



Book Review — American Higher Education: A History

K.B. Melear
Florida State University

Lucas, Christopher J. (1994). *American higher education: A history*. New York: St. Martin's Press. pp. xxi + 375. ISBN 0-312-12945-9. 15.95

American Higher Education: A History, by Christopher J. Lucas is a historical narrative of the origins and development of the system of higher learning in place in contemporary America. It extends and updates earlier works in this area, and provides, as the author had hoped, "a more 'accessible' historical account, useful chiefly for nonspecialists and a more general readership . . ." but is nonetheless a thorough review of the historical underpinnings of American higher education. This work is recommended for students and professionals who seek a broad understanding of contemporary higher education and how it came to pass.

Christopher Lucas' book, *American Higher Education: A History*, traces higher education in America from its historical origins to its contemporary status, seeking to define the predicates of our system of higher learning and to delineate the course of events which determined the development of colleges and universities today. It is a critical review of an area previously explored in great detail by two classic works on the history of higher education in America, *The American College and University: A History* (1962) by Frederick Rudolph, and *Higher Education in Transition: A History of American Colleges and Universities, 1636-1976* (1976) by John Brubacher and Willis Rudy. The intention of Lucas's work, however, is clearly not to displace these prior histories, but to update them in a manner readable by anyone with an interest in the topic. In that regard, Lucas has presented, as the final portion of the work, a section on contemporary American higher education in an effort to bridge the gap between the other works and the current status of higher education. This historical narrative, therefore, serves as an extension of earlier works, and accomplishes the purposes delineated by the author to present ". . . a more 'accessible' historical account, useful chiefly for nonspecialists and a more

general readership than the audiences for which earlier studies were intended, though without sacrificing essential material." Lucas has produced a very smoothly written text which flows logically across time periods, avoiding the technical vernacular and discontinuous framework characterized by earlier works.

The book is dubiously titled, as the first of its four major sections (roughly one-third of the actual text of the book, as the final 58 pages are comprised of notes, sources, and indices), entitled "Historical Origins and Antecedents," explores higher education in antiquity. Although incongruent with the book's title, the discussion of the effects of ancient education is concomitant to the study of contemporary higher education. In this section, Lucas examines the role of higher learning and scholarship from a number of ancient perspectives, including a review of Mesopotamian and Egyptian scribal schooling and a thorough discourse on the influence of early Greek, Roman, and Christian influences on education, emphasizing the works of Plato and Aristotle. Lucas moves then into the medieval period in European history to examine the rise of the cathedral school and its transformation into the early *collegia* and its ultimate renaissance. The final portion of this section then

examines post-medieval European academe's contribution to the foundation of higher learning in colonial America to provide a conceptual framework for the predicates of the concept of modern higher education.

Part Two

"American Higher Education: The Formative Period," begins the exploration of our system of higher education by examining the college in existence in colonial and antebellum America. Although this work can in no way be considered an institutional history, the necessary progression of institutional origins is outlined in great detail in this section. The early institutions of higher learning in the original colonies were founded on the notion of piety and the universal curriculum was a clear reflection of this ideology. According to Lucas, the curriculum was less of an exploration of the available body of knowledge and more of a ". . . repository of knowledge to be absorbed and committed to memory, not criticized or questioned." The American Revolution, however, engendered dramatic changes in this philosophy, and students found themselves with a new voice, of which they made frequent use! The college movement began to boom, and the Jacksonian mentality of the antebellum years created a move toward practical vocationalism and away from liberal learning. The ensuing vigorous curricular debates are thoroughly discussed in this section. The pernicious effects of the Civil War on higher education are examined, and the evolution of the American college and university is developed through a discussion of the birth of the land-grant college, institutions of higher learning for women and black students, and the rise of the elective curricula and graduate education.

Part Three

"American Higher Education: Maturation and Development," examines the tumultuous changes which took place throughout the course of the twentieth century and their effects on American higher education. Colleges and universities were no longer seeking leadership from clergymen—rather, they desired a president with a penchant for business and fundraising to help satisfy the needs of the new areas of research and institutional expansion. Particular attention is given to changes in the nature of student life, as universities became ". . . more impersonal, more permissive, less directly engaged in student supervision." Indeed, a clearly outstanding difference between institutions of higher learning in this time period compared to their predecessors was size—the twentieth century institution was larger and more focused on graduate education and inquiry, an influence of the German university model. These larger and more diverse schools of higher learning saw many changes take place in the world of academe as professors sought the idea of "academic freedom", students were admitted based upon entrance examination scores, and community colleges began to play a significant role as providers of students

who sought a varied curricula. Lucas' treatment of curricular changes throughout the course of the development of higher education in America provides the reader with a foundation for a basic understanding of the social and political influences on the prescribed curriculum over time. Further study of the curriculum in America should be directed to Frederick Rudolph's (1977) *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636*. The final chapter of this section focuses on post-World War II higher learning in America, and emphasizes the effect of growing government involvement in higher education, most particularly with regard to the dramatic increases in enrollments and the changed face of the student population brought about by the G.I. Bill. Lucas then brings us into contemporary America as he traces the changing role of minorities and women in higher education, and paints a vivid portrait of student life in the tempest of the 1960's and 1970's.

Part Four

"Contemporary Challenges and Issues," chronicles the issues facing American higher education today, and Lucas takes care to present current topics without inflecting his opinions or interpretation by attempting to examine arguments made from each viewpoint represented. He presents us with the predicating arguments surrounding such issues such as multiculturalism and "political correctness" and the influence of the ideas on American higher education, the fragmentation of the curriculum and the related rise in vocationalism, and the dreaded "publish or perish" doctrine faced by many faculty members. The final chapter of the book brings us full circle by integrating a historical context into Lucas' assessment of the condition of higher education today in an attempt to explain where higher education stands today and the events which shaped the course of its arrival.

In an intelligent society, we must learn from the triumphs and failures of the past. It is therefore necessary to maintain a working knowledge of bygone events in order to understand our current condition. Christopher Lucas has provided us with a means of assessing the colorful history of higher education in America so that we may draw our own conclusions regarding our current status and direction for the future. Lucas' book is central to the study of higher education for just that reason: it is a concisely written text, devoid of technical verbiage and detail, which opens a window on the past to help us shape our vision for the future. He has achieved his stated goal of creating a work which satisfies the need to develop a sense of context, a ". . . setting within which both continuities and essential discontinuities with the past may be examined fruitfully." Lucas' book, for this reason, would serve as an excellent complement to the library of anyone interested in a broad overview of the history and examination of American higher education.

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1999 Article Citation

Melear, K. B. (1999, September 8). Book Review — American higher education: A history. *Current Issues in Education* [On-line], 2(4). Available: <http://cie.ed.asu.edu/volume2/number4/>.

Author Notes

K.B. Melear is a doctoral student in Higher Education at Florida State University. His research interests include the history of American higher education, with particular regard to the history of higher education in the South, the influences of politics and policy on institutions of higher learning, and leadership studies. He holds a Bachelor and Master of Accountancy from the University of Mississippi. K.B. Melear can be reached via e-mail at KMelear@AOL.com.

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2011 Article Citation

Melear, K. B. (2011). Book Review — American higher education: A history. *Current Issues in Education*, 2(4). Retrieved from <http://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/828>



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