

HEQA - Christina Groeger

[00:00:00] **Jack Schneider:** Welcome to *HEQ&A*, the podcast of the *History of Education Quarterly*. I'm your host, *HEQ* co-editor Jack Schneider. Every few weeks, we'll dive into recent work from the journal, asking authors how their projects challenge or extend what we know about a topic, exploring what's interesting and surprising about it, and then taking a step back to consider broader implications. In the second half of the show, we turn our sights to teaching. So, if you're an educator, make sure to stick around until the end. And now let's hear from one of our authors.

[00:00:50] **Christina Groeger:** I'm Christina Groeger I'm an assistant professor of history at Lake Forest College, and my article's called "The Fight For a Public University in Boston: Making a Public-Private Educational System." So the article is about a very long fight for a public university in Boston. So despite having a very long and storied history of educational firsts, Boston actually was one of the last major cities to have a public university, and Massachusetts was also one of the last states to organize one. So the question, you know, guiding question is why--and I think in the process of doing research for this article, I came to see the educational landscape in Boston as very competitive and kind of full of conflict and, and contested. And so in the Northeast where private universities were older and better established, they put up a really tough fight against other public institutions that they saw as competitors.

[00:01:54] So there were kind of repeated efforts to form a public university, I found, you know, dating back to the 1880s, 1890s when organized labor was actually kind of the leader in pushing for a free public university in, in the Boston area. But private universities, private university administrators, who often sat on state boards of education or had a lot of power politically and were politically influential. They kind of repeatedly shot down these proposals again and again and again.

[00:02:28] One of the, you know, the interventions of this article is to say--is to kind of rethink our chronology around the history of higher education. So rather than see trends like the neoliberal university or, or budget cuts being a kind of recent phenomenon, um, in the post 1970s era, I think if we take this longer history, we actually see fiscal austerity and the role of private institutions and private power as dominant since the 19th century and the kind

of post-World War II "Golden Age" of academia more as the exception to the rule, and just kind of a brief exception.

[00:03:06] This was one of the surprising things that I, that I found, but in the process of fighting for a public university, a lot of other educational innovations that we think of as, you know, providing access and, you know, good on their own, like things like community colleges or, uh, university extension programs, or even things like state scholarships-- these were often, in Massachusetts history, they came as proposals to substitute for a public university.

[00:03:35] So I found that a lot of other kinds of educational institutions, we also maybe need to rethink the sort of political history of their origin, at least in the Northeast and in Massachusetts as things that you know, were new ideas as ways of expanding access [that were] actually used to kind of undercut support for public universities to say like, no, we can't have a state university, but let's do university extension instead because it's cheaper (mostly about cost), or it would be non-threatening and a non-competitor to established universities.

[00:04:11] I'll also add that in a lot of other proposals in state reports that were often written by private university administrators serving in these public functions, they proposed a number of public private partnerships for other kinds of ways of privatizing, you know, a public service, um, or something like a state scholarship that would be used by a student to go to a private institution, these sort of public private partnerships also, I think, challenge the idea that like neoliberal solutions or privatizing public functions is a, is a new phenomenon. These date back, you know, over a century.

[00:04:50] In taking on the framing of this article is really looking at public-private competition you could say, or looking at different institutions and their competitive relationship. I think we, you know, uncover a really important aspect of the history of higher education in the United States. And often these entities, you know, private institutions, public institutions are written about separately. Um, and we don't see the really important ways that they shaped each other. Um, and in this case how private power and private institutions really, you know, shaped the limits of, you know, what was possible in the public sector.

[00:05:29] And I think also shaped the public sector, you know, when public universities. Were established. They often were kind of molded, uh, in ways that were not competitors with the private sector. So even, you know, UMass Boston was finally started in Boston in 1965. And in the way that it was created at that point, a lot of elite private institutions like Harvard and MIT didn't really mind at that point because they were not competing for the same students. They were attracting kind of a more national student base, a more elite student body, whereas UMass Boston would have served-- and other community colleges that were also finally established in the 1960s in the Boston area, they were serving more working class, commuter students. And Northeastern was one of the biggest, um, opponents, because they also served kind of the same student body, but by and large, like when universities were finally, when public universities were finally established, they reflected that fight and, and kind of their organization, who they attracted, how they fit into this kind of ecology of institutions was very much shaped by the private sector.

[00:06:44] **Jack Schneider:** The second half of the show is dedicated to thinking about teaching. We ask authors to put on their guest lecturer hats and take students into the weeds. What should they pay attention to, methodologically speaking? What else should they be reading if they want to take a deep dive into the historiography? And where are there opportunities for further research?

[00:07:03] **Christina Groeger:** The bulk of this article is based on newspaper reports and also kind of the regular state commission reports on higher education. And so I found a lot of petitions that were made to the state legislature for creating a state university in Boston. And then I could kind of follow the reporting on this in, in local newspapers to get a sense of where these proposals went, as well as the kind of final report that was put out.

[00:07:32] I also use, like, I try to compile data from that goes into two different charts in the article. And these, I think, you know, even independently from the article might be interesting for teaching. One traces the tuition rates for universities in the Boston area, plus, uh, UMass Amherst from the 1890 or 1880, all the way to 1980. And so like by different institutions, not every single institution, but kind of some of the most dominant universities. And that was information that I, I couldn't find, um, no one else had had compiled it that I could find. So as an example of just looking at the tuition rates of different private universities, and then also how it compared to a public university was also really interesting.

[00:08:20] You can note the kind of huge rise, especially, um, in the late 20th century and how public universities were free by and large at the, at the start of this period, but, and, and they remain cheaper, but they also start increasing their tuitions, um, which again is sort of a part of some of the ways I think that the private sector ended up influencing public universities by public universities, kind of having to adopt some of the same private sources of financing, including charging students for education.

[00:08:52] Um, so that's one chart and then another, but, you know, painstakingly. This data isn't really compiled anywhere official. So it really was finding newspapers, newspaper reports that often would, would note whenever a tuition change was made. So, you know, look, look at that, 'cause a lot of work went into compiling that data.

[00:09:09] And then another chart, this was from more, you know, official education statistics, but just the enrollments in private universities in Massachusetts compared to public universities over time throughout this period. So you can see, you know, the rising enrollment in each, but also their ratio. And at, at the very beginning, you know, the public sector accounted for a tiny percentage of all higher ed students, by the end it accounted for almost half, but it never actually got, you know, to a majority of students, which is also kind of interesting to look at that change.

[00:09:45] So in other research, I, I use quant--other sort of quantitative methods, um, and here I compiled some of these statistics because I think they can really help give us a picture of, you know, just numbers and, and what's going on on the ground.

[00:10:01] One of the, the big topics here of this article is the kind of mixed public private system of education that is in some ways, char--you know, characteristic unique to the United States. Um, and I think the power of private financing, the private sector in higher education is something that, that characterizes the United States or the US system of education compared to other countries that have a, a more entirely publicly financed higher ed system.

[00:10:34] And so one, I think, just in thinking about like, how, how do we understand the US in comparison to other countries and really understanding, like how did we get this mixed public private model? I think it fits into a historiography about that, including even the--there's a longer historiography

on the ways that early institutions, colleges like Harvard or MIT actually were semi-public from the beginning. So I'm also kind of blurring the lines, um, where I think, you know, we need to be more, more specific when we talk about like, what, what it means to be a private versus a public institution. So colleges like Harvard receive state aid, they often had, at least in the early, early period, they had public officials kind of sitting on their boards and they often used the argument that they were serving a public purpose and therefore there was no need for an additional institution. And I think that at the time that was, that was a popular argument and a very powerful argument that university administrators could use. And it was only in the late 19th century when what we would now consider private universities, started getting more of their income from, you know, wealthy philanthropists, from student tuition, and a more conceptual divide between public and private starts to emerge.

[00:11:53] This relationship and, and kind of the, the ways that both private universities had public funding, but also public universities were kind of shaped by private practices, I think is, is a really, a whole area worthy of more exploration. And I'll just note a few books that I think are, are taking up this relationship in recent years. Mark Boonshoft's *Aristocratic Education and The Making of the American Republic* talks about how public schools emerged in part reaction to private academies that were seen as a kind of elitist, um, in the early Republic period.

[00:12:29] Robert Gross, his book *Public vs. Private: The Early History of School Choice in America* looks at competition between Catholic schools and public schools. And I, so I think a number of recent studies are really showing this relationship and how that's--to understand either one and, and also to kind of complicate the dichotomy between these institutions, we really have to look at both of them in the same frame and together.

[00:12:53] I'll add two. I think part of what I'm trying to do is also break down silos between education history and history of political economy and, and political history. Um, and so on that front too, I'll mention Davarian Baldwin's book, um, *In The Shadow of the Ivory Tower* about the role of universities in shaping urban development, you know, very broadly. And I think like, like this article speaks to their, their extraordinary amount of political and economic power in shaping kind of an urban landscape, um, or, and, and more broadly a political system.

[00:13:30] And then finally on the history of higher education funding, which is in part what this article looks at and, and different sources of, of public versus private financing, I'll note too Ellie Shermer's new book, *Indentured Students* that looks at the history of the student loan industry, which is a little bit the second half, um, of this article. I talk a little bit about the way that Massachusetts was actually one of the first to create like a state backed student loan policy intended to help students. But again, like, you know, that's, that strategy came, I think in some ways, politically at the expense of other strategies that would've more direct, you know, directly expanding the public sector or providing, you know, free college for students directly as opposed to increasing student loans. Um, but sources of higher educational funding, I think is also a fruitful area that, that this article, uh, contributes to.

[00:14:29] In terms of future research, the continued exploration of conflict between, and sort of the relationship between public and private institutions is important. Continuing to, to break down some of the silos I think education history is often broken into. Education history versus political economy, more broadly, or history of capitalism. Um, financial history looking at also K-12 and higher education in a broader frame because that distinction doesn't really, uh, apply in an earlier time period really before the, the early 20th century.

[00:15:07] So looking at kind of the role of a range of, you know, professional schools, trade schools, business, or commercial colleges that were very popular looking at how those two were part of this broader educational landscape and how institutions kind of created their own niche in, in a very competitive ecology um, I think is a useful frame. Um, and. I think a lot more work to be done there.

[00:15:32] One of the surprising things that I think could be an area of further research is the role of organized labor in, in making higher education specifically, you know, not just, not just compulsory education or, or public education at the, at lower levels, but making university education a priority and, and really taking on that legislative fight, which I suspected, but, um, but didn't realize to the extent that they were really the, the leaders in, and I think one of the interesting arguments that, that also might challenge, you know, we think of higher education and access and the importance of education in particular, you know, and today in terms of social mobility and in gaining sort of the benefits of what higher ed has to offer to be able to help students.

[00:16:19] And that's one of the key arguments for expanding higher education and making it more affordable. But for organized labor, it was, it was less about cost and social mobility. I mean, that was part of it, but it was also about who actually controlled the institution and whose interest did the institution serve? So they saw university administrators and really the landscape of higher ed at the time as extremely anti-labor, training future managers, and then university administrators, they often served as strike breakers and were generally hostile to organized labor.

[00:16:55] So thinking actually about the debates about the interest that just higher ed as a, as a collective serve and, and thinking about universities as corporations today, I think opening up a way of understanding universities that looks at like whose interest they serve, um, and kind of their broader functions in society. It would be helpful in, in thinking about, you know, what are the best kinds of reforms that we wanna push for, and like, how do we actually make universities not just accessible, but actually reshape, you know, who they, who they serve and what they do for students, um, and the role that they play in society more broadly

[00:17:38] **Jack Schneider:** Check out *History of Education Quarterly* online. The journal is published by Cambridge University Press and it's carried by most academic libraries. You should also be sure to follow *HEQ* Twitter handle: @histedquarterly, which regularly sends out free read-only versions of articles, and the show's Twitter handle @HEQandA. And don't forget, subscribe to the show so you don't miss forthcoming episodes. We're available on iTunes, Stitcher, and wherever you get your podcasts. HEQ&A is produced at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Our producer is Jennifer Berkshire and our theme music is by Ryan Shaw. I'm Jack Schneider. Thanks for joining us.