



# Higher Education Divided

National Expectations and  
the Bifurcation of Purpose and  
National Identity, 1946–2016

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*Dedicated to my family—  
Matthew, Audrey, Sabrina, Natalie, and Matthew, Jr.*

## PREFACE

The purpose of higher education in the United States, from the Colonial Era to present-day, has ultimately been defined as a means to educate the public, to produce knowledge to be shared with the public, and to reinforce the democratic ideals the nation was founded upon. Although this purpose has not completely changed, the interpretation of this purpose has been manipulated over the course of US history. Democracy is still the ideal and the United States is still thriving and basking in the glory of the success of the great American experiment. However, the ideal and the reality are not congruent. American society is still sharply divided across class lines, and higher education's tertiary institutions are a reflection of deeply rooted socio-economic classes that reveal inequality in the United States.

Tertiary institutions of higher education do have varied purposes with the ultimate goal still being reinforcing democratic idealism. This is a noble goal, and each college and university serves this call to the best of institutional capability. The challenge that arises is in the varied experience of members of the classist socio-economic structure in American society—members of each socio-economic class experience democratic idealism differently, and thus understand American national identity based on their status, and are limited to the appropriate institution type for educational attainment, the key to the American Dream.

Ultimately, in 2020, institutions of higher education are challenged to educate more of the nation's youth and are charged to not only support the nation-state as superior to others, but it is also expected to fill the gaps where the national system has failed—socially, politically, and

economically. This is an incredible burden on a social institution that lacks federal support and proper funding. Yet, this is the reality for higher education in the twenty-first century. In this daunting reality with seemingly insurmountable charges, there is opportunity. Higher education has an opportunity to turn its attention to the people of the United States, to focus on the self-imposed duties to increase access, teach to engage, to create to support all members of society, and to keep the democratic purpose not only alive but bring the full breadth and depth of American society into the folds of the American ideal. It is our duty as researchers, practitioners, policy-makers, and faculty to do our part to support our home institutions in challenging powers that seek to further bifurcate institutions, their graduates, and thus, society.

It is important to note that this work was completed during the Spring of 2020, in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The pandemic has created a very difficult situation—from loss of life, public health challenges, economic decline, fear of infections, inability to maintain jobs, and divisive politics. The United States is in uncharted territory and it will take all of the strength and might of the foundational institutions to support and bring the nation out of this tragedy. Higher education has already delved into the crisis head-on. This has been either on a national scale through research and medical service, creation of protective measures, and on state, local, and individual levels by simply responding as necessary to the crisis as it unfolded. Students were evacuated from campuses for their safety and classes transitioned to non-traditional means of delivery.

The challenge ahead for higher education cannot be ascertained at this moment; however, it is safe to surmise that institutions of higher education will have to adapt to serve students, to continue to meet national needs, and to support their communities. With an unknown end to the pandemic, institutions may have to continue to adapt teaching and learning strategies, and curricula will certainly be revised to include an attempt to understand the implications of the pandemic. What all of this will look like for colleges and universities is unknown. It is an uncertain future, complicated by profound economic challenges resulting from the pandemic. Higher education is one of the nation's most prized institutions. Colleges and universities have adapted and supported the nation through Revolution, Civil War, industrialization, political corruption and upheaval, the 1918 pandemic, two World Wars, the Depression, the Cold War, the Space Race, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, medical innovations, technological advances, multiple armed conflicts in the

Middle East, terrorism, and many, many other formidable opponents. Higher education will undoubtedly be expected to help the United States, its democratic ideal, and its people restore the nation to its prosperous position. There are still many factors that will influence what role higher education can fulfill—the pandemic is not over, there is a presidential election in a few months, and job loss continues—but as in the past, American colleges and universities will meet the needs of the public it is contractually obligated to serve.

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction: Establishing National Identity and the Purpose of Higher Education in the United States

Higher education and its various institutional configurations in the United States has grown and changed alongside social, economic, political, and cultural demands, resulting in the creation of varied institution types that represent specific national agendas and the greater historical context. From 1946 to 2016 higher education was called to educate more citizens to save democracy, train workers to adapt to changing market demands, create commodities demanded by a knowledge-based economy, and prepare future leaders in an interconnected, increasingly globalized, world community (Palmadessa, 2017b). The historical limits of this study are vital to the primary focus of this study: 1946 represents the year the Truman Commission issued its report, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, in which the presidential agenda to increase access to higher education to save American idealism included an increase in the number of community colleges to meet the influx of students; 2016 marks the final year of President Obama's administration. The research question I seek to answer in this study is, from 1946 to 2016, how do presidential agendas' varied expectations of four- and two-year public institutions reflect a greater social disparity among graduates of the respective institution types?

Policy initiatives and presidential agendas from 1946 to 2016 that promote access to higher education are ultimately positive changes and goals. However, in these agendas and initiatives, there is a reproduction of ideological practices that ultimately perpetuate inequality and the tertiary structure of American higher education. The prescribed variations of their

role in the United States as defined by presidential agendas and initiatives (Palmadessa, 2017b) represent that inequality. To understand how presidential administrations and initiatives call upon tertiary higher education to respond to national needs differently based upon their position in the hierarchy of institutions and thus reproduce social inequality, I approach the analysis of presidential speeches and initiatives from a human capitalist, economic competition, and conflict lens, and critically analyze the text using methods of critical discourse analysis (CDA).

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Higher education's purpose and relationship to the nation-state has changed and developed over the course of the institution's history, particularly in relation to developments in the nation as a whole (Palmadessa, 2017b). As states formed after the Revolution, universities were formed to teach patriots to be leaders (Geiger, 2005). During the formative years of the nineteenth century, the United States expanded and consolidated power, just as the universities were expanded and consolidated (Duryea, 2000). With the dawn of the Second Industrial Revolution after the Civil War, land-grant colleges were founded; at the turn of the twentieth century to the period of the Great War, curriculums were vocationalized to support industrial and agricultural growth in the United States. Although these developments and transformations in both American society and higher education profoundly impacted the future of higher education, none were as great as those following the Second World War (Geiger, 2005).

*Universities in Twentieth-Century America* The most tumultuous period in higher education history was the period following the Second World War to the 1970s. There were unprecedented demands for enrollment (Geiger, 2005) as well as great debate over the proper direction of higher education: to maintain an academic haven, become a tool for economic growth, or to be a means for social transformation (Newson & Buchbinder, 1988; Schugurensky, 2006). After the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill) passed, enrollment surged and institutions adapted to meet the demand for not simply physical space but programs that the students desired. These programs ultimately benefitted the post-War nation, supporting many technological advancements made during the war and bringing the social issues that emerged to the forefront of concern. In the 1950s, however, there was a slight decline in enrollment, only to be