



2017

Normal Schools Revisited: A Theoretical Reinterpretation of the Historiography of Normal Schools

Garrett H. Gowen
Iowa State University

Ezekiel Kimball
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.luc.edu/jcshesa>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gowen, G. H. & Kimball E. (2017). Normal schools revisited: A theoretical reinterpretation of the historiography of normal schools. *The Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*, 3(1), 128-143.

This Conceptual Framework is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals and Magazines at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs* by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).

Normal Schools Revisited: A Theoretical Reinterpretation of the Historiography of Normal Schools

Garrett H. Gowen, Iowa State University
Ezekiel Kimball, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Abstract

This article provides a theory-driven account of the emergence, development, and ultimate disappearance of the normal school as a unique institutional form within higher education. To that end, this article engages new institutionalism in order to construct a composite narrative from the historiography of teacher education that counters the cursory treatment of normal schools in popular and widely used synthetic histories of higher education. This article also responds to the challenge of better integrating normal schools into the historiography of higher education and suggests future avenues for theory-driven history.

Keywords

normal schools, historiography, new institutionalism, institutional isomorphism, feminist institutionalism

ISSN 2377-1305
© 2017
Gowen & Kimball

Postsecondary institutions are not all created equally: they vary markedly in mission, audience, and quality (Bastedo & Gumpert, 2003; Eckel, 2008; Taylor & Morphew, 2010). As market forces intersect with institutional ambitions, the guidance of philanthropic organizations, and political will (e.g., Gasman & Drezner, 2008; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Iverson, 2012; Loss, 2012; Wilson, Meyer, & McNeal, 2012), individual institutions are forced to balance disparate competing pressures in order to chart an institutional course forward (Chetkovich & Frumkin, 2003). Not surprisingly, the end result is a range of institutional responses to a seemingly similar set of pressures.

However, although there is considerable range in institutional responses to environmental pressures, many of them follow similar patterns (Clark, 1978; Eckel, 2008; Trow, 1999). An analysis of the organizational field of higher education suggests the overall trend for the majority of higher education institutions is toward the expansion of access opportunities and the massification of postsecondary education (Loss, 2012; Trow, 1999, 2002). The theoretical lens offered by new institutionalism provides a plausible explanation for both the movement toward mass higher education and the myriad other ways that institutions differentiate themselves based on mission (e.g., Ayers, 2015; Lacy & Tandberg, 2014; Taylor & Cantwell, 2015). Briefly, new institutionalism holds that organizations that serve customers within a given market will respond to similar environmental pressures and will address those pressures in similar ways—thereby becoming more similar to one another over time. Environmental pressures to become increasingly similar are provided by forces such as regulatory pressures, the emulation of best practices, and overlap in the workforce.

In this article, we begin to integrate new institutionalist perspectives with the history of higher education by examining the development of normal schools in the 19th century. Among higher education researchers, new institutionalist interpretations have primarily been offered of recent shifts in mission, but the massification of higher education is part of a long historical evolution. Although historians like Nemec (2006) and Freeland (1992) have used new institutionalism to frame the development of American higher education, the new institutionalist approach remains infrequently used in studies exploring the history of higher education. In so doing, our work is consistent with a number of recent works that use historical evidence to apply, test, and refine theory to better explain historical evidence (Klein, 2011; Robbins, 2010). It is also consistent with recent efforts to use historical cases as a teaching tool or interpretive lens that can help to explain present conditions (Alridge, 2015; Kimball & Ryder, 2014). For example, recent works have combined historical evidence and social theory to examine the social construction of merit in educational systems (Baez, 2006), literacy education among African Americans during slavery (Gundaker, 2007), the development of the idea of social science education (Jacobs, 2013), and the role that a modernizing ideology has played in the development of American schools (Mehta, 2013).

Our selection of normal schools is deliberate. First, normal schools are part of a strand of literature addressing nondominant institutions (i.e., neither research universities nor liberal arts colleges) within the history of higher education (e.g., Gasman, 2007; Gasman & Drezner, 2008; Gasman, Spencer, & Orphan, 2015; Finnegan & Alleman, 2013; Finnegan & Cullaty, 2001; Ogren, 2003). Moreover, the systematic study of normal schools makes clear the extent to

which other institutional types were infused with societally dominant ideas about gender, class, and race (Acker, 1992; Butler, 2004; Kimmel, 2016). Second, normal schools are the subject of two competing bodies of historiographic literature—one covering higher education and the other teacher education. While seeking objectivity, these historical narratives reflect both the perspectival limitations of the historical record and the historians who produced them. Significantly, the historiographic accounts offered by synthetic histories of higher education (e.g., Geiger, 2015; Lucas, 1994; Rudolph, 1977; Thelin, 2004, 2011) and teacher education (e.g., Fraser, 2007; Herbst, 1989; Lucas, 1997; Ogren, 2005; Taylor, 2010) differ markedly. By relying on these two different accounts, we are able to construct a composite narrative that explicitly engages new institutionalism in a way that would not be possible given the cursory treatment of normal schools in many texts. Finally, although normal schools no longer exist, the institutions that replaced them—among them regional state universities, community colleges, and urban universities—still do. Our analysis offers a theoretical interpretation of the origin, expansion, and disappearance of normal schools that is logically consistent with explanations now being offered for their descendants.

Historical accounts and the ways in which they are written are not static but rather are rightfully subject to continuous reinterpretation and recontextualization (Evans, 2000; Iggers, 2005). This reinterpretation and its use to refine theoretical propositions is consistent with commonly applied historiographic techniques. Broadly, historiography is the study of how historians developed history as an academic discipline (Iggers, 2005). In narrower circumstances, however, historiography examines how historians have written about a particular subject,

which includes “the methods [they] use, the sources [they] explicate, and the theories [they] depend on” (Eisenmann, 2010, p. 59). Examining the ways in which the history of both normal schools and higher education have been written allows researchers to explore how such histories might be revisited.

To ground this historiographic analysis, we first summarize synthetic histories of higher education to describe the market niche to which they are typically assigned. We next describe the main tenets of new institutionalism in detail before using it to unpack the role of normal schools in histories of teacher education. Based on this analysis, we suggest that an understanding of normal schools grounded in new institutionalism might lead these institutions to be assigned a more prominent role in the historiography of higher education—one in which they are an integral part of the massification of higher education and create vital access opportunities for underserved populations. We close by offering some observations regarding how new institutionalist approaches might inform historical work in higher education moving forward.

The Normal School in Synthetic Histories of Higher Education

A full discussion of the role played by normal schools in the historiography offered in synthetic histories of higher education is a complex undertaking. As we will explore in this section, such complexity arises because the authors of such histories often use a truncated rendition of the history of normal schools to elucidate their perceived failings relative to more well-established institutional models. Furthermore, the narratives regarding normal schools contained in synthetic histories have changed little over time: for example, in recognition of new scholarship that challenged the prevail-

ing interpretation of the history of higher education, Thelin (2004) published a second version of this work in 2011. Although substantially updated in many other regards, the section on normal schools remains basically unchanged (cf. Thelin, 2004, 2011)—despite the fact that it neglects to discuss the work of Ogren (2005), which has replaced Herbst's (1989) as the definitive work on the subject (Fraser, 2007). Thelin (2004, 2011) instead relied extensively upon Herbst's older work.

Lucas (1994) provided a paradigmatic example of the way that normal schools are discussed in synthetic histories:

Unable or unwilling to compete directly with universities in offering specialized professional training, many colleges set about the task of redefining themselves exclusively as teaching institutions. . . . Special-purpose or regional institutions, in contrast, rather quickly succumbed to the research-dominated model and sought to acquire the trappings of a full-fledged university . . . the normal school as an institution dedicated to teacher preparation affords a prime example . . . normal schools had long concentrated their efforts on the training of classroom practitioners for the lower schools. Successive name changes over time pointed to their evolution in an entirely new direction, however. Thus the "normal school" of the 1890s, which up until then had been little more than a glorified high school, became the "state teachers' college" of the teens and twenties. A few decades later, it had become the "state college." Eventually, much expanded, it took pride in being the "state university." (p. 187)

In brief form, the Lucas (1994) excerpt reveals the recurrent themes in normal

school historiography as represented in synthetic histories. These themes reveal that normal schools (a) are most often discussed in aggregate and situated as part of larger historiographic trends that impact multiple institutional types; (b) provide little in the way of meaningful curricular content, but do offer avenues for the diversification of the student body; and (c) disappear rather swiftly into other more progressive institutional forms.

Normal schools are most often situated within larger dislocations in the role and structure of higher education that occurred following the decline of post-Republican higher education (Geiger, 1992, 2011). According to this depiction, normal schools emerged to address an unmet need for teacher education, which historically had been inattentively addressed by the liberal arts course at more traditional institutions (Rudolph, 1977; Geiger, 2015). However, with the expansion of public primary and secondary education (Thelin, 2004, 2011), a larger and more stable supply of qualified teachers was required (Thelin, 2004). Both Geiger (2000) and Thelin (2004) assigned an additional historiographic function to the normal schools—although they differ in the details. Thelin (2004) indicated that the normal school served as a catalyst for the growth of private institutions, which could not meet the high standards expected of a proper liberal arts college but were still needed to provide localized access to higher education. Geiger (2000) took a slightly different line of argument, suggesting that publicly supported normal schools provided "competition from below" that eventually led to the decline of the multipurpose college. In both cases, however, they agreed that the normal schools represent a diversification of institutional forms and student access pathways. Significantly, the major synthetic histories seem to agree in large

measure that individual normal schools were of little import—with only Thelin (2004, 2011) and Geiger (2015) mentioning specific institutions by name. That inattention to the role of specific institutions seems to highlight the fact that these synthetic histories regarded the normal school as a mildly interesting historiographic footnote rather than a major causal actor in the history of higher education.

Discussions of the curriculum provide perhaps the clearest example of the way in which synthetic histories dismiss the importance of normal schools. Described as providing an education more consistent with secondary schooling than higher education (Thelin, 2004, 2011), normal schools were depicted as having emerged out of rural academies rather than colleges (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976). Geiger (2015) described the curriculum as “a course of up to 3 years (which few completed) of professional training for teachers of rural primary schools” (p. 272). These argument leads to an image of the normal school as a hybridized version of high school and college (Thelin, 2004, 2011). As Geiger noted (2015), however, the normal school faced considerable pressure to conform to the ideals of higher education from the outset—including coursework focused on the accouterments of liberal culture and the development of what would today be called the co-curricular opportunities. These sorts of collegiate trappings included coursework that provided exposure to classic works of literature and participation in a host of literary societies, athletic teams, and Greek Life organizations. In part, this environmental pressure reflects the diverse audience that attended normal schools.

As noted by Brubacher and Rudy (1976) and Geiger (2015), normal schools provided access to rural students. They also

accepted a number of students from recent immigrant groups who were largely unable to attend other institutional forms (Geiger, 2015). Most importantly, however, normal schools were major avenues of access for female students prior and subsequent to the emergence of large numbers of women’s colleges (Thelin, 2004, 2011). In fact, female students made up the majority of enrollments across all normal schools and at most individual institutions (Geiger, 2015). Thelin (2004) ultimately concluded: “Any discussion of the advanced education of women in the nineteenth century ultimately overlaps with the subject of teacher education” (p. 84). In this regard, we might characterize normal schools as particularly progressive rather than the prevailing image of backwardness—although the synthetic histories do not explicitly make this argument.

In fact, Rudolph (1962) suggested that this desire for access to higher education as a vehicle for mobility served to undo the very need for normal schools, and indeed, normal schools did not last long. According to Geiger (2015), there were roughly 35 normal schools in 1870 and 140 in 1900. Yet, while normal schools grew and expanded rapidly, they were planting the seeds for their own destruction. As Rudolph (1977) noted, the late 19th century saw many institutional forms—including Catholic colleges, historically Black colleges, and normal schools—move toward a four-year curricular model. Geiger placed this shift in the 1880s and argued that “academic drift” led them to adopt differential two- and four-year courses wherein an education appropriate to high school was afforded in the first and a college-level education in the second (p. 277). Many normal schools moved away from their historical origins as inclusive, access-oriented institutions as this curricular shift occurred. As Lucas (1994) noted in the excerpt that frames this section, many

normal schools became full-fledged colleges and universities—with other synthetic histories noting their transition into other important institutional forms such as urban universities (Geiger, 2015), comprehensive colleges (Thelin, 2004), and community colleges (Rudolph, 1962).

New Institutionalism as a Theoretical Lens

As evidenced by the preceding section, the treatment of normal schools in synthetic histories of higher education is quite truncated, providing opportunities for a more nuanced discussion. In order to anchor this treatment, we utilize new institutionalist theory. New institutionalism provides meaningful context for the evolution of normal schools as well as different perspectives and explanations for the origins and disappearance of normal schools as institutions. Although less frequently employed by historians of higher education (Freeland, 1992; Nemeč, 2006), new institutionalism is utilized in other higher education research (e.g., Ayers, 2015; Lacy & Tandberg, 2014; Taylor & Cantwell, 2015). Consequently, by adopting it for historical analysis as well, we can produce a theoretically consistent narrative of higher education that integrates and adequately addresses the critical role of normal schools.

As Laden, Milem, and Crowson (2000) note, there are many forms of institutional theory. Concrete notions of institutions, such as legislatures or the legal system, largely drove institutional theory up until the 1950s (Lowndes, 2010). More recent theorizing, however, suggested that institutions are more nuanced and subject to more debate than prior conceptions (Laden et al., 2000; Lowndes, 2010; March & Olsen, 1984). Zucker (1987) broadly conceived of institutions in two contexts. The first is the

environment as an institution, where the environment of an organizational field exerts a normative order to which organizations conform in the interests of resource availability and long-term survival. Institutional environments also encourage reproduction within the normative order, and over long periods of time organizations will begin to resemble one another through isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 1991; Zucker, 1987). It is important to note that isomorphism occurs not out of a drive for efficiency but instead arises from a purely reproductive imperative that brings organizations within a field into line with established rules and embedded formal practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Zucker, 1987).

The second is the organization as an institution, where implemented institutional elements, such as rules, structures, culture or history, symbols, or values, emerge “from within the organization itself or from imitation of other similar organizations” (Zucker, 1987, p. 446). In this context, institutional elements are “easily transmitted to newcomers, are maintained over long periods of time without further justification or elaboration, and are highly resistant to change” (p. 446). Institutional organizations emphasize whatever elements allow for common and formalized structures, processes, and behaviors across similar organizations, and that grant the most stability and continuity over time (Zucker, 1987). The features of stability and continuity are notable for the purposes of historical analysis because we can identify commonalities between modern institutions and their forebears. New institutionalism draws its value as a theoretical lens from its flexibility and multifaceted substrains, which highlight different aspects of institutions through a common framework. This paper draws on Zucker’s dualistic definition of institutions in addition to two important substrains of new institutionalism: institu-

tional isomorphism and feminist institutionalism.

Institutional Isomorphism

Most notably described by DiMaggio & Powell (1983), *institutional isomorphism* seeks to explain the growing homogeneity among organizations in a given organizational field. Structural change has been traditionally understood to be motivated by competition and the need for efficiency, while organizational change, which in this case paradoxically refers to “the process of making organizations similar to one another” (p. 148), can also occur without actual gains in efficiency (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). DiMaggio and Powell largely attributed this conformity to the structuration of organizational fields:

Fields can only exist to the extent that they are institutionally defined ... which consists of four parts: an increase in the extent of interaction among organizations in the field; the emergence of sharply defined interorganizational structures of domination and patterns of coalition; an increase in the information load with which organizations in a field must contend; and the development of a mutual awareness among participants in a set of organizations that they are involved in a common enterprise. (p. 148)

Selection, or as it is more commonly referred to, natural selection, acts with great force in the early years of the structuration of a field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Over time, the pressure to avoid obsolescence leads institutions to respond to the organizational field by attempting to read the structuration environment, a collection of powerful forces that compel organizations to become similar to each other in a process known as isomorphism (DiMaggio

& Powell, 1983). Isomorphism generally is a constraining force compelling organizations to resemble one another under common environmental circumstances (Hawley, 1968). DiMaggio and Powell focused on the institutional derivation of isomorphism, which took into account certain modern realities of organizational culture: “Organizations compete not just for resources and customers, but for political power and institutional legitimacy, for social as well as economic fitness” (p. 150).

Normative pressures are derived from the professionalization of a field, which DiMaggio and Powell (1983) interpreted as the “collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the conditions and methods of their work, to control the production of producers, and to establish a cognitive base and legitimation for their occupational autonomy” (p. 152). Professional standards dictate certain requirements for membership, and normative isomorphism results from the conformity inherent in these standards. Professionalism further evinces isomorphism through its usage of higher education and professional training institutions as socialization agents that both develop and distribute normative organizational patterns of behavior (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Feminist Institutionalism

The centrality of norms in influencing institutions and organizations is a central focus of new institutionalism, both in terms of organizational conformance and the replication and communication of rules, routines, and other formalized practices (March & Olsen, 1984, 1989; Zucker, 1987). Under this prevailing logic, Chappell (2006) suggested that when institutions “constrain certain types of behavior while encouraging others” (p. 225), they likewise prescribe norms for

acceptable masculine and feminine behavior (Acker, 1992; Butler, 2004; Kimmel, 2016). Institutions that operate under these norms produce or reproduce “broader social gender expectations” (p. 226). Acker (1992) found that institutions have largely been “defined by the absence of women” (p. 567) and that this gendered precept is embedded within the continuity of stable institutions, including both environments and organizations.

Feminist institutionalism, a subset of new institutionalism, studies these gender norms in the context of institutions, as well as how institutional processes “construct and maintain gendered power dynamics” (Lowndes, 2010, p. 65). Unlike other institutional theories, however, feminist institutionalism is visionary in that it seeks to change institutions as much as it seeks to understand them. Chappell (2006) situated her perspective within the notion of institutional dynamism, an aspect of new institutionalism that emphasizes the potential impermanence of generally stable institutions (Thelen & Steinmo, 1992). This is not to say that rapid change is likely, absent a crisis of significant magnitude, and incremental change over a long period of time is more characteristic of continuous institutions (Chappell, 2006). Feminist institutionalism provides an avenue for challenge to gendered institutional structures because it draws from a wide base of feminist organizational theory.

New Institutionalism, Normal Schools, and Histories of Teacher Education

There are relatively few recent book-length histories of normal schools. Instead, normal schools are most often discussed under the wider rubric of the history of teacher education, which befits the complexity of institutional forms concerned with pre-

paring new teachers during this period. Although many of the same themes were raised by these works, as were apparent in the discussion of the role of normal schools in the historiography of higher education, the narrative presented in works focused on teacher education is more nuanced, and on a number of key points, it differs markedly from that presented by the synthetic histories. This section will address the following in the context of new institutionalism: (a) the origins of normal schools, (b) early expansion of the normal school model, (c) the proliferation of the normal school in the late 19th century, (d) concerns over the normal school curriculum, (e) attempts to increase standards and their impact on the viability of the normal school model, (f) structural changes in higher education that impacts the normal school’s viability, (g) the complicated legacy of normal schools, and (h) the role of the normal school in ensuring mass access to higher education.

In his work on teacher education, Lucas (1997) described the normal schools as emerging from state-subsidized courses at private academies and high schools designed to provide instruction in effective pedagogical techniques to new teachers. While certainly influencing the form that they would eventually take, a more standard narrative on the founding of normal schools connected them to a reform impulse among male educators (Herbst, 1989; Ogren, 2005). According to this narrative, as public education became more widespread, a small group of reformers began to advocate for the creation of a system of state-supported normal schools modeled on French teacher training institutions and the centralized Prussian school to train teachers (Fraser, 2007; Herbst, 1989; Lucas, 1997; Taylor, 2010). Notably, in seeking this European inspiration, the founders of normal schools mirrored the behavior of the leaders of near-

by colleges who were simultaneously laying the foundation for the American university (cf. Fraser, 2007; Geiger, 2015), an initial example of isomorphic behavior.

Like many other grand aspirations for higher education, however, the vision for normal schools was most often subordinated to political expediency and local interests (Labaree, 2004; Peterson, 2010). A philanthropic bequest—triggered upon the allocation of matching funds by the Massachusetts legislature—became the catalyst for the creation of the first three normal schools in 1838 (officially opening in 1839). From the start, however, they faced an uphill battle. A wide variety of other options were available for the training of new teachers ranging from on-the-job learning to coursework at local high schools to existing higher education institutions (Fraser, 2007; Ogren, 2005). Indeed, when New York State sought to address the same felt need for an increased supply of qualified teachers a few years earlier, they solved it by providing small monetary grants to local academies in exchange for the creation of the desired coursework (Fraser, 2007). Even while these alternative approaches were pursued, however, additional state normal schools followed shortly thereafter—both in Massachusetts and in other states. This growth began in New York in 1844 and later Michigan in 1849, Connecticut in 1850, Rhode Island in 1854 (when it assumed control of a private institution), Pennsylvania in 1855, Illinois in 1857, and Minnesota by 1860. Many of these institutions faced initial struggles with low enrollments, frequent moves, and temporary locations (Fraser, 2007; Lucas, 1997). In fact, Ogren (2005) summarized their early existence as having been on “shaky ground,” driven by “public skepticism and scrutiny, limited state funding, and the popularity of other institutions” (p. 55).

The general lack of enthusiasm or support for normal schools, from both the public and from policymakers, extended the normative environment of higher education over normal schools as institutions and presented two options: (a) survival through conformance to societal demands and the broadening of the curriculum, or (b) irrelevance and disappearance. This isomorphic context created a survival imperative among normal schools as institutions. Most complied, but the mission of the normal school shifted in the process (Peterson, 2010). As a result, normal schools came to focus on some mix of secondary education, preparation of teachers, and provisional access to higher education for rural populations (Herbst, 1989). This model catalyzed further and more rapid growth in the normal school ranks following the Civil War (Fraser, 2007). By the end of the 1860s, normal schools could be found in 16 states, and by the close of the 19th century, at least 30 states would operate normal schools of their own (Lucas, 1997; Fraser, 2007), although by some estimates it would be closer to 40 (Ogren, 2005). Major municipalities such as Boston, New York City, Baltimore, San Francisco, and Chicago also established their own normal schools, and across the country, many private institutions closely resembling the government-controlled normal schools were created. Eventually, the number of normal schools would peak at approximately 200 (Ogren, 2005).

Even at their peak, however, questions about the quality of education provided by normal schools were raised—the answers to which continue to be rehashed today. As Fraser (2007) noted, “One of the most difficult things to classify about normal schools, in all but the last decades of their century-long life, was the question of what level of education they offered” (p. 118). All the early normal schools provided a one-year

course of study that included (a) a comprehensive overview of the content covered in a standard primary school education, (b) limited instruction in secondary mathematics and sciences, and (c) training in effective pedagogical techniques (Lucas, 1997). As the need for qualified teachers beyond the primary grades expanded, so too did the content of the normal schools, and with it, the duration of required study (Fraser, 2007).

However, as Ogren (2005) has discussed, this expansion was governed by the same impulse that had originally driven their founders: an integrated education that included a review of the content that instructors would be responsible for teaching, an introduction to the art of teaching, and at least some introduction to higher learning. Moreover, criticism of the academic rigor of normal schools was tinged by the gender constraints that were implicit within teacher education institutions through the systemic devaluation of female perspectives in some of the existing historiography (cf. Herbst, 1989; Hoffman, 1991), and by the multiple attempts to legislate the curricular content of normal schools, an effort that presumably would have remedied any concerns. Feminist institutionalism recognizes this criticism to be fundamentally rooted in the inherent gendered nature of normal schools as institutions. Ogren (2005, 2013) and Labaree (2004) further noted that normal school operations were subject largely to market demands, and as the need for teachers across the country increased, the ability of normal schools to provide solid academic instruction decreased. The survival imperative that first appeared as normal schools conformed to the preconceived structures of higher education thus emerged again under new, changing environmental demands.

These early institutions also had largely

open admissions and admitted many students with subpar academic preparation. As a result, normal schools were critiqued for their admissions practices—most notably admitting some students who had received no schooling beyond the primary grades (Lucas, 1997). Fraser (2007) conversely noted that many forms of professional education, including medical education, did the same. They also exhibited widely inconsistent instructional quality (Lucas, 1997), although admissions standards increased as did instructional quality (Lucas, 1997; Ogren, 2005). Labaree (2004), however, indicated that professionalism among normal schools did not maintain that same perception of expertise as did medical and law education, due to sexism and the broader exposure of teachers to the public, which contributed to the significant devaluation of teaching that continues today. Fraser further suggested that by the time normal schools received parity with colleges or universities in instructional quality and admissions expectations—most often in the 1920s—normal schools reaching that plateau were seeking to “shed the normal school name and claim a collegiate title” (p. 119). Issues of prestige and legitimacy intermingled with the survival imperative further contributing to the isomorphic pressure exerted by the environment in which normal schools were compelled to operate. Indeed, by 1923, the coordinating organization for normal schools that began in 1858 as the American Normal School Association transitioned to the American Association of Teachers Colleges through a series of name changes and mergers, a symbolic shift that signals the integration of normal schools and their legacy into the history of higher education. Ironically, the transition to teacher colleges further diminished the professional character and perception of teaching, with actual teacher education sidelined by a larger, more comprehensive curriculum and traditional

college structures, such as athletics and segregated co-education (Ogren, 2013).

In making this shift, normal schools also experienced pressure from higher education institutions that had begun to address teacher education in more systematic ways as the American university took shape and professional schools were consolidated under their auspices (Fraser, 2007). This pressure led not only to undergraduate degrees in education but also to master's and doctoral degrees targeted toward educators in the late 19th century and early 20th century—first offered as an outgrowth of psychology and later as standalone education degrees. In fact, many of the better trained instructors on the staff of normal schools began to resent the most “thankless” aspects of remedial instruction they often were required to offer and agitated for change (Herbst, 1989, p. 142).

The unique values of the normal school mission that were initially compromised by the first expansion of curriculum, namely access and niche education, were completely subsumed by the comprehensive education that comprised the American university. The growth of accreditation as an overt tool of isomorphism in the early 20th century also applied significant pressure to the weakest of the remaining normal schools (Fraser, 2007). As a result of these pressures, some normal schools were combined with existing institutions—often universities; some became first teacher colleges and later state colleges and universities; and some closed (Herbst, 1989; Fraser, 2007). Furthermore, the baseline for institutional legitimacy shifted, with only the normal schools that made the transition to a more homogenous institutional forms emerging unscathed. The resulting institutions, which either absorbed weak normal schools or were formerly normal schools, added a layer of legitimacy by co-opting teacher education. Little noted

in this progression—at least according to the standard historical narrative—is the declining role of teacher education in the mission of these institutions with each subsequent shift and its eventual relegation to the periphery at most former normal schools by the 1940s (Ogren, 2005).

In appraising the legacy of normal schools, historians of teacher education can be either enthusiastically positive or negative depending on the historiographic role to which they are assigned, with little room for middle ground. As noted above, most synthetic histories are largely negative and cast normal schools as regressive institutions. Even within histories of teacher education, similar perspectives can be found, and it is clear that normal schools were never the transformative influence on teacher education that their founders envisioned. At their peak, less than one quarter of all practicing teachers was normal school graduates (Lucas, 1997). From the outset, many who attended normal schools had no intention of making teaching a career (Herbst, 1989; Lucas, 1997). Instead, normal schools were often a means to secure a secondary or higher education that was otherwise unavailable (Lucas, 1997; Ogren, 2005). Lucas (1997) also noted that, for many female students, teaching was a short-term option that was to be replaced with marriage and childrearing. Nonetheless, the countervailing perspective, put forth most forcefully by Ogren (2005), holds that normal schools were a vehicle for opportunity that connected disparate audiences to the larger liberal culture movement sweeping the nation.

As Ogren (2005) argued, historians of education have often focused on elite institutions due to the easily visible role that they played in the perpetuation of cultural and social capital; however, doing so obscures important differences in experiences based

on a student's gender, race, social class, age, and hometown. Consequently, we may misunderstand how institutions at the fringes of higher education have shaped history in important ways. According to this interpretation, the curriculum did not lack rigor but was instead tailored to the state of American public higher education. The normal school can likewise be seen as a lean organizational form that provided access to those who could not afford to pursue higher education at more expensive institutions prior to the advent of financial aid. Finally, unlike the oft-lauded impact that innovations in medical and legal education had on the professionalization of these occupations, the role of the normal school in professionalizing teachers is seldom acknowledged in the other historiography of higher education (Herbst, 1989; Ogren, 2005).

Even today, the descendants of normal schools provide access to many of the students who comprise the mass sector of higher education (Ogren, 2005). Herbst (1989) noted that, in some rural areas, the normal school functioned as the only local option for higher education. In Illinois, for example, he concludes that "During its first 10 years, from 1857 to 1867, the normal university was for all intents and purposes the state university of Illinois" (Herbst, 1989, p. 112). The normal school played a key role in granting access to higher education in this regard, not just to teachers, but to others who would not otherwise have access to higher education. In this sense, normal schools certainly did deserve the sometimes-applied moniker "the people's universities" (Herbst, 1989, p. 112). Additionally, as Peterson (2010) recalled, 19th century Americans viewed schools as "adjuncts to the home" (p. 23), and increasingly came to prefer female teachers. The profession, and by extension the normal school, offered women access to a different life and set of

experiences than would otherwise have commonly been available at the time. At the same time, however, these women were trained within the gendered constraints that comprised normal schools as institutions, and the disdain with which professional teachers were (and continue to be) received demonstrates the pervasive power of gendered norms. Nonetheless, normal schools were one of the first broad access institutions accessible to female students, who most often constituted the majority of enrollments (Herbst, 1989).

Discussion

The relative dismissal of teacher education within the major synthetic histories of higher education necessitates a reframing of both the historiographies of higher education and of normal schools. This section will employ insights from new institutionalism in order to understand the development of higher education as a stable, normative environment and to recontextualize the emergence and disappearance of normal schools within this environment.

The normative environment of higher education formed in tandem with the construction of the field of higher education throughout the late 19th century. During the emergence of the American research university, academic leaders, like university presidents James Burrill Angell and William Rainey Harper, were at the height of their power and influence, which they used to discursively shape the national education agenda (Lucas, 1994; Nemec, 2006). The federal government, still rebuilding after the Civil War, began to legitimate the expertise conferred by universities and both implicitly and explicitly enshrined the research model as the status quo (Nemec, 2006). Moreover, institutions of higher education of all varieties started to resemble a field as they

became more interconnected through the correspondence of their leaders and faculty, and through the creation of national associations, such as the Association of American Universities. The institutional field was formally codified by the efforts of private foundations and voluntary associations that sought to impose standardized criteria for what constituted a quality institution (Nemec, 2006). In this regard, the research university model was particularly dominant.

This stratification of the elite ideals, which included relative newcomers like Johns Hopkins and the University of Chicago, from the lowly others ignited institutional competition in the pursuit of excellence and an overall informal atmosphere of normative pressure. Accreditation exacerbated the already existing isomorphic forces through both legal and various informal channels. In fact, accreditation largely originated with the university presidents of the mid to late 19th century and their discursive attempts to standardize high school education, both in terms of quality and curriculum (Nemec, 2006). An informal alliance between the federal government and the leading luminaries of the field established the overarching legal environment for higher education nationally, as well as the standard practice upon which peer institutions were expected to model themselves.

As students arrived at higher education institutions, including normal schools, they brought along expectations set by the larger liberal culture movement (Kett, 1994). Aspects of student life and the co-curriculum that originated as student initiatives, including Greek Life and student clubs, were eventually co-opted by university administrators (Thelin, 2011). These concerted efforts not only reinforced the university as an institution against perceived threats but also created a standard to be replicated across

institutional type. As Geiger (2015) noted, the 19th century saw the development of an institution standard that increasingly emphasized institutionally sanctioned and promoted student services, in addition to the normalized mission of research. Normal schools had to compete in this rapidly consolidating environment.

Elite institutions drove, and still drive, the competition that fuels this normative field: Ogren's (2005) concern that educational historians excessively focus on elite institutions is valid, and certain critical perspectives are ignored in such analysis; however, it is difficult to effectively frame normal schools within the history of higher education without also acknowledging and positioning the isomorphic power of elite institutions. Yet, normal schools functioned as institutions as well, especially before the first pressures of the higher education environment, and the original founders and students helped to shape several enduring and self-reinforcing features of teacher education.

Feminist institutionalism provides a venue to examine the gendered nature of normal schools from their inception, an idea that can be seen most clearly via the extent to which normal schools are associated with access for female students. Indeed, for historians of higher education, the primary rhetorical function of the normal school is to elucidate either the state of women's education—a positive—or to bemoan the lack of rigor of the curriculum—a negative. That condition is also entirely consistent with feminist institutionalism, which holds that not only are organizations inherently gendered but also that without proactive, intentional intervention they replicate the sexism of the broader society. That is, they devalue the "female." As noted earlier, the historiography presented in synthetic histories has been remarkably durable and

persistent over time, highlighting the extent to which the normal school connects with larger social systems of thought that replicate the status quo.

The first waves of isomorphic pressure over normal schools further evince this gendered perspective. Normal schools employed a curriculum that was largely perceived to lack rigor, especially when compared with developments in curriculum structure elsewhere in higher education. The expansion of normal school offerings in the competition for enrollment, prestige, and legitimacy, essentially a capitulation to isomorphism, further decreased the rigor of the curriculum as it minimized teacher education and inherently devalued both teaching as a profession and the women who sought to teach. The broader dismissal of the normal school curriculum can be seen as occurring because it does not resemble those offered at other institutions, read as “colleges for men,” and therefore must not be as good. Moreover, the relative accessibility of normal schools and the proliferation of women as students meant that the teaching profession itself suffered from the same poor reputation, especially among higher education institutions.

The ultimate disappearance of the normal school unfolded as teacher education, and the scholarship of education more broadly, was dually stratified and marginalized within the new and growing professional schools of colleges and universities (Labaree, 2004; Ogren, 2013). Ogren noted that, after 1940, increasing focus was put on graduate education, despite a prevailing belief that graduate schools and colleges of education were of minimal quality. The gendered norms that began in normal schools, however, remained, and the professionalization of teaching further incorporated a devaluation of women, especially when compared

to the development of the law and medical professions. Graduate education also faced increasing pressure within the normative environment to focus on research, which was paradoxically considered detrimental to teacher education but essential to improving the prestige of education as a field. The implications of the integration of normal schools into higher education can still be seen within contemporary schools and colleges of education, and the institutional pressures that triggered it remain as stable and continuous as ever.

Implications and Conclusions

In a conversation about the future direction of the history of higher education, Mattingly (2004) predicted that consensus in understanding the origins and development of the modern university will require “deeply historical” and “intensely interpretive” work (p. 596). This consensus fundamentally rests upon a reconceptualization of the historiography that better accounts for the many omissions and exclusions across higher education scholarship (Mattingly, 2004). Normal schools, and the many individuals who sought opportunity and education through them, represent a critical instance of omission and narrow interpretation within the major (and widely used) synthetic histories of the field.

Ogren (2013) advanced the place of normal schools, and teacher education more broadly, within the historiography of higher education; however, she notes that historians face the “continuing challenge to make it more integral” in the historiography of higher education as a whole (p. 452). This paper responds to that challenge in two ways: (a) by recognizing normal schools as part of the normative environment of higher education, it is possible to make them a foundational aspect in a manner that is not currently

or adequately addressed in the popular synthetic histories of higher education; and (b) by proposing a theoretical reinterpretation that suggests that synthetic histories not only overlook normal schools but also provide an overly negative perspective on their contemporary impact and continuing legacy.

It is clear this history is in dire need of a reconceptualization that acknowledges and includes the arc of teacher education as a foundational part of higher education. A new institutionalist approach provides a solid theoretical underpinning for the situation of normal schools within the contracted field of higher education in the 19th century. It is important to note that isomorphism played a large role in structuring the field of higher education as a whole, and it is within this narrative that normal schools can be framed, not as obsolete relics, but as institutions that succumbed to the enormous pressure to conform or disappear. Feminist institutionalism accepts the gendered nature of institutions, and likewise embeds a challenge to the continuing legacy of such norms that remain in the institutional descendants of normal schools. As can be seen in this paper's application of new institutionalism, theory can be a powerful lens for highlighting the work that remains to be done within the history of higher education and for making further progress towards Mattingly's (2004) vision of a new canonical consensus.

References

- Acker, J. (1992). From sex roles to gendered institutions. *Contemporary Sociology*, 21(5), 565–569. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2075528>
- Alridge, D. P. (2015). The ideas and craft of the critical historian of education. In A. M. Martinez-Aleman, B. Pusser, & E. M. Bensimon, *Critical approaches to the study of higher education: A practical introduction* (pp. 103–129). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ayers, D. F. (2015). Credentialing structures, pedagogies, practices, and curriculum goals: Trajectories of change in community college mission statements. *Community College Review*, 43(2), 191–214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552115569847>
- Baez, B. (2006). Merit and difference. *Teachers College Record*, 108(6), 996–1016.
- Bastedo, M. N., & Gumpert, P. J. (2003). Access to what? Mission differentiation and academic stratification in U.S. public higher education. *Higher Education*, 46(3), 341–359. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1025374011204>
- Brubacher, J. S., & Rudy, W. (1976). *Higher education in transition: A history of American colleges and universities* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Chappell, L. (2006). Comparing political institutions: Revealing the gendered “logic of appropriateness.” *Politics and Gender*, 2(2), 223–235. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1743923x06221044>
- Chetkovich, C., & Frumkin, P. (2003). Balancing margin and mission. *Administration & Society*, 35(5), 564–596. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399703256162>
- Clark, B. R. (1978). Academic differentiation in national systems of higher education. *Comparative Education Review*, 22(2), 242–258. <https://doi.org/10.1086/445980>
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147–160. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101>
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (Eds.). (1991). *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Eckel, P. D. (2008). Mission diversity and the tension between prestige and effectiveness: An overview of US higher education. *Higher Education Policy*, 21, 175–192. <https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2008.2>
- Eisenmann, L. (2010). The literature review as scholarship: Using critical reviews and historiography. In M. B. Gasman (Ed.), *The history of U.S. higher education: Methods for understanding the past* (pp. 56–68). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Evans, R. J. (2000). *In defense of history*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Finnegan, D. E., & Alleman, N. F. (2013). The YMCA and the origins of American freshman orientation programs. *Historical Studies in Education*, 25(1), 95–115.
- Finnegan, D. E., & Cullaty, B. (2001). Origins of the YMCA universities: Organizational adaptations in urban education. *History of Higher Education Annual*, 21, 47–79.
- Fraser, J. W. (2007). *Preparing America's teachers: A history*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Freeland, R. M. (1992). *Academic's golden age: Universities in Massachusetts, 1945–1970*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Gasman, M. (2007). Swept under the rug? A historiography of gender and Black colleges. *American Educational Research Journal*, 44(4), 760–805. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831207308639>
- Gasman, M., & Drezner, N. D. (2008). White corporate philanthropy and its support of private Black colleges in the 1960s and 1970s. *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 8(2), 79–92. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ijea.2008.14>
- Gasman, M., Spencer, D., & Orphan, C. (2015). Building bridges, not fences: A history of civic engagement at private Black colleges and universities, 1944–1965. *History of Education Quarterly*, 55(3), 346–379. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hoeq.12125>
- Geiger, R. L. (1992). The historical matrix of American higher education. *History of Higher Education Annual*, 12, 14–28.
- Geiger, R. L. (2000). The “superior instruction of women”: 1836–1890. In R. L. Geiger (Ed.), *The American college in the 19th Century* (pp. 183–195). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Geiger, R. L. (2011). The ten generations of American higher education. In R. O. Berdahl, P. G. Altbach, & P. J. Gumpert, (Eds.), *Higher education in the twenty-first century* (3rd ed.) (pp. 37–68). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Geiger, R. L. (2015). *The history of American higher education: Learning and culture from the founding to World War II*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gioia, D. A., & Thomas, J. B. (1996). Identity, image, and issue interpretation: Sensemaking during strategic change in academia. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41(3), 370–403. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2393936>
- Gundaker, G. (2007). Hidden education among African Americans during slavery. *Teachers College Record*, 109(7), 1591–1612.
- Hawley, A. (1968). Human ecology. In D. L. Sills (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of the social sciences* (pp. 328–337). New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Herbst, J. (1989). *And sadly teach: Teacher education and professionalization in American culture*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Hoffman, N. (1991). Places where status is sought. In H. S. Wechsler (Ed.), *History of higher education annual* (Vol. 11, pp. 81–94). Chicago, IL: Northwestern University.
- Iggers, G. G. (2005). *Historiography in the twentieth century: From scientific objectivity to the postmodern challenge*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.
- Iverson, S. V. (2012). Constructing outsiders: The discursive framing of access in university diversity policies. *Review of Higher Education*, 35(2), 149–177. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2012.0013>
- Jacobs, B. M. (2013). Social studies teacher education in the early 20th century: A historical inquiry into the relationship between teacher preparation and curriculum reform. *Teachers College Record*, 115(12), 1–33.
- Kett, J. F. (1994). *The pursuit of knowledge under difficulties: From self-improvement to adult education in America, 1750–1990*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Kimball, E., & Ryder, A. (2014). Using history to promote reflection: A model for reframing student affairs practice. *Journal of Student Affairs Research & Practice*, 51(3), 298–310. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jsarp-2014-0030>
- Kimmel, M. (2016). *The gendered society* (6th ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Klein, K. L. (2011). *From history to theory*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Labaree, D. F. (2004). *The trouble with ed schools*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lacy, T. A., & Tandberg, D. A. (2014). Rethinking policy diffusion: The interstate spread of “finance innovations.” *Research in Higher Education*, 55(7), 627–649. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-014-9330-2>
- Laden, B. V., Milem, J. F., & Crowson, R. L. (2000). New institutional theory and student departure. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 235–255). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Loss, C. P. (2012). *Between citizens and the state: The politics of American higher education in the 20th century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lowndes, V. (2010). The institutional approach. In D. Marsh & G. Stoker (Eds.), *Theory and methods in political science* (pp. 60–79). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lucas, C. J. (1994). *American higher education: A history*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lucas, C. J. (1997). *Teacher education in America: Reform agendas for the 21st century*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- March, J. G., & Olsen, J. P. (1984). The new institutionalism: Organizational factors in political life. *American Political Science Review*, 78(3), 734–749. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1961840>
- March, J. G., & Olsen, J. P. (1989). *Rediscovering institutions: The organizational basis of politics*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Mattingly, P. H. (2004). Renegotiating the historical narrative: The case of American higher education. *History of Education Quarterly*, 44(4), 577–596. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2004.tb00021.x>
- Mehta, J. (2013). The penetration of technocratic logic into the educational field: Rationalizing schooling from the progressives to the present. *Teachers College Record*, 115(5).

- Nemec, M. R. (2006). *Ivory towers and nationalist minds: Universities, leadership, and the development of the American state*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Ogren, C. A. (2003). Rethinking the nontraditional student from a historical perspective: State normal schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Journal of Higher Education*, 74(6), 640–664. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2003.0046>
- Ogren, C. A. (2005). *The American state normal school: "An instrument of great good."* New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ogren, C. A. (2013). The history and historiography of teacher preparation in the United States: A synthesis, analysis, and potential contributions to higher education history. In M. B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 28, pp. 405–458). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.
- Peterson, P. E. (2010). *Saving schools: From Horace Mann to virtual learning*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Robbins, J. (2010). Quantification and cognitive history: Applying social science theory and method to historical data. In M. B. Gasman (Ed.), *The history of U.S. higher education: Methods for understanding the past* (pp. 102–21). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rudolph, F. (1962). *The American college and university: A history*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Rudolph, F. (1977). *Curriculum: A history of the American undergraduate course of study since 1636*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Taylor, B. J., & Cantwell, B. (2015). Global competition, US research universities, and international doctoral education: Growth and consolidation of an organizational field. *Research in Higher Education*, 56(5), 411–441. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-014-9355-6>
- Taylor, B. J., & Morphew, C. C. (2010). An analysis of baccalaureate college mission statements. *Research in Higher Education*, 51(5), 483–503. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-010-9162-7>
- Taylor, B. P. (2010). *Horace Mann's troubling legacy: The education of democratic citizens*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Thelen, K., & Steinmo, S. (1992). Institutionalism in comparative politics. In S. Steinmo, K. Thelen, & F. Longstreth (Eds.), *Structuring politics: Historical institutionalism in comparative analysis* (pp. 1–32). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Thelin, J. R. (2004). *A history of American higher education*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins
- Thelin, J. R. (2011). *A history of American higher education* (2nd ed.). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Trow, M. (1999). American higher education—past, present and future. In J. L. Bess & D. S. Webster (Eds.), *Foundations of American Higher Education* (2nd ed., pp. 7–22). New York, NY: Pearson Custom Publishing.
- Trow, M. (2002). From mass higher education to universal access: The American advantage. In S. Brint (Ed.), *The future of the city of intellect: The changing American university* (pp. 110–143). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Wilson, J. L., Meyer, K. A., & McNeal, L. (2012). Mission and diversity statements: What they do and do not say. *Innovative Higher Education*, 37(2), 125–139. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-011-9194-8>
- Zucker, L. G. (1987). Institutional theories of organization. *American Review of Sociology*, 13, 443–464. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.13.1.443>

Suggested Citation:

Gowen, G. H. & Kimball, E. (2017). Normal schools revisited: A theoretical reinterpretation of the historiography of normal schools. *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*, 3(1), 127-143.