

Reconstructing the Campus: Higher Education and the American Civil War

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Review

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Cohen, Michael David *Reconstructing the Campus: Higher Education and the American Civil War*. University of Virginia Press, \$45.00 ISBN 978-0-8139-3317-7

Understanding the Intersection of Wartime and Education

Historians of the Civil War agree that the conflict served as a watershed period for the nation evident in almost all areas of American life and culture. In particular, the demands of war accelerated the movement toward modernity in the nation's major political and economic institutions. Michael David Cohen's study of higher education introduces readers to another, often overlooked, institution effected by the war and its aftermath. Drawing from government records and documents from seven major colleges scattered throughout the four geographic regions, Cohen concludes that the Civil War "drove some of the most important educational reforms of the late nineteenth century" (14). In particular, he posits that the conflict and its aftermath created a relationship between the government and higher education, introduced new curricula, and reshaped the nature of student populations, ultimately producing the modern American university and college systems with which we identify today.

Following a chronological and topical order, Cohen reveals the depths to which the war permeated campuses, bringing about a new culture of higher education. His examination of pre-war campus life underscores this depth of change. On the eve of the Civil War, faculties offered limited curricula intended to prepare students for a narrow range of professions. The student body, too, drew from a small pool of American youths. Sons of elite planters from the South attended schools while those from the North came from more economically diverse backgrounds. Men and women attended separate schools where admissions requirements placed high moral standards on their students. Little relationship between the government and colleges existed as most schools remained private, denominational institutions. Yet, as Cohen demonstrates, the

war transformed this insulated and elitist culture.

The Civil War forced colleges to adapt to changing conditions and reevaluate their role in American life. As secession loomed, class dialogues shifted their focus away from traditional topics to discussions such as Lincoln and an impending war. Faculty members likewise rose up as experts on the conflict, advocating either a pro- or anti-Confederate position. When the war broke out, male students left school for the military front either as draftees or volunteers. The depleted student population caused some institutions to close while others struggled to remain open. Cohen identifies that the greatest changes to schools occurred in the South because of its regional proximity to military engagements. Colleges, for example, turned into makeshift hospitals and Union troops pillaged some campuses. Wartime inflation likewise created economic hardships that threatened to close the doors of southern schools. Those institutions that survived the war-- whether northern or southern, eastern or western--witnessed the advent of new curricula, student populations, and government involvement.

Faculties and trustees initiated drastic reforms to curricula that would transform the nature of higher education. Cohen contends that the greatest change came in redesigned curricula that would "better serve a postbellum nation" in which more students sought training in a wider range of vocations (53). Military education backed, in many cases, by government funding emerged from a need to produce citizen-soldiers prepared for war. The Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862 likewise helped establish universities that concentrated on agricultural and engineering learning. Southern colleges adopted these reforms in an attempt to attract more students after the war. Regardless of regional interests, leaders in higher education realized the need to alter curriculum in order to serve the needs of a changing student population and to meet the demands of a nation on an accelerated path to modernity.

A particularly revealing aspect of Cohen's study is the emergence of a new, diversified student population. The aftermath of war and the onset of Reconstruction created an atmosphere that encouraged potential students from varied backgrounds to turn to education as a way to rebuild their lives. Schools became coeducational and biracial, and welcomed non-traditional students from broader socioeconomic groups. The creation of land-grant colleges along with financial government assistance in the form of veteran's benefits drew non-traditional, older students to higher education. Before the war, men and

women tended to travel to receive their education, oftentimes going out of state. Yet the economic hardships of travel along with lower tuition costs for in-state students at land-grant institutions encouraged men and women to remain in their respective states. Cohen concludes that the results of this desire to stay close to home meant that schools became “less geographically diverse” (128).

The strongest argument Cohen posits is that the relationships colleges and universities forged beyond the campus walls. During the 1860s and 1870s, the federal government grew increasingly involved in higher education. From the Morrill Land-Grant College Act and veteran’s educational benefits to curricula development and establishing a supportive bureaucracy, the federal government situated itself within the campus culture and facilitated the transition to a modern university system. A new role for the government, for example, was in the collecting and analyzing of statistical information on higher education. To accommodate this effort, the government established the Department of Education in 1867. Promoting higher education also garnered the interest of government officials, as seen in the strong presence of colleges and universities at the 1876 Centennial Exposition. Institutions also reached out to their surrounding communities for the first time. Public lectures and extension schools provided a new role for higher education in the community, establishing a tradition of public service still evident today.

Cohen’s lively and engaging study of higher education brings into high relief the transformative nature of the Civil War and its aftermath. He aptly demonstrates how the conflict reconstructed campuses in a way that accommodated a changing culture and people who sought new opportunities for learning. Although it seems, at times, as if little more can be said about the Civil War due to the breadth of studies on the subject, Cohen reveals that more can be done to understand how the conflict gave way to a new, modern nation.

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