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## Higher Education as an Institution\*

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## Higher Education as an Institution

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It is common to analyze higher education in concrete terms, as a set of specific and local organizations, roles, interactions, and economic transactions. Such analyses may start with particular individual students, as persons, sitting in classrooms with particular teachers and peers, studying specific topics, in a specific organizational context. Or they may situate the university and students within the context of an immediate labor market and economy, with associated individual and collective demands and interests. But in the alternative sociological institutionalist perspective of this chapter, one can view higher education as deeply affected by—indeed, something of an enactment of—structures whose nature and meaning have been institutionalized over many centuries and now apply throughout the world. The meaning of categories such as student, professor, university, or graduate, or of topics such as physics or literature, may be locally shaped in minor ways, but at the same time have very substantial historical and global standing. These wider meanings obviously have pervasive impacts on the content and character of local settings, and they help explain many of the features and effects of higher education that seem problematic from other analytical purchases.

In this chapter, we consider how viewing higher education as an institution helps explain many of its characteristics and its effects in modern society. Sociological institutional theory in part arose from studies in the sociology of education (Meyer 1970; Meyer 1977; Meyer and Rowan 1977), and it turns out to have considerable leverage vis-

à-vis the analysis of higher education in the modern world. In general, institutional views stress the dependence of local social organization on wider environmental meanings, definitions, rules, and models. The dependence involved goes well beyond what is normally thought of as causal influence in the social sciences: in institutional thinking, environments *constitute* local situations—establishing and defining their core entities, purposes, and relations.

This line of thought is exceptionally useful in analyzing higher education for two reasons. First, in contrast to particularizing views, an institutional perspective supports the realization that local higher-educational arrangements are very heavily dependent on broader institutions—even more than most local work organizations. This means, on the one hand, that it is difficult to create a university if the concept “university” is not available in the wider cultural and organizational environments. On the other hand, it means that if the environment does contain a blueprint or model, then the whole founding process turns out to be easy. And in fact—as Figure 1 illustrates—thousands of universities have appeared over recent decades, with enormous and ever-growing numbers of students.

[Figure 1 about here]

Second, in contrast to conventional views, seeing higher education as an institution directs one’s attention to the cultural scripts and organizational rules that are built into wider national and world environments that establish the main features of local situations. In its central “university” form, higher education has a history of almost a millennium, and throughout the whole period it has nearly monopolized some very

central steps in the implementation of Western and now world cognitive models of progress and justice, models now echoing and circulating through the excellence (progress) and equity (justice) themes so prevalent in higher education. Universities and colleges, together with their disciplinary fields and academic roles, are defined, measured, and instantiated in essentially every country in explicitly global terms, and are so reported to international institutions like UNESCO. They are thus sharply attuned to transnational ratings and world standards, which contain heroic accounts of fair and equitable universities to be emulated everywhere. Even rather recent university creations such as “professors of sociology” enjoy global and practically universal status (analogous to rabbis or priests), and occupants of such positions can travel the world interacting with reciprocally recognized peers. Moreover, a proliferation of world conferences and international associations reflect a broad array of disciplines, inter-disciplinarity, professions, theories, and research applications that presuppose common models of progress and justice as they further their higher-educational reach. Conferences, associations, and indeed universities themselves are carriers of wider environmental models, sites for their theoretical elaboration, and ultimately depend on these cultural models for their legitimacy.

It thus makes good sense to look at higher education as an institution, and to consider the consequences of its extensive and intensive institutionalization. We do this in several steps. First, we briefly review the emergent tradition of sociological institutionalism, emphasizing its core ideas. Then, in the main body of the chapter, we discuss the explanatory ideas this line of theory has contributed to the sociological analysis of higher education.

## I. SOCIOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

Institutional theory arose in reaction both to functionalism and to the various strands of Marxist/conflict theory that dominated American sociology in the 1970s. These sociological perspectives sought to explain the production of social structures in terms of the functional needs or the power and interests of actors operating in local situations. In contrast, institutional theory emphasizes that local organizations arise in good measure independent of local circumstances— deriving from wider socio-cultural environments that support and even require local structuration around exogenous models and meanings. Three main ideas elucidate this perspective (for more extensive reviews, see Thomas et al. 1987; Meyer et al. 1997; Jepperson 2002; Hasse and Kruecken 2005).

### 1. Institutional Environments Constitute Local Structures

A first central theme of institutional theory—that environments supply the blueprints and building blocks of local structures—has been explored both generally and in the context of higher education at the levels of persons, organizations, and societies. These analytical levels themselves are elaborately institutionalized in a set of cultural assumptions and organizational rules that establish the framework of modern societies.

At the level of persons, the modern life course or career is heavily patterned around exogenous models and definitions—including those that define virtually all contemporary persons as “individuals” (Meyer 1977; Meyer and Jepperson 2000). By law, individuals must attend primary schools in countries worldwide (Ramirez and Ventresca 1992), and advanced educational certificates are commonly required to gain

entry into desirable occupational and training arenas (Brint 1998; Brown 2001). The education-occupation link encompasses a thick layer of institutional definitions, which have rather distant relations to actual role performance. In the modern world, it does one little good to possess the skills of a university graduate if one lacks proper certification from a properly accredited university. Conversely, if an individual does carry the right documentation, his or her actual abilities are often treated as secondary matters (Collins 1971).

Organizationally, the existence and legitimation capacity of rule-like external models are crucial to the creation and stabilization of all sorts of everyday structures (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Firms, hospitals, and government agencies do not generally spring from local soils if their forms are not prefabricated and available in the institutional environment (Scott 2002). The dependence on external cultural models is even more extreme for schools and universities, given their cultural centrality (despite task ambiguity and goal complexity). Yet when higher-educational organizational models are globally institutionalized, specific instances can—and do—arise, essentially everywhere.

At the societal level, taken-for-granted cultural and organizational models contribute greatly to the apparatus of the national-state (Anderson 1991; Meyer et al. 1997), including the content and scope of citizenship (Ramirez, Soysal, and Shanahan 1997). At the same time, world scripts define the features of proper social organization; for example, regarding health (Inoue 2003) and the natural environment (Frank, Hironaka, and Schofer 2000). Of course, education is central in all these models, and not

surprisingly, schooling arrangements in particular countries dramatically reflect wider world patterns, as discussed below.

## 2. Institutionalized Models Reflect Collective and Cultural Processes

A generation of research has provided powerful support for the first proposition above. But this raises forcefully the following research question: if external cultural models drive local social organization, where do these models come from? Some sociologies argue that dominant models (a) reflect the interests and powers of the strongest actors in the environment, or (b) emerge from evolutionary selection or functional adaptation.

Both lines of argument fall short in the modern system. Neither easily explains many of the world's most dynamic movements. Powerful nation-states and dominant corporations did little to spur the massive environmental protection (Frank et al. 1999) or human rights movements (Ramirez and Meyer 2002). Nor did they, in reality, lead modern world movements for scientific expansion (Drori et al. 2003; Schofer 1999) or organizational rationalization (Drori et al. 2006). Nor did they fuel various worldwide movements around education, such as Education for All (Chabbott 2002) or higher education's enrollment explosion (Schofer and Meyer 2005). And while ex-post facto accounts can attribute functional qualities to environmental protection, human rights, etc., empirical evidence of their supposed benefits is often fleeting (see, e.g., Schofer, Ramirez, and Meyer 2000 on the science-development tie).

Institutional arguments point out that all these broad social movements are shaped by highly institutionalized collective authorities—many associated with the university.

These authorities eschew sectarian interests and instead putatively represent common goods and universal truths (Meyer and Jepperson 2000). In all the cases listed above, professionals imbued with authority from the knowledge system and the sciences play agenda-setting roles. So do the widest variety of non-governmental associations (Boli and Thomas 1999), operating on both national and global scales. And so do social movements operating in the same ways. Professionals, associations, and social movements—in the name of collective interests—function as creators and carriers of national and world models in the modern system. And finally, institutionalists call attention to the ways the world’s stratification system upholds successful cases operating as admired models, rather than as simply working through power and dominance.

### 3. Enacted Institutional Models are Likely to be Disconnected from Local Practice and Realities

As emphasized above, institutional theories envision local structures as embodying wider models. Such models facilitate and direct local organizing, and local situations gain meaning, authority, and legitimacy by conforming. If a local business gains stability by organizing according to standard legal and professional models, it is even truer that a local university—lacking production or profit as guide—lives and dies by its formal conformity to wider rules.

A powerful implication of the institutional perspective here is obvious: It is often more important to embody exogenously legitimated proprieties than it is to adapt these forms to local possibilities and demands. In institutional theory the gap between the legitimated model and its immediate enactment is referred to as “loose coupling” or

“decoupling” (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer and Scott 1983; Weick 1976). Vis-à-vis higher education, it is clear that universities must observe proper standards formally, whether or not they can be maintained in practice. Thus, for example, a formal commitment to faculty research must be made even by a resource-starved university. Likewise, high admissions standards can have loopholes that distort outcomes without overtly challenging meritocratic ideals. Even when the gap is noted, the formally compliant university gets credit for at least playing by the rules of the game.

## II. INSTITUTIONAL EXPLANATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Having reviewed some core ideas of institutional theory in sociology, we turn to the lines of argument and research these ideas put forward. A good deal of empirical research is involved, but also much reinterpretation of existing findings.

### 1. Explaining Global Isomorphism and Isomorphic Change

#### a. The University Is a World Institution.

Given the enormous variation in social, cultural, and economic conditions within countries and (even more) across the world, most lines of sociological theory would predict extreme variation in the character of educational institutions in different national or regional locales, and very different trajectories of growth and change. Institutional theories, fairly uniquely, predict isomorphism and isomorphic change.

This is perhaps the single most important implication arising from institutional theory. If higher educational structures, like universities and colleges, reflect common

models in national or world environments, they should show unexpected similarities across diverse settings and change in similar ways over time. And by all accounts, the university is indeed a central historic global institution, core to the distinctive trajectory of Western and now world society (see, e.g., Eisenstadt 1986, 1987 on the heteronomy of the intellectuals).

The empirical literature provides clear evidence on the issue: educational systems are remarkably similar around the world, and increasingly so over time. Historically higher education, taking the form of the university, spread around the world with a great deal of isomorphism in aspiration and content (Riddle 1990, 1993). The university's medieval roots were cosmopolitan and universal, and it spread wherever the Western system spread, retaining universalistic aspirations (Rashdall 1987 (1895); Thorndike 1944; Altbach 1998). The same isomorphism holds in research on the diffusion and cross-national expansion of the university in the contemporary period. Windolf (1997) shows that similar patterns of higher-educational expansion characterize several different Western countries. Schofer and Meyer (2005), meanwhile, find consistent patterns of enrollment growth worldwide over the twentieth century, especially over the last half-century.

Second, studies that attend to the curricular content of the university show the same patterns. The university evolves as a global institution, retaining much of its medieval cultural character through most of the eighteenth century, shifting into a more modern and scientific mode in the nineteenth century, and into an even broader rationalism in the twentieth century. Frank and Gabler (2006; Gabler and Frank 2005) analyze changes in faculty composition across a set of universities worldwide, through

most of the twentieth century, and show consistent global trends and increasing isomorphism over time, yielding dramatically expanded emphasis on the social sciences, sharply contracted attention to the humanities, and slightly weakened focus on the natural sciences. Across the branches of learning, the so-called applied fields outperform their so-called basic counterparts (Brint 2002b). Drori and Moon (2006), and Ramirez and Wotpika (2001) show the same patterns in analyzing student enrollments by field for the last third of the century. Even when examining prestigious outliers like Oxford, one finds that the curricular trends therein parallel world trends (Ramirez 2006a).

Third, the global character of the institution is indicated by its own self-referential conceptions. Schools identify themselves with the category “university” and vigorously seek to be accredited as such, enhancing their longevity in doing so. As Clark Kerr famously notes (1987, and elsewhere), most of the really long-lived organizations in the world are universities. Riddle (1990) furthermore notes that higher-educational institutions go to great lengths to portray themselves as universities, often parading unrealistic institutional histories or self portraits with much of the “invention of tradition” typical of nation-states themselves (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

#### b. The University Is a National Institution and Organizational Form.

With the breakdown of integrated medieval Christendom, and the rise of the Westphalian Europe of national states, the university tended to become disconnected from the Church and Empire, and closely linked to the emergent national (and subnational) states. In terms of cultural content and the nature of academic authority, it retained its global and universalistic forms and aspirations. But organizationally, the

nineteenth century universities generally became more nationalized, leading to their depiction as “laboratories of nationalism” (Reisner 1922) and supporters of the national project (Readings 1996).

So, studies that attend to the organizational form of the university tend to emphasize a very different pattern than the culturally globalized one noted above. If the university is, in terms of cultural content, surprisingly homogeneous around the world – and tends to be isomorphic in change trajectories to -- it is organizationally quite variable across national boundaries, and sometimes across strata or category within national states. For instance, countries differ dramatically on how much their higher education is public or private (Levy 1986). They differ greatly and systematically on patterns of organizational structure and control: the landmark studies undertaken by Burton Clark and his many colleagues provide very dramatic evidence on the extreme organizational differences in variables like degree of university (or professorial) autonomy, differentiation, and the like (Clark 1983, 1987, or even 1998; see also Schriewer 2004).

Studies in this tradition also suggest some qualifications on overall generalizations about isomorphism. These studies see cross-national variations in organizational structure as also affecting variations in the cultural content carried and transmitted by the university. Some university systems are relatively closed to change and to broad linkages to changing societies, while others are strikingly open (Ben-David and Zlockzower 1962; see the detailed contrast between German and American universities in Lenhardt 2005). Ramirez (2003, 2006a, 2006b) also emphasizes these differences, contrasting the American tendency to celebrate university linkages with

society (e.g., in the land-grant universities) with European traditions that create sharp boundaries against society (as in Germanic cases).

Ramirez's observation calls attention to a central distinction. The university, practically everywhere, claims an intimate tie to a universal and global or cosmopolitan knowledge system. But in the whole modern period, it brings this knowledge to bear within the frame of a particular (commonly national) polity (this is also a central point made by Riddle 1990). And its organizational structure, as opposed to its cultural content and authority, reflects the organization of that particular polity or state. Thus, American universities often develop as private formal organizations, with a good deal of embeddedness in both the "civil society" and market structure, while continental universities operate more directly under the authority of the bureaucratic state.

In a sense, the organizational structures of higher education reflect political institutional frames rather than educational ones. In more centralized polities, universities tend to be more centrally authorized and funded, and professors. One main implication of this difference is that perceived success or failure in higher education in more centralized polities is more likely to be attributed to the state or to a national educational ministry than to an entrepreneurial university president or a friendly benefactor. And thus reforms repairing perceived failure are likely to occur through more centralist routes. But this difference in the locus of the perceived success or failure account is not likely to strongly correlate with differences in the actual content of instruction and research. For this reason, few empirical studies find tight linkages between the organizational structures of higher education and the actual content of instruction and research (but see Lenhardt 2005 for examples of exceptions). For

instance, the centrality of the study of social inequality in our own field of sociology holds true across national systems of higher education, despite well-known organizational differences.

Moreover, what nation-state–based variations have occurred in university contents appear to have waned over time. Cross-national differences in overall academic profiles declined over the twentieth century (Frank and Gabler 2006) and, across a broad sample of universities worldwide, the field of history became increasingly less oriented to particular nation-states (Frank et al. 2000).

This increased homogeneity now seems to extend even to the organizational structures of higher education. Ironically, the European countries that led the breakdown of the more cosmopolitan medieval university system, and tied the university closely to the emergent national state, now experience a concerted effort at organizational isomorphism. The “Bologna Process,” reflecting recent agreements at standardization, is having great impacts on university systems throughout the continent (see, e.g., Kruecken and Meier 2006, Teichler 2002).

Overall, higher-educational systems exhibit even more isomorphism nationally than globally—topics, fields, and credentials tend to have many commonalities (for a comparison of trends in the history curricula at Harvard and Wisconsin over the twentieth century, see Frank, Schofer, and Torres 1994). For example, the contents of syllabi in the sociology of education field exhibit little dependence on the legal status of the university, its overall prestige, or the extent of federal grants awarded to its faculty (see the American Sociological Association’s website for a collection of Sociology of Education syllabi). Successful innovations are copied throughout national systems (Kraatz and

Zajac 1996; Soule forthcoming, 1997). This is especially notable in American higher education. The American system (a) is very weakly controlled by integrated political authorities; (b) has very diverse constituency bases; and (c) has widely varying levels of resources. Nevertheless, there is surprising homogeneity in definitions, content areas, degrees, and the like. Students in all sorts of schools are seen as “college students,” and graduates have surprisingly similar rights and opportunities (but see Karabel 2005; Dougherty 1994). And many analyses of the individual effects of higher education show very weak effects of school characteristics, in comparison to the background properties of the individual students themselves.

In countries in which higher education is more centrally controlled, schools are sometimes structured in clearly distinct categories with sharply different status and rights. Here, national level institutions yield distinctive charters that sharply differentiate among schools and/or students (Meyer 1970, 1977). Formal differentiation can occur along axes of stratification (as between universities and polytechnics, in some countries) or along disciplinary boundaries (e.g., special universities of engineering or science). In some such instances, very substantial distinctions between the opportunities available to students follow.

## 2. Expanded Higher Education as Support for the National State of High Modernity

Clearly, there are world-wide models for higher education, and these models render higher education as essential to the successful national state. And in fact higher education spreads in rather standardized forms wherever the nation-state system spreads.

This means that universities typically emerge concomitant with independent national identities and state organizations.

But none of the models involved are static; nor are their real-world embodiments. With the consolidation of the nation-state system around the turn of the nineteenth century, and then its spread to the New World and diffusion worldwide, the globally institutionalized model of higher education expanded and changed. Thus, countries were dealing with moving targets. Institutional theory, as discussed above, helps explain why higher education around the world reflects common models. It also helps explain why these common models promoted almost universal higher-educational expansion in the period from around 1800 to World War II.

a. Higher Education and Modernity.

During the nineteenth century, the competitive nation-state moved rapidly to claims to authority over and responsibility for governing domestic and international public life. The nation-state's goals, increasingly, were rationalized under the rubrics of Progress and Justice, and its competence to produce these goals was rooted in a newly emerging knowledge system (Toulmin 1989; Schofer 2001, 2003). The imagined powers of science and rationality took on mythic status during this period, as did notions of a national and/or civilizational high culture descending variously from Athens, Rome, or Jerusalem.

Higher education, increasingly through the century, became the institutional locus of this new knowledge system. The old university of the early modern period—training a very few priests, lawyers, doctors, and teachers—came to life. More rapid expansion

began—in the sheer number of universities, in the number of countries with universities, in student enrollments, and in the range of scholarly topics. Higher education, which had grown slowly and steadily through previous centuries, embarked on a rapid upward trajectory (Riddle 1990). Because higher education was expanding as a model-driven institution—growing to produce a progressive and equitable future rather than to manage a stable society—it expanded on a very widespread basis. Growth occurred not simply in areas with industrial or commercial development but everywhere the new model of national society spread. Higher education expanded both in developed Europe and in rural America, for instance. Later, much of this expansion would be justified in terms of human capital (as progress) and of citizenship and human rights (as justice).

b. Modernity and the Survival and Growth of the University.

One core problem in the study of the historical development of higher education is the survival and growth of the university as its key locus. Over the last two centuries, there have been so many clear practical and theoretical reasons why it should have lost out in the long-term expansion of higher education. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, critics accused the university of being archaic, linked to the old regime and its culture, and in need of replacement by specialized education in emergent sciences and technologies. Thus late into the nineteenth century, Andrew Carnegie lamented that the worst thing that could happen to a young man was to get a college education. It was thought that a new system was needed, tuned to the specializations required by a more complex and differentiated economy, state, and society.

In more radical countries, the university was indeed partially replaced. In France, a set of specialized institutions for state service appeared. The United States, through the Jacksonian destruction of core elite monopolies (Hofstadter 1963), witnessed the rise of a college system. And in other countries such as Germany and Spain, a wave of university deaths also occurred (Riddle 1990, 1993). By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the university was back everywhere.

The explanatory question is why the modernizing differentiating society did not, as many expected and sought (or feared), generate specialized training institutions linked to its structural needs, but rather returned to—and expanded—the university. By the end of the twentieth century, the process had gone so far that in many countries, even business had found a home in universities (Moon 2002), as had ethnic and women's studies programs, influenced by multiculturalism and other innovations in inclusiveness (Brint 2005).

To understand this, it is important to look at the institutionalized cultural base underlying the extensive claims to technical sophistication made by nineteenth-century modernity. Taken at face value, these might indeed have required a good deal of specialized higher-educational training. But these claims, more than reflecting functional realities of society at the time, constituted rather a myth of the unified authority, power, and sovereignty of the growing national state. The university may have been an inefficient producer of actual governing capabilities at the individual level, but it was an excellent locus of expanded governmentality at the collective level (Foucault 1991). It supported a claim to unified knowledge and authority, rooted in the most universal principles. In other words, the university supported the production of a whole system of

knowledge together with assumptions about the world, more than it supported the installation of knowledge itself. The university qua institution, in short, was more important (and efficient) than the university as organization.

Any realistic examination of the curriculum of the nineteenth-century university, in practically any country, makes the situation clear (Frank and Meyer 2006). At that time, the university was sustaining a high rationalistic (and national or civilizational) culture, more than training people for positions in the differentiated society. At the supposedly land-grant University of Wisconsin in 1879, for example, fully 32 percent of the students were studying the Ancient Classical curriculum, built around Latin and Greek, and another 39 were studying the Modern Classical curriculum, in which French or German replaced Greek. The rise of our own field of sociology, at the end of the century, furthermore illustrates the point: in the complete absence of useful knowledge or technical sophistication, sociology arose on the claim that a whole arena of human life could be analyzed and managed in light of scientific principles— principles that were as yet unknown but were to be created in the future (Hamilton and Sutton 1989).

The unity of the university survived, thus, as a core cultural base of high modernity, not as an effective training system for the human parts of the new machine. Newman, Humboldt, and Hutchins live on in the history of the university as core enactors of the “city of intellect” (Brint 2002), not as successful organizational leaders or managers.

### 3. Globalization and the Post-Modern University

Parallel to the explanatory points about the expansion (and survival) of the university in the period of high national modernity, similar issues have developed for the period since World War II.

#### a. Explaining Global Expansion

A key elucidating question is why higher education expanded so explosively beginning about 1955. The facts of the matter are not in dispute. In 1900, less than one per cent of a global cohort could be found in higher education. In 1950, the number was up to perhaps two to three percent. Now, it is around 20 per cent (Schofer and Meyer 2005). A country like Kazakhstan now has about as many university students as the whole world had in 1900. Note that this expansion was based on opening the doors to various segments of the population that had been historically excluded from the university just about everywhere—most prominently, women. After World War II, the number of women in higher education increased both as a proportion of the age cohort and as a share of total tertiary enrollments (Bradley and Ramirez 1996). The expansion took place across curricular domains (Ramirez and Wotipka 2001). Women's share of university places increased even at the most elite institutions, including Oxford (Soares 1999) and in the Ivy League (Karabel 2005). Also during this period, the university's curricular coverage expanded greatly, bringing all sorts of matters into university focus that had for centuries been excluded. The rise of the social sciences, undoubtedly, is the most striking such change. Absent world models of progress and justice, and their national and local enactments, it is difficult to make sense of these ongoing world trends.

Classic functionalist explanations (left or right) fail to explain the university's extraordinary recent expansion: there is simply no evidence whatsoever that the growth was mainly driven by the integrative needs of the social order or by the requirements of class reproduction. In terms of role training, the occupational structures of developed countries shifted steadily over the whole century, with no dramatic or discontinuous leap in professionalization after the War that would account for intensified growth (see also Windolf 1997). Moreover, university expansion characterized the poor or developing countries almost as much as the developed ones.

Competition and conflict explanation are often employed (Collins 1971, 1979; Boudon 1973; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; and others). The idea is that with mass educational expansion, status-competition and group-competition processes shift to the higher educational level, and inflationary expansion results. It is generally argued that this process occurs in weak or decentralized states, which are unable to stop it. (This is one classic explanation of rapid and early American expansion.). But this explanatory story has limits. First, it does not explain why education becomes, worldwide, the legitimated principal basis of status competition. Second, it does not explain why elites powerful enough to control success educationally would keep expanding education rather than simply restricting access for their lower-status competitors (Rubinson 1986). And third, it does not explain why modern societies and their elites generally proclaim the value of university expansion, rather than worrying about the over-education involved. Indeed in previous periods, much elite concern about over-expanded higher education could be found (Shils 1971; Dore 1976; Freeman 1976). For one thing, it was seen as inefficient. For another, it was seen as generating excessive social aspirations and

expectations, and thus anomie. Such ideas now seem to have lost legitimacy and almost disappeared: the World Bank, in supporting expanded and improved higher education for the whole developing world, does not mention them (World Bank 2000).

Concerns about the putative inefficiencies and anomie-generating consequences of “over-education” can still be found in some elite quarters, perhaps especially in Europe. But the respective elites and political forces have been completely ineffective in actually constraining the explosive current expansion of higher education (Schofer and Meyer 2005). And the current European “Bologna Process” in fact involves a number of pressures for continued rapid expansion. Interestingly, the only elites in the post-war world that had the will and power to slow or block expansion were the Communist parties. Concerned to match education with national needs, and even more concerned to block the rise of schooled elites that would weaken the proletariat and its party, eastern country after country in fact slowed higher educational expansion in the 1970s and 1980s. The story is told in detail by Lenhardt and Stock (2000, and elsewhere).

The decline of the idea of over-education assessed in relation to the needs of national society turns out to be a key to the expansion question. In the pre-war period of high modernity, national-state society was the clear locus of higher education. This society was seen as a bounded corporate body with a limited set of available roles: education was supposed to produce people in numbers appropriate to this relatively fixed role structure. World War II, a depression, human-rights disasters, a Cold War, decolonization, and the emergent nuclear age—all undercut the legitimacy of this brand of nationalist and corporatist imagery (Djelic 1998). The dominance of the United States in the post–World War II period—much more liberal and vastly less corporatist than the

former European powers—furthered the shift. The emergent model of society was more conceptually fluid, and increasingly oriented toward an expanding world society. Thus the fashionable notion of “globalization” describes fundamental changes not only in production and exchange systems and governance structures, but also in cognitive models of society (Robertson 1992), changes increasingly extending to all humanity (Boli forthcoming).

According to the new and resolutely optimistic model of society, individual and social progress could be achieved everywhere. Development theories became widespread, guiding the main world policies of dominant countries and institutions like the World Bank and the United Nations. Individual development—meaning education—would produce (practically by definition) social progress, and with it a more just and equitable order. Thus in the new cultural and organizational blueprints, education was by no means treated as a training ground for a fixed set of roles in a stable national social order. It was rather the root source of human, social, cultural, and economic capital. In the new model, there could never be too much—more education was always better. Thus educational expansion acquired the highest legitimacy in terms of both individual and collective good. In this way, a new globally institutionalized model of society generated a new and expanded model of higher education, and explosive growth resulted worldwide (Schofer and Meyer 2005).

#### b. Explaining the Success of the University in the Context of Globalization.

The huge contemporary expansion of higher education occurs mainly in integrated institutions claiming university-equivalent academic status. But despite the

striking success of the university —multiplication in its numbers, explosion in its enrollments, proliferation in its direct objects of study, etc.—an elaborate popular and academic literature bemoans crisis and breakdown in the present context. On the research side, the core of the university is seen as fragmenting in the face of funding and pressures from a variety of applied interests in society (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Kirp 2003). On the teaching side, the university's core is thought to be breaking down under the joint pressures of extreme modern specialization, applied and vocational training, competition from the non-academic world, and the loss of central academic values (Gumport 2000). Mostly, these changes are depicted fearfully, as cultural destruction (Readings 1996; Aronowitz 2000). Sometimes, they are accepted—and even lauded—as the necessary triumph of organizational rationality and efficiency, as in the celebration of entrepreneurial universities (Clark 1993; Branscomb and Keller 1998).

The university's present triumph and success as a global institution, in other words, is also one in which fragmentation and breakdown are envisioned. In this sense, the present period parallels the nineteenth century, which was rife with fears and hopes about the university's breakdown.

The explanatory task is simply to understand, much as in the previous era, why the complex and differentiated post-modern society does not create a completely differentiated set of research and training institutions to support its elaborated and specialized role structure. The core answer is that the post-modern society, like the earlier modern one, rests on a bed of cultural assumptions involving universalistic values, human empowerment, scientific knowledge, and rationality. The university—while inefficient at preparing people for specialized roles, in comparison to direct role-training

arrangements—is extremely well positioned to support precisely such generalized notions. Students learn—and society itself learns—that all the specialized and professionalized roles of contemporary society are fundamentally based on universal scientific knowledge and rationality, and that with schooling, ordinary persons can be transformed to possess the relevant competencies. Actual role training is not the point—if it were, the university would indeed weaken and fragment, and more efficient competitors would win out. In an odd way, this emphasis on a schooled consciousness, in the modern system, reflects or reactivates an older notion of natural law to which modern doctrines of rationality and scientific knowledge are subordinated. The issue is beyond the aims of this paper, but worth analysis.

The institutional point is that post-modern society, much like its modern counterpart, ultimately rests on faith in science, rationality, and human capability, much like religious understandings. The unified university, no matter how inefficient at teaching specific occupational roles, is ideally set up to celebrate the unity of knowledge and cultural authority, and to affirm the extraordinary human capacity for agency in acting in the newly global world.

### c. The University and the Global “Knowledge Society.”

The comments above suggest that the much-heralded “knowledge society” is more important and realistic as a set of assumptions and cultural claims than it is as an actual depiction of a mundane social order. Only a very few countries could even plausibly be described as possessing a “knowledge economy.” And even in these, as we detail below, links between the university and the role system prove surprisingly weak.

Indeed, many headliners in the technology industry, including Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, do not possess a university degree.

Yet, the myth of the “knowledge society” is very much at the heart of the university’s centrality in the post-modern and increasingly global world. The present-day liberal world polity places great demands on social actors—nation-states, organizations, and individuals—to act on behalf of a variety of private and public ends. The global knowledge-society myth empowers these actors and provides the basis for coordination among them—resulting in much more action (collective and otherwise) than one might expect (Olson 1971; Drori et al. 2003, 2006). The university, science, and rationalized knowledge together supply a symbolic infrastructure that sustains the status of individuals and states as what are now called “actors,” and provides the basis for order in a globalized but stateless world. In this sense, the post-modern world bears some similarities to nineteenth-century America, as analyzed by de Tocqueville. Bringing order into their stateless world, the Americans celebrated—precisely as the global system now does—individual empowerment and capacity, scientific and meta-scientific principles, and the benefits of organizational rationalization. At the center of all these, the Americans placed a rapidly expanding system of education, precisely as the whole world does now.

The myth of the knowledge society makes it seem reasonable to suppose that our world can be held together by expanded and competent persons schooled in a common objective culture of science and rationality. The supposition is only partly unrealistic. As Cohen (1970) presciently noted some decades ago, our world is now crisscrossed by university-educated elites who share a great deal of cultural material (Nussbaum 1997).

The elites of many countries, it seems, communicate more easily with elites elsewhere than with the parochial populations of their own citizenries.

Indeed, scientific and university elites play a central role in global society, bolstered by the knowledge-society myth. Scientists and expert knowledge form the basis for much international mobilization and coordination. University-trained experts carry policy models around the world, acting as diffusers and receivers of innovations (Frank et al. 2000). For instance, university-trained economists played a key role in establishing neo-liberalism in Latin America (Gourinchas and Babb 2002). Likewise, scientists have played a critical role in spreading global environmentalism (Frank et al. 2000; Hironaka 2003). Indeed, much contemporary social change—on issues such as the environment, human rights, indigenous people’s movements, economic policy, and the like—can be traced in some significant part to a global web of “knowledge society” participants. (See, e.g., Suarez [2005] on human rights–education professionals.)

Globalization, and the associated powerful myths of a knowledge society, not only drive university expansion around the world, but also produce major changes in organizational structures. World society has no regulating and sheltering Ministry of Education under whose regulations a traditionally academic university could operate. It is an open and competitive place, much like the American society of de Tocqueville’s time (and our own). This produces a worldwide wave of managerialism in university structure, as with many other kinds of organizations (Drori et al. 2006; Moon 2002). The managed and administered university competes on an increasingly global scale, with a rapidly expanding set of regional or global schemes for rating and ranking and accrediting universities on standardized bases. The impact is strongest in Europe, and is

pressed by the Bologna process, but the effects are worldwide. Thus in far-off Korea, Hanyang University (a respected private school) announces a strategic plan (2005): “Hanyang’s recent ‘HYU Project 2010’ [with a] vision of fostering global leaders incorporates a plan to educate leaders, who can actively deal with issues relating to the global environment. . . The result of this development is to be Hanyang’s ranking as one of the most renowned universities in Korea. Furthermore, consequent of this domestic success, Hanyang plans to progress further in order to join the world’s top 100 universities by 2039. . .” Typical of the new and rationalized system coming into place worldwide, Hanyang reports its ratings on sixteen different dimensions evaluating its research, the success of its alumni, and overall university status.

Thus, the modern university functions as a purposive actor in a world that is globalized and rationalized. In this world of imagined homogeneity, standardized dimensions of ranking, certification, and accreditation make sense. Universities around the world can be compared, and rated on standard scales. And if they are effectively and purposively managed organizations, perhaps they can improve their rankings vis-à-vis all the other universities of the world.

#### 4. The Effects of Higher Education as an Institution

Traditional perspectives on higher education take the view that particular higher-educational programs produce knowledge and skill that tangibly impact individual role performance and social progress. The idea is that this occurs through research and innovation, certainly, but also through the productivity of trained individual graduates.

To those who see higher education as a potentially efficient training machine, this is the core justification for proliferation and growth.

It is thus interesting to observe (a) how little evidence consistently supports this core point over the last century of massive expansion of higher education (Rubinson and Browne 1994) and (b) how little difference the absence of evidence seems to have made in slowing the university's trajectory (Chabbott and Ramirez 2000).

To be sure, individuals with university degrees earn more than those without such credentials. But it has been difficult to show that university-trained individuals create more productivity (Boudon 1973) or even that they outperform their less-well-educated peers (Berg 1970). Moreover, studies have failed to observe any aggregate effect of overall tertiary expansion on economic development, whereas strong beneficial effects of secondary education are routinely observed (Benavot 1992; Barro 1991; Levine and Renelt 1992; Schofer et al. 2000). This situation makes more sense if one conceives of higher education as an institution, i.e., if the university exists more to link the role structure of society to universalized cultural knowledge than to efficiently prepare graduates to fill these roles. Role learning, after all, is best produced by proximately located training—situations of practice, apprenticeship, and technical training. And more practical programs of this sort routinely do assess role-relevant learning and capacity. This is precisely what the university does not do; it has been criticized for this lapse for centuries. Rather than carrying on such criticism, perhaps it is better to consider why immediate outcome assessment is so consistently avoided in the university.

a. The Legitimization of Personnel and Knowledge for the Post-Modern Society.

Conceived as an institution, rather than as an organization for producing trained individual outputs, the university serves a highly collective function. It defines certain types of knowledge as authoritative in society, and authoritative on the basis of the highest cultural principles (e.g., science, rationality, natural law). Situating relevant knowledge in the context of general academic principles is a basic strategy for building authority throughout modern history. And organizing this knowledge as having, by social definition, been installed in a clearly demarcated category of certified persons is crucial (Collins 1979). Discussions of professionalization routinely note the importance of locating professional schooling near to the cultural center, and thus the university (e.g., Abbott 1988).

The historical success of these authority-building projects appears dramatically in the main research literatures on modern social stratification. In essentially all modern countries, the single most powerful predictor of the social status of an occupation is the education required for it, and held by its incumbents. The effect here is very clearly an institutional one—defined in cultural terms at the collective level. Often the rules giving preference to the educated are organized in the law, directly or indirectly. Specified levels of education are commonly required for occupational positions, and in any case assigning important positions on the basis of educational credentials is very highly legitimated. Discrimination on the basis of education—in stark contrast to discrimination on most other bases—is typically not illicit. Note that these requirements and legitimations do not usually rest on any actual inspection of the individuals being certified, or on any direct assessment of the knowledge thought to be salient. The legitimizations of personnel and knowledge are institutional and collective, not

individual. They arise over long periods of time, and they hold more or less constant worldwide.

Many concrete instances are discussed in the research literatures. Barrett (1995), for instance, ties the cross-national distribution of demographers to the rise of national population-control policies. Moon (2002) shows links between the rise of managerialism in business and the development of business schools and MBA programs. Wotipka and Ramirez (2004) find that the numbers of women in higher education correlate with the earlier establishment of women's studies courses. The causal relations, here, are obviously bidirectional. The rise of certified academic knowledge props up the expansion and authority of corresponding roles in modern society, and in turn, roles that gain importance root their success in academicized knowledge (Abbott 2005). Thus, expertise in population, management, and gender issues is bolstered by the consolidation of academic specializations in these domains.

All these more institutional connections are strengthened precisely because of the relative absence of individual- and activity-level linkages between training and work. If individuals were in fact allocated into positions on the basis of skills, and if implicated knowledge were indeed closely linked to organizational performance, the authority of higher education would be greatly weakened. And the legitimacy of the linkage claims between occupational activity and the highest cultural knowledge would be lowered. In short, the decoupling of concrete skills and individual capacities from the system that provides abstract certification maintains the university's collective cultural authority and capacity.

b. Institutionalized Higher Education and the Social Stratification.

The decoupling of local and practical and individual experience from the institutional linkages between higher education and society has strong effects on individual educational experience and outcomes. At every phase, the roles of the “student” and the “graduate” are organized in terms of very general institutionalized rules. And so they are experienced: The individual knows he or she is a student, acquiring credentials, and therefore possessing certified knowledge and capacity. Others know it, too. Under these conditions, it is less relevant whether the knowledge actually exists or is possessed by the student.

These insights provide the bases for a general explanation of one of the most central, but also most intellectually problematic, empirical observations in the sociology of American higher education. This is the finding that the extreme variations in resources and quality among higher-educational organizations often yield surprisingly modest differences in many social outcomes, with individual properties (abilities, intentions, and the like) held constant. The finding has a long history (Jacob 1957; Feldman and Newcomb 1969). It is constantly contested (see the reviews in Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). Many of the studies that do find positive “effects” fail to control for student selection (contrast Useem and Karabel 1986, and Bowen and Bok 1998, with Kruger and Berg 2002).

The finding seems very unreasonable to those analysts who see educational effects as resulting from the interactions and experiences students have in immediate circumstances. From an institutional point of view, however, the finding makes sense. The student has a role and an identity in what is really a national and global institution.

The role and the identity thus have transcendent meanings: they are known by the student and everyone around the student, including all sorts of gatekeepers in society. An individual's opportunities and expectations are substantially transformed by becoming a college graduate, and this transformation is in good part independent of the particular college or particular student experiences involved. The student acquires the generalized charter or status of a graduate (Meyer 1970). So over and above the individual properties (prominently including intentions, plans, and the whole apparatus of individual choice) that affect outcomes, the formal rules of the game matter greatly.

Thus, the particulars of one's university experience may show modest effects on one's life chances, but becoming a "graduate" generates very large effects on one's future life, and is known by everyone to do so. Naturally, a wide variety of intellectual and psychological effects follow. An individual who will experience all of his or her subsequent life course as a graduate is clearly a very different person from one who will experience life as a non-graduate.

Where effects can be found on individual life outcomes is where higher education is itself stratified and categorically demarcated. American community colleges, for instance, have weaker positive effects on their graduates than four-year schools (Dougherty 1994; Brint and Karabel 1989). In some countries, the opportunities available to polytechnic graduates are more limited—sometimes by law—than those available to university graduates, such that life outcomes differ sharply. The same effects occur in secondary education: for instance, students who attend secondary schools that do not confer access to higher education are obviously unlikely to attend. Similar effects can be found in comparing substantive educational programs. Specializing in a given

subject, even with individual properties held constant, can open doors if doing so is required, and known to be required, for entry into particular roles.

All these kinds of effects are built into the institutional structure of modern societies. They are cultural and organizational rules, whose implications and consequences affect individual life courses independent of the properties of the individuals involved. Naturally, as individuals become aware of the rules that govern their lives and opportunities, they acquire appropriate consciousness, abilities, and orientations.

### III. CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS

Higher education is, and has been, the central cultural institution of the modern system. Over many centuries, it links an ever-expanding set of specific activities, roles, and organizations to a universal and unified cultural core. And it defines categories of certified persons as carrying these linkages, and as possessing both the relevant cultural core and the specific authority and capacity to carry out the roles.

Several important things can be learned from thinking about higher education as an institution. First, attention can be more sharply directed to the world and national frames that provide higher education, and especially the university, with a compelling rationale. From its medieval origins to its post-modern incarnation, universities are not mainly local organizations justified by specific economic and political functions or shaped by particular historical legacies or power struggles. A much broader cultural and civilizational mission has always informed higher education. Its legitimacy and development throughout history have been linked to enacting this broader mission, which

today includes the idea that universities are sites for developments that lead to social progress.

This first point leads to a second one: universities (in contrast to other higher educational possibilities) have not merely endured but prevailed, despite all sorts of local inefficiencies, disjunctions, and criticisms. Town and gown tension—in the most general sense—has a well established pedigree, but this legacy has not stopped country after country from expanding its system of higher education, and organizing it around a university base. Everywhere universities play a central role in this expansion: efforts to kill the university have repeatedly failed. Theories that emphasize distinctive local or even distinctive national features cannot account for the global explosion of higher education after World War II. This unanticipated growth is clearly attuned to worldwide directives and transnational celebrations of the broadly accessible, socially useful, and organizationally flexible university. These directives and celebrations are found in international conferences and associations, and much transnational expertise mobilizes itself in support of the learning society and its university roots and ties.

A third point logically follows: higher education not only expands but is increasingly standardized around the world. While communities and countries vary with respect to resources and traditions, universities nevertheless grow more similar with respect to goals and programs for meeting these goals. Broad accessibility translates itself into more diverse student bodies in higher education cross-nationally. University curricula change and change in similar directions across higher education cross-nationally. Social progress goals lead to and are embellished in what is imagined to be more socially useful curricula: canonical gods embodied in the humanities give way to a

more rationalized and people-centered social-science curricula. Lastly, profound organizational differences reflecting local and national “path dependencies” are undercut by transnational standardization processes (Teichler 2002; Lenhardt 2005; Kruecken and Meier 2006). The latter ever more firmly situate universities in a global field, within which comparisons increase along multiple dimensions. Protestations of distinctiveness seem feeble; the Bologna declaration regarding higher education and the Shanghai world ratings of universities—both penetrate deeply.

These inferences seem to be at odds with much of the comparative education literature, which continues to emphasize distinctive national systems of higher education. This literature needs to be modified in three important ways: First, we need to recognize that universities emerged and developed before the age of nationalism. These universities were cosmopolitan and global in outlook; they become more nationalized in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Secondly, much of this nationalist flavor was evident at the level of formal organization and as regards the cultural account of the university, its charter, and its saga. But there were deeper commonalities among curricula than is generally recognized. Lastly, we are once again in a transnational or global era and this should lead to a narrowing of organizational differences across universities within and between countries. This is evident in the spread of business schools, for example, but it is important to recognize that other less industry-linked programs of study such as women’s studies are also diffusing. Much of this diffusion is positively theorized, evoking frames of excellence and equity.

Taken as a whole, these developments suggest that the mantra “no salvation outside higher education” is more deeply institutionalized today than at any earlier time.

The World Bank used to have qualms about higher education growth in less developed countries, but the manpower-planning inclination the Bank once shared with more centralized economies (e.g., Lenhardt and Stock 2000) is no more. Furthermore the profile of the “best” systems of higher education or “best” universities is more likely to be known worldwide due to the rise and activity of a cadre of transnational higher education experts. Trans-local comparisons and their implications are not new. But in a more integrated world we should find a plethora of higher education reforms holding up successful systems or universities as exemplars. All sorts of sober instrumental goals will be articulated, but the overriding process will continue to be one of proper identity enactment. We will see greater awareness of whether the right goals were articulated and less knowledge of whether these are realized. Universities will continue to be model-driven and the models will be worldwide in character and influence.

What further research directions are suggested by thinking about higher education as an institution? First—and perhaps obviously—we would predict that, net of other factors, the more isolated countries are less likely to experience higher educational growth. The case of Maoist China illustrates this point, as does the whole episode of Communist resistance to expansion (Lenhardt and Stock 2000). A parallel prediction is that more isolated cases will also be less standardized with respect to curricula, goals, and educational certification itself. Within Maoist China, and the Communist world in general, “red” could trump “expert.” Isolation here refers to limited or no contact with world educational conferences and associations as well as with universities and educational authorities from the main world centers. The research direction basically consists in creating a set of indicators of the degree of nations’ educational linkage to

world and regional educational models. A second and related avenue of inquiry is based on the idea that the probability of a country's or a university's adopting an educational program, reform, or objective is influenced by regional or world rates of similar adoptions. For example, universities are more likely to offer courses on human rights in their law schools or to launch environmental studies programs in a country or region where many other universities are already doing so.

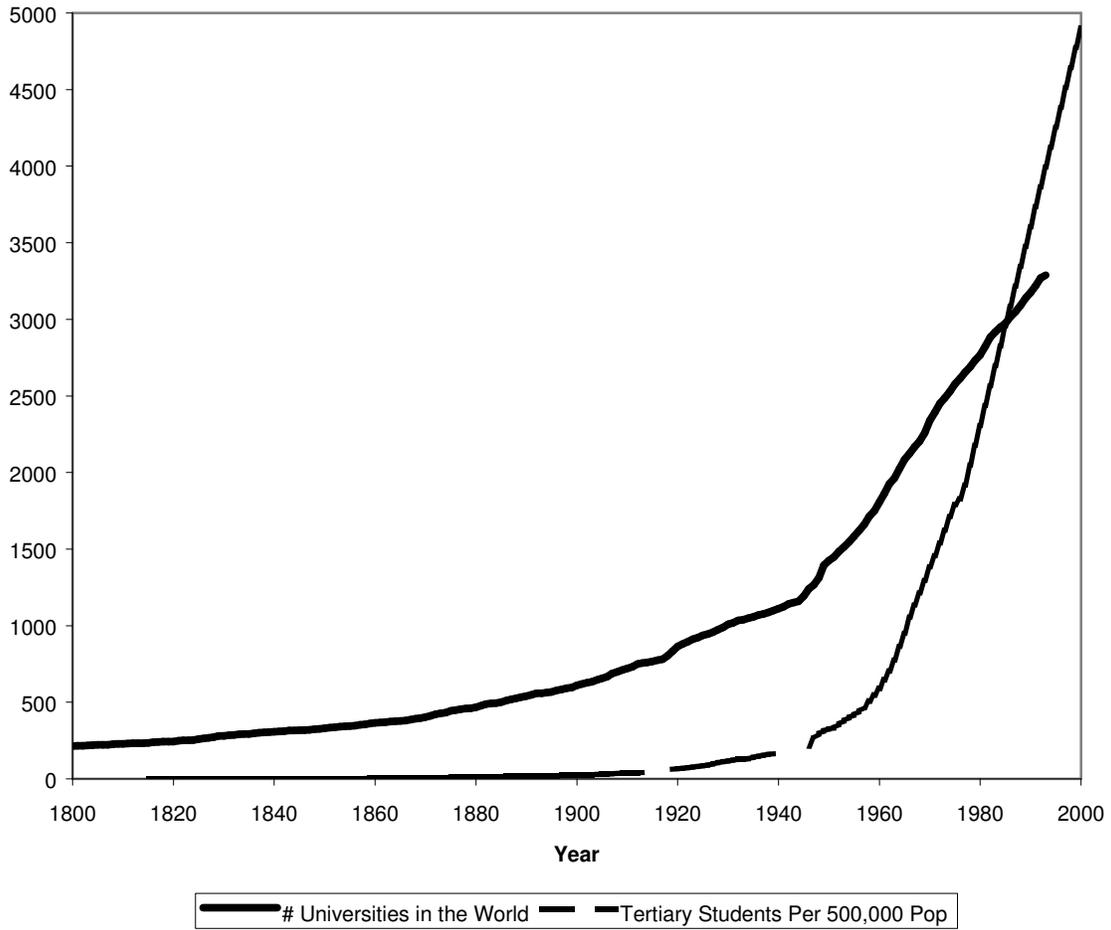
Comparing across eras instead of across regions or countries can reveal whether the current period indeed instances more world and regional educational conferences and associations, and whether higher rates of participation in these conferences and memberships in these associations are also peculiarly characteristic of the current era. An institutional perspective would expect to find these differences across time. That is, one would expect to find in place today a world with relatively thick educational networking, and in which network ties are relatively strong predictors of educational outcomes, such as growth and standardization.

Lastly, more qualitative research is needed to study world model construction and their enactment in local sites. We have contended that world models of progress and justice give rise to excellence and equity frames in higher education. We have further contended that many changes in higher education are rationalized around these frames. How this transformation plays out in specific systems of higher education or universities is an important question. We assume that the older and more prestigious universities are more able to resist change, especially if they are located in the older and relatively wealthier countries as well. But even these establishments have changed with the times—admitting women, developing non-traditional programs of study, differentiating

between professors and managers in the universities, etc. Still it would be interesting to see which emphases of the world educational regime—accessibility or usefulness or flexibility—are more resisted, for what reasons, and with what consequences.

The institutionalized character of higher education—which supports the organizational and role structures of contemporary society through highly cultural and collective processes—creates a web of tautological relations among central cultural knowledge, authority, and the widest variety of particular roles and activities. Higher education creates the presumption of legitimate knowledge and authoritative personnel carrying this knowledge. As a result, the concrete social inspection of the knowledge and personnel is often weakened or eliminated. The schooled individual, in part by social definition, carries the credential. And the schooled knowledge is part of it. In itself, this produces some strikingly standardized individual effects of higher education.

Figure 1: Worldwide Expansion of Universities and  
Post-Secondary Enrollments, 1800-2000



Sources: Banks 2001; Schofer and Meyer 2005; UNESCO 2000, 2004.

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