
Blogging Education History

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Introduction

Reading the news as an historian

Every year, I change something about the classes I teach: update material I present, figure out new ways to ask questions, fiddle with the assignments. In Fall 2009, I asked students in my undergraduate history of education class to write two papers presenting historical perspectives on current issues, along with two close primary-source analyses, a midterm, and a final. I discovered that the historical-perspectives paper was a greater challenge for students than I expected, though we spent considerable time in class talking about the step needed.

So for Fall 2010, I have made a few changes: instead of writing two shorter papers, students will write a single medium-length paper crafting an argument with historical perspective, and that semester-long assignment will have much more scaffolding (or structured support) through the semester, with students identifying and then narrowing down possible topics, writing weekly in a journal about the connections they see between the topic they have chosen and the history they are learning, and then slowly building up an historical argument.

This short collection of blog entries is another tool I hope students will use. I began writing a blog about my professional life in 2001, back in the Internet Dark Ages when, as Frank Hayes wrote, "We walked twenty miles to the schoolhouse/Barefoot and uphill both ways" (in a song titled "When I Was a Boy" poking fun at false nostalgia). On occasion, I make comments on current events rooted in my background as an historian, being a scold as Jonathan Zimmerman terms it but also trying to teach a little using a current news item as a teachable moment.

The majority of this collection consists of comments on the news in some way. The first section is generally about K-12 schooling, starting with an historian's attempt at a year-end review (you can judge how well I made my choices about important stories) and then focusing on specific issues. The middle section is more about teaching, less about history, but I figured that if you were here for the ride, as one might say, you should know a little about how I think about teaching. The last section is about higher education, and again uses current events (or published commentary) as a springboard for more long-term issues. This class focuses on the history of elementary and secondary education, but we shouldn't ignore higher education, especially since you are in it!

I have added the original dates for the entries and done some light editing (such as removing some prefatory remarks specific the occasion). Otherwise, what you read here is what appears on my blog. If there are terms you don't know, I probably used it assuming my readership knew it, so please ask me to explain. Also, this is not required reading. There will be no test on any of these items. They're here to give you a sense of the back of my mind, if there is any such thing, and maybe as examples to help you with the perspectives paper for the semester.

Education news commentary

Education stories of 2009 (U.S.)

12/31/2009: The end of the year is the traditional time for journalists and laypeople to look back and identify major issues in a year. As Phil Graham (or maybe Ben Bradlee) said, journalism is a first rough draft of history, and you know what a first rough draft looks like. Nonetheless, as an historian I'll take a stab at what I think will be seen in retrospect as key developments in education in the U.S. They may even have been key issues this year!

1. *The Great Recession and students' lives*. More children are homeless, hungry, or displaced in some way because the adults in their family have lost jobs or their homes. We won't know the exact extent of the effects on children's lives for a few years, but the news stories of the recession's effects on children are first indicators of a quantum leap in child poverty. And there is also an effect on the lives of college students, though the effects are more complicated. People are returning to school at a rapid clip, but because financial resources are lower, there is also a greater demand for financial aid at college.
2. *The Great Recession and the education stimulus packages* (plural). In late 2008 it became obvious that for several years Florida had been leading the country again... in declining state and local revenues. Around the country in early 2009, school-system budgets for 2009-10 looked like they were going to collapse, resulting in catastrophic layoffs that would affect not only schools but the whole economy. Federal spending kept hundreds of school systems afloat and is a good part of what saved the economy from a much worse decline in aggregate demand. The early-2009 stimulus package (aka ARRA) is the major part of the story but not all of it. If you didn't hear about the mid-December shifting of \$23 billion from TARP into an account school systems could use to save jobs, you missed a substantial increase in the stimulus that should be considered part of December's second stimulus, along with an extension of unemployment benefits and federal subsidies for COBRA payments.
3. *College financial aid reform*. The Obama administration is combining administrative changes to simplify the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) with a push to eliminate the federally-subsidized private lending program and shift resources into direct lending. While it is not politically possible (and probably not legally possible) in many states to require that all students complete the FAFSA, it is possible to make it much easier to complete, encouraging more students with real financial need to take advantage of financial aid.
4. *The growing role of community colleges... and erstwhile or soon-to-be-erstwhile community colleges*. The July plan to give \$12 billion to community colleges is a relatively small part of the overall policy emphasis of the administration on community colleges, from the appointment of a community-college president as the chief administrator of higher education policies to the greater scrutiny of proprietary training institutions (where do you think students who would otherwise go to proprietary job-training programs will be headed instead?). Ironically, two of the largest states are headed in a different direction, with Florida's community-college system disintegrating or morphing into a "state college"

sort-of-system, and some voices in California voicing a similar idea with new caps on Cal State enrollments. (DC is headed in the other direction, with UDC splitting into two- and four-year institutions.)

5. *Race to the Top*. Some of you may wonder why this isn't #1, but I'll defend my judgment that it's important but whether you like RTTT or not, it's not nearly as important a *change* as the issues I've put above this. But don't fret if you disagree: see #8.
6. *Common core standards effort*. The halting, awkward, adolescent-like steps towards creating at least some vague national-level standards developed, and while Alaska and Texas may not be involved, and other states may opt out later, this is the curriculum equivalent of the 1989 Charlottesville summit, in that it is a national rather than a federal effort. (See Maris Vinovskis's [recent book](#) for that story.)
7. *City school control battles*. From the renewal of mayoral control in NYC (and Bloomberg's reelection) to an emergency manager in Detroit and the apparent devolution of Los Angeles Unified, governance is once again front and center in urban school politics. Well, maybe it never left as an issue, which is a cynical historian's perspective. But if you think I'm cynical, wait until Diane Ravitch's new book comes out in a few months. No, I haven't read the manuscript. But you don't have to before you can take a good guess at what Ravitch will say about New York City. (Recent developments in Detroit and Los Angeles came after she must have submitted her manuscript.)
8. *Teacher evaluation in local bargaining*. Collective bargaining agreements put the AFT in the center of teacher evaluation debates through its support of new arrangements in New Haven, St. Louis, and even Detroit. And both teacher evaluations and collective bargaining more generally are at the heart of disagreements between the Minnesota and Florida teachers union state affiliates, on the one hand, and state departments that would like teacher union signoffs on RTTT applications, on the other. Disclosure: I am a member of the Florida Education Association and was on the governance board for a two-year term that ended this past summer. I haven't had time to learn much more than what's available publicly on the Florida disagreement, but I'll give you one idea in the back of my mind that's also in yesterday's [Ed Week story](#) (requires subscription) by Stephen Sawchuk: both affiliates are merged (i.e., in both the NEA and AFT).
9. *Sexting as a news topic*. This is the latest object of our perennial concern about youth behavior, made highly visible with the suicides this year by Jesse Logan and Hope Witsell. The main difference between teens' sending racy photos of themselves by cell and other foolish teenage behavior is that cell-phone technology enables a social chain-reaction from an MMSed photo that other (and more fundamentally stupid/dangerous) behavior does not. Not that any of these is a good choice, but if you knew that your teenager was either going to get addicted to a drug, become pregnant/impregnate someone, or send or receive a sext message, which would be the *least* inherently dangerous behavior? Fortunately, [Mike Petrilli](#) is correct about the state of American teenagers: the trends on seriously dangerous adolescent behavior is headed in the right direction... not that any reporters covering the sexting issue noted that fact.
10. *Textbook affordability*. Arnold Schwarznegger's midyear ramblings about ebooks aside, there has been movement in several areas to address the rent-seeking behavior of both textbook publishers and college bookstores. This includes public and private ventures to create online textbooks with inexpensive print-on-demand options and textbook rentals, and Florida is probably not going to be the last state where public colleges and universities need to list textbooks for all courses at least a few weeks before

a term starts, to allow competition. There are some logistical problems with the last, such as with brand-new courses or new sections opened up to serve demand, but some tweaking will probably result in an institutionalized arrangement allowing students to search for books they can find anywhere.

So what have I missed? Any errors in judgment on the ordering? What do you think the issues for 2010 will be? Time to kibitz!

I am not a caring teacher

4/23/2006: Some days, I think that philosopher Nel Noddings is the most dangerous person in America, or rather, because others abuse her ideas, the common *image of Nel Noddings* is the most dangerous (imaginary) person in America. I'm thinking of the implications some draw from her work on caring. From what I understand as a mere historian of education, her work (going back to her 1984 book *Caring*) argues that a relational ethic of caring is an alternative to the deontological arguments of Kant or the utilitarian ethic of Bentham and that ilk. I'll return in a moment to the contribution she and other feminist philosophers make towards ethics and justice in a minute, but what concerns me is how others misread her. The most studious misreading I know of is by virtue ethicists such as [Michael Slote](#), who argues that one must turn her relational argument into virtue ethics because to do otherwise would be unfair to the person who is caring (since caring may not be worth anything unless *received* as caring by the other person). (See [Noddling's response](#).) That's an interesting argument (though I think it gives considerable privilege to paternalism), but I will leave the proper categorization of Noddling's *caring* to the professional philosophers.

What concerns me is the more casual transformation of Noddling's *caring* notion into a rougher virtue, especially in teacher education programs. Those taking inspiration from Noddings often write about a "caring teacher," including the characteristics a caring teacher might have (e.g., [Concordia College](#), 2003; [Lewis-Clark State College](#), n.d.; Nowak-Fabrykowski & Caldwell, 2002). Mentioning the characteristics of a "caring teacher" (or dispositions, in [NCATE](#) lingo) instantly turns *caring* into a virtue.

But virtue ethics have no place in professional education, especially in teacher education. I say this from an historian's perspective, not a philosopher's. There are a number of reasons why virtue ethics are inappropriate in professional education—the way that it can lead to litmus testing (as in LeMoyne College), or the psychologization of evaluation and the presumption that faculty in a professional school can somehow evaluate (or worse, intuit) what's inside someone's head. This search for some sort of a professional soul tempts faculty to think of professional education as a process reconstructing the self, something with which I am highly uncomfortable.

More insidious is the way that this transformation of *caring* into a virtue feeds into the historical rhetoric denigrating teaching as an intellectual occupation. Two hundred years ago, the primary qualification for teaching was virtue, not academics. When Mann and others encouraged the hiring of women as teachers, it was from the essentialist argument that women are more nurturing. While that was a shift from the predominance of men in teaching, it dovetailed with changing sex roles (Strober & Tyack, 1980).

We retain this legacy of seeing teachers as role models, with virtue and morals more important than skill. People assume my wife must be *patient* because she teaches special education, but whether she can *think* about her students is ignored. And then there are the old chestnuts: Women who *care* and teach don't need to be paid decently, because that's just what women (and teachers) do. It's a service profession, after all, like nursing and social work. Who goes into teaching to make money? So pardon the sound of my teeth grinding when I hear about "caring teachers." Regardless of the philosophical arguments, writing and talking about teacher virtues feeds into some of the worst historical legacies for teachers.

That conclusion doesn't mean that Noddings isn't important. She is, but in a different way. In my mind, her work falls within a literature on reconstructing (liberal) philosophical arguments from relational assumptions. Rawls' (1971) *original position* was the ultimate end-point of liberal philosophy, focusing on the logical consequences of assuming that people are isolatable individuals: take that individual outside of reality, behind the veil of ignorance, and see what the logical person-in-a-vacuum would conclude is just. As many others have noted, that assumes the existence of the person-in-a-vacuum. Communitarians have taken one counterposition to liberalism, arguing that we must see the community in itself as an important unit of society.

Others have taken a different approach, seeing relationships as the source of self (Guignon, 2003) and of a network of obligations that have ethical consequences, including public policy (Kittay, 2001). In this regard, I find Kittay's work more satisfying than the others, because she recognizes the way that there are multi-level dependencies, where those who care for a dependent are themselves weaker and dependent. Kittay argues that welfare reform of the 1990s privatized the act of caring, placing it in the bounds of family, outside public policy. Leo Casey's [argument](#) against the "caring teacher" language echoes Kittay's criticism of the privatization of dependency: when teachers are assumed to be the sole ones who care for kids' minds, then the network of support that teachers themselves need is neatly placed on the shelf.

Thus, Noddings' work is better seen as tentative, raising interesting questions about the extent to which we can (re)construct notions of ethics and justice from a relational starting point. Those in education have much to offer in this regard, from the relational nature of teaching to the implications of disability for our notion of the self. Instead, too many of our colleagues see her work as the caring gospel, a reification that does far more harm than good. Do I care for my students? I try. But don't call me a caring teacher, ever.

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Where is the bureaucracy reenactor crowd?

1/13/2009: In the past few months, I have been struggling with how to teach a difficult topic: bureaucracy. It's not hard to enter the topic with a class; everyone experiences bureaucracy in ways that they can talk about at one level. Generally, I find that students absorb notions of street-level bureaucrats, scripts about "real school," and loosely-coupled systems. And one of the most popular books I assign is about bureaucracy: Tyack and Cuban's *Tinkering toward Utopia*. Especially for current school administrators, bureaucracy can be a very attractive topic.

But at another level, a bureaucracy is hard to learn. Though we experience the status games that Weber discusses, and though most adults spend months and years learning the tacit knowledge that Polanyi has described, I know relatively few friends and colleagues who can reliably describe the weird ways that bureaucracies work.

It's not that people don't theorize, but that their theories are often two-dimensional: bureaucracies always behave a certain way, at least in many of the explanations I hear. But that's not a legitimate generalization. Large organizations have repertoires of behavior, and the choices of individuals matter. The truth is somewhere between guessing the psychology of individual administrators and making cookie-cutter pictures of school bureaucracies.

There are two common errors I have observed in the lay perspective on bureaucracy, even from people who work within them. First is an inattention to the interplay of explicit and tacit knowledge, an inattention to the relationship between formal rules and the inevitable discretion in applying them. At universities, this is often played out in arguments about what an accrediting body will or will not call a university on the carpet about. Some things are no-brainers: if news reports show that an institution is the victim of massive financial fraud and mismanagement, an accrediting body will almost inevitably place the institution on probation. But the rules are often more flexible than what a reader may assume. So while my regional accrediting body requires that college teachers have a masters degree with 18 hours in the instructional area, institutions (usually department heads) can certify an individual as qualified without meeting that requirement. Too many such exceptions will raise red flags, but not the occasional one.

At other times, people confuse the discretionary authority of administrators with what is politically or

financially possible. In many universities, for example, there is a political balancing act between a provost's office and departments. While in theory many a provost can overrule every department recommendation on tenure and promotion, in few cases will university administrators ignore recommendations that come from both the tenured faculty and a department chair. If the recommendation is to deny tenure, few provosts want to discourage what they perceive as higher standards. And if a provost consistently denies tenure to faculty that are recommended for approval at the department level, there will also be a political price to pay.

A related error is inattention to institutional routines. I recently read the novel manuscript of a friend, and while I loved the plot, I winced whenever the author confused jails with prisons, swapped police and sheriffs' deputies, ignored the existence of continuances, and so forth. I do not read many mysteries these days, and when I have, I have usually enjoyed the Agatha Christie more than police procedurals. But there is something about the details of institutional behavior that matters to me.

I suppose I am the bureaucratic equivalent of a Civil War reenactor: I have an acquired instinct for institutional behavior and can spot inaccuracies faster than you can say *thin slice*. I have no idea where I acquired it, and I am not sure how to teach it or if one can teach it at all. But that knowledge should be teachable, because many of the problems that frustrate parents on a day-to-day basis is bureaucratic behavior. "They're just unfair" is an understandable reaction to events, but neither despair nor screaming at principals (or threatening lawsuits) will get your child the best opportunities, or at least not without considerable cost.

"Declining (x) literacy"

9/16/2005: Now that Constitution Day is nearly upon us (tomorrow, folks, the 218th anniversary of the signing of the Constitution, not that its signing had much historical significance—quick, what was the criterion for ratification?), the [New York Times](#) has its obligatory obeisance-and-reflection, which turns out to be a bunch of historically-unreflective pap about "historical literacy:"

*The new law takes effect as many historians are voicing alarm over the **dimming** historical memory of the nation.*

James Rees, executive director of George Washington's Mount Vernon estate, said that in his 22-year tenure he has seen a **growing** historical ignorance among visitors. ...

Some educators believe that young people's history proficiency is **declining** because they watch too much television,...

Some experts say the problem is **worsening** because history and civics are receiving less attention in public schools, the result of a nationwide focus on reading and math.... (emphases added)

One of the great signs of historical ignorance is when people take on one of the great trend-y myths of popular belief, like the myth of declension. Whoops. Looks like Sam Dillon, the reporter for the Times,

catered to that myth in the article. While Americans may not know enough of their own history, I doubt that such ignorance is greater now than at any time in the past, except maybe September 17, 1787, when there was very little national history to regurgitate on standardized tests.

Moreover, the usual definition of "historical literacy" is focused on fragmentary bits of information that look remarkably like trivia. In the case of the Times article, the obligatory quiz question was the commander of colonial forces at Yorktown in 1781 (hint: not William Sherman, Ulysses Grant, or Douglas Macarthur). While I'd like folks to have a clue to who was the commander, I'd also like them to know a little more: why the battle was important and who else was involved besides the colonials and the royalists, for starters.

As historian of education Harvey Graff has noted, we use the word *literacy* when we want a trump card to tout the importance of a topic, even though any particular literacy concept is historically contingent and constructed. To add to computer literacy, economic literacy, math literacy, physics literacy, among others, we now have historical literacy. And, after a bit of searching, I've discovered that there are at least 31 pages referring to [condom literacy](#). That puts the dispensers in gas station men's rooms in a *whole* other perspective. Postmodernists should be so happy, that we are constantly commanded to read the world in so many ways.

Punished for speaking your home language

12/9/2005: A 16-year-old who speaks English also speaks his parents' language and is suspended from school for speaking his home language *in the hallway*, not in class. A nightmare from the early 20th century? No. Today's [Kansas City-area schools](#). Fortunately, the superintendent of the district rescinded the punishment, but civil-rights advocates are still fuming, and rightly so. This has nothing to do with the language of instruction and everything to do with the *politics* of language.

I'm not "for the children"

4/22/2006: I've just finished reading a fine student paper, but it's one one where the obligatory purple passage at the end spoke of the need to *keep the children in mind*—in this case, the student was skeptical of the value of vouchers. Just yesterday, Matt Ladner [opined](#) about the Oprah series, "But U.S. schools can get much better once we put the interests of students and parents before those of the special interests." In his case, he's in favor of vouchers.

I need to address this framing of education policy at length in another forum, but I can quickly explain why such rhetorical appeals make me uncomfortable. There's both a certain sleaziness and a logical slipperiness in making this appeal *for the children*.

Spend time at home *for your child*. Call up your state representative to argue for a program *for your child*. Go to the ballfield and yell at the ump *for your child*. Spend your moolah on Mozart CDs *for your child*. Spend thousands of dollars on dresses and makeup *for your child* in a 4-year-old beauty pageant.

In reality, while we can all be altruistic about what we push, we're doing so based on *adult* values. That's why we make kids do things they may not like (at least at first). We're the adults. That's also why most of us are repulsed by choices of *some* parents. Referring either to one's own choices in parenting or to public policy as "for the children" is both non-specific in terms of results and also an abdication of responsibility for one's choices in terms of values.

The final death of race-conscious desegregation

12/5/2006 (before the Supreme Court's decision striking down desegregation plans in two cities in these cases): Given the news stories after yesterday's oral argument in the Seattle and Louisville cases, it seems clear that the Supreme Court is going to strike down desegregation plans that are

- not court-ordered
- cognizant of race in any formulaic sense

Affirmative action in the individualized way that Sandra Day O'Connor accepted in the Michigan law school case a few years ago may survive, but you can't do that in K-12 school systems except in districts so small that the practice won't affect more than a tiny proportion of students.

The court may change with a different president, reversing whatever opinions are written here, but I suspect some school districts will go the Raleigh route and try to rewrite desegregation plans to focus on social class. I don't think those will be any less divisive, but my guess is that they'll withstand court scrutiny: in the *Rodriguez* case many years ago, the court said that social class was not the suspect classification basis that race was.

However, I expect that most of the (few) remaining desegregation plans will simply be dismantled. That doesn't mean we're returning entirely to the days of separate-and-unequal: wealthy parents will be able to buy access to desegregated schooling. And parents who are willing to bus their kids across town will sometimes have access to desegregated schooling. (Both of my children attended a magnet middle school where the student population was more diverse than their zoned middle school.) And without desegregation plans, there *will* be some low-level exposure to children of other races in *the majority* of schools.

But our society has missed a tremendous opportunity that opened up for it, first in the late 1950s when massive resistance blocked the first efforts to desegregate schools and again in the 1970s when school districts could have responded to busing orders with efforts to change the housing market.* As many others have written, residential segregation limits the extent of school desegregation.

Where do we go from here? I wish I knew. I am not sanguine about the claims that accountability and choice will solve the multiple problems of schools that are entirely segregated and serve students in poor neighborhoods. Nor am I claiming that desegregation was any cure-all. But there is something immensely sad about knowing that a moment has passed and that the country has irrevocably lost an opportunity.

* In my fantasy, Southern school systems would have made two policy choices to reshape housing markets: Telling developers that they would reward new mixed-income housing with truly neighborhood, walkable schools; and asking judges to exempt from busing orders any neighborhood that became and remained stably desegregated.

The myth of apolitical education policy

2/27/2007: Monday in [Get Schooled](#), the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* Bridget Gutierrez asked,

But will public education ever not be political?

This is a classic statement that gets a mental "facepalm" reaction from me. How can you have education connected to citizenship (either education *for* citizenship or education *attached to* citizenship as a right) and then expect that somehow there wouldn't be a politics of education?

Historically, the desire for "removing politics from education" has been a rhetorical trump card, most famously in the Progressive Era (see David Tyack's *The One Best System*, 1974, for the most famous history of Progressive-Era bureaucratization). Usually, it hasn't removed politics from education so much as shifting education policymaking to a *different* political arena.

The Project Method zombie

8/19/2008: The [NCTAF blog](#) calls it "a 21st century education system." [Steve Lohr admires it](#) as "the drive for technology-enabled reform of education." The [New Technology Foundation](#) calls it "a fully proven model."

While I have some hopes for how technology might be used to change instruction, calling project-based learning *new* is something that raises alarms in my internal History Warning System(tm). I suppose I could point back a few years to [Ted Hasselbring](#) et al.'s Jasper Project, but let's nail this puppy to the wall. If you just read a bit of William Heard Kilpatrick's [The Project Method](#) (published in *Teachers College Record* in 1918), I think you'll discover that project-based learning isn't new.

Kilpatrick's version of project-based learning was torn apart in the Progressive Era by John Dewey and Boyd Bode, among others, as vapid, content-free pabulum. That's not *necessarily* the case with well-designed anchored instruction, but the devil's in the details. From my own experience, there is an *enormous* amount of work that goes into designing anchored instruction that works. Neither technology nor the existence of an interesting case guarantees valuable instruction, and I hope we stop believing in education panaceas, whether you call them *project-based learning*, *vouchers*, or anything else.

Again: the existence of anchored instruction isn't bad. It's the *idea* of any panacea that we need to watch for, else the zombies of long-dead promised panaceas will rise and eat your brains. Or they'll eat our children's

brains.

Teaching

A former student e-mails

4/2/2001: Last night, a student from the fall e-mailed me. Over the course of the last semester, she and I had a running correspondence about the teaching of the course as well as the substance of it as well. She's an older student who, for a variety of reasons, was justifiably irritated at some of the structures I impose for younger undergraduates. I learned a great deal from her comments, which pushed me to think about what I do and why. One exchange, first her:

Here's my take on your comments. First that you detected a lack of respect for the writers you are asking us to read, and observed little or weak paraphrasing. Cool, you're right. Both counts. Writers should be respected even if they're wrong and it's an attitude that is easily corrected. It seems to me that you are defining respect for a writer by direct references and this paraphrasing you've requested. To me that was all a waste of words because you read the stuff, I've read the stuff and the paper only serves to show how we relate and respond. Another student pointed out to me that your aim might just be to have our papers readable by some outside person who possibly hasn't read the article in question. Ok, I'll buy that; surely that will improve with awareness. . . .

Looks to me so far that my papers are associational with the readings, but you're probably hearing way more than you care to about what we already know, and not enough about what difference it makes 'by direct reference/paraphrase'. To be honest, reading these articles hasn't presented me with much new information, but then we're back to the 'respect the writer of the readings ;-)' and the teacher, aren't we? :-) By the way, there were a couple of things I'd have included in those papers, but couldn't fit all that into 600 words and pull off paraphrasing too!

And my response:

I know that at times a focus on the "text" makes teachers seem like we most value the pinning of authors down for close study, maybe making me an academic-as-lepidopterist (or butterfly collector). Please have pity on this poor reader, though, as I try both to gauge each student's understanding of the material and also respecting the nuances of all your thoughts. Specific references help with both of these tasks, because I face many times each week a passage of student writing that is ambiguous. Is the ambiguity intended, a reflection of writing late at night, or a sign of some misunderstanding?

Discussing details helps me understand writing.

Teachers with small numbers of student--and students who have time to reflect and respond--have a great advantage in this effort at communication, in that a conversation can often sort out what the student is understanding and thinking. With more than 100 students, I do not have that option (I refuse to call it a luxury). The result is a horrific Catch-22 in which students most lacking patient guidance and coaching, in medium to large classes, are those where they most desperately need the skills that only such close teaching can provide.

As I wrote to another teacher afterwards, "My wife, who is taking classes for a masters, often chides me about this 'textuality' of academics, and at least I have an answer now for her (and myself)."

Plagiarism again

3/19/2002: I discovered two cases of plagiarism over the last few days. I feel rotten for the betrayal of ideals and the time I had to spend tracking it down instead of reading *other* students' work. I'd like to spend a minimal amount of time on this and not let it get to me, but my spouse tells me every case of plagiarism will always affect me like this.

What students know (or think they do)

8/23/2004: This semester is my first teaching one of the frosh courses in USF's Honors College, and I enjoyed meeting my students this morning, though there was one disconcerting minute or two, when I was trying to encourage discussion of real-life high-stakes examples of trying to discern truth. (The course, titled "Acquisition of Knowledge," is really an epistemology course.) I had discussed the controversies over Michael Bellesiles' now-discredited book (*Arming America*) that had won a prestigious historians' prize and controversies over what educational research is and is not, but those are fairly arcane matters for the first morning of the semester. Time to let them start a heated debate. So I asked how many had read or heard of the Swift Boat veterans ads or the controversy over Bush's National Guard service.

The group looked sheepish while a few raised their hands. I was flummoxed. Oh, well. So much for students' keeping up with current events. Time to try another tack, I figured. I asked how many remembered the O.J. Simpson trial. I don't know why, really—it was the first thing that came to mind in terms of pop culture and discerning the truth.

Every hand went up.

A war against the empty thesis statement

4/9/2007: To [The Little Professor](#), who complains about student papers with the thesis statement declaring "many similarities and differences," I say, I will join with you in this battle. In fact, I think I've been there

all along, but I just didn't know where the chain of command was. Lead on!

My students don't usually declare the existence of "many similarities and differences." My students are far more creative when they write empty thesis statements, finding their own, unique ways of listing topics rather than summarizing an argument. (Sometimes they list to the right, sometimes to the left, ...) I've never thought of writing "Arrrgggh!" in the margins, and that's an interesting idea, though it does bring to mind the scene from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

The professor says I have a thesis of ... Arrrgggh!

A thesis of arrrgggh? That sounds like an expletive.

I think it's a note of frustration. Arrrgggh!

Oooooooooohhhhh!

No, not "Ooohhh." "Arrrgggh!" Frustration.

No, not an "Arrrgggh!" of frustration, but "Ooohhh," as in surprise and alarm.

[they all turn around]

[in unison] Oooooooooohhhhh!

[The Great Beast of Vapid Writing launches itself at the hapless students, swallowing up their grades.]

And now, to a bit of reading of student work, followed by the judging of undergraduate research posters. After a head-cold-filled weekend, I'm on the market for new nasal passages. Unfortunately, despite rumors to the contrary, it appears that there are *not* any available at the moment on eBay.

How to ask questions of faculty

2/13/2008: Once again [Cal Newport has solid advice](#) for college students:

Don't be afraid to ask questions when confused in class. Use the following format: *<this is my interpretation> + <this is what confused me> + <this is what I want to be clarified>*

Yes, yes, yes: don't ask a vague question such as *Can you tell me again <topic>?* Instead, explain your *best* understanding, which will help me or my colleagues figure out if you've nailed it, if you're in the ballpark but need some guidance, or if you're out of the ballpark.

Do not use dictionary definitions in papers, unless you're writing a paper about dictionaries

11/7/2009: A word of advice to all students: in almost every subject, no matter what some teacher told you years ago, do not ever waste your time or words repeating a dictionary definition in an academic paper. Whatever Mr. Johnson's and Mr. Webster's successors wrote down is descriptive, not authoritative, and almost certainly it is useless for the argument you wish to make. There are obvious exceptions (philology, etymology, etc.), but I have never seen a paper where a dictionary definition serves any purpose other than to motivate my tooth-grinding.

Avoid the interrupting, comma

11/7/2009: One more bit of advice to students this afternoon: If you wish to write forceful sentences, do not be a writer, who places a comma between the subject, and verb of a sentence, nor between parts of a compound verb or noun with, only two items, nor in the middle of, a prepositional phrase. (Remove the underlined commas and reread.)

Doctoral students and Ph.D.s tend to be addicted to the [dual comma interruptus](#), but other students appear to have a habit with the single, self-pleasuring comma.

Perspectives on higher education

Mis-Remembering Title IX

5/14/2007: The [debate over the 2005 reinterpretation of college athletic applications of Title IX](#) tends to avoid acknowledging the truth: the higher-ed athletic application of Title IX is only one part of what Title IX's prohibition on gender discrimination touched, and it's probably the least important large chunk of Title IX's effects. In the decade before Title IX's passage as part of the Education Amendments of 1972, ...

- Schools could slot students into program by sex and could make programs differentially available by sex (classically, home economics for girls and shop for boys, or higher math and science just for boys)
- High schools expelled pregnant students and students who had given birth (I know: it still happens today, but it's clearly illegal)
- Administrators were not held responsible for looking the other way when teachers discriminated based on sex
- A small fraction of administrators were female

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- Many K-12 schools had *no* athletic programs for girls

Unless I explain these facts to students, many assume that Title IX *only* affects athletics and the debate over single-sex education. But in the broad sweep, Title IX has been remarkably successful in the core areas of academics and providing professional opportunities. So I'm torn over the current debate. Yes, athletic opportunities matter, but not as much as academic opportunities.

Palin is more typical than you think

10/22/2008: Robin Abcarian's [L.A. Times story yesterday](#) about Sarah Palin's college career tries to establish a contrast with the three other major-party nominees:

Sen. John McCain is remembered as a passionate contrarian... Sen. Barack Obama... is remembered as a daunting scholar and calming influence. Sen. Joe Biden... is remembered fondly by professors who found him charming. Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, however, is barely remembered at all.

"Looking at this dynamic personality now, it mystifies me that I wouldn't remember her," said Jim Fisher, Palin's journalism instructor at the University of Idaho, where she graduated with a bachelor of science degree in journalism in 1987. Palin, he said, took his public affairs reporting class, an upper-division course limited to 15 students. "It's the funniest damn thing," Fisher said. "No one can recall her."

It's **not** "the funniest damn thing" at all. It's all too typical of American colleges.

In a world where the majority of college students are either at community colleges or at public universities and colleges, anonymity is too often the norm. At huge places students can find niches, but if the various surveys of student engagement are any indication, it's all too easy to graduate from college without talking with a faculty member outside class, without having the same faculty member twice, and without the type of engagement with *either* faculty or classmates that people would remember years later.

I should know: I've had well over 2000 students at USF, and I have only had a handful for more than a single course, 15 weeks (or 10, in the summer), in, out, and often halfway out the door at the end of class, rushing to the next class, or to work, or somewhere. I struggle against the anonymity and my own bad memory for names and faces; and at least in the context of a single class, I can use [Mnemosyne](#) to learn names. But a few months after the end of a semester? If I've only talked with them a handful of times, and never in office hours or about interesting subjects, I really don't know them. The few who have kept in contact after that one semester? I'll remember them for years.

The liberal arts and narratives of declension

8/2/2009: There is a teacher's voice in my head, asking the logical question of *New York Times* reporter

Patricia Cohen who speculated whether [the humanities are in decline](#) (perhaps because of the Great Recession) and whether [older history subdisciplines are also in decline](#): "where did she go to school, and who were her teachers?" Evidently, the *Times* is hiring reporters who either never had good history teachers, never paid attention to them, or forgot one of the basic lessons in a good college history class: beware narratives of climbing societies, falling societies, or any society-wide "rise and fall." The February article brought [the expected number of letters to the editor](#) to a newspaper that might just depend on readers who want to read (you know, that humanities-ish activity), [Timothy Burke had some words](#), and Michael Berube had solid things to say in [early June](#) and [late June](#). About the second article, again see [Burke](#) as well as [Mary Dudziak](#), [Mark Grimsley](#), [Claire Potter](#), and [David Silbey](#). I am months late on this, so I will do what I can.

First, before panicking it probably makes sense to divide what parts of the proportionate decline of humanities majors in the past few decades are attributable to different factors: the growth of undergraduate professional degrees, the growth of higher-education enrollments more generally, the decline of GI Bill-related enrollment as a proportion of undergraduates, and any leftover changes that just might be related to the nature of the disciplines themselves. In part because the expansion of higher education came side-by-side with the belief that a college degree's main utility was getting a job and growing credential requirements for jobs, enrollment grew faster in professional majors than in the humanities.

Maybe I should cry over the fact that a lower proportion of students are history majors than there used to be (though the percentages bounce up and down), or maybe I should celebrate the dramatic expansion of college attendance in the past 70 years and the fact that even if the proportion of history majors has dropped, there are still more graduates with history majors living in the country today than were living in 1950. Remember new "old saw" about the total population of China and India; apply as balm to humanities woes. Not only does the general expansion of college attendance make me less concerned than others are, but my guess is that they're more likely to be exposed to teaching that asks important historiographical questions and that uses primary sources. I didn't say immersed in: exposed.

Those perspectives do not completely eliminate concern about the future of humanities teaching and humanities departments in colleges and universities. Though regionally accredited colleges and universities have some version of a distribution/breadth requirement or general-education program (depending on your regional accreditor), that fact does not mean that a department has to be anything more than a "service outlet," the higher-ed equivalent of the quick-lube shop tucked in between the strip malls of Finance and Psychology. "Shakespeare while u wait! Fulfill writing requirement in 30 mins or ur money back."

On the other hand, while the standard choices of academe has been for greater adjunct use in all high-student areas (and that is true whether they're called adjuncts or graduate students), the reality is that humanities classes are cheap in comparison with science and math if one looks at course credit earned. High [failures rates in algebra](#) and the costs of maintaining labs add up in a pragmatic sense, and that's only looking at credit courses. What about community college remedial classes? As DeanDad has noted, developmental courses in math are [a death march](#) in comparison with other noncredit classes. Teaching-heavy institutions may short the humanities in individual places, but the combination of

gen-ed/distribution requirements makes it virtually impossible for college students to graduate without some liberal-arts classes and thus virtually impossible for colleges to eliminate liberal-arts programs entirely.

And then, if you look at the costs of maintaining the research capacity of faculty, the humanities look even better: no lab animals to house, fewer research assistants to hire, and the primary need for many scholars is a computer, some travel funds for conferences or research trips, and time. The big difference is in universities with doctoral programs, where the expectation of support for doctoral students has both direct costs (tuition waivers, which are on top of the pitiful stipends for TAs and RAs) and also indirect costs (in terms of the classes that graduate faculty are **not** teaching while they are running seminars and advising students). What I'm seeing in Florida universities is a combination of closing small doctoral programs as well as some atrocious decisions about closing departments.

The probable consequence of the first type of decisions--closing down small doctoral programs in the liberal arts **and in other areas**--is a change in the doctoral-education opportunities in those fields, somewhat different workloads for those faculty, and perhaps a bit of status shift back to traditionally-elite programs. It's not as though small-program closures is going to bump the publication trends in any significant manner, and Cohen's articles presume that the rolling crisis in academic publishing is in an entirely different universe from the mythical status decline she posits. In her February article, the world of publishing is entirely ignored, and the June article only discusses a presumed shift in journal publishing. In the real world where I live, as opposed to the make-believe world of the *New York Times* reporter, the long-term crisis in the liberal arts is in academic publishing and questions about the economics of monographs and the long-form argument.

(Among the atrocious departmental closure decisions, the University of Central Florida almost shut down its statistics department the same year it's opening up a new medical school, and Florida Atlantic University reorganized its engineering college into the Department of Tenured Faculty We Like, Department of Tenured Faculty We Hate, Department of Tenure-Track Faculty, and Department of Non-Tenurable Faculty Who Teach Boatloads of Undergraduates. Those weren't the official names of the reorganized units, but that's the central function of the reorganization. Guess which "department" was closed, with the tenured faculty told to leave by August 7?)

Another stupid article on "the dating scene" in college

2/6/2010: Some of the clues that the [latest article on the "dating science" in colleges with 60% female enrollment](#) was written by a reporter with an axe to grind and a preset angle at which to grind:

- The featured photograph from a university with 60% female enrollment (a) is of college seniors (or I hope they're seniors) in a bar, (b) is of an all-white group of students, (c) has six women and one man, (d) has no older students.
- Every photograph features white students.
- All the women interviewed for the story appear to be members of sororities.
- One of the interviewees is a former student who happens to be hanging out in a bar near campus. (So

why is he representative? Why didn't the reporter step a few minutes away from a bar?)

- The focus is entirely at a flagship public university.
- There are no older students interviewed for the story.

Since the primary world of colleges is at the regional state university and community-college level, maybe we should skip the flagship campuses and look at the statistics of an institution such as [Miami-Dade College](#). MDC has more than 150,000 students enrolled, and while 60% of them are women, only about 35% are right out of high school (under 21). About two-thirds are attending MDC on a part-time basis, and while MDC is now a four-year institution, I don't think there are any dorms, so every one of those students are commuters and live somewhere in the Miami area. In other words, the dating scene for straight, gay, or bisexual students is where they live as well as on campus. That's the reality for the majority of college students in the United States, not the preppy picture that the *New York Times* reporter and photographer portrayed.

But if you want to look at residential colleges and universities, maybe a little reality should intrude: the average age at civil marriage for women in the United States has moved back up to the mid-20s, where it has been historically for well over a century, with the exception of the immediate postwar years. College students' meeting and marrying in college is common enough but not dominant.

And the history of colleges is not one filled with demographic "balance" in some hypothetical way. For many years, the ranks of elite residential institutions were filled with single-sex colleges and universities with single-sex undergraduate colleges, and the students in those colleges and universities had to go off-campus for a heterosexual dating scene. And in the first decade after World War II, the GI Bill pushed enrollment in public universities in the other direction, towards majority male enrollment. If you can find more than a decade or two when the dominant demographic profiles of residential colleges, community colleges, and public universities were all fairly evenly split by gender, I'd be surprised. My guess is that maybe a decade or two will fit with the peak of the Baby Boom through the mid-1980s... when people worried about the social consequences of the sexual revolution. As one of Gilda Radner's characters would say, if it's not one thing, it's another... so let's stop obsessing with the on-campus dating opportunities of college students.

Why is a college education like a tulip bulb?

6/11/2010: Anonymous community-college blogger [Dean Dad](#) has one plausible response to the [latest installation](#) of the "college is the next asset bubble to burst" argument, and every time I come across it I grind my teeth, think of ravens and writing desks, and go on. At least Glenn Reynolds (the latest proponent) is neither an economist nor an historian, or I'd accuse him of professional incompetence. Hint to all who might think he's right: a college degree is not an excludable good that is the type normally resellable on a speculative basis. But at least I have material for this entry...

Some part of the argument regularly floated on this topic is an anticipatory taste of Schadenfreude (German for the joy of watching others experience pain): "I just can't wait for the bastards to get their due," with

higher education standing in for all bastards here. As many people before me have pointed out, Schadenfreude isn't a wise basis for public policy, and desire for it tends to blind one to analytical details. Most students are not in the type of tuition-dependent institution that Dean Dad rightly points out is the only part of higher ed vulnerable to a "oh, we can't spend as much as we'd like" change in behavior. Millions still want a college education, and if they can't afford private tuition or out-of-state tuition somewhere else, they'll pop for a four-year university degree or start at community colleges.

At some level, the dissatisfaction with higher education leads to grumbling and sometimes structural changes in public higher ed (e.g., calls for accountability, today more about attainment than cognitive outcomes). Concerns about family costs have led to the changes in student loan policy. Grumbling has not yet led to changes in tax laws that would move the needle on athletic departments or large endowments. And given the labor-market queueing advantage of those with college degrees, you're not going to see people leaving colleges in droves, or at least not "college" in the abstract.

In other words, this doesn't look like an asset bubble to me in any way I'm familiar with.

Studying the studying study: it's foreign-language enrollments

8/8/2010: About a month ago, the [first coverage appeared](#) of [a March paper by Philip Babcock and Mindy Marks](#) attempting to pin down changes in college student studying. Since then, lots of people have drawn all sorts of conclusions without reading the paper very carefully. The dominant representation of the paper is the usual declension story, because the top-line conclusion of the authors is that net of all compositional effects, college students are spending less time studying today than several decades ago, in all higher-ed sectors. While the authors spend only two paragraphs on explanations (most of the paper is detailed number-crunching of various surveys, discussions of what's comparable and what is not), it's that rank speculation that's gotten most of the play.

But there's a substantial problem with trying to fit the top-line empirical conclusion of the study with the standard story of declension, because the standard story of declension heavily weights the supposed decline towards the last few decades. Back when I was a college student, the story goes, we could study Nietzsche while drinking 120-proof Everclear and running 4 miles a day, but the students today want to be catered to, colleges spend all this money on climbing walls and dining-hall furniture, yadda yadda. (For the record, I didn't read Nietzsche until grad school, I have never had Everclear as far as I'm aware, and I was a very amateur on-and-off-mostly-off intramural badminton guy, not a runner, but I hope you understand my point. See the [Monty Python Yorkshireman sketch](#) for the classic example.)

But the paper's empirical conclusion is that if there's been a decline in the average number of hours studying (and they claim that decline over 40 years to be about 10 hours per week), that decline occurred largely before 1988. There's an interesting question here about the question-framing effects of the different surveys (Project Talent in 1961, NLSY's 1981 follow-up, and HERI in 1988 and 2004), because students were asked to place their studying time in groups of hours rather than state a specific number of hours, and surveys did not consistently ask for the same reference ("typical" versus "last" week). In one way of looking at the data,

without trying to adjust for framing effects, the 1961-1981 decline was 4.7 hours, while the 1961-1981 decline was 8 hours after some adjustment for framing effects, but in either case, the last few decades' decline was minimal.

This substantive conclusion is at odds with most of the representation of the survey. If the study is true, then somehow college students of the past two decades have been *less* vulnerable to the corrupting influence of pop culture/sports/drinking/frats/whatever than students of the 1960s and 1970s (and possibly 1980s), where the apparent real declines occurred. Or where college administrators in the last few decades have been less influenced by a consumerist orientation, in comparison with the prior generation of administrators. All three of you who believe either story, please raise your hands.

Since Babcock and Marks have made a reasonable prima facia case that the decline happened in every slice they tried to examine (liberal-arts colleges, public universities, community colleges, etc.), and that demographic factors and intensity of study don't have much evidence as factors, let's think about the twenty-year period between 1960 and 1980 and the 15-year period between 1990 and 2005, and let's take their empirical conclusions at face value. What could explain the much larger drop in study time in the first period and a minimal drop in study time in the second period?

- Greater preparation of high-school graduates on average by 1980.
- Greater influence of the "counterculture": somehow, students of the 1960s and 1970s were more influenced by changing social mores than students of the 1990s and early part of the last decade.
- A loosening of in-loco-parentis attitudes of colleges: Once the ties were loosened in the 1960s and 1970s, there wasn't much further to go. This is a variant on the prior explanation.
- The spread of electronic typewriters.
- A quantum change in curricular requirements in the first era that would have a much greater change in study time than anything that could have happened in the second era.

The first explanation might work moderately for some elite institutions that could be more selective by 1980, but it's not plausible for all institutions, especially the growing public institutions in the 1960s and 1970s. The second and third explanations are going to appeal to those who tend to look to cultural explanations, but without changing academic expectations, a cultural argument doesn't explain how *more* people could graduate in 1980 with fewer study hours on average than in 1960.

My spouse guessed that the spread of computers might have made studying more efficient. That doesn't fit with the timing of the drop, but another bit of technology does: electric typewriters. Smith-Corona created the first line of "portable" electric typewriters in the late 1950s, and IBM created the Selectric line (and its little ball o' letters, so much sexier than the daisy wheel) in the early 1960s. The quotation marks around *portable* mean that the first Smith-Corona portable was about as portable as the first 25-pound "portable" computers, but you take what you can get at the time. The spread of electric typewriters made it possible for middle-class students to type drafts and final copies without killer finger muscles. (Ha! I know that in the 1960s there were plenty of students whose first drafts were what they turned in.) And without the writing-longhand stage. And with the spread of electric typewriters in K-12 schools, *where typing is taught*,

students would have found learning typing to be less torture than with manual typewriters.

But the electric-typewriter explanation is probably marginal as an explanation. It's a great Just-So Story, but there's no way to confirm or disprove it.

On the other hand, at least as I write this entry, I think the most plausible *and empirically-based* explanation is a specific curriculum change between 1960 and 1980 that you did not see between 1990 and 2005. So where would you look for this? Folks like the late Allan Bloom would look more generally to the humanities, or rather the expansion of professional education at the expense of liberal-arts education and the watering-down of liberal-arts requirements. That's pretty general, and it doesn't really explain much about declining study time, unless you can assert that *on average* professional courses require less work than liberal-arts courses as a generic claim. That might be true but it might not be: ever completed every problem set for a series of accounting classes? No, I haven't, either, but if the evidence on study time generally is limited, what do you think exists as evidence of different fields?

My speculation on the structural side, and on this you can easily disprove me: changing language requirements that were either reduced or that could be tested out of. There are some types of classes that are very hard to reduce work-time on, at least for most students, and language instruction is one of them. When I attended college in the mid-1980s, my institution (Haverford College) allowed students to test out of the language requirement. So sometime in my first fall, I hopped a bus with a dozen other students, and we rode to an unidentified building at another college to take an acronym-titled test I don't recall. I passed, and I wasn't required to read in another language until grad school.

To some extent my speculation is inappropriately based on personal experience, but it jibes with my sense of higher-ed history and my instinct that if there was a quantum drop in study time between 1960 and 1980, there's a relatively simple and time-specific explanation. And it's a claim testable through a (somewhat boring) research project: collect the catalog requirements of a range of institutions in 1960 and 1980 and see how curriculum requirements *and opt-out provisions* changed.

But there is [data collected by the Modern Language Association](#) on foreign-language class enrollments, data collected in surveys of foreign-language departments in various years since 1960 (see Table 4, on p. 18 of the 2006 report). The survey year with peak proportionate enrollment was 1965, at roughly 16.5 foreign-language enrollees per 100 students. The survey year with lowest proportionate enrollment was 1980, with 7.3 foreign-language enrollees per 100 students. Since 1980, relative enrollments in foreign-language classes have remained stable or climbed a little bit.

This is an Occam's Razor (or simplest plausible) explanation of the drop in study time as the result of changing foreign-language enrollments: between 1960 and 1980, average study time dropped because proportionate foreign-language enrollments dropped, and between 1990 and 2005, average study time stayed relatively stable in a time when foreign-language enrollments were stable in a relative sense. No other explanation is needed, whether cultural or economic or what have you. I may be wrong about my speculation on requirements/test-out policies, but I suspect a whole load of people need to apologize for

ravings about lazy students and consumer-oriented colleges and universities. (This isn't a story of great academics from the current generation of students, but it fits with the general historian of education's assumption of relative stability about human nature and students.) For all their flaws, today's institutions at least haven't let foreign-language enrollments erode for a few decades, and enrollments are better than in 1980.

Update: Babcock emailed me this afternoon with the URL of a [AEI policy brief](#) he and Marks wrote that's a reasonable lay-friendly summary of the evidence and an expansion of the speculation on what might have happened. In that brief and in email correspondence with Babcock, it's clear Babcock and Marks are explicit in stating that some ideas are speculative, such as the student-survey influence on faculty. I'd go further: you'd need some stronger evidence to claim that student surveys were widespread by the mid-70s, enough to cause substantial changes in nationwide behavior of faculty and students.

My suspicion about specific requirements are subsumed in that brief under the "lower standards" catchall category. That could refer to curricular requirements, general classroom treaties resulting in lower expectations, or increasing use of student TAs and adjuncts and the consequences for what *really* happens in a class. Even within curricular requirements, there's a question of whether the common requirements are going to influence study-time more than requirements for majors.

Some of that is traceable: curriculum requirements are going to be in catalogs, many of which could be in university/college library special collections (but far more for four-year institutions that maintain institutional archives, so community-college catalogs from the 1960s will probably not have survived in great numbers). Unfortunately, I think the era of public-records statutes and state archives really came in the 1970s, but a few states may have sufficient extant records to show what happened over time across an entire state.