

The Campus and Beyond: Higher Education and Social Inequalities in Europe and North America, 1850s-2000s

International Conference at the German Historical Institute Washington. Organized by Raphael Rössel (GHI Washington), Elizabeth Tandy Shermer (Loyola University Chicago), and Stefanie Coché (Gießen University).

This conference aims to bring scholars of European and North American higher education together to consider three main themes: access, on-campus inequities, and the social consequences of higher education's dramatic expansion. The conference presupposes that higher education and its impact on Western societies has changed dramatically since the late nineteenth century. In Europe and North America, universities have evolved from hyper-exclusive havens of elites to entry points for broad sections of the population seeking social and professional security. In the United States, a mere three percent of young adults attended college in 1890, compared to thirty percent in 1950. Today, about two-thirds of US high school graduates decide to enroll in higher education. To many, a degree from an institution of higher education presents the sole path to (relative) economic independence.

Despite the enormous importance of higher education to both individuals and societies, the existing historiography has hardly addressed the relationship between higher education and social inequalities. Scholars of college life have often limited their focus to students' political activities, especially left-wing protests. Although historians of higher education have placed the transformation of university cultures in broader contexts, they have often disregarded the wider economic, political, and social consequences of the changes on campus.

This international conference focuses both on distinct European and North American trajectories of the social impact of collegiate education as well as on transatlantic interdependencies and interactions. The conference addresses three central topics.

The first is the history of access to higher education. The opportunity to attend university was and often still is connected to identity and/or economic affluence. However, the significance of these aspects for university access fundamentally changed over time. In the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, gender, religion, disability, and ethnicity enabled or prevented university attendance or only permitted matriculation at segregated institutions. Over the course of the twentieth century, exclusionary policies based on identity markers were (formally) lifted. However, higher education institutions that continue to utilize identity markers for admission decisions (e.g., womens' colleges and some faith-based institutions) or highlight their tradition as once segregated institutions (e.g., HBCUs) have persisted in North America but play only a marginal role in Europe. Simultaneously, the role of individual and/or family wealth as a prerequisite for university access has significantly increased. Against the backdrop of rising tuition costs, student loans programs, among other things, forced millions of Americans (and a rising number of Europeans) into debt and increased their risk of poverty. Large segments of the student population have turned to non-residential institutions to reduce costs, but these students also often struggle to find housing and job opportunities in competitive urban markets.

Secondly, the conference traces the long-term effects of on-campus inequalities. Universities have always been hierarchical places. Power struggles between faculty and students have shaped the social history of college life. Furthermore, these groups were and are also marked by stark internal differences and hierarchies. On both sides of the Atlantic, exclusive student societies became a hallmark of campus

cultures after 1850. Academic clubs, sports teams, and fraternal orders served not merely as extracurricular activities but also as the bases for powerful personal networks. The conference attempts to unearth whether and to what extent student groups secured privileges on and beyond campuses through their admission policies, their worldview and/or their rituals. How exactly did different actors generate belonging and social inequality? How did these negotiation processes change over the decades? Which actors relied on what patterns of legitimization and when, and what do changes in these constellations reveal? The conference will also address inequalities among teachers and other university employees. In both North American and European academia, for instance, unionized college faculty faced political backlash during Red Scares. But how did unionization as well as changes in employment status and occupational profiles of academic and non-academic personnel affect social relationships on campus, as well as the public perception of colleges?

The third focus of the conference addresses the societal consequences of higher education's expansion.

Transatlantic differences in the organization of higher education are striking, so we assume that this is a key element. While the majority of (Central) European universities were and are public, two-thirds of all US universities and colleges are not state-affiliated, and a substantial number of US institutions operate for profit. The conference seeks to analyze the political, economic, and social impact of these structural differences. How, for instance, did church-run colleges influence the values of their graduates? How did the formation of private universities in European higher education or the rise of for-profit institutions in the US in the second half of the twentieth century change students' motives for studying and the public perception as well as the "worth" of a college degree, especially as so-called knowledge industries became more important to Western societies?

We invite scholars from different methodological and historical backgrounds to convene and develop a common research agenda. The thematic range includes, but is not limited to, the following potential topics:

- Social and cultural history of access to higher education (e.g., admission restrictions based on gender, race, disability, etc.; history of affirmative-action policies, history of university enrollment, history of elite institutions)
- Social and economic impact of college degrees and the relationship of higher education and social stratification
- History of the Campus as a workplace (e.g., unionization, history of student employment, social history of non-academic and academic professions within colleges)
- History of university/college affordability (e.g., student loans, tuition payments, student housing)
- History of private and for-profit higher education in North America and Europe
- Social and cultural history of student organizations (e.g., fraternities/sororities, social clubs/eating clubs, religious student orders, varsity/college sports teams)
- History of segregated and/or separated institutions within higher education (e.g., history of HBCUS, history of women's colleges, history of Deaf higher education, history of religious seminaries)

The conference will take place from **October 9 - 10, 2025**, and will be hosted by the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C.

Please submit an abstract (max. 500 words) and a short biography (max. 150 words) in English via the [GHI conference platform](#) by **December 8, 2024**.

Accommodations will be arranged and paid for by the conference organizers. Participants will make their own travel arrangements; funding subsidies for travel are available upon request for selected scholars, especially those who might not otherwise be able to attend the workshop, including junior scholars and scholars from universities with limited resources.

Please contact Nicola Hofstetter-Phelps (hofstetter-phelps@ghi-dc.org) if you have any difficulties submitting your information online or if you have other questions related to the event.