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History, Historiography, and the Appraisal of University Records

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Rookie university archivists are ill-prepared for the responsibilities entailed in the management of an academic archives. First, there is the unique institutional setting. The unusual and varied systems of university governance make strict adherence to the paradigms for archival arrangement and description impractical at times. Second, and more vexing, is the fact that few college and university archivists are intellectually prepared. Unless the archivist is a devoted alumnus, he or she must first study the institution’s history, mythology, and cultural traditions. But what of the larger academic world? Unfortunately, most archivists know little about the development of American higher education even when they have spent years in college studying for a career in history.

A review of a reading list for any graduate level class on the literature of American history will indicate why this is so. If the archivist is lucky he will find one, maybe even two, titles related to education. Rarer still is the citation on higher education. Obviously, history professors consider academia a minor cultural force. But if there is a shortage of historians with an interest in things academic, there is no shortage of academic archives. It is somewhat ironic, given the dearth of written history related to
American higher education, that the largest institutional section of the Society of American Archivists should be the College & University (C & U) section.

Small as it may be, there is a recognizable body of work devoted to the history of higher education and C & U archivists need to be acquainted with its content. The fact that most of this history has been written in the past twenty years makes the need even greater. It might be overstating the case to suggest that academia has become a "hot" research topic, but the recent outburst of scholarly monographs and articles on a wide variety of academically related topics indicates something more than a passing intellectual fad.

This essay is a review of the themes and issues in the historical literature on higher education published since 1975. It is the culmination of several years of "catchup" study by the author, and it is offered to other C & U archivists who came to the profession with inadequate preparation in education history. Only monographs based (to some degree at least) on research in C & U archives or on the papers of leading academic figures are cited.

This study is also offered as an antidote to all the appraisal theories and documentation strategies which, taken collectively, have managed to complicate and mystify one of the simplest, although most stressful, tasks in the archival profession. It is not difficult to understand why archivists hesitate and fret over records appraisal; negative appraisal decisions are final and positive decisions that may burden a repository with records of marginal value. Archivists want to believe there is a formula that will validate the decisions they render. Yet, there is none.

In the final analysis, it is the user and not the archivist, who determines the value of a record. In so far as records of scholarly value are concerned it is the professional historian who will have the last say. However, the degree to which records appraisal (as
it is described in the professional literature) has become disjoined from any discussion of current historical research is dismaying. Moreover, records appraisal cannot be performed without regard to the history that surrounds the records. Information in a document can have meaning to the appraiser only when the appraiser has a knowledge of issues, people, and events that shaped that document's creation. Therefore, archivists can inform and substantiate their appraisal decisions with an adequate knowledge of the historical context in which the records were created and the historiographic context in which similar records were used, and that is the best they can do.

Of course, historians represent only a small fraction of a university archives's patronage. But those with an institutional claim to the archives have different records needs than the scholarly community. The records needed to support the institution's legal and fiscal responsibilities or to assist the university's public relations and endowment campaigns may or may not be of interest to an historian. This does not mean that archivists should spend inordinate amounts of time analyzing the needs of professional historians. Rather, archivists should, as Roy Turnbaugh suggests, "listen to the still, small, voice of
common sense" when appraising records,¹ better still if the voice that speaks is an informed one.

In the literature on higher education, three themes have dominated. One theme concerns the impact of science and the scientific method on the humanistic professions. In *Advocacy and Objectivity,*² published in 1975, Mary Furner traces the schism that emerged in the nineteenth century between amateur and professional social scientists and the demise of social advocacy within the academic community. *Advocacy and Objectivity* set the tone for much of the subsequent literature on this theme; the dichotomy between professional "objective" scholars and the biased, amateur, intellectuals tainted by metaphysics or political ideology is a characterization that appears frequently in later works. Furner's work on the social sciences has been supplemented by a number of monographs

¹ Roy C. Turnbaugh, "Appraising Public Records in an Ahistorical Culture," *American Archivist* 53 (Fall 1990): 564. Recent articles in the *American Archivist* indicate dissatisfaction with appraisal theory. See, for example, Terry Abraham's "Collection Policy or Documentation Strategy: Theory and Practice," *American Archivist* 54 (Winter 1991): 44-52. It is still too early to discern a consensus on this issue. John Roberts argues, as I do, that we should be better historians. ("Archival Theory: Myth or Banality" *American Archivist* 53 [Winter 1990]: 112.) Turnbaugh, on the other hand, stresses the archivist's relationship to the parent institution rather than the needs of specific user groups. A point of agreement among the antitheorists is that the literature on appraisal confuses more than it instructs.

focused on specific disciplines including law, philosophy, political science, sociology, and literary study.³

The second theme pertains to the emergence of the research university in the era of corporate capitalism. Historians who write on the period of the Gilded Age often contend that the rapid growth of professional schools is explained by capitalism's need for an expanded middle class of college educated technicians and managers. *The Culture of Professionalism*, by Burton Bledstein, was the first to explore this theme in depth and was one of the first of many works on the culture of the new middle class.⁴

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The first theme emphasizes research and scholarship; the second theme looks at the rationale for the modern university’s evolvement including changes in the curriculum. The third theme centers on the modern university’s service mission and the relationship of faculty to the world outside the college gates. The service mission originated in the wave of educational reform that propelled the university movement of the late 1800s. Many of the new professional scholars were motivated by the belief that learned men and women could effect social change, and a few were involved in social movements of the time. However, this populist spirit was curbed by the need to placate conservative patrons of higher education as well as by demands within the professions for objectivity. Eventually, contracted research with state and corporate agencies and extension education became the means by which the university fulfilled its service mission.5

The thematic breadth of the recent literature is more than matched by its topical diversity. Whereas the earlier literature consisted of institutional histories and general treatises on higher education’s evolution, contemporary historians have deconstructed the academy into an array of issues and topics.

5 The best and most complete expression of this theme can be found in Carol S. Gruber, Mars and Minerva: World War I and the Uses of Higher Learning in America (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1975). Furner also deals extensively with this theme. Their works and the volume by Bledstein were published within a year of each other. These three titles would be included in any core reading list on the history of higher education as would Laurence R. Veysey’s The Emergence of the American University (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965) and Frederick Rudolph’s The American College and University: A History (New York: Knopf, 1962) from the earlier literature.
Today, there are works on gender issues, on academic freedom (or the lack thereof), on the ideological motivations of faculty, on admissions policies and discrimination, on student political movements, and, finally, on student life in general.


7 Ellen W. Schrecker, No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism & the Universities (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). See also Gruber for a good discussion of how the concept of academic freedom was shaped at the turn of the century.

8 David M. Oshinsky, Richard P. McCormick, and Daniel Horn, The Case of the Nazi Professor (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988); Robin W. Winks, Cloak & Gown: Scholars in the Secret War, 1939-1961 (New York: Morrow, 1987); Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Peter J. Kuznick, Beyond the Laboratory: Scientists as Political Activists in 1930s America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). The notion that university professors are, or ever were, free of political or social bias has been finally laid to rest.


One topic is conspicuous by its absence from the literature. While works on extracurricular activities abound, works related to curriculum are sparse in number. One exception is general education which, as one historian notes, becomes a matter of great concern among educationalists about "every twenty years or so." In a broad sense, the education of young adults and their final intellectual preparation for adulthood has aroused some interest, but there has been little discussion on the actual content of college curriculum.

Perhaps the most significant historiographic development of the last fifteen years has been the transformation and growth of cultural history. So far, the impact of cultural history on the study of higher education has been limited, but in other subject areas cultural interpretations have significantly influenced the historical consensus.

Of course, cultural history is not new. For years, though, it was confined to the study of Western Civilization's artistic, intellectual, and literary product. In the late 1960s, cultural

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12 Page Smith, Killing the Spirit (New York: Viking, 1990): 141. Wechlser does an excellent job of connecting the general education movement of the 1920s to the admission of non-WASP students. See also Graff for his observations on an earlier "canon war." It should be noted that, once again, general education has become a major controversy. The current interest in the literary canon and the content of general education may provide an incentive to reexamine previous attempts to improve undergraduate education.
historians extended their research into the forms of leisure, art, and domestic life identified with the middle and lower classes. This trend coincided with the growing influence of the Annales School and the rise of the new social history and, in time, the distinction between social and cultural history eroded. Gradually cultural historians began to advance hypotheses in fields such as labor and business history, ethnic and immigration history, and even diplomatic history.

As cultural historians expanded their enquiries into all forms of non-intuitive behavior, including the everyday rituals of the work place and home, they also began to explore a wider range of documentary sources. Increasingly, cultural historians are identified as much by the sources they use as by the subjects of their research. A variety of often unconventional sources are utilized. Visual and textual depictions of social ritual and pageantry are important sources for the cultural historian. Thomas Schlereth, a pioneer in the field of material history, refers to himself as "a cultural historian increasingly intrigued with the historicity of things."\(^1^3\) Any of the myriad products of a culture, such as buildings, furniture, costume, art, or machinery might be studied by today’s cultural historian.

A popular topic in North American cultural history is the *embourgeoisement* of the masses in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Cultural historians are intrigued with the expressions of middle class values and sentiments. Did the new middle class of managers and technicians embrace the culture of the old urban bourgeoisie, did they modify the cultural norms of their rural and artisan ancestors, or did they give rise to something new? As a training ground for many of the new

professionals, the modern college was a factor in shaping middle class ideology. Since then, college life has become a rite of passage for middle class youth. Thus, it is not surprising that historians have been drawn to the collegiate experience as a representation of American mainstream culture.¹⁴

The term cultural text is used as a generic label for the documentary sources employed by cultural historians. As the use and acceptance of cultural text grows, archivists should explore the possible effects that the new scholarship will have on records appraisal. The impact of cultural history on collecting strategies will vary from archives to archives; those that collect print materials and image records will give greater attention to this matter than those who do not. The effect on C & U archives should be substantial since they have traditionally been more liberal in their collecting, often playing the additional roles of institutional library and museum.

The impact of cultural history on all aspects of archives management needs to be assessed. At the University of Florida Archives greater attention has been given recently to its image collection in terms of what is collected and how finding aids are structured. More consideration has also been given to campus ephemera and realia, but the print collection has been neglected over the years. The University of Florida Archives is a repository for all university publications but is only minimally involved in

¹⁴ Helen Horowitz and Lynn Gordon have been the principal cultural interpreters of the American college. It is no coincidence that both have written on the experiences of women students. Studies of the "women’s sphere" in a male-dominated world have relied heavily on cultural texts. Typical sources for both authors include student literary magazines, photographic and textual depictions of student activities, drama scripts written by students, yearbooks, and campus building plans.
their acquisition, appraisal, or cataloging. However, there is a growing awareness of the print collection’s research potential.

In many ways, the new cultural history is an extension of the now not-so-new social history, and the lines of demarcation between the two have diminished. As a means of documenting the history of people who do not leave an abundance of written record, social historians sought other forms of historical evidence. Quantitative analysis, such as the creation of biographical profiles for different social groups and occupations (prosopography), is another alternative to traditional methodology. However, research in the history of higher education has never relied on a mass of hard facts and statistics. Instead, the written history of higher learning is the history of ideas, movements, and youth.

The link between social and cultural history is evident in the recent interest in sports history. As institutions, professional and collegiate sports reveal much about racial and class relationships in America. As ritual, sports can explain much about mass psychology and the morality of different social classes. Sports history has had a popular following for many years, but scholarly interest in sports is relatively recent. The appearance of *The Journal of Sports History* in 1974 and its subsequent success demonstrated the subject’s credibility within academic circles. However, the monograph literature has been limited largely to professional sports and general works on sports; few titles related specifically to collegiate sports have appeared.\(^\text{15}\) To date, the

study of collegiate sports has centered on three topics: scandals, professionalism vs. amateurism, and racial integration. But, the college sports culture has been barely touched, and more titles and topics are surely forthcoming.

Southern universities figure prominently in collegiate sports history. In general, though, historians of higher education have not included southern institutions in their work. This is not unusual; historians who write on topics of national scope will often avoid discussion of the South because of the complications imposed by the issues slavery and racial segregation. As a consequence, separate subfields related to southern labor, southern politics, southern women, etc., have arisen. Oddly, however, the history of higher education has not produced an equivalent subfield.

There is a distinct chronological bias in the literature as well. Interest in colonial and early republican colleges has always been limited, but a number of journal articles and the occasional monograph for these time periods continue to be produced. Most of the literature has centered on the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. Significant interest in the post-Progressive Era college has not been evident however—a surprising phenomenon considering the rapid growth of higher education that occurred after both world wars.

A plausible explanation for this bias is that we still await the denouement of trends that began during World War I. Enroll-

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ments skyrocket, administrative bureaucracies expand, and academic programs multiply, but the fundamental missions of the modern university, as well as the university's general governance, remain largely unchanged. Fortunately, the academic and administrative malaise of the past seventy years has been accompanied by periods of student activism, changes in the class, gender, and ethnic composition of the student bodies, the growth of faculty unions, and the end of *in loco parentis*. The response of universities to social transformations in the student and faculty bodies may prove to be the most valuable collecting areas of more recent years.

Also missing from the literature is an explanation for the proliferation of state-supported schools in the twentieth century. The emergence of the research university may have been a response to the needs of industrial and financial capital, but it does not explain why the United States is the only industrialized nation that requires such a high proportion of its population to attend college.

Today, higher education is confronted with an existential crisis. Critics on the political right, left, center, and from within and without academia, have launched a general assault on the institutions of higher learning, particularly directed at large, research universities. ¹⁷ Charges that the curriculum has been

¹⁷ The intellectual climate on the American campus was the focus of a lively discussion at the 1991 SAA C & U Section meeting in Philadelphia. Discussion centered on conservative critics who have garnered most of the media attention. Conservatives argue that the literary canon has been debased by the introduction of works written from a multicultural perspective, that multiculturalism also threatens America's cultural and historical identity, and that liberal universities have shut out conservative viewpoints in order to maintain "political correctness." The most prominent spokesmen have been Allan
watered down coincide with complaints that universities expend far too much on research. Revelations of academic fraud and allegations that major universities misuse federal grants further erode the ivory tower image. Yet, the crisis in higher learning parallels crises in other institutions. The erosion of confidence in government, the media, the church, and the school is perhaps a prelude to a new era of social and pedagogical reform. If so, it will certainly motivate historians to investigate more closely the recent history of higher education.

Neither the prospects of future research nor the prodigious output of monographs on higher education in recent years indicate a need to increase records acquisition. On the contrary, one of the striking characteristics of the literature is the virtual absence of administrative documentation below the level of the president’s office. What can be gleaned from a thorough reading

David Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990); and Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: Free Press, 1991). But, there are critics of other political persuasions as well. The left argues that academic research is often dictated by the needs (and money) of business and government, is directed to a narrow professional audience, and is unintelligible to the larger public. Russell Jacoby (*The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* [New York: Basic Books, 1987]) suggests that the pursuit of academic careers has robbed America of an entire generation of socially engaged left intellectuals. Leftists may dominate a number of college departments, as Kimball and D’Souza maintain, but their impact on American culture will be minimal according to Jacoby. Page Smith’s *Killing the Spirit* attacks the publish or perish syndrome and the banality of today’s academic publications. Smith makes an impassioned plea for a return to quality education and an end to academic pedantry.
of the literature are the topics that are and are not being researched and, occasionally, new approaches to research in archives.

The continued interest in the histories of the disciplines is perhaps the clearest example. Each year several new titles are added to an already extensive list. The resurgence of intellectual history has been a factor in this development, but much of this literature has been the work of individuals in the disciplines rather than professional historians. This area of study will grow as the disciplines continue to evaluate their pasts.

The interest in student culture is also indicative of current research. However, the documentation of student life in C & U archives has often been unimaginatively traditional. Consequently, archivists often lament that students leave no substantive record of their time at college. But, as the writings of cultural historians Lynn Gordon and Helen Horowitz demonstrate, students leave abundant evidence of their campus life in the form of bad literary prose, dramatic improvisation, student election propaganda, football programs, and other ephemera.

The ideology of education will always be an important part of the literature. However, documenting the educational philosophy of the modern academic officer may not be as easy as it once was. The university presidents of the late nineteenth century publicly and privately expressed their concerns, visions, and prejudices. The records of today’s presidents tell much about their daily pursuit of endowments and their relationship to the university’s governing bodies. However, how do they feel about the current state of academia beyond its budgetary problems? How do they respond to the recent critiques leveled at higher education? It is not altogether clear that the files of presidents, provosts, and deans contain a serious dialogue on the ideology of higher learning.
Records appraisal is a very subjective process. The mind is guided through the process by what archivists know of the institutions they serve and by a knowledge of how records are utilized by different user groups. Historians are one such group. This essay should be viewed as a map of the intellectual terrain that constitutes the written history of higher learning in America. Its purpose is to guide C & U archivists who wish to explore the culture of academia in greater detail.

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