons from the Post-GI Bill Era. Although the GI Bill dramatically increased access to higher education for students of many different identities, today's reality is that college access continues to be an issue. While this reality is obscured by greater participation and completion rates overall, the stark contrasts are obvious at many flagship universities whose racial composition fails to reflect the demographics of their state population. Affirmative Action admissions policies continue to survive the seemingly never-ending challenges put forth by white plaintiffs (starting with Allan Bakke in 1978 to Abigail Fisher most recently). Further, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the administration of standardized tests typically used for college admission, and some institutions and systems have allowed for a test-optional application. This moment provides an ideal opportunity to review and implement college admission processes that increase equity and seek to reflect local and national demographics in student populations.

Realizing the long history of higher education makes difficult efforts to rectify imbalanced racial compositions on campus immediately, but effort needs to be made. This includes expanding faculty and research pipeline programs to support more Students of Color in pursuing graduate school and careers in research and academia. Individual institutions, particularly public funded ones, need to assume some responsibility for education resources taken from their local communities and support and develop K-12 partnerships to create more avenues for higher education access.

The Contemporary Era—Promoting Private, or Individual Benefits

Cohen and Kisker dub the era since 1994 "Privatization, Corporation, and Accountability." This era also is noteworthy for encompassing the War on Terror, the Great Recession, and a global pandemic (2010, pp. 435–437). While attending colleges may seem far removed from these issues, the reverberations from these real-world events have trickled down impact students' college choices. The fallout from Hurricane Katrina, the rise in mass shootings, and most recently the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, has demonstrated a lack of preparedness by government to address social needs in the wake of natural and other disasters, as well as a general failure to support programs and initiatives to help agencies provide assistance in the aftermath of natural or other social

disruptions. Perhaps in response, students entering college increasingly demonstrate a civic mindedness in quantifiable measures when compared to other college cohorts (Hurtado 2005). A national study of incoming freshman by the Higher education Research Institute (HERI) in 2012 shows, "[i]ncoming students persist in putting a premium on job-related reasons to go to college," which reasonably can be linked to the economic climate following the Great Recession of 2008 (Pryor et al. 2012, p. 2).

For more than 50 years, the Freshman survey has asked students to list which factors are important in their decision to go to college. Looking at the trends related to student responses over time, almost all the listed college decision-making factors have increased over time in importance, which researchers believe indicates students view higher education as a multi-faceted experience (Pryor et al. 2007, p. 21). However, even with increases in commuter and part-time students, respondents to the freshman survey still view their time on campus as "prolonged adolescence," with Cohen and Kisker (2010) acknowledging the time spent partying has remained relatively consistent since the survey was first administered (pp. 480–481).

Tracking the shifts in what specific factors are found to be important also provides insight into how students' attitudes toward college have changed. Not surprisingly, the top two reasons for attending college in 1976, were "to learn about things that interest me" and "get a better job" remained the top two factors in 2006, representing two major influences that have impacted education since the late 1970s (Pryor et al. 2007, p. 21). One influence has been the dramatic increase in students going to college as "a way to make more money," which jumped from 49.9% in 1976 to 69.0% in 2006 (Pryor et al. 2007, p. 21). The other is the extent to which parents are involved in their child's decision to go to college. The percentage of students indicating "my parents wanted me to go" as an important reason for going to college has jumped from 30% for both men and women to 43.3% for men and 48.9% for women. Combined with students and families shouldering a larger financial burden to attend college also has elevated their expectations of what attending college should do for them, resulting in blaming the institution if it does not live up to student expectations (Cohen and Kisker 2010, p. 479).

The Challenges of Student Affairs as a Patchwork Solution

As the composition of students in US colleges and universities continues to diversify, it is increasingly important for higher education institutions to understand and accommodate the different backgrounds of students, from academic preparedness, and socio-economic status (SES), to expectations of college, and internalizing the benefits of college across personal, professional, and intellectual dimensions. A far cry from the early days of higher education, today's students recognize that college completion rather than simply participation is the currency needed to enjoy the benefits of higher education. Research asserts student involvement in campus life leads to greater social and academic integration, and promotes retention (Astin 1984; Tinto 1975). Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model, one of the early models on student retention, asserts both academic and social integration increases students' institutional commitment, ultimately decreasing the likelihood of leaving college without a degree. However, the generalizability of the Student Integration Model for Students of Color has been questioned and is one of the most consistent criticisms of Tinto's model (Oseguera et al. 2009). Specifically, Tinto assumes college students must assimilate into the dominant campus culture in order to persist in college. This places the onus almost entirely on the student (Braxton et al. 1997) while ignoring an equally important input for success, the campus climate and the degree to which students, particularly Students of Color, feel welcome.

Guiffrida (2003) highlights the importance of ethnic-based organizations for cultivating students' sense of belonging on college campuses, particularly for minoritized students. For example, Latinx students involved in campus activities (i.e., academic, cultural, social, or mentoring) tend to persist to graduation (deAcosta 1996). Similarly, Black students who participate in campus activities are more likely to persist (Allen 1992). Fischer (2007) also found underrepresented Students of Color who have a non-positive perception of the campus climate are less happy and are more likely to drop out of college. Ultimately, many factors can impact completion rates of minority students, but the literature frequently points to campus climate, as either supporting minority student retention, or hindering it (Hurtado et al. 2012).

Unfortunately, most traditional higher education strategies and theories upon which institutional services and programs are based are outdated

and do not fit the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. For example, career development programs have yet to consider the particular needs of first-generation college students (whose parent(s) do not have a US college education). First-generation students are not new to higher education, and yet recent studies find first-generation students are less likely to seek out support from career advisors, engage with professors, seek out internships, or complete their degree within four years (Elfman 2018; Pascarella et al. 2004). Most strikingly, inequities persist after college. While early career earnings of first-generation students are comparable to right after college, first-generation students are less likely to enroll in graduate or professional school four to five years after graduation (Pascarella et al. 2004). Even if students fulfill the same requirements for degree completion, the inequity of outcomes post-college emphasizes how higher education's sorting function persists to stratify outcomes based on goals set during the colonial era.

The Crucial Pivot: Where to from Here?

In striving for institutional change, it is important for colleges and universities to consider trends in student motivations for pursuing higher education. In general, student motivations and the demographic of students entering a college can be reflective or resultant of the stated purpose of the institution, current cultural events, or the student's background. Likewise, campuses also can be impacted by these factors.

With unprecedented change transforming higher education due to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, including moving thousands of students from campus residence halls, transitioning to online instruction, curtailing campus-based activities, and the resultant budget challenges associated with all of these changes, institutions must recognize the need to adapt at this time to remain relevant. They also need to adapt to be more equitable. Despite its long history in the United States, higher education remains a peculiar institution due to its often schizophrenic adherence to its colonial and elitist roots while simultaneously representing itself as a path toward equitable change. Unfortunately, the recent systemic and unmitigated failures across a number of American institutions, including voting, policing, health care, and punishment, may dilute higher education claims to provide answers to current problems, since with few exceptions, colleges and universities have been the beneficiaries of Whiteness and white supremacy, since their inception. As increasingly diverse

students enroll in US higher education with the expectation of economic gain and workplace identification, institutions must be mindful to accommodate these expectations, and when necessary focus attention on social and institutional impediments in the way of student success, both within and after the university. While I do not pretend to offer this chapter as a comprehensive solution to dismantling Whiteness in higher education, the voices and perspectives of students, especially Students of Color, must be at center of any efforts toward organizational change. Supporting Black students, staff, faculty, and community directly confronts white supremacy in our institutions and social life. Contrary to the trends of corporatizing the college, it remains imperative colleges and universities retain value as social institutions working toward public good, rather than corporatized institutions focused relentlessly on their own survival.

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