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Normal Schools Revisited:

A Theoretical Reinterpretation of the Historiography of Normal Schools



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Postsecondary institutions are not all created equally: they vary markedly in mission, audience, and quality (Bastedo & Gumpert, 2003). As market forces intersect with institutional ambitions, the guidance of philanthropic organizations, and political will (e.g., Gasman & Drezner, 2008; Gioia & Thomas, 1996), 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.

This unequal stratification is also apparent in the narratives that we tell about higher education: 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 in order to consider them as a foundational part 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.

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 (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). 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 histo-



ries of higher education and teacher education differ markedly. These historiographies will be summarized here in a manner that engages our theoretical framework of new institutionalism. Briefly, new institutionalism holds that organizations within a given field 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. Moreover, institutions simultaneously constrain behavior and construct and maintain gendered power dynamics.

Finally, although normal schools no longer exist, the institutions that replaced them—among them regional state universities, community colleges, and urban



Image by J. Curtis Main

universities—still do. Our analysis offers a theoretical interpretation of the origin, expansion, and disappearance of normal schools that is logically consistent with explanations offered for their descendants.

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 prevailing interpretation of the history of higher education, Thelin (2004) published a second version of this work in 2011. Although 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. Thelin (2004, 2011) instead relied extensively upon Herbst's older work. As a result of this sort of inattention, normal schools (a) are most often discussed in aggregate and situated as part of larger 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 into other more progressive institutional forms. In short,

normal schools are most often discussed in order to make a point rather than as an intrinsically important topic.

Discussion and Conclusion

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.

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.

Normal schools further 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.

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