

The Brandeis Idea: Variations on an American Theme

by David Hackett Fischer

Combine a set of paradoxes, let them commingle for a half-century, and they may form an idea, embodied by a University, that is special and unique.

One of the great American success stories is our system of higher education. Its dimensions are so vast that one can scarcely comprehend them: nearly 4,000 colleges and universities, a million instructors, 15 million students, more than 50 million alumni, and nobody knows how many vice presidents, associate provosts, assistant deans, development officers, and other functionaries who compose the academic fourth estate. The annual cost of the entire system is officially reckoned at 200 billion dollars. It is growing at about five percent a year, which means a doubling time of 15 years.

The social impact of higher education is expanding at a rapid rate. As recently as 1940, fewer than 15 percent of young Americans went to college. Today about 60 percent do so, a fourfold increase in two generations. Before World War II, about four percent of young African Americans entered college. In our own time, the comparable proportion is between 45 and 50 percent, a tenfold increase. These great movements are not much reported in the popular press, which prefer to bring us the bad news from academe. But they exist, and so strong is their momentum that as the 20th century nears its end, we are rapidly developing a system of universal tertiary education in the United States.

What makes this system most distinctive is not its numbers but its special nature. American colleges and universities have long been different from sister institutions in other nations. In northern Europe, medieval universities began in the 12th century

as guilds of scholars who banded together for mutual protection and grudgingly agreed to admit a few students. Many old universities in England, France, and Germany still keep something of that character. In southern Europe, some of the older universities started in a different way, as associations of students who hired scholars to teach them. Academic politics in Mediterranean and Latin American nations still reflect the spirit of those origins.

American institutions went another way, but not at the start. The earliest colleges in English-speaking North America replicated the structure of European universities. Harvard (and Yale to some extent) copied Cambridge. William and Mary imitated Oxford. But the old models did not succeed. Guilds of scholars were not easily transplanted to the new world.

A new model was invented for the fourth American college at Princeton (1746). It was founded not by scholars or students but by community leaders. Most were Presbyterians who wanted an institution to train ministers and churchmen. To that end, Princeton was given a new and different sort of structure. It was chartered as a corporation, with a governing body called the Board of Trustees. The trustees appointed a deputy called the president. He hired a faculty as employees of the college, not the "governing body" as the fellows of an Oxford College are called even today. The president and faculty together designed a curriculum, admitted students, offered instruction, and recommended degrees, under the watchful eye of the trustees, who were community leaders.



The American college was a unique artifact when it was invented in the 18th century, and it flourishes today in many thousands of institutions that have been constructed on the same model. There is a straight line from the founding of Princeton in 1746 to the incorporation of Brandeis with very much the same structure in 1948.

Even as these American institutions share a distinctive structure, they are highly diverse in other ways. They are public and private, religious and secular, large and small. They serve many different constituencies: a state or a city or town, a religious denomination or an ethnic group, a learned profession or the practitioners of a particular art or science. But they also seek the general esteem of a larger public, and compete fiercely with one another for students, resources, and reputation.

Every year, American colleges and universities are elaborately graded on quantitative scales for scholarship, teaching, endowment, publications of the faculty, examination scores of students, books in the library, computers on the campus, amenities in the dorms, and food in the dining halls. A small rise in the national ranking inspires orgies of institutional self-congratulation. A decline of a point or two brings a grim process of self-scrutiny.

On balance, this competition has had a constructive result. In general, it has made American institutions more open and free than they might otherwise have been. It has also made them stronger at what they do.

American institutions compete with one another by seeking to develop a distinctive character and a unique role, often with high success. By the test of admissions, the most selective institutions of higher education in America today are not the old Ivy League universities, but the Juilliard School and the Coast Guard Academy, first-rate schools with unique areas of strength.

With all of these strengths, the American system of higher education also has many flaws. Most of them come down to incompetent administrators, dysfunctional faculty, and unmotivated students. Recently most schools in the United States have had major problems with the corruption of political correctness, which have required judicial intervention and are still out of control. But on balance the strengths of the system far outweigh its weaknesses, and are very broadly distributed. Nearly all American colleges and universities excel at something. Many are excellent at most things. The level moves upward.

Brandeis as an American Institution

From a historian's perspective, one of the most interesting examples of this complex institutional process is the growth of Brandeis University. Every American college and university has its own story to tell, and no two are quite the same. But there is something specially interesting about the Brandeis story, for the history of the institution itself and for an understanding of the general trends.

Brandeis is a very American institution, but it is so in a unique way. Its size and scale put it in a special class. Most institutions of higher education are either small colleges or large universities, but Brandeis is something else. It is a small university of 3,000 undergraduates, 1,000 graduate students, and 360 faculty. Nearly all of the top 30 universities (which include Brandeis in most rankings) are five or 10 or even 20 times larger. In one recent survey only two were smaller: Rice and Cal Tech.

It is not easy to be a small university. Operating costs are very high—higher than in small colleges or large universities. In its early history Brandeis had the highest unit cost in American higher education. This is no longer the case, but running costs in small universities remain comparatively high, which is why there are so few of them.

But most Brandeisians believe that their institution should always be a small university, which offers special

opportunities for teaching and learning. One of our largest ambitions is to remain small and to center our efforts on a select number of strong programs in the basic disciplines of the arts and sciences. That purpose has entered deeply into the grain of this institution. It developed from a series of choices that were made by Trustees, presidents, faculty, and students.

Brandeis was different in that respect from the very beginning, and largely because of the way it began. An important element of contingency was at play here. Most American colleges and universities started with a small group of founders who shared a common vision and unity of purpose. Brandeis had two groups of founders. They shared a unity of purpose, which was to found an American institution of higher education with Jewish sponsorship. But they did not have the same vision of what sort of institution it should be.

Some of its founders were Jewish businessmen who wanted a liberal arts college of high quality, somewhat like Swarthmore or Amherst or Williams, with a strong undergraduate curriculum and no graduate programs. Others were Jewish intellectuals and scholars who had studied and taught in European universities. More than a few were refugees from Fascist oppression, and they had witnessed the destruction of great institutions of learning in the Old World. They had found a home in America, but they were not happy with American institutions, which were alien to their own experience. One of them said that his dream was to found a "European university in America."

A struggle developed between these two groups, and the American businessmen won. They acquired a campus and a charter of incorporation that had been granted to a defunct proprietary medical and veterinary school called Middlesex University. Then they chose President Abram Sachar, who had a foot in both camps. Sachar was an American scholar who had been trained at Cambridge in England. He hired a faculty of mixed character. Some were American teacher-scholars who thought in terms

of a liberal arts college. Others were European scholar-intellectuals, such as Herbert Marcuse, who preferred a European university in America. A few were scholars and scientists, such as Saul Cohen, who were quick to recognize an opportunity to combine a research institution with a college of liberal arts. The result was an institutional compromise that grew rapidly into a small university and developed on several distinctive lines.

The most important question was about the intellectual purposes of the institution. Historian Daniel Boorstin has observed that great North European universities were organized around an idea of higher learning and devotion to scholarship. American colleges with lay trustees centered on an idea of higher education and service to the community. At Brandeis these two institutional ideas were brought together in an unusual way. Something similar happened in many American institutions after World War II, when a wave of European émigrés had a major impact on the cultural life of the United States. At Brandeis this national trend was highly concentrated in a small institution. As a consequence, the linkages between higher education and higher learning became exceptionally close. An idea began to develop at Brandeis of great scholars, world-class scholars, who were directly engaged in undergraduate teaching in small courses. This happened in very few American institutions. Small colleges did not as a rule attract great scholars of the caliber that Abram Sachar began to hire at Brandeis. Large universities with some exceptions were rarely known for close undergraduate instruction by senior faculty. Brandeis had both, and an intimate connection between these two elements became an institutional idea that had a special intensity at Brandeis.

More than most universities, Brandeis has always placed heavy emphasis on teaching—and teaching of a particular kind. Our ideal is a dedicated scholar-teacher who engages original scholarship directly in the teaching process, and also a scholar-learner who does original work on the forward edge

of knowledge. To that end, we have tried to create an institutional structure of exceptional flexibility. We strongly believe that schooling should not get in the way of learning. We have a minimum of formal academic rules and requirements.

Another defining question at Brandeis is about the texture of undergraduate life. In many American colleges and universities, undergraduate life revolves around the rituals of football and fraternities, and has done so for many years. European institutions have much less of this. The founders of Brandeis divided on this question. When the refugee intellectuals spoke of a “European university in America,” they meant among other things no football and no fraternities. Some of the businessmen had other ideas. They were unhappy about the stereotype of the effete Jewish intellectual and urgently wanted a football team. It was not to be just any football team. They demanded that Brandeis must have the best small college football team in the world.

In the beginning this was done. Brandeis had football. It recruited top players and began to win games, and the businessmen were pleased. The scholar-intellectuals were not so happy, but they bided their time and waited for a moment when the team was not winning and costs were rising. Then they launched an attack on football. Their leader was Dean of Faculty John Roche, who demonstrated that most of the football players who had been recruited to combat the myth of the effete Jewish intellectual were tough Irish and Italian kids. Football was abolished at Brandeis.

But there was more to the story. In the 1970s and 1980s, athletics were much neglected in the University. Facilities that were never very good were allowed to decay. Then another group of faculty during the presidency of Marver Bernstein recommended the development of facilities for broad participation in athletics and for the development of fitness and life-sports. During the administration of President

Evelyn Handler, Brandeis acquired first-class facilities for participant sports in which most students became involved, rather than spectator sports with a few semiprofessional gladiators in school colors. This new institutional policy is still incomplete in its development, and unstable in its dynamics, but we have moved decisively in that direction.

There were many other questions of defining importance in the early history of Brandeis. One of them was about graduate education. Most American universities have developed a full panoply of graduate programs and professional schools in law, medicine, business. Some people at Brandeis wished to move in that direction. Others wanted scarcely any graduate education at all. Here again a compromise developed. Only two professional schools were founded: The Heller Graduate School and the Graduate School of International Economics and Finance. Both had a special character. They cultivated strong linkages between professional education and the basic disciplines of the arts and sciences. The University also established programs in medicine and law, but they were organized around research and teaching, rather than vocational training.

Graduate programs were also founded in the basic arts and sciences, but their numbers were kept very small. Once again, Brandeis concentrated its limited resources and made an effort to found a small number of strong programs in core disciplines. All this rose from the acts and intentions of a small number of faculty such as Saul Cohen, Jack Goldstein, Stephan Berko, and Leonard Levy who founded the programs in the early years, and others who developed them.

The individual graduate programs also had a special texture at Brandeis. A case in point is the graduate program in American history. Like Brandeis itself, it is small and does not seek to grow larger. Its faculty consists of six historians. Each year it admits only five students for doctoral study. The program is independent, free-standing, and self-governing—not part of an

academic department. It is run by the
entire faculty, with a rotating chair.
Students are not in competition for
resources, and through the years they
have formed an exceptionally strong
sense of community. The curriculum is
highly flexible. Most learning happens
in reading and research courses that
are separately created for individual
students. Through the years they have
won every major prize in American
history. This program builds upon the
special opportunities of a small
university such as Brandeis.

A small university engenders many
problems of character and purpose.
One of them is about the spatial
texture of the institution. American
colleges are often very small and
tightly centered institutions. Large
universities tend to be open and
complex institutions of a very different
nature. Here again Brandeis went a
different way, partly because it was a
small university, and also because it
happened to be in the Boston area. Its
suburban campus is part of an
academic metropolis that is home to
more than 50 colleges and universities.
Many are of exceptionally high quality.
When they are in session, Boston is the
largest college town in the world, with
hundreds of thousands of students in
residence, and many scholars and
intellectuals. The result is a
metropolitan academic culture of
exceptionally high complexity, with
many intersecting circles that allow
individuals to move in their own
intellectual orbits. The richness of this
intellectual environment offers unique
opportunities for individual learning
and teaching that are an important part
of Brandeis.

Another and even more important part
of Brandeis is its religious affiliation.
For many people, Brandeis is defined
by its Jewish sponsorship, which has
always been central to the life of the
institution. But like thousands of other
American colleges and universities of
religious sponsorship, Brandeis tried to
link its affiliation to another purpose.
The University cherishes a heritage of
faith and a tradition of learning that is
deeply embedded in Judaism. At the
same time it welcomes students and
faculty of many creeds and cultures, in
the free and open spirit of modern
America.



Officially Brandeis calls itself a
nonsectarian institution of Jewish
sponsorship. This is a difficult balance
to maintain. The idea of “nonsectarian
Jewish” is what the philosopher W. B.
Gallie called an “essentially contested
concept.” It is debated, adjusted, and
redefined in a process that will
continue to be contested as long as the
institution exists. But the concept itself
of a nonsectarian university of Jewish
sponsorship is firmly in place, and is
universally supported within the
institution.

Yet another defining question in any
university is about its social
responsibilities. Here again, Brandeis
has gone its own way. From the
moment of its founding, many faculty
and students have been actively
engaged in social causes. They took a
leading part in movements for civil
rights, world peace, racial equality,
social justice, and the rule of law. They
did so in moments when these causes
were deeply unpopular and bitterly
contested, at some considerable cost to
themselves and to the University. And
they did it in an interesting way.
Brandeisians contributed the light of
scholarship and science to their labor
in social causes. A heritage of service
that had long been part of American
higher education was linked to higher
learning. In the process, another
institutional tradition was formed.



To put all of these elements together is
to discover an institution that is special
and even unique in American higher
education. At its center is a Brandeis
idea, which has gradually become *the*
Brandeis idea.

This concept is highly complex in its
parts, but it is very clear in its main
lines. The Brandeis idea is a bundle of
paradoxes: a nonsectarian university of
Jewish sponsorship; a small university
where teaching and research are
joined; a core university that
concentrates its efforts in the basic arts
and sciences; a teaching-centered
university that joins higher learning
and higher education; a university that
combines disinterested scholarship
with social responsibility; a young
university that is old in its traditions; a
very American university that has a
European and international flavor.

In 50 years the Brandeis idea has
entered so deep into the grain of the
institution that nobody can remove it,
though some have tried. The result is a
very special institution that is like no
other in the world. ■

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