

Introduction

This book is a collection of pieces I wrote about American higher education, most of which came out after my 2017 book on the subject, *A Perfect Mess: The Unlikely Ascendancy of American Higher Education*. These essays provided an opportunity for me to elaborate on some of the themes I explored in the book and also to pick up new threads of the argument about the form, function, and evolution of the remarkable system of higher education that arose in the U.S. It made sense to pull them together into a single volume, to make them more accessible to readers.

The heart of the story can be found in the title of the first chapter in this volume, which is about how this is “a system without a plan.” America never had a figure like Wilhelm von Humboldt to map out a coherent vision for a structure of higher education. Indeed, only a madman would have planned a system as radically decentralized, chaotically organized, and stunningly inefficient as the system that eventually came into being. And yet it turned out that these same organizational *inefficiencies* have helped establish the system’s *effectiveness* as an educational institution, making it the envy the world. In the 2024 Shanghai rankings of world universities, American institutions account for 26 of the top 50, 16 of the top 20, and 8 of the top 10. Not bad for the heirs of a rag-tag collection of small, scattered, and undistinguished nineteenth century colleges that were rightly considered a joke by European visitors.

It turns out that a planned system of higher education doesn’t work out any better than a planned economy. The U.S. system emerged organically in the peculiar context of the early American republic, which was characterized by a weak state, a divided church, and a strong economy. Unlike the conditions that fostered European universities, neither church nor state was strong enough to assert control over the system, which instead emerged organically through the competition among a large number of colleges constituted as independent corporations. Once states started forming their own colleges, the public institutions followed the model of the privates, struggling to survive in an environment with only modest state funding and the need to compete for students, professors, and donors. This entrepreneurial spirit and institutional autonomy came to serve it well in the following century, when the system blossomed into its current dominant position.

The essays here were written at different times, for different purposes, and published in widely different venues – as journal articles, book chapters, magazine articles, speeches, op-eds, and blog posts. So I have not tried to weave them together in a single story running through this book but instead simply clustered them into rough categories and left them in their original form. As a result, you’ll find a fair amount of repetition, as central themes keep popping up in different chapters. So it is less a book to be read from cover to cover than a collection of essays to be explored as you see fit.. Feel free to skip around and look for things you are interested in rather than plowing through from beginning to end. I’m hoping some of these essays will be useful for teachers to use in class, for students to draw on in their studies, and for others to consider as they ruminate about the universal experience of schooling.

Part I: The US System of Higher Education

1. A System Without a Plan

This is a story about the peculiar nature of American higher education and about what made this system so successful. In some ways it may seem strange to call the motley collection of more than 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States a system at all. System implies a plan and a form of governance that keeps the system working according to this plan, and that indeed is the formal structure of higher education systems in most countries, where a government ministry oversees the system and tinkers with it over time. But the U.S. system of higher education did not arise from a plan, and no agency governs it. It just happened. But it is nonetheless a system, which has a well-defined structure and a clear set of rules that guides the actions of the individuals and institutions within it. In this sense, it is less like a political system guided by a constitution than a solar system guided by the laws of physics. And like the latter, its history is not a deliberate construction but an evolutionary process. I examine the forces that drove this process of development, the distinctive structure that emerged from the process, the rules that govern the structure, and the particular benefits and cost that the structure bestowed upon this peculiarly American system.

2. From Rags to Riches:

How the American College Went from Pitiful in the Nineteenth Century to Powerful in the Twentieth

From the perspective of nineteenth century visitors to the U.S., the American system of higher education was a joke. It wasn't even a system, just a random assortment of institutions claiming to be colleges that were scattered around the countryside. But by the second half of the twentieth century, the system had assumed a dominant position in the world market in higher education. Compared with peer institutions in other countries, it came to accumulate greater wealth, produce more scholarship, win more Nobel prizes, attract a larger number of talented students and faculty, and dominate global rankings. How did this remarkable transformation come about? The answer is that the characteristics of the system that seemed disadvantages in the nineteenth century turned out to be advantages in the twentieth century. Its modest state funding, dependence on students, populist aura, and obsession with football gave it a degree of autonomy that has allowed the system to stand astride the academic world.

3. College – What Is It Good For?

In this 2013 John Dewey Society Lecture I examine the history and the structure of the American system of higher education. I argue that the true hero of the story is the evolved *form* of the American university and that all the things we love about it, like free speech, are the side effects of a structure that arose for other purposes. I tell this story in three parts. First I explore how the American system of higher education emerged in the nineteenth century, without a plan and without any apparent promise that it would turn out well. Then I show how this process created an astonishingly strong, resilient, and powerful structure, which deftly balances competing aims – the populist, the practical, and the elite. Then I veer back toward the issue raised in the title, to figure out what the connection is between the form of American higher education and the things that it is good for. I argue that the form serves the extraordinarily useful functions of protecting those of us in the faculty from the real world, protecting us from each other, and hiding what we're doing behind a set of fictions and veneers that keep anyone from

knowing exactly what is really going on. Awkwardly, this means that the institution depends on attributes that we would publicly deplore: chaotic complexity, hypocrisy, and opacity. I end with a call for us to retreat from substance and stand shoulder-to-shoulder in defense of procedure.

4. How Education Came to Democratize Merit, Formalize Achievement, and Naturalize Privilege

Modern systems of public education have transformed the concept of merit. The premodern form of this quality was what Joseph Kett calls essential merit, which represented a person's public accomplishments. The new kind of merit, which arose in the mid-nineteenth century, is institutional merit; it is earned through academic attainment. In this paper I examine three consequences of this shift from essential to institutional merit in the American setting. First, this change democratized merit by making it, at least theoretically, accessible to anyone and not just the gentry, who in the premodern period had prime access to this reputational good. Second, it formalized the idea of merit by turning it from a series of publicly visible and substantive accomplishments into the accumulation of the forms that schooling had to offer – grades, credits, and degrees. Third, following from one and two, it served the social function of naturalizing the privileges of birth by transposing them into academic accomplishments. The well born, through the medium of education, acquired a second nature that transformed ascribed status into achieved status. The result, for better and for worse, is a new aristocracy of merit.

5. How *Not* to Defend Private Research Universities

In this populist era, private research universities are easy targets that reek of privilege and entitlement. They're filthy rich and they educate a tiny group of students drawn primarily from the upper classes. But maybe that's ok. My point is that private research universities are elite institutions, and they shouldn't pretend otherwise. Instead of preaching access and making a mountain out of the molehill of benefits they provide for the few poor students they enroll, they need to demonstrate how they benefit the public in other ways. This requires making the case that the very exclusivity of these institutions serves the public good. They should embrace their focus on research production and graduate education and accept that providing instruction for undergraduates is only a small part of the overall mission. And they should show how the concentration of talent in a small number of elite institutions make them a highly effective engine for knowledge production and economic development for society as a whole. Radical inequality in the higher-education system therefore produces outsized benefits for the public good. This, paradoxical as it may seem, is how we can truly justify the public investment in private research universities. As private institutions operating in a highly competitive higher education market, they have a lot of autonomy, which gives them the freedom to pivot quickly to take advantage of opportunities for new programs of study, research areas, and sources of funding, largely independent of political influence.

6. An Affair to Remember: America's Brief Fling with Higher Education as a Public Good

American higher education rose to fame and fortune during the Cold War, when both student enrollments and funded research shot upward. Prior to World War II, the federal government showed little interest in universities and provided little support. The war spurred a large investment in defense-based scientific research in universities, and the emergence of the Cold War expanded federal investment exponentially. Unlike a hot war, the Cold War offered an extended period of federally funded research public subsidy for expanding student enrollments. The result was the golden age of the American university. The good times continued for about 30 years and then began to go bad. The decline was triggered by the combination of a decline in the perceived Soviet threat and a taxpayer revolt against high public spending, both trends culminating with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. With no money and no enemy, the Cold War university fell as quickly as it arose. Instead of seeing the Cold War university as the norm, we need to think of it as the exception. What we are experiencing now in American higher education is a regression to the mean, in which, over the long haul, Americans have understood higher education to be a distinctly private good.

7. Reflections on Weber’s “Politics as a Vocation” and the Role of the Professor

Max Weber gave this speech, “Politics as a Vocation” at the University of Munich in 1919. At the heart of the address is his famous account of three forms of political order, three alternate modes of legitimizing governance. Traditional authority derives from precedent: we’ve always done it this way. It’s the primary form that characterized authority in the millennia before the modern era. Legal authority comes not from primordial practice but from the letter of the law or bureaucratic regulation. Its basis is rational, expressed on the methodical implementation of previously established procedures. Charismatic authority is the disruptive force in political life, exploding out of nowhere and potentially turning things upside down. Think about Old Testament prophets, sent by God to challenge a king or redirect a wayward people. In this essay I explore how the institution of the modern American professoriate embodies all three of these types of authority. Much of the complexity, contradiction, and the professor role derives from these elements embedded within it.

8. How the Fall of the Roman Empire Spurred the Rise of Modernity – and What This Suggests about the Rise of US Higher Education

This essay is a brief commentary on historian Walter Scheidel’s book, *Escape from Rome* and an exploration of what his analysis shows us about the unlikely ascendancy of US higher education in the twentieth century. Scheidel examines the question: How did Europe come to create the modern world? His answer is this: Europe became the cauldron of modernity and the dominant power in the world because of the collapse of the Roman empire – coupled with the fact that no other power was able to replace it for the next millennium. The secret of European success was the absence of central control. This is what led to the extraordinary inventions that characterized modernity – in technology, energy, war, finance, governance, science, and economy. I connect Scheidel’s analysis with my own take on the peculiar history of US higher education, as spelled out in my book, *A Perfect Mess*. My argument parallels his, showing how the US system arose in the absence of a strong state and dominant church and in the presence of a strong market economy, which fostered creative competition among colleges for students, faculty, and money. Out of this unpromising mess of institutions emerged a system of higher ed

that came to dominate the academic world. Early institutional chaos led to later institutional strength, a system what was not created by design but emerged from an organic process of evolutionary competition. In the absence of Rome (read: a hegemonic national university), the US higher education system became Rome.

9. Teacher Persona

This essay is a reflection on one particular component of the practice of teaching – the need for each teacher to construct an authentic and effective teacher persona. At the start of their careers, teachers fumble around for a way to establish an emotional link with students that is effective and sustainable, for the teaching persona that works best for them. This persona is both natural, in that it draws on characteristics and strengths of the teacher as a person, and constructed, in that it is put together in order to serve the ends of promoting learning in the classroom. In my course on the history of school reform, I used to talk with students a lot about the practice of teaching, and in one class we would explore the teacher persona. Most of the students were former teachers themselves, so I would ask them what their own teacher personas were. At one point, I decided to ask them to suggest the nature of my own teacher persona. The result was a revelation to me. I show a word cloud that depicts this persona, a document that is one of my proudest memories of teaching, which is now framed on the wall over my desk.

10. You Don't Have to Kill Yourself Trying to Get into the Ivies

American students are killing themselves in pursuit of exclusive educational credentials that they don't need in order to be highly successful in life. The incentives built into our meritocratic educational system encourage ambitious students to settle for nothing less than the very highest grade, the most selective college and graduate school, and the most prestigious career option. Being very good at school is not enough; you need to be the best – even though there are always others who are doing even better. However, data show that getting into an Ivy League school makes a difference at only the tippy top of the occupational structure. Graduates of flagship state universities on average make as much money as a graduates of the Ivies, and most corporate CEOs and leading political figures attended public institutions. So relax. If you're a good student and get into a good college, you're likely to do just fine.

Part II: Scholarship

11. The Dysfunctional Pursuit of Relevance

In this essay I argue that the effort to make educational research more relevant is counterproductive. Teachers and researchers have different orientations toward education that arise from the different institutional settings, occupational constraints, daily work demands, and professional incentives of each realm of practice. These are not dysfunctional differences to be resolved by creating the proposed composite role of the clinical researcher but useful alternative perspectives, with each providing what the other is lacking. Drawing on work by Augier and March, I identify two key problems with the pursuit of relevance. One is that relevance is a tricky quality to define, since it is easier to recognize in retrospect than in prospect. Another is

that efforts to make research more relevant can paradoxically make it useless or misleading, by focusing on short term results that are narrowly measured instead of on consequences with a longer horizon and broader scope. In this sense, then, applied research may grow stale quickly while basic research may age well. Scholarly work that neither arises from a quest for relevance nor demonstrates any particular utility at the time it is carried out may turn out to be highly useful at a later time and in a different place. Research relevance, therefore, is not only hard to define, but the active pursuit of it may produce educational knowledge that is irrelevant.

12. Do No Harm

Over the years, research on teaching and teacher education has caused a lot of damage to teaching and learning and learning-to-teach in schools. So I suggest a good principle to adopt when considering the role of research in teacher education is a version of the Hippocratic Oath: First do no harm. One factor that bends educational research toward the dark side is research funding, which tends to go to work that serves current policy objectives. In recent years, that has harnessed scholarship to the service of accountability and test-driven instruction at the expense of broad-based education. Another factor is the education version of Gresham's Law, wherein bad research tends to displace good. High-quality academic research reflects the complexity of the education system, so its findings include a lot of qualifying clauses that undermine its ability to make definitive policy recommendations. But research done by think tanks and educational entrepreneurs provides clear answers to educational problems in a manner that is easy for the layperson to comprehend. That's because they identify the policy prescription first and then look for data to support it.

13. Perils of the Professionalized Historian

History is an intensely normative domain, full of emotion and bubbling over with value judgments. It tells us compelling stories about who we are, where we came from, what we stand for – and that leaves it open to manipulation by political demagogues and hell-bent reformers, who mold it to meet their own ends. This poses a problem for historians, who operate under guidelines that mandate high professional standards to ward off these dangers – particularly empiricism, objectivity, and specialization. In the process of pursuing professionalism, however, they undercut their effectiveness by disdaining the art of historical narrative, which is so compelling for prospective readers. Regular people tell stories to make sense of events – filled with actors, actions, and meaning – whereas experts deploy densely-reasoned data-based analyses. We shouldn't leave the narrative realm to the purveyors of bad history. Instead, we need to tell stories that allow history to speak to the problems of the present, while being careful to ensure that we're telling the history we currently *need*, not the history we *want*.

14. Why? Different Ways that People Give Reasons – and Lessons for Scholars

In this essay, I explore the issue of the different ways in which people give reasons to each other. It draws on a lovely little book by sociologist Charles Tilly: *Why? What Happens When People Give Reasons...and Why*. One of the things that makes his account valuable is how it gives scholars a way of understanding the yawning chasm between how they explain things to

other experts and how ordinary people explain things to each other. People tell stories; experts eschew narrative and focus on turgid analysis crammed with theory and data. Bridging this gap is difficult for scholars but it's absolutely necessary, if our insights are going to gain acceptance in a broader audience. It's possible for scholars to connect with people who don't understand the methods we use to develop our conclusions. We can find ways to tell compelling stories that will make an effective case for a particular understanding of events without recourse to either arcane methodologies or raw emotional appeals.

15. A Brutal Review of My First Book

I don't know about you, but I love reading brutal book reviews. It's a lot of fun to watch a skilled writer skewer someone else's work with surgical precision. In the interest of balance, I thought it would be right and proper to present a review that eviscerates one of my own books. So here's a link to a review essay by Sol Cohen that was published in *Historical Studies in Education* in 1991. It's called, "The Linguistic Turn: The Absent Text of Educational Historiography." I walk the reader through his devastating critique, which I fortunately never saw until I was already safely ensconced as a full professor at Stanford. And then I show how, in spite of his detailed analysis of my text, he failed to identify several additional key places where I skated over major gaps in my argument. Enjoy.

16. Why We Need Histories of Education

History of education, like history more generally, continually struggles to inform contemporary policy without simply become its tool. So how can we address the educational issues that matter today without being unduly partisan? How can we mine history selectively in order to meet our current needs without doing history a gross injustice? We should aim to construct the history of education that we need at this historical moment, but we should not construct the history that we and our contemporaries want. This means being a relentless critic of bad history. It means being an iconoclast – seeking to shatter the convenient fictions and reigning metaphors of the day in light of a more complex and interesting reading of the past. It means being a realist – showing what actually happened in past efforts at school reform. And it means being a resurrectionist – picking up fallen idols and buffing them up for reconsideration in light of the problems of the day.

17. Doctoral Study as a Transformative Experience

When students enter a doctoral program, they often think it's going to be a continuation of their previous education, moving seamlessly from bachelor's to master's to doctoral study. Well, it's not. Really, it's a whole nother thing. So one of the things that prospective doctoral students should be asking themselves is whether they really want to enter into this extended process of professional apprenticeship and personal transformation. Maybe it's really not worth it for you if the very real costs outweigh the potential benefits. Do you want to become that person and leave your former self behind.? It's not for everyone.

18. Scholarship Thrives on Peripheral Vision

The problem with scholarly focus is that it leads where you intend to go. And this is a problem because when you get there you're likely to find that your destination isn't all that interesting. In practice, scholarship is not about effectively carrying out a plan but about exploring a terrain and developing the plan that is warranted by what you discover in that terrain. Writing is not the process of explaining the argument that is embedded in your outline but instead the process of finding out what that argument should be. If your paper follows your outline from beginning to end, it's clear that you haven't learned anything in the course of writing that paper. You found what you were looking for rather than what was actually out there waiting to be found. The best scholarship relies on your peripheral vision.

Part III: Schools of Education

19. Life on the Margins

Teachers educators have remarkably little influence in the politics of teacher education. The prime piece of evidence for this is the lack of success we have had in turning teaching in a more progressive direction over the last 100 years. Reasons for our lack of influence include the following: We occupy a lowly status within higher education (with our late arrival to the university and with teaching's *déclassé* associations); we're engaged in a difficult form of professional practice that looks easy; we're too predictable in promoting the progressive agenda; and we're seen as bulwarks of the educational establishment. As a result, we often find ourselves defending the indefensible while also demanding the unrealizable. Backing off from both positions might give us a little credibility.

20. Progressivism, Schools, and Schools of Education

This essay tells a story about progressivism, schools, and schools of education in twentieth-century America. Depending on one's position in the politics of education, this story can assume the form of a tragedy or a romance, or perhaps even a comedy. The heart of the tale is the struggle for control of American education in the early twentieth century between two factions of the movement for progressive education. The administrative progressives won this struggle, and they reconstructed the organization and curriculum of American schools in a form that has lasted to the present day. Meanwhile the other group, the pedagogical progressives, who failed miserably in shaping what we do in schools, did at least succeed in shaping how we talk about schools. Professors in schools of education were caught in the middle of this dispute, and they ended up in an awkwardly compromised position. Their hands were busy—preparing teachers to work within the confines of the educational system established by the administrative progressives, and carrying out research to make this system work more efficiently. But their hearts were with the pedagogues. So they became the high priests of pedagogical progressivism, keeping this faith alive within the halls of the education school, and teaching the words of its credo to new generations of educators. As a result, progressivism became the ideology of the education professor. I argue that the union between pedagogical progressivism and the education school is not the result of mutual attraction but of something more enduring: mutual need. It was not a marriage of the strong but a wedding of the weak. Both were losers in their respective arenas: child-centered progressivism lost out in the struggle for control of American schools, and

the education school lost out in the struggle for respect in American higher education. They needed each other, with one looking for a safe haven and the other looking for a righteous mission.

21. Teach For America and Teacher Ed: Heads They Win, Tails We Lose

Teach For America is a marvel at marketing, offering elite college students a win-win option: By becoming corps members, they can do good and do well at the same time. Teacher education programs are in a hopeless position in trying to compete with TFA for prospective students. They can't provide students with the opportunity to do well, since they can offer none of the exclusiveness and cachet that comes from being accepted as a TFA corps member. TE has always offered students the chance to do good, but this prospect is less entrancing when they realize that TFA's escape clause allows graduates to do good without major personal sacrifice. More than that, it promises to be a great career booster that will pay off handsomely in future pay and prestige. In short, the competition between TFA and TE is a case of "heads they win, tails we lose."

22. The Lure of Statistics for Educational Researchers

In this essay I explore the historical and sociological elements that have made educational researchers dependent on statistics – as a mechanism to shore up their credibility, enhance their scholarly standing, and increase their influence in the realm of educational policy. I begin by tracing the routes of the urge to quantify within the mentality of measurement that arose in medieval Europe, and then explore the factors that have pressured disciplines and professions over the years to incorporate the language of mathematics into their discourse. In particular, this pattern has been prominent for domains of knowledge and professional endeavor whose prestige is modest, whose credibility is questionable, whose professional boundaries are weak, and whose knowledge orientation is applied. I show that educational research as a domain – with its focus on a radically soft and thoroughly applied form of knowledge and with its low academic standing – fits these criteria to a tee. Then I examine two kinds of problems that derive from educational researchers' seduction by the quantitative turn. One is that this approach to educational questions deflects attention away from many of the most important issues in the field, which are not easily reduced to standardized quanta. Another is that by adopting this rationalized, quantified, abstracted, statist, and reductionist vision of education, education policymakers risk imposing reforms that will destroy the local practical knowledge that makes the ecology of the individual classroom function effectively. Quantification, I suggest, may be useful for the professional interests of educational researchers but it can be devastating in its consequences for school and society.

23. Reflections on *The Trouble with Ed Schools* for the Chinese Edition of the Book

I wrote this essay in 2023 as the preface to the Chinese translation of my book, *The Trouble with Ed Schools*. For me, this was a nice opportunity to accomplish two things in looking back on this work, which was published in 2004. One was to show how the book came about through my own experience as an outsider immersing myself in an education school, a

participant observer going native. The other was to explain, for a non-American audience, what's peculiar about the American education school. For the new Chinese audience, I thought it might be useful to provide some background about where this book came from. First, I show how the book arose from my own experience early in my career as an education professor. And then I show how the institution it examines emerged from a peculiarly American context, which is likely quite different from the conditions within which education schools operate in China.