

**Office of the President**

**TO MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY**

**DISCUSSION ITEM**

*For Meeting of March 18, 2015*

**BACKGROUND ON THE ORIGINS OF THE STRUCTURE OF UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In the first of a series of presentations established by Regent Kieffer and introduced at the January 2015 Regents meeting, Chancellor Dirks of UC Berkeley will present a summary of the evolution of U.S. undergraduate education, identifying the key debates that produced such conventions as vocational vs. liberal educational goals; “collegiate” versus “university” models (with attendant teaching vs. research foci); the lower/upper division and elective course system; and others. The goal of the presentation is to provide broad context for current debates over how to structure undergraduate education at the University of California within the context of the California Master Plan for Higher Education.

**BACKGROUND**

Since a comprehensive review of the evolution of higher education is beyond the scope of any Regents’ meeting, Chancellor Dirks will provide highlights of key episodes and debates from which many of the familiar structures in undergraduate education emerged. This exercise will show that such structures represent deliberate *choices* – many of which are the products of vigorous debates still resonant today. The goal is to help the Regents and the general public better understand the contemporary choices facing the University of California, as it pursues its mission of educating growing numbers of Californians to the highest national and international standards.

This presentation will focus on four distinct periods of U.S. history, during which important events precipitated or were precipitated by foundational debates regarding the purpose of higher education, its benefit to society, its benefit to individuals, how both curricula and the university itself should be structured, and who should pursue a university education. Specific areas to be discussed include the role of the university at the founding of the nation in the late 18th century; the development of the concept of a public university in the 1860s; discussions about how the university should be structured at the turn of the 19th century; and the modern university as it developed in the 1950s and 1960s, when access became a central priority.

***THE LATE 18TH AND EARLY 19TH CENTURY  
HIGHER EDUCATION AT THE DAWN OF THE REPUBLIC***

At the birth of the nation, U.S. political, civic, and religious leadership viewed higher education primarily as means to benefit the commonwealth. While the capabilities, ambitions, and needs of the individual provided an important reason for establishing universities, the ultimate goal of advanced learning was to support democracy through the cultivation of educated, engaged, enlightened, and responsible citizens.

For promoters of higher education, such as Thomas Jefferson, colleges and universities were viewed as vital tools to create a society distinct from the great powers of Europe. Jefferson and others believed that the American university would produce a true meritocracy, one in which inherited privilege and position would be superseded by ambition and ability.

In regard to the curriculum taught in this period, emphasis was placed on what Enlightenment-era thinkers termed “useful knowledge,” including subjects such as science, modern languages, and government. Over the course of the antebellum years, religion moved outside of the curriculum, and the importance of studying topics such as ancient languages was called into question. These decisions were not without opposition, and indeed the curricular debates marked the first in a long series of clashes over a fundamental question: What should be taught in a university? What, in particular, was the purpose of an undergraduate education?

***THE 1860s  
THE CREATION OF THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY***

A distinct element of the United States’ modern system of higher education is the diversity of institutional types, including the mix of public and private colleges and universities. The path to this diverse system lay in the dominance in the early 1800s of a great number of private denominational colleges, which were typically the products of local political and economic circumstances of the states and municipalities in which they were located. At this time, moreover, only a small fraction of Americans attended high school – and university education remained the province of the wealthy elite.

In no small part, the emergence of a set of public universities was a reaction to America’s initial investment in these institutions and the desire to provide alternatives. Particularly in new states in the expansive west, private colleges seemed incapable or uninterested in serving the broader needs of U.S. society. By the mid-1800s, state governments, with federal government prompting, launched a dramatic number of new public universities distinct in their governance, in their commitment to broad access, in the scope of their academic programs, and in their commitment to public service. Institutions such as the state universities in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota offered the first examples of this new breed of institutions.

While states themselves were charged with organizing and coordinating their educational systems, an extremely important impetus did come from Washington. In 1862, and in the midst of the Civil War, Congress passed and President Lincoln signed a bill entitled the Agricultural

College Land Grant Act, commonly known as the Morrill Act. It offered states one thing the federal government had lots of – land, largely in the expansive West – and prompted them to sell or use it to establish universities and degree programs that would support local and state economies. Without excluding “classical studies,” military training, and other scientific fields, the new educational structures would “teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.”

***1870 – 1925***  
**STRUCTURING UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION**

The University of California came into existence in 1868, just in time to receive federal support under the Morrill Act. But for twenty years, the Berkeley campus located in Strawberry Canyon grew slowly in enrollment and programs, and its purpose was debated by lawmakers and the public: Should it be a comprehensive university resembling the emerging ones in Michigan and Wisconsin, or a vocational polytechnic focused largely on training future farmers?

In 1872, and after only three years of full operation, the purpose and management of the University were already under attack. The 1870s in California were marked by economic depression, drought, race riots, and an increasingly corrupt political system fed by the growing monopolistic power of what became the Southern Pacific Transportation Company. A growing class of farmers and laborers viewed the University, and its Board of Regents, as conspirators engaged in a plot to further a new and primarily urban caste of wealthy Californians. Members of the State Grange charged that the Regents and the UC’s president, Daniel Coit Gilman, had colluded to ignore the requirements of the University’s land-grant charge. Legislators demanded audits and wrote bills to make the University a vocationally focused institution, and by 1874, Gilman was fighting for the life of the institution and for the ability of its president and board to govern its affairs. Frustrated, Gilman resigned to become the first president of Johns Hopkins University in 1875. In Baltimore, and with the backing of benefactor and banker Hopkins, Gilman would successfully build his ideal university, devoted to research and graduate training under a new German university model.

Smarting from Gilman’s departure, a convention was held in Sacramento in 1878 to discuss the fate of the University of California. While the University nearly became a vocational school to train farmers and laborers, a last-minute substitute motion by University supporters elevated UC to the status of a “public trust” and bestowed upon it a high level of autonomy. Not legislators but scientific and academic experts, it was decided, were in a position to assess what constitutes a first-class research and pedagogic agenda at a university.

With autonomy assured, UC established a clear charge and began to construct a comprehensive university and shape its curriculum. In this period, a number of modern conventions for undergraduate education evolved: the spread of the residential college structure; the introduction of competitive admissions standards; the institutionalization of regionally based accreditation frameworks; the model of a student pursuing a general education in the first two

years, and specializing in a distinct major in the second two; the growth of a multitude of new fields of study, particularly in the social sciences; the incorporation of the natural sciences into the general curriculum; and the creation of a framework of upper and lower divisions, which underpinned the establishment of the first junior colleges in California.

*1950 – 1970*  
**THE MODERN UNIVERSITY**

In the twentieth century, the purpose of higher education took on new elements as hundreds of institutions opened their doors, research and the advancement of human knowledge and well-being through research became central to universities' missions, the meaning and value of collegiate culture was widely accepted, and modern organizational processes came into being.

For the University of California, a dominant theme was balancing excellence in instruction with a need to increase capacity and access. In the 1950s, facing massive growth in college enrollment – partly as a result of the GI Bill, as well as in anticipation of a postwar population boom – the California government hammered out a complex compromise designed to make the highest quality education available to the highest performing Californian high school students, at the same time guaranteeing access to higher education for all, while also controlling costs. The solution came in the form of the Donahoe Education Act of 1960, better known as the “California Master Plan for Higher Education,” which institutionalized a tripartite system of public research universities (the University of California), comprehensive four-year undergraduate campuses (the California State Universities), and open-access Community Colleges.

This division of labor ensured that the University of California would be able to offer the highest quality education and research opportunities available to California's most talented students, that the California State University system would provide broad access to liberal and polytechnic education, and that the California Community College system would provide high school graduates with access to vocational training and a low-cost path to transfer to a four-year institution. Carefully accommodating many and varied learners while minimizing competition between institutions across the state, the Master Plan's influence has been immense, and many other states and even nations have imitated its structure.