Education For All

Public institutions are leaders in the democratization of higher education

by Stephen G. Pelletier

Take yourself back to the first day of the fall semester. Picture a typical State U. student—we’ll call her Ruby Harris. A single mother and an Army veteran who served a tour of duty in Iraq, Ruby is applying her benefits from the new GI Bill to pursue a nursing degree. The second generation in her family to go to college, Ruby is following both her mother and her aunt into the field of nursing. As she registers for classes, visits the bookstore and negotiates the hallways of unfamiliar buildings, Ruby is certainly not thinking about the history of public higher education. Yet, her story is the story of the democratization of higher learning over the last 60 years.

Making her way across campus, Ruby finds the classroom for Composition 101, a requirement for her nursing program. The professor who will teach Ruby’s section, Carlos Torres, is preparing to meet the class for the first time. Focused on the details of starting a new class, he also isn’t thinking about the history of public higher education. Yet his story, like Ruby’s, is also the story of the democratization of higher education.

Had they been of college age just 60 years earlier, neither Ruby nor Professor Torres would have been likely to be able to attend college. But the rapid, dramatic growth of public higher education changed all that. Opening the possibility of college to more than just the elite and wealthy, the rise of the public university in the decades following World War II transformed both higher education and society as a whole. The breadth and impact of that true sea change cannot be underestimated—and warrants a closer look.

“Revolutionary” Institutions

Paralleling the emphasis on freedom—from both the Crown and from religious persecution—that defined the founding of this country, American higher education started as private higher education, with strong ties to religious denominations. Even though some of the founding fathers—notably Benjamin Franklin—advocated conceptually for state-controlled higher education, the notion of the state university generally did not gain traction in the early days of the United States. (One notable exception? The College of William & Mary, founded by royal charter in 1693 and supported in its early days by colonial taxes on furs and tobacco.) According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES),
among the 37 colleges founded before 1800 that still exist today, only four were public.

Fred F. Harcleroad, a notable historian of public higher education, argues that among other factors, the growth of public higher education was stymied in the Revolutionary era by the debate about separation of church and state, and by tensions between advocates for greater federal authority and proponents of states’ rights. State-controlled institutions were seen as “revolutionary,” Harcleroad suggests, and their development was squelched in various ways by an establishment that was predisposed to privately controlled, denominationally-related institutions. In that era, therefore, colleges associated with religious denominations flourished while the very concept of public higher education was slow to grab a toehold.

(Harcleroad’s seminal book, *Colleges and Universities for Change: America’s Comprehensive Public State Colleges and Universities*, co-written with past AASCU president Allan W. Ostar and published by the AASCU Press in 1987, was invaluable as background for this article.)

It took a decision by the Supreme Court, handed down in 1819 in a famous case involving Dartmouth College, to in essence clear the way for the simultaneous existence of denominational colleges and state-established institutions. After that, as Harcleroad and Ostar observe, the evolution of egalitarianism in an era that saw Andrew Jackson elected to the White House in 1828 helped nurture the notion of “education for all.” That culture gave rise to the normal school, the root institution of many public universities. Harcleroad and Ostar observe that of the 406 state colleges and universities extant at the time they were writing, “103 were founded as normal schools between 1839 and 1900.” In addition, of course, the Morrill Act of 1862 helped foment the development of public land-grant institutions with a focus on agriculture.

The first half of the 20th century saw the evolution of the normal school. As they became more sophisticated in the education of teachers, many evolved again to become teachers colleges. As they expanded their curricula to include many majors other than education, and opened their doors to students who did not intend to be teachers, they became multi-purpose state colleges. Eventually, many would gain university status. Moreover, between 1920 and 1960, many state institutions with a technological focus came into being. That gave rise to institutions like the California state polytechnic universities in San Luis Obispo and Pomona and Louisiana Tech University.

The end of World War II sparked a voracious appetite for higher education. Returning veterans were eager to gain skills that would help them claim a job in the post-war economy. As the war came to an end, Fred Harcleroad recently recalled, “there were something like eleven-and-a-half or 12 million veterans who were entitled to the GI Bill.” The availability of those benefits meant that “a lot of people who never dreamed of going to college now were able to go and have their costs paid.”
That confluence of factors—the availability of the GI Bill and the cohort of veterans who were ready to tap its benefits—can be seen as a turning point in public access to higher education, helping to define what some call the democratization of higher education. Moreover, by creating considerable demand for college, the GI Bill helped drive the expansion of higher education to meet that demand—growth that would transform public higher education in the United States.

Accessing Higher Education

"Democratization of higher education" is a rather amorphous phrase, under which one can park all kinds of political and economic considerations. For our purposes here, however, we will focus on one central dimension of the concept of democratization: access to higher education.

In terms of access, the story of the democratization of higher education through public colleges and universities is nothing short of remarkable. Numbers tell the heart of this tale.

Higher education in this country began as the province of the elite. The earliest data available from the federal government show that in 1870, 63,000 students were enrolled in college. (Perhaps surprisingly, no fewer than 21 percent were women.) Engaging just 1 percent of the total college-aged population, higher education was by no means a small-d democratic, or egalitarian, enterprise.

As the 19th century gave way to the 20th century, the number of potential college students who actually matriculated began to grow. In 1910, for example, some 355,000 students were enrolled in college. By 1930, that total had more than doubled, to 874,000 students. By 1950, that total had more than doubled again, to 2,338,226 students. By 2007, total student enrollment in degree-granting institutions was 18,248,128. Government statistics show that total enrollment topped 20 million students in 2009.

A most dramatic uptick in enrollment in higher education started after World War II. While there have been periodic dips in college attendance since then, the overall story is one of striking growth. A ladder of data by decade, drawn from NCES, shows that at a glance:

- In 1947, total student enrollment in degree-granting institutions was 2,338,226.
- In 1957, total student enrollment in degree-granting institutions was 3,323,783.
- In 1967, total student enrollment in degree-granting institutions was 6,911,748.
- In 1977, total student enrollment in degree-granting institutions was 11,285,787.
- In 1987, total student enrollment in degree-granting institutions was 12,766,642.
- In 1997, total student enrollment in degree-granting institutions was 14,502,334.
- In 2007, total student enrollment in degree-granting institutions was 18,248,128.

Government statistics show that total enrollment topped 20 million students in 2009.

In terms of student access to colleges and universities, the democratization of higher education has taken place through public higher education. Again, student enrollment data tell the story. In 1947, public and private institutions enrolled roughly the same number of students (1,152,377 versus 1,185,849, respectively). By 2009, however, some 14.8 million students were enrolled in public institutions, versus 5.6 million in private institutions. Government projections suggest that a similar gap will persist until at least 2019.

If we pull the numbers from these totals for just 4-year public institutions exclusively, we see that this sector—which of course encompasses the AASCU institutions—has offered access to college to a large proportion of the total college-going population. NCES statistics, for example, show that in 2007 4-year public institutions enrolled 2,341,468 students. By 1983, that total had more than doubled, to 5,223,404 students. And by 2009, no fewer than 7,709,197 students were enrolled in 4-year public institutions.

Another notable trend has been the sheer addition of institutional capacity to accommodate more students. Between 1950 and 1986, for example, government statistics track an expansion in the number of 4-year public institutions, excluding branch campuses, from 344 to 461. When branch campuses are added, the total number of public 4-year institutions rises from 537 in 1975 to 672 in 2010.
A strong case in data can also be made that public higher education has also been central in the democratization of access to college by women and minority students. In 1967, according to the NCES, men in public colleges and universities outnumbered women by more than 2 to 1 (351,947 men, 170,676 women). But as has been well documented, the number of college-enrolled women has gradually eclipsed the number of men. That shift actually took place earlier in public institutions than in all of higher education combined. Women in public institutions first outnumbered men in 1981; men regained the majority for two years after that, but in 1984, women gained a lead that they would then retain. (The balance in favor of women did not tip for all of higher education until 1988.) By 2009, nearly 60 percent of students at public institutions were women.

Over time, public institutions have also opened their doors to a much more ethnically diverse student body. Again looking just at 4-year public institutions, NCES data show that between 1976 and 2009, enrollment by black students rose from 8.6 percent to 11.6 percent of the total student population. Enrollment by Hispanic students rose even more dramatically, going from 2.6 percent of the total student population at public institutions to 10.3 percent. Enrollments by Asian and Pacific Islander students rose from 1.8 percent of all students to 7 percent. In the same period, enrollment of white students in 4-year public institutions declined from 84.2 percent to 65.6. The result is that, increasingly, campus student populations bear more resemblance to society as a whole.

For many students, access to higher education pivots on the affordability of college. The pricing options that public universities offer, in contrast to those at most private institutions, point to yet another contribution that public institutions have made to the democratization of higher education. As just one point of comparison, NCES data show that the average price of attendance for an on-campus student in academic year 2010-11 was $19,478 for an in-state student at a public 4-year institution, versus $35,675 for a comparable student at a private, nonprofit institution.

The bottom line? As more students, including more women and members of minority groups, have identified an affordable path to attend college, they are largely finding their way to higher education through the gates of public colleges and universities. Trends like these led noted higher education researcher Louis Menand to conclude, in an article in The New York Times, that the transformation of higher education following World War II “is due, above all, to the growth of the public university.” In that context, Menand said “the democratization of higher education is one of postwar America’s greatest accomplishments.”

### Specific to AASCU

Several data points that focus on AASCU member institutions point more specifically to AASCU’s role in the democratization of higher education:

- In 1961, AASCU institutions enrolled 314,754 undergraduate students. By 2009, that number had jumped to 3,226,085 undergraduates. Similarly, AASCU institutions enrolled 36,892 graduate students in 1961, but by 2009 had made room to accommodate 618,195 graduate students.

- A comparison of degrees awarded at AASCU colleges between 1961 and 2009 also points to their role of in the democratization of higher education:

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>1961</th>
<th>2009</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degrees awarded</td>
<td>43,864</td>
<td>531,598</td>
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<tr>
<td>Master’s degrees awarded</td>
<td>8,834</td>
<td>153,487</td>
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<tr>
<td>Doctorates awarded</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>7,551</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total degrees awarded</td>
<td>52,939</td>
<td>719,958</td>
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The full democratization of higher education will require universities to renew their ability to prepare future citizens of our democracy, and not merely for jobs.

Students in Armstrong Atlantic State University’s Bachelor of Science in Rehabilitation Science program.

Work to be Done

Echoing Menand, our look at selected statistics clearly underscores a remarkable story of success in higher education. Having contributed a lion’s share to the broad national effort to make higher education more accessible to a wider cross-section of potential students, public institutions can justifiably celebrate this great success. But it would be Pollyannaish to look at these statistics and suggest that the democratization of higher education has been fully realized and is therefore complete.

The full democratization of higher education will not be achieved until everyone who should be going to college is doing so. The challenge for all institutions of higher learning, including 4-year public universities, will be to continue to reach out to and, ultimately, enroll all those who could benefit. That will mean continuing, and perhaps redoubling, efforts to enroll more minority students. In particular, deeper efforts are needed to see that more black and Hispanic men enroll in college. And stronger efforts are needed to redress the reality that college attainment by women of color still lags that of their white counterparts.

Our focus here has been on access to college, but full democratization of higher education will also require better results by a host of other measures. Improving college completion rates is an obvious imperative. Another is developing more productive pipelines for students to pursue majors in areas that are of critical importance to society, including the STEM disciplines of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Adrianna Kezar, an associate professor for higher education and assistant director of the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis at the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California, offers some perspective in this regard. Kezar’s short list of things that still need to be accomplished would include reaching out to ensure that more low-income students can earn college degrees and recruiting more women and people of color to both faculty and administrative posts. “As institutions think about their futures, they have further work in terms of democratization,” she says. “Let’s hit low income. Let’s hit men of color. Let’s hit women in the sciences.” More broadly, she also suggests that full democratization of higher education will require universities to renew their ability to prepare future citizens of our democracy, and not merely for jobs.

Looking ahead, therefore, public universities might do well to both celebrate past successes—which are indeed considerable—and find ways to build on a notable track record to realize even bigger wins. “There is a lot to celebrate, and things have changed,” Kezar says, “but there is still work to be done.”

Stephen G. Pelletier is a writer and editor in Rockville, Maryland.

1971 The “Morse Commission,” led by Wayne L. Morse, former senator from Oregon, addressed strengthening America’s emerging state colleges and universities.

1972 AASCU’s first international mission—to Mexico—led to the establishment of a Center in Pueblo; dozens of missions in subsequent years.