

## UNIVERSITY OF THE UNITED STATES

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By observation, it is clear that national universities are a common global feature, that is, unless you are in the United States, which today has only two federally chartered institutions (The United States Military Academy and the United States Naval Academy) (Thelin, p. 42). The question this paper poses, and which is only briefly discussed through “A History of American Higher Education” by John R. Thelin (2011), is: Why was education in the United States not formed as, or eventually transitioned to, a national enterprise?

This analysis starts with the chartering of William and Mary in 1693 as the second colonial college, and arguably the first national college. So national was this institution that faculty and students “were required to take an oath of allegiance to the crown and to the Church of England” (Thelin, p. 14). Thelin’s failure to capture the complete picture of William and Mary as a national institution in the American colonies compounded when he chose not to discuss the revocation of the Royal charter with American Independence, or the climate surrounding the re-chartering of the institution in 1779. This re-chartering was negotiated by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, both of whom Thelin later described as advocates of nationalized education (p. 42). The reader is left wondering, why these advocates, both alumni of the college, would not have worked with fellow “alumnus” George Washington to re-nationalize the institution.

Notably, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century national educational sentiments existed. This is evidenced by the founding of the United States Military Academy in 1802, the 1817 congressional bill to create a national university, and the establishment of the United States Naval Academy in 1845. While Thelin does draw these legislative acts together into a cohesive “national initiative” for education, he stops short of relating them to both to the re-chartering of William and Mary and later the initial proposal of the Morrill Act in 1857. Again, the reader is left grasping for undiscussed context around the drafting of the initial Morrill Act. Was a national university, or a system of nationalized universities, teaching agricultural, mechanical, and military sciences desired? Sentiment would appear so.

Following the passage of the Morrill act of 1890, “agricultural experiment station directors talked among themselves about leaving the state universities in order to form a federal alliance” (Thelin, p. 137).

This talk coincided with reductions in state appropriations at the same time as federal opportunities began to expand through the Departments of Agriculture and Interior. While state universities would “win” and retain their agricultural experiment stations, federal involvement in Higher Education was just beginning.

In 1893 Congress chartered American University in Washington, D.C, which by title would appear to be the answer to this paper’s question and prove a national university does exist. However, American University’s charter established it as an institution serving Washington D.C, not the entire nation. In 1917 President Woodrow tied colleges and universities across the country to the national development of a trained military with the establishment of the Student Army Training Corp (Thelin, p. 200). And in 1944 the federal government sent veterans returning from World War Two back to school with the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act (Thelin, p. 262). All three of these developments came with increased federal oversight and regulation, closing the gap between a state or private institution and a national university or national university system.

As federal research funding increased, after the passage of the National Defense Education Act, this gap continued to close. The metaphorical distance between the federal government and American colleges and universities in the 1950’s was so close that institutions, especially state universities, had faculty and administrative members sign loyalty oaths to the federal government (Thelin, p. 275), not unlike King William and the English College of William and Mary. These trends continued through the 1970’s, with the passage of the portable Basic Educational Opportunity Grants and the Higher Education Amendments. With each step colleges seemingly became increasingly dependent on federal funding and responsible for meeting federal regulations.

Almost 250 years ago the North American continent was home to a singular national university. Today it’s home to two. And while Thelin may not draw all of the above pieces together, a strong national educational sentiment could still exist in the United States. Given time, this sentiment may still answer the original question; the United States may still nationalize its higher educational system.

Thelin, J. (2011). *A History of American higher education*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.