CARRIE B. KISKER ARTHUR M. COHEN

THE SHAPING OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

EMERGENCE AND GROWTH OF THE CONTEMPORARY SYSTEM

THIRD EDITION

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For Harry Kisker, who first put a history of higher education into my hands, and who set an example—as an educator, spouse, and parent—to which I will always aspire.

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Preface

This book had its origins in a History of Higher Education course that my co-author, colleague, mentor, and friend, Arthur M. Cohen, taught for many years in UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. As he related, and as I saw the year I was his teaching assistant, few of the students who enrolled each term had much prior knowledge of American history, and fewer still were aware of the roots of the collegiate tradition in our country. As the course evolved, it became apparent that a useful text would need to both encompass the entire scope of American higher education—from the Colonial Era to the present day—and set the developing colleges in the context of their times, all within the span of a 10-week quarter. Furthermore, the review of nearly 400 years of continuous expansion in enrollments, staff, curriculum, finance, and other aspects of the system had to be organized so that students and other readers could digest its component parts and come to understand how they influence one another. The matrix described in the Introduction to this volume has helped serve that purpose.

The Shaping of American Higher Education: Emergence and Growth of the Contemporary System was first published in 1998, and a second edition appeared in 2010. Both focused primarily on the Mass Higher Education Era (1945–1975) and the Consolidation Era (1976–1993), as most of the trends that had developed earlier either matured or transformed during these periods; the second edition also provided an early analysis of the Contemporary Era (then spanning the years between 1994 and 2009). While this third edition exhibits a few modifications in the system's history based on recent scholarship, its chief contribution is its synthesis

of the Contemporary Era, which now encompasses the turbulent years between 1994 and 2023. In addition, unlike the other major texts on the history of American higher education, this book gives appropriate consideration to the development and contributions of the institution in which 40% of undergraduates first enroll: community colleges. These open-access institutions have been an essential thread in the fabric of American education since the early 1900s yet receive little mention in other major histories of colleges and universities in the United States.

New in the Third Edition

A new edition of *The Shaping of American Higher Education* is warranted now, as several shifts in the system's functioning have occurred in the past three decades, along with numerous changes in public perception and support of America's colleges and universities. In particular:

- Like a snake biting its own tail, states and localities have continually disinvested in higher education and the institutions have responded by raising tuition and becoming increasingly entrepreneurial in their search for funds. Accordingly, the burden of paying for college has shifted ever more away from government and toward students, parents, corporations, and philanthropic donors. As a college degree has become viewed predominantly as a private good, the foundation on which the system was built and has been supported for nearly four centuries—the idea that higher education is essential for societal well-being—has begun to erode.
- Nearly all institutions have implemented equity-minded approaches to teaching, learning, and student

support and some have sought to alter longstanding structures and policies that have precluded social and economic mobility for racially marginalized groups. As a result, access, persistence, and completion rates improved across the board. However, a vitriolic backlash to the concept of structural racism, as well as recent rulings against affirmative action and legislation in some states to ban diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and practices, have (at a minimum) complicated institutional efforts to provide welcoming and inclusive learning environments and may ultimately thwart higher education's ability to provide equitable support for marginalized or minoritized learners.

- Along with the growing tendency to hire part-time and non-tenure-track faculty, frontal attacks on tenure and academic freedom in some states accelerated the trend toward faculty de-professionalization and now threaten institutional autonomy.
- Over the past several decades, demands that institutions be held accountable for their stewardship of public funds and the outcomes of their students multiplied, contributing to rising administrative costs and entire units dedicated to compliance and reporting, not to mention a wealth of data from which to cherry-pick numbers to critique the system.
- New pedagogical and technological approaches to teaching and learning were introduced, forcing a reckoning about the costs and purposes of higher education, as well as the skills and competencies that students need to succeed in the workforce and in a democratic society.

- The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated and laid bare what many in higher education have known for years: that unconsciously high numbers of students suffer from basic needs insecurities or mental health challenges. Institutional responses to providing new services or connecting students to resources in the community were publicly championed but often privately criticized as falling outside higher education's social role and responsibility.
- Reflecting (and sometimes feeding) high levels of political polarization and social fragmentation across the nation, student activism has reached a fervor not seen since the 1960s and early 1970s. America's colleges and universities are once again battlefields on which America's culture wars are fought, yet unlike in previous eras, now they are also the targets of ideologically inspired attacks by politicians or commentators. As a result, public distrust in institutions of higher education has reached an all-time high, threatening the perceived legitimacy of a system that has long been the envy of the world.

The era from 1994 through the present is thus one of the most fascinating and—for its supporters—disquieting periods in the history of American higher education. Yet the roots of each of these and other contemporary issues can be traced through previous eras, along with institutional responses and systemic adjustments. The system is pliant; it rarely moves quickly or abandons that which has come before, yet somehow shapeshifts to meet emerging societal pressures and needs. For this to continue, institutional leaders—faculty and administrators alike—must embody the *Sankofa* and look both to the future and to the past. They must identify innovative solutions to contemporary problems, yet

stand together to protect the great strengths of American higher education, including institutional autonomy, academic freedom, equal access, and equitable support.

It is my hope that this book provides college and university faculty, administrators, trustees, and students—as well as scholars, policymakers, and commentators—with a nuanced understanding of the trends and events that have shaped American higher education over the past 400 years and a renewed appreciation for the complexity and vital importance of our diverse and multipurpose system.

Acknowledgments

I have been blessed in life to have the support and love of several generations of family members and friends, including especially my husband, Sean, my exceptional children, Meredith and Grayson, my parents, Lucie and Rick Bourdon, and all my siblings and their spouses (Jackie and Clint Kisker, Hansell and Mac Woods, Allen and Lindsay Bourdon, Leland Bourdon and Megan Ash). But of all the intergenerational relationships I have been lucky enough to experience, the friendship, support, and love of my mentor, colleague, co-author, and friend Art Cohen has been perhaps the most surprising and—at least from a career perspective—monumental.

Art was four months shy of 50 years old when I was born, already well established as the grandfather of community college studies and a respected professor of higher education at UCLA. When I entered graduate school at age 25, he was three times my age and two years away from becoming emeritus. It was an unlikely friendship, but we recognized something in one another and for nearly 20 years Art advised me, encouraged me, debated with me, and eventually asked me to collaborate in the revision of his crown jewels: *The American Community College* and *The Shaping of American Higher Education*. Working with Art on the sixth and second editions, respectively, of these books taught me more than all my graduate courses put together; Art was a wealth of (sometimes esoteric) knowledge, and while I did not always agree with him, he taught me to listen, to hear, to reconsider, and then to formulate an iron-clad counterargument. Sometimes I even convinced him.

Art passed away in December 2020 at the age of 93, after months of COVID-induced separation in which I was able to visit him only once. Yet over the past 18 months, as I have written the

seventh edition of *The American Community College* and the third edition of this book, I have heard his voice in my head almost daily, and his presence has been constant, shining through in sentences that only he could write as well as those that we composed together. For this, and for all that came before, I am ever so thankful. This book is much like our relationship was: a joining of scholarly thoughts and ideas, an amalgamation of our training and lived experiences. The only difference is that in this edition, when our perspectives differed, I always got the final word.

Writing a book such as this—especially when your co-author is deceased—can be a lonely venture, but several people provided support and camaraderie. Lauren Kater offered exceptional research assistance. Drs. Mark D'Amico and Reed Scull, who have both taught *The Shaping of American Higher Education* for years, provided encouragement and useful feedback on the new Contemporary Era chapter. (Indeed, the idea of urging readers to begin with the final chapter originated with Dr. D'Amico.) Many more—especially those mentioned in the first paragraph—gave me the love, time, and carpool assistance I needed to finish this treatise on the past, present, and possible futures of American higher education. Thank you all.

Carrie B. Kisker
Los Angeles
September 2023

About the Authors

Carrie B. Kisker is president of Kisker Education Consulting in Los Angeles and managing director of the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC). She received her BA (1999) in psychology from Dartmouth College and her MA (2003) and PhD (2006) in higher education from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Drawing from her own and others' research, she regularly consults with college leaders on issues related to entrepreneurship and innovation, program and policy development, strategies for student equity, strategic planning and accountability, and civic learning and democratic engagement. Kisker is author of the sixth and seventh editions of *The American Community College* (2014, 2023), written with Arthur M. Cohen and Florence B. Brawer, *Creating Entrepreneurial Community Colleges, A Design Thinking Approach* (2021), and the second edition of *The Shaping of American Higher Education: Emergence and Growth of the Contemporary System* (2010) with Arthur M. Cohen.

Arthur M. Cohen (1927–2020) was professor of higher education at UCLA from 1964 until 2004. He received his BA (1949) and MA (1955) in history from the University of Miami and his PhD (1964) in higher education from The Florida State University. He was director of the ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges from 1966 to 2003, president of CSCC from 1974 to 2007, and longtime editor-in-chief of *New Directions for Community Colleges*. Over the course of his career, Cohen served on the editorial boards of numerous journals and wrote extensively about community colleges, including 21 books; more than 80 book chapters, journal articles, and essays in edited volumes; and untold numbers of conference papers, journalistic pieces, and research reports.

Introduction

A Framework for Studying the History of Higher Education

Reading the history of higher education teaches appreciation for the power of tradition. Practically every aspect of the contemporary system can be traced to the formation of universities in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and many to the colleges in the Colonial Era. Some aspects were present in the universities of medieval Europe. This great weight of history and tradition is one of the system's strengths, but the stability of form over nearly 400 years also ensures a rather slow pace of change. New ideas—no matter how laudable—must always contend with the conflicting mandates, needs, and priorities of administrators, faculty, students, and other stakeholders. And all institutional decision-making occurs within the context of changing societal norms and public expectations about the purposes, costs, and outcomes of higher education.

Understanding the history of colleges and universities in America is thus essential for those who would reform the contemporary system or institutions within it. Publications calling for completely revising governance, teaching, funding, or student support appear frequently. An industry of innovation is apparent. But the practices, policies, and pedagogical approaches that are most likely to be adopted and institutionalized are those that build on what has come before, anchor themselves in the historic missions and purposes of the institution, incorporate incentives for each stakeholder group, and otherwise leave intact anything that does not directly conflict with the new approach. Even the

most consequential event to have ever affected American higher education—the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath—did not result in fundamentally changed institutions: courses were moved online but remained part of the same programs, tied to the same institutional calendars and number of credit hours; student services personnel were asked to identify new ways to support learners at a distance, but the percentage of expenditures dedicated to student support did not increase commensurately.

Throughout its history the system has successfully resisted, co-opted, or absorbed—eventually changing but with the glacial majesty befitting a venerable structure. However, higher education has become more vulnerable to external forces over the last several decades. In particular, the slow but steady disinvestment in public institutions by states and localities, as well as fiscal repercussions stemming from the Great Recession of 2007–2009, have accelerated trends toward privatization and entrepreneurship. New governance players have exercised greater demands for accountability in both institutional actions and student outcomes. And intense media scrutiny of colleges and universities, driven in large part by the voracious demands of a 24/7 news cycle, clickbait headlines, rapidly rising tuition levels, and growing distrust of government and public institutions, has put higher education under a microscope. Public perception (whether it is rooted in fact or takes context into account) reigns supreme, and much institutional decision-making now takes place within a political arena.

In addition, colleges and universities have once again become flashpoints for conflict over changing American values. But unlike the student activism of the 1960s and 1970s, the social fragmentation and widespread distrust of *the other* that has thrust colleges and universities into the culture wars of the Contemporary Era threatens the perceived legitimacy of the system. And the emergence of new entry points to the workforce and different ways of "doing college" (Gaston and Van Noy, 2022, p. 28) threaten the necessity of a system designed around linear, sequential pathways.

For nearly 400 years, American colleges and universities have held a near-total monopoly on providing access to a better life; for the first time in history, prospective students may be turning the other way or at least delaying entry.

Thus, 25 years into the twenty-first century, higher education is faced with a decision; either it gathers its cloak of history and tradition around itself in an attempt to insulate against an onslaught of public accusations and demands, in the process feeding the perception that college is for some people and not for others, or it spreads its arms, ensuring transparency, inviting innovation, and enveloping new approaches and ideas alongside time-honored values and institutional mores. One choice leads to a society in which U.S. institutions of higher education were once the envy of the world; the other to a future where they still are. The challenge, however, lies in recommitting to that decision every day, in every corner of every college, even in the face of reduced funding and politically motivated attacks.

Fortunately, many of the most fraught issues in higher education today have been debated since the colleges began. What shall be taught? Who shall learn it? Who shall pay? And who gets to decide? Such questions are grounded in the stories of each institution and historical responses differ according to the societal context in which they were considered. Today's challenges are related to yesterday's practices, and tomorrow's decisions must be informed by an understanding of what has come before.

A Framework for Studying the History of Higher Education

The history of higher education is taught in most graduate programs that prepare faculty or administrators for positions in colleges or universities, and it is increasingly appealing to those seeking to understand how and why such institutions frequently become symbols of societal discord or settings for social activism. Most courses

and texts on the subject utilize a chronological approach; students and readers learn about colleges in the Colonial Era and then are led through the development of universities on into the present. Many also take a topical approach, pointing out changes in the number and types of institutions, students attending, working conditions for faculty, curriculum, patterns of governance, and public and private financing. These topics are often supplemented by subtopics of interest: the rise of women's colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), intercollegiate sports, training for the professions.

Within these topics, various key events are noted. The founding of certain types of institutions—state colleges, graduate and professional schools, and community colleges, for example—may be accorded separate sections. Legislation, including the Morrill Acts and the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (popularly known as the GI Bill), is given space along with important court decisions such as the Dartmouth College case, which protected institutional independence. The courses and texts also show how certain trends have been pervasive: greater access for students, a trend toward occupationally relevant curricula, secular governance, and state-level coordination of higher education.

This book's approach is to define trends and events chronologically under topical headings and within six major eras, and to detail interrelationships among them. Exhibit I.1 displays the framework for this book. While many readers will choose to start at the Colonial Era (Chapter 1) and trace the history of American higher education as it is presented chronologically, others may elect to begin at the Contemporary Era (Chapter 6)—the time period with which they are most familiar—and then go back in time to learn about various antecedents to the modern system. This edition has been revised to better facilitate such an approach. Still other readers may elect to take a deep dive into particular topics, skipping from era to era to understand how curriculum, governance, or finance, for example, has evolved over nearly four centuries. All approaches

are welcomed, and all six chapters conclude with several questions relating to trends and events associated with that era; these issues may serve as discussion topics in class or as starting points for student essays or dialogues.

As Exhibit I.1 shows, each of the topics illustrated has at least one major trend associated with it. Many of the tendencies have lengthy histories. The institutions have grown steadily larger and adopted more varied purposes and specialties. The trend for students has been in the direction of greater access; ever-increasing numbers of 18-year-olds and adults have matriculated. In recent years, attention to student equity has also come to the fore. In general, the faculty moved steadily toward professionalization, although this trend slowed and began showing distinct signs of reversal late in the twentieth century. Curriculum has become more directly related to workforce entry, as one occupational group after another began demanding additional years of schooling for its initiates. Throughout the first 350 years of American higher education, governance tended toward broader systems and a diminution of church-related control, but in the past three decades it has become increasingly decentralized and bureaucratized, with an ever-expanding number of governance actors demanding some level of accountability for student and institutional outcomes. Similarly, institutions became more and more dependent on public funds until the late twentieth century, when disinvestment in public institutions accelerated, the forces of privatization took hold, and colleges and universities were forced to broaden their search for support. Higher education's outcomes have been directed increasingly toward producing a skilled workforce, enabling people to move out of the social class into which they were born, and conducting scientific research that yields useful products and processes.

Not all topics show such distinct trends. The context varies as public perceptions reflect contemporary societal concerns. In general, the expectation that higher education will contribute to economic growth has found its way into the mainstream of public thought.

Exhibit I.1. Trends and events in American higher education.

Eras	I Colonial 1636-1789	II Emergent Nation 1790-1869	III University Transformation 1870-1944	IV Mass Higher Education 1945-1975	V Consolidation 1976-1993	VI Contemporary 1994-2023		
Topics							Overall Trends	Recent Adjustments
Societal Context							Expanding nation and economy; increased demands and expectations	Social fragmentation; distrust of government and public institutions
Institutions							Diverse; multipurpose	
Students							Access	Attention to equity
Faculty							Professionalization	Part-time, fungible labor
Curriculum and Instruction							Vocational and varied	
Governance and Administration							Secular; larger units	Decentralization; accountability
Finance							Public funding	Disinvestment; privatization; entrepreneurship
Outcomes							Individual mobility; societal and economic development; advancement of knowledge	

But the belief that it can or should ameliorate social problems or that access and equitable support for everyone should be pursued is affected by the short-term mood of the nation, its media, and its national administration.

The six eras reflect the evolution of the trends. In the Colonial Era, 1636–1789, the college form was established on Old World models. The Emergent Nation Era, 1790–1869, saw hundreds of small colleges established and the beginnings of access for different types of students. In the University Transformation Era, 1870–1944, the research university made its appearance, faculty professionalization took a leap forward, and the role of the state expanded. The Mass Higher Education Era, 1945–1975, was marked by greater size and number of institutions, augmented student access, and an increased reliance on federal funding. The Consolidation Era, 1976–1993, saw a flattening of growth in faculty professionalization, fewer institutional openings, and lower public per capita funding, matched by a greater reliance on state-level governance and increases in tuition and fees.

The era since 1994 is especially significant from a historical perspective, as it can be characterized by course changes in several of the trends evident throughout the first five eras. Namely, institutions became increasingly entrepreneurial in their search for funds as the historical reliance on public coffers shifted to corporations, individual donors, and students themselves. Faculty professionalization essentially came to a halt as colleges and universities employed ever greater numbers of part-time and non-tenure-track instructors and as legislators in some states mounted a frontal attack on tenure. Large, centralized public systems gave way to autonomous units and all institutions faced demands for greater accountability. A commitment to equity and to understanding the historic structures and policies that have precluded social and economic mobility for various racial and ethnic groups led to a widely publicized and at-times ugly backlash against the system, along with accusations that colleges and universities were anti-White. And the for-profit sector

grew astronomically (and then shrank considerably) as federal regulations either supported the expansion of or cracked down on the sector's abuses.

For several of the topics, major events cluster around the cleavage lines separating the eras. The year 1790 marked the beginning of a rapid expansion in number and type of institutions. The first state colleges and the first technical institutes were formed shortly thereafter, and the curriculum was opened well beyond the liberal arts to include a broader array of emphases. Within a few years on either side of 1869, the Morrill Land Grant Act was passed, graduate study was introduced along with the first HBCUs, and the first sizable philanthropic donations were given to establish universities. The year 1945 marked the opening of the Mass Higher Education Era because the GI Bill, the President's Commission on Higher Education report, and the formation of the National Science Foundation all occurred around then. In the years surrounding 1976, America finally disentangled itself from the conflict in Vietnam, the gap between rich and poor began widening for the first time since the 1950s, and the rate of college-going turned up once more. However, the Consolidation Era was notable less for major events than for planting the seeds of change that would alter or even reverse historical trends in the years that followed. The beginning of the Contemporary Era in 1994 coincided with intensified public preferences—both at home and abroad—for smaller government and greater reliance on individual responsibility and free markets. Even though these preferences have weakened as people sought government aid to stimulate the economy or provide pandemic relief, together with increased access, escalating costs, and greater emphasis on efficiency, they have led to adjustments in several of the trends that had undergirded the previous 350 years of higher education in America.

This book accords approximately equal emphasis to each of the eight topics. But the eras are treated differentially. Because other works have covered the years prior to World War II rather

completely, this book devotes only 30% of its total to those eras: 15% to the Colonial and Emergent Nation Eras together and 15% to the University Transformation Era. Roughly 20% each is devoted to the Mass Higher Education and Consolidation Eras, and about 30% of the book discusses the trends and events of the past 30 years.

The book is less a history than a synthesis. Several general history books from McMaster (1909) to Jordan and Litwack (1994) were consulted relative to the societal context for the period prior to 1945, but no attempt was made to uncover new information regarding debatable issues. A rich literature traces social reform; the background and effect of immigration policies; sources of the expansionist mentality in the nineteenth century; the oppression of Indigenous peoples; economic, social, and political issues related to slavery; and so on. As Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn (1997) documented, all have been reinterpreted repeatedly and are not repeated here. Controversies also persist over most major events within higher education: whether the Dartmouth College case of 1819 truly altered relations between states and private institutions; who was most influential in Congress's passing the Morrill Act of 1862; the extent to which the Civil War constrained the expansion of higher education in the South; the importance of various collegiate forms that were tried early in the twentieth century; which institutions deserve the lion's share of credit for preserving general education—to name only a few. Thorough treatments of each of these issues are available elsewhere.

This work traces higher education's first few centuries by synthesizing prevailing views without iterating the debates over motives, causes, or prime movers. It recounts the story of the early eras only to establish a background to the past 80 years for readers unfamiliar with the ways higher education developed. It centers on what was and what is, with a minimum of what ought to be. However, biases do appear throughout; absolute objectivity is an impossible conceit. In particular, we are unapologetic advocates for preserving

and protecting at all costs the major pillars upon which higher education has rested for nearly 400 years, including institutional autonomy, academic freedom and free expression, and a commitment to acting for the public good. To these mainstays we add the (relatively) newer concepts of equal access and equitable support as essential aspects of the system. Over four centuries, American higher education has experienced numerous trends in curriculum, pedagogy, financing, and other characteristics, but these principles provide a through line from 1636 to the present and protect the ideals upon which this country was founded; abandoning them would be nothing short of abdicating higher education's role in the preservation of our democracy.

Not all of postsecondary education is treated here. People always have learned outside the formal system; apprenticeships, ateliers, and academies have been prevalent throughout history. Today, industry-granted nondegree credentials, noncredit courses, proprietary schools, and virtual universities (both non- and for-profit) surround the core enterprise and involve millions of learners. But this work considers primarily the sector that the National Center for Education Statistics calls higher education and that most people mean when they say they went to college: public and private, nonprofit community colleges, four-year institutions, and universities.

This book is useful as an overview for faculty, staff, and students in all institutions of higher education who may benefit from knowledge of the broad currents affecting their work. It draws on numerous historical and contemporary sources; unless otherwise cited, most statistics on the institutions and their students, faculty, governance, finances, and outcomes are from the U.S. Department of Education's *Digest of Education Statistics* or similar, broadly available publications. Since the first edition of this book was published in 1998, it has been adopted widely in undergraduate and graduate education and social science courses, providing students with an understanding of the institution in which they are engaged and where they might spend their careers. This book