The Past, Present, and Future of Higher Education

HIST 485 (Steve Volk, Oberlin College, Fall 2015)

HIST 485: The Past, Present, and Future of Higher Education

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Wednesdays, 7:00-9:00 PM
Classroom: Mudd 456
Of the many things we know about higher education in the United States, two compose the ground floor of this class: (1) a post-secondary (“tertiary”) education is increasingly required for economic success in this country – that being defined as being more than one step away from ruin, and (2) it is in a state of crisis. Both of these statements have to be unpacked: is “an education” solely, or even primarily, about one’s economic future? Does an education serve other purposes, such as the ability to enjoy “know oneself,” to be a purposeful citizen, or to live life to the fullest? And what IS the crisis in higher education? Financial? Organizational? Structural? Existential? This course will address these issues and others by looking at the history of (some forms of) higher education in the United States, and then exploring four questions about its current shape (who gets in? what gets taught? who pays for it? who’s in charge?). We will debate a set of “cultural conflicts” that are currently roiling the waters of higher ed (higher education’s role in the production of inequality; “disruption” and challenges to traditional governance structures; the conflict between free speech protected space; and the university role in democracy). And finally, we will discuss the future of higher education and whether technology will re-make the higher education in the United States.

Our questions we will often be broad and philosophical, and they, necessarily the ones that trustees, presidents, or chief financial officers might ask about the institutions they oversee. We will not be asking how colleges can “bend the cost curve,” which is terribly important for the future of liberal arts colleges, or (at least not directly) how to convince high school students that they should be willing to take on a large debt in order to get a college degree. Both are important questions, but our course will do more to explore the social and economic conditions that have shaped the current environment of higher education than to propose specific policy approaches to address the crisis.

The course will be eclectic, but hopefully not haphazard. While the private, residential, liberal arts college experience will inform many of the questions that shape the class, we will be examining higher education in all its forms: public and private, not-for-profit and for-profit, 2-year and 4-year. On the other hand, we will not be considering graduate education or the field of “adult” or “continuing” education.
There seems to be no shortage of commentators who seem eager to address this the state of higher education, and we have much to learn from many of them. But, I often find that they are either asking the wrong questions or that the questions they ask leave unchallenged some fundamental assumptions. I've adopted the "Tressie-test (http://tressiemc.com/2013/08/03/a-bechdel-ish-test-for-higher-ed-disruption/)" (from Tressie McMillan Cottom of Virginia Commonwealth University) when I read about higher education crises and fixes, starting with the fact that neoliberalism has largely shaped the economic and political environment in which higher education environment currently struggles to exist. With this in mind, the central goals of this course are to:

1. Ask productive, meaningful questions about higher education in the United States.

2. Be clear about the assumptions underlying our questions.

3. Become better informed about both the history and current organization of higher education in the United States.

4. Apply the lessons learned beyond this class.

5. Develop strong communication, collaborative, and critical thinking skills.

5. Approach the examination of higher education critically, looking for answers democratically, and taking what we do and what we learn seriously.

Oberlin College Archives, Edward McDowell, Woodblock print of Finney Chapel, 1933
The syllabus and its weekly readings are organized to cover topics that I think are important, but they are certainly not the only ones. If, as members of the class, you think that there are critical topics currently not included and that fall within the parameters set out above, you will have time to raise them in the first two weeks of class. If you suggest a new theme to be added to the syllabus, you must also recommend which topic it should replace. Final decisions on swapping topics will be made by class vote. I will leave open the possibility of adding new readings to the syllabus, or removing others, should they prove to be too much.

This course is intended to look not just at the past and present of higher education, but its future as well. Because I’m a constructivist who believes that you learn best through doing, I decided to challenge some traditional course structures by using technology to connect with some people who aren’t physically in Oberlin and to create an inter-generational discussion about education.

The course has four different “student bodies”: 1) "Regular" students enrolled at Oberlin who are in the classroom in a more typical fashion; 2) a few staff and faculty members interested in the topic who have asked to participate in the class; 3) a group of about seven Oberlin alumni who have applied to be in the course and who will join us remotely via Zoom (http://zoom.us/) video conferencing; and 4) a larger group of Oberlin alumni who just couldn’t fit in the virtual group plus anyone else in the world who wants to form part of a DOCC (Distributed Online Collaborative Course). This group will be formed of people who will have access to the course syllabus, all on-line readings, and a weekly summary of our discussions that two “regular” students will

Each of these groups will be have slightly different responsibilities in the class. Registered Oberlin students will be responsible for all assigned readings and all assignments; faculty, staff, and virtual participants will be expected to keeping up in a reasonable way with the readings and, if they want, the other assignments including posting to the discussion board; and members of the DOCC are free to do as much or little as they want.

1. As a seminar, there is a lot of reading for the class. Some weeks, everyone will be required to do all the readings; some weeks different groups will be assigned different sets of readings. "Group 1" students are required to come to class with written questions and a précis of one reading that is starred (*) in the syllabus (you can select among various ones that are starred).

2. Two-three in-class students will be in charge of organizing each week’s discussion.

3. Two in-class students will be assigned the task of being “note takers” each week; their notes will be posted to the discussion board/blog.

4. Building an on-line bibliography and resource section. One project for the class as a whole is to build an on-line, annotated bibliography on higher education in the United States. The idea behind the bibliography will be to give anyone interested in the topic a curated set of readings or other resources (videos, podcasts, etc.). The bibliography is intended to be more than a massive list of everything available. It should address the question: If I wanted to become more knowledgeable about higher education, where would I start? You will all be responsible for contributing to the resource list. The bibliography will be posted online.
prepare. They will be encouraged to post
observations, questions, and suggestions to a
discussion board/blog
(http://hist485f15.weebly.com/past-present-
future-blog).

5. Final Project: In-class students will be
responsible for a final project in which you
address any topic explored in the class or one
that hasn’t been examined. More on this to
follow, but it can be done in a variety of media
beyond the written paper.

Grades and Grading Policy

I hate grading; you probably hate getting grades. We will discuss early in the semester whether you want to
adopt the grading system I have below or use a “contract” or alternative system. In the meantime, your
grade will be determined as follows:

Weekly précis writing: 25%
Organizing class sessions: 15%
Note taking: 10%
Bibliography: 5%
Participation: 15%
Final Project: 30%

Grades are based on your final GPA in the course. To get the letter grade, you must average above the
posted GPA:

A+ = 4.165; A = 3.85; A- = 3.50; B+ = 3.165; B = 2.835; B- = 2.50; C+ = 2.165; C = 1.835; C- = 1.50

Most assignments (e.g. weekly précis) are due at class time. If you are in charge of organizing the class
session, you will be required to post your questions the day before class by 8:30 PM. I will give you
instructions on the other projects. Your final project will be due Sunday, Dec. 20 at 11:00 AM. Assignments
that are turned in late will be docked one grade step (e.g. from a “B” to a “B-”) for each day late.

You may request an Incomplete ONLY for the final paper. To be counted, all other work must be turned in by
4:30 PM on the last day of the Reading Period, December 15.

Attendance, Tardiness, Class Behavior, Accommodations

This is your class – you are teachers as well as students and you have a responsibility to be in class. Please
let me know if you have to miss a class. If you miss more than two, we will have a talk. The classroom is a relatively small space, so coming in late can create an unnecessary hubbub. Similarly, laptops are to be used only for class purposes – do not keep your email, Instagram, Facebook or other apps open. We will discuss Twitter use in class.

Finally, if you have a documented disability and wish to discuss academic accommodations, please contact me as soon as possible.

Give Us This Day Our Daily Education News

One indication of the growing crisis in higher education (and in education in general) is that many newspapers that used to have a regular education beat now publish infrequently on the topic. But (as the syllabus will indicate), there’s plenty of news to read. I’d like to begin each class with a brief summary of some of the week’s education news. The best places to keep up with it are:

The Chronicle of Higher Education (http://chronicle.com/section/Home/5). Many of its articles will be for subscribers only, but the college has a subscription, so you can get access with your oberlin.edu account via the library homepage.

Inside Higher Ed (https://www.insidehighered.com/) - whose content is still free and available to all.

Course Materials

Required readings are available either:

Online (click the link)
On Blackboard (organized by week)
On reserve (for required books only)
Some materials are also linked to eBooks available from OBIS

Please inform me if a link is broken or (if not available online) is not in Blackboard.

NOTE: Many weeks have “Further Bibliography” listed. These are not required or even recommended. They are there if you want to follow up on the topic at a later time.

Books Recommended for Purchase

These books have been ordered at the bookstore. You can buy/rent them there, find them on reserve in Mudd, order them through an online bookseller, or get them through OhioLINK. Those which show an active link are available as eBooks.


SYLLABUS

INTRODUCTION

Sept. 2: WHY I AM GOING (WHY I WENT) TO COLLEGE

To prepare for the first class, read William Deresiewicz, "The Neoliberal Arts: How College Sold its Soul to the Market," Harper's Magazine (September 2015). [NOTE: A pdf of the article is in Blackboard.]

Deresiewicz's claims are highly polemical: What is his argument? What do you find resonates with your own experience? What doesn't? What are the questions he raises that you think we should be examining?


HIGHER EDUCATION - WHAT IT WAS
As Clark Kerr reminds us, "The university started as a single community – a community of masters and students." From its original, medieval (Oxonian) notion – often still embodied in today's residential liberal arts colleges – it has expanded to what Cardinal Newman called "the high protecting power of all knowledge and science, of fact and principle, of inquiry and discovery, of experiment and speculation..." Knowledge, for Newman, was its own end. But that wasn't the end. Abraham Flexner argued that the heart of the "Modern University" was in its professional graduate schools. And Kerr himself talked of the "Multiversity," the communities of undergraduate and graduates students, of humanists, social scientists and scientists, of academic and nonacademic personnel. The college was also founded on principles of exclusion, and its past should be understood before we talk of its future.

Delbanco, College: What It Was, Is, and Could Be: Chs. 2-3 (36-101);


Further Bibliography:


**Higher Education - What It Is: Four Difficult Questions**

Sept. 16: WHO GETS IN? Admissions and the Role of Money, Race, Rankings in Selecting a Class

Who should attend college and who does attend? Should everyone have access to a liberal (rather than vocational) education, i.e. should we be teaching “Plato to plumbers” (http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/04/plato-to-plumbers/361373/) or only to a select few? To what extent does higher education have the responsibility, not to mention the possibility of correcting the inequities that now a defining characteristic of K-12 education? Who gets in and why? What role have college rankings, particularly the U.S. News ranking, played in the shaping of higher education? Should colleges attend to diversity considerations in regulating access? Should we have some institutions that are much more selective than others?

NOTE: In this week’s discussion we will largely side step many of the legal questions regarding affirmative action, particularly the Fisher case (Fisher v. Univ. of Texas (http://www.scotusblog.com/case-files/cases/fisher-v-university-of-texas-at-austin/)) due to be re-heard by the Supreme Court in 2015-16.


A Tiny Bit of Background: Some Aspects of a K-12 Education:


Ta-Nehisi Coates, "If I Were a Black Kid...Advice for Students in Baltimore County and Cambridge, Massachusetts," (http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/06/if-i-were-a-black-kid/276655/) The Atlantic (June 7, 2013).


Selecting a Class at "Highly Selective" Colleges:


**Further Bibliography:**

Chronicle of Higher Education, “Student Diversity at 4,725 Institutions”: Table (http://chronicle.com/article/Student-Diversity-at-4725/149537?cid=megamenu) showing race, ethnicity, and gender of 20,642,572 students enrolled at 4,725 colleges and universities (Fall 2012)


We will focus on two different questions this week, and reading will be divided up accordingly. The first question will examine the history and current shape of the liberal arts curriculum: Should the curriculum focus on developing citizens with powerful deliberative capacities and the inclination to use them for the public good? Should it challenge the opinions and religious and cultural assumptions students bring with them? Should it shape students’ views about what is valuable in life and valuable to learn, or should it respond to their preferences and allow them to shape their own values? Should education be the transmission of knowledge or the fostering of inquiry and reasoning skills that are conducive to the development of autonomy (i.e., education as conservative vs. progressive)?

The second question is much in the news although it has a long past: Should education be “liberal” or vocational? The debate between Booker T. Washington, who argued that Blacks should be given primarily vocational instruction, and W.E. B. DuBois, who believed that the purpose of an education was not to “make a man a carpenter but to make a carpenter a man,” is well known... but it certainly didn’t end at the turn of the 20th century. Governors Scott Walker of Wisconsin and Rick Scott of Florida recently made news by arguing, respectively, that the purpose of the public university system was to meet “state workforce needs,” (http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/scott-walkers-uw-mission-rewrite-could-end-the-wisconsin-idea-b99439020z1-290797681.html) and that the state shouldn’t be funding degrees in anthropology since, “If I’m going to take money from a citizen to put into education then I’m going to take that money to create jobs.” (https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/10/12/florida_governor_challenges_idea_of_non_stem_degrees) Senator Marco Rubio, in arguing that more students should go into vocational education, stressed (http://wfcourier.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/rubio-calls-for-modernized-economy-higher-education/article_9df043e2-e0b9-5cef-ac78-fd80e70e68cf.html) that “the country cannot keep graduating people with degrees that don’t lead to jobs...So, you can decide if it’s worth borrowing $50,000 to major in Greek philosophy,” Rubio said. “Because after all, the market for Greek philosophers has been very tight for 2,000 years.”

But, as a recent survey of college and university presidents conducted by the Chronicle of Higher Education underscored, many more are thinking about the “job-training” aspects of a liberal education than in previous years. Can we argue that the values of a liberal education for everyone remain as valid now as they were to Plato?

**GROUP 1: Shaping a Curriculum**

**Some Background:**


Contemporary Practice:


GROUP 2: Liberal or Vocational Education


Chronicle of Higher Education, "What Presidents Think About Future," July 2015: p. 14, Figure 8; p. 16, Figure 10; p. 17, Figure 11; p. 18, Figure 12; p. 19, Figure 13.


Sept. 30: WHY DOES IT COST SO MUCH? Is Higher Education Financially Sustainable?

A large part of the public discussion of higher education has been focused on the issue of finances and the increase of tuition. For public institutions, this has been driven by the persistent decline in state financing (http://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/Post-Launch-Images/2015/06/Chartbook-final-graphics/fig3.jpg?la=en). For many private institutions, critics have placed the blame on a variety of factors from “climbing walls” and athletics to the demand of attracting “good” students in an increasingly competitive environment. What is certain is that as a college degree (and an advanced degree) have become an absolute necessity for future economic success, students and their parents are forced to take on increasing debt loads. Rather than focusing on “bending the cost curve,” we will examine the set of factors that are driving costs in higher education…and their consequences.


Further Bibliography:


Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).


Remember the "Tressie-test"? I raise it because the familiar elephant in the room is the nature of the neoliberalism which has restructured the U.S. economy over the past 40 years. Higher education is hardly immune from the impact of privatization and corporatization. The questions that are raised are many. The questions that are raised are in many ways about whether education will continue to be seen as a public good... or if those days are over. This week we'll examine both the impact of neoliberalism and what increasing inequality means for higher education. We'll take up other aspects of this question, particularly student debt, next week and issues of governance on October 28.

**Group 1: The Neoliberal Turn**


Richie Zweigenhaft, "Is This Curriculum for Sale?"
Group 2: Is Higher Education a Public Good?

Suzanne Mettler, Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream (NY: Basic Books, 2014), Chapters 3-6 (pp. 87-187).


Further Bibliography:

David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (NY: Oxford, 2005)


Lawrence C. Soley, Leasing the Ivory Tower: The Corporate Takeover of Academia (Boston: South End Press, 1995).


Joe Berry, Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts to Change Higher Education (Monthly Review Press, 2005),

Coalition on the Academic Workforce (http://www.academicworkforce.org/)

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**Higher Education - Where is it Going? Four Challenges**

Oct. 14: WILL HIGHER EDUCATION BE AN ENGINE OF INEQUALITY? The Student Debt Problem

Many of the issues we have already covered pertain to the question of whether higher education can return to a historic mission of providing a singular mechanism for social mobility. What we want to consider here is whether, as many scholars have charged, higher education has become a means of solidifying inequality. Fundamental to this question is the issue of student debt.


Richard Fry and Andrea Caumont, "5 Key Findings About Student Debt," (http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/05/14/5-key-findings-about-student-debt/) Pew Research Center, May 14, 2014.


**Optional: Some Candidates’ Plans:**

Further Bibliography and Resources:

Project of Student Debt (http://ticas.org/posd/map-state-data#) (Institute for College Access and Success)


Oct. 21: Fall Break

Oct. 28: WHO WILL RULE THE UNIVERSITY? "Disruption" and Challenges to Traditional Governance Structures In Higher Education

issues of governance and the university not only deal with more “traditional” questions of academic freedom and the role of the faculty in determining curricular decisions (often tied into the question of tenure and its future), but shifting issues of the impact of outside forces on universities (particularly for public institutions), the changing nature of the presidency, and the charge that faculty governance holds back needed changes.


Further Bibliography:


Coalition on the Academic Workforce (http://www.academicworkforce.org/)
The question of "free" vs. "regulated" speech has become increasingly important over the past few years. It has moved from a discussion of establishing speech "rules" for campuses that were designed to protect student learners from hate speech to conversations about who should be invited or permitted to speak on campus to contemporary questions of the threats to learning that disturbing or discomforting ideas can pose. There is little question that the campus speech "question" has been shaped by (among others) the greater awareness of such issues as sexual violence and harassment as well as the omnipresence of internet culture. A second "front" in this war is over the question of academic freedom vs. "civility" and whether administrations are establishing new standards of "behavior" to shape the faculty.

Note: Readings within each of the sections will be divided up.

**Are Students "Hiding from Scary Ideas"?**


**Microaggression and Hate Speech on Campus:**


Further Bibliography:


Nov. 11: PREPARATION OR PRACTICE? Does Higher Education Prepare Students for Democratic Citizenship or Will It Be a Site Where Democracy Is Practiced?

It has long been argued that an educated citizenry is essential for democracy, but such an understanding embodies the notion that the purpose of an education is for more than job preparation. John Dewey argued in Democracy and Education (1916) that, in its broadest sense, education is the means of the "social continuity of life." Since then, many progressive educators have pointed out the essential role and responsibility that educators (and the education they provide) have in not just democracy but justice. The central role of teachers in the preparation for and practice of democracy is perhaps underscored by the fact that, although teachers have few resources to change the direction of social life, any evidence of social crisis is quickly deposited at the feet of teachers and the curriculum. Is education a public good? Should schools, as Dewey argued, be more than preparation for life but life itself? Should we practice what we preach?

John Dewey, Democracy and Education (https://obis.oberlin.edu/search~S4/?tDemocracy+and+Education/tdemocracy+and+education/1%2C4%2C7%2C2B/frameset&FF=tdemocracy+and+education+an+introduction+to+the+philosophy+of+democracy+and+education+indexsort=-.) (Simon & Brown, 2011), Ch. 6 (Education as Conservative and Progressive) and 7 (The Democratic Conception in Education), p. 41-56.


Jennifer S. Simpson, Longing for Justice: Higher Education and Democracy's Agenda (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014): Chapters 1, 2, 7 (3-66; 201-230)


Technology, some have argued, will inevitably “disrupt” higher education to the same extent that it has disrupted industries such as auto making and journalism. This is seen as positive in the sense that it will allow more people access to higher education at a lower (or no) cost. This is the assumption behind MOOCs – Massive Open Online Courses. To the extent that MOOCs are carefully prepared and designed, they can be quite good, although initial results in terms of completion and quality across MOOCs is not promising. Nevertheless, technology has been cast as the one force that can resolve the challenges of access, costs, and faculty inflexibility, among others. Here we will examine the ways that technology has and can change the verities of higher education: both for the good and for the not-so-good.


Further Bibliography:

Jeffrey R. Young, "College à la Carte (http://m.chronicle.com/article/College-la-carte-The/228307): The 'unbundling' of higher


Nov. 25: No Class (Thanksgiving)

Dec. 2: INSTRUCTIVISM, CONSTRUCTIVISM, CONNECTIVISM: Technology and Pedagogy

At the end of the day, there are classes that suck in a traditional face-to-face delivery mode and classes that suck when delivered by MOOC. It’s not about the technology, it’s about the learning. At the same time, technology has allowed for much more robust learning environments than previously possible. This week we’ll examine some examples of ways that technology, by allowing us to ignore space and time constraints and by connecting learners far beyond the class, can improve learning.


Jim Grooms (Instructional Technologist at Mary Washington University): Projects (http://jimgroom.net /projects/).


Further Bibliography:

Dave Cormier: Rhizomatic Learning (http://rhizomatic.net/).
Bonnie Stewart: The Theoryblog (http://theory.cribchronicles.com/).
Audrey Watters: Hack Education (http://hackeducation.com/)
Kentaro Toyama, Geek Heresies (NY: Public Affairs), 2015.

Des. 9: HAS THE NEW AMERICAN UNIVERSITY ALREADY BEEN INVENTED? Lots of examples out there - where do you think it should go?

Based on new technological models, a number of institutions of higher education have promised to deliver the “new American university.” Liberal arts colleges are also deeply involved in “re-inventing” themselves. How does it look to you?

Note: Readings are divided up among groups.

Group 1: The Reinvented University


Amanda Ripley, "The Upwardly Mobile Barista: Starbucks and Arizona State University are collaborating to help café workers get college degrees. Is this a model for helping more Americans reach the middle class?" (http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/05/the-upwardly-mobile-barista/389513/) The Atlantic (May 2015).


**Group 2: Reinvented Universities and Community Colleges**


**Group 3: The Reinvented Liberal Arts College**


Final Project: Due at 11:00 AM on Sunday, December 20. No late papers without an official incomplete.

Main image: Oberlin College Archives: Oberlin's BA graduates of 1855