

The Republic

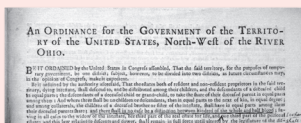
1776–2026

ERA ONE

Founding and Early Republic (1776–1861)



1776 John Adams advocates for laws for the “liberal education of youth,” capturing the founders’ belief that the new republic’s survival depends on education. Adams and other founders see colleges and universities as vital to sustaining self-government.



1787 The Confederation Congress passes the Northwest Ordinance, which establishes a process for admitting new states to the union. Article 3 of the ordinance declares education “necessary to good government,” setting a precedent for federal interest in education.

1795 The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill opens. It is the first public university in the US to award degrees.



1799 The Dartmouth at Dartmouth College becomes the first student newspaper in the US. (Yale Daily News becomes the first daily college newspaper in 1878.)



1819 Thomas Jefferson founds the University of Virginia, the first institution with an honor system and elective curriculum in the US. Jefferson designed the campus as an “academic village” with the Rotunda housing the library the focus of the campus, rather than a church.



1832 Artist John Trumbull donates paintings to Yale University, leading to the foundation of the Yale University Art Gallery, the first college museum in the US.

1833 Oberlin College and Conservatory (originally Oberlin Collegiate Institute) is founded. Coeducational from its beginning, it is the first college in the US to admit students regardless of race, starting in 1835.

1836 Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia, is founded, opening in 1839. It is the first college in the world chartered to grant degrees to women.

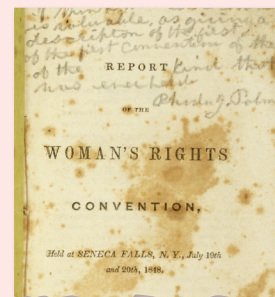
1837 Mount Holyoke Female Seminary is founded. Now Mount Holyoke College, it is the oldest higher ed institution for women that is still a women’s college.



1837 Cheyney University of Pennsylvania becomes the US’s first Black university.

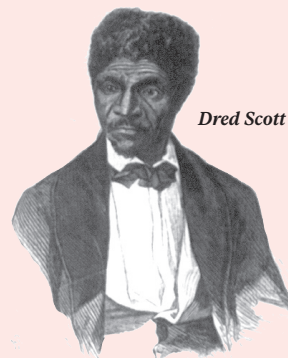
1840 The University of South Carolina finishes building the South Caroliniana Library, the first building specifically designed and built to house a college library in the US. (Harvard University’s library system, established in 1638, is the oldest, but its collection was housed in other buildings rather than a separate library.)

1848 The Seneca Falls Convention’s key document, *Declaration of Sentiments*, lists as a grievance that women have been denied “the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her.” One of the convention’s resolutions



calls for equal access to education as central to women’s equality.

1852 Antioch College opens in Ohio with abolitionist and education reformer Horace Mann as its first president. One of the nation’s first nonsectarian, coeducational institutions with an emphasis on social reform, it pioneers a work-study program in which students alternate academic study and real jobs.



1857 In *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, the US Supreme Court rules that Black people are not citizens, creating a legal justification for segregation in education.

1858 Iowa Agricultural College and Model Farm (now Iowa State University) begins operations as a prototypical land-grant institution, chartered to provide practical education in agricultural and mechanical arts.

250 Years of US Higher Education

of Learning

By Marilyn Cooper,
senior editor and writer, *Liberal Education*

ERA TWO

Expansion, Reconstruction, and Segregation (1862–1899)

1862 The first Morrill Act grants each state public lands to sell with the proceeds funding the establishment of public colleges and universities to teach agriculture, mechanical arts, and other “practical” subjects.

1865 The Reconstruction era begins. Freed people’s colleges such as Fisk University (1866) and Howard University (1867) are founded soon after. The Freedmen’s Bureau supports education for newly emancipated students.



Howard University

1876 Johns Hopkins University opens, introducing the research and graduate study model. The nation’s first research-focused university, its laboratories emphasize original research.

1881

Booker T. Washington founds Tuskegee Institute, which emphasizes practical vocational and industry training with the goal of improving economic conditions for Black Americans.



1890

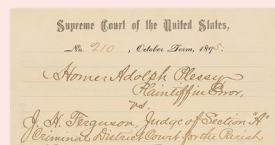
The second Morrill Act requires Southern and border states to either admit Black students to their land-grant colleges or establish separate land-grant institutions for them, ensuring that states can still comply with the original 1862 act while maintaining segregation.

1892

The Committee of Ten, appointed by the National Education Association and chaired by Harvard President Charles Eliot, recommends a standardized high school curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking over rote memorization. The committee’s work influences college and university entrance requirements.

1896

In *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the US Supreme Court upholds racial segregation under the doctrine of “separate but equal,” shaping higher education for decades.



ERA THREE

Progressive Era to World War II (1900–1945)

1901 Joliet Junior College becomes the first public community college in the US.

1905



Andrew Carnegie establishes the Carnegie Foundation for the

Advancement of Teaching. The endowment provides pensions for retiring college and university faculty and later develops the Graduate Record Examination (1937) and the Carnegie Unit, the basis for the modern credit hour in higher education.



1906

In response to concerns expressed by President Theodore Roosevelt about injuries and deaths in college football, representatives from sixty-two colleges form the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (later the National Collegiate Athletic Association) to regulate safety and rules in college sports.

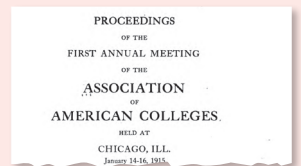
1910

Princeton University establishes the first mental health center on a US higher education campus.



1915

John Dewey and Arthur O. Lovejoy found the American Association of University Professors to further professionalize the professoriate, reform institutional governance, and protect academic freedom.



1915

150 campus executives found the Association of American Colleges (now the American Association of Colleges and Universities) to advocate for liberal education among its member institutions.

1917

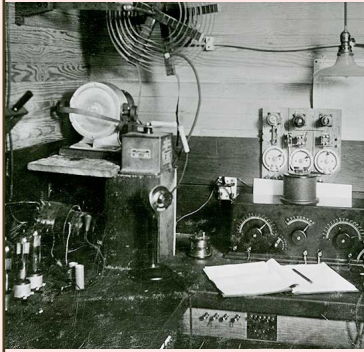
The US enters World War I. Colleges become military-training centers and contribute scientific and technological advances to the war effort.



1920

Thirty-four junior college leaders found the American Association of Junior Colleges (later the American Association of Community Colleges) to promote institutions focused on college preparation and vocational training.

1920 WRUC at Union College in Schenectady, New York, becomes the first college radio station to regularly air scheduled programs.



1922 The University of Iowa introduces the nation's first master of fine arts in creative arts program, later becoming home to the Iowa Writers' Workshop (1936).

1926 The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is administered for the first time. A committee headed by Princeton psychologist Carl Campbell Brigham designed the test to measure a student's potential for college.

1. If a man's salary is \$20 a week, and he spends \$14 a week, how long will it take him to save \$300?
Ans. _____ weeks
2. If two pencils cost five cents, how many can you buy for fifty cents?
Ans. _____ pencils
3. If a package containing twenty cigarettes costs fifteen cents, how many cigarettes can be bought for ninety cents?
Ans. _____ cigarettes
4. At 16¢ a yard, how much will seven feet of cloth cost?
Ans. _____¢
5. Fifty-six pounds of camping outfit are to be carried. A, B, and C share the load in these proportions: three parts to A, two parts to B, and two parts to C. How many pounds does A carry?
Ans. _____ lbs.

1934 The anti-war National Student League organizes the National Student Strike against War on April 13, initiating a wave of student activism.

1935 The Federal Emergency Relief Administration, a New Deal government agency, establishes the Student Aid Program to offer work-study opportunities to lower-income college students. The program aims to increase college attendance and degree completion rates.

1944 The GI Bill provides substantial funding for veterans' degrees, training, and certification tests. Key benefits include covering full tuition and fees for public in-state colleges



and universities and providing monthly stipends for housing, books, and supplies.

1945 Vannevar Bush's report, *Science the Endless Frontier*, advocates for sustained substantial federal funding of scientific research, especially at universities. The report proposes a centralized system for supporting scientific advancement for the public's welfare, national security, and economic prosperity after World War II. The report leads to the creation of the National Science Foundation (1950) and establishes the modern framework for US science policy.

ERA FOUR

Cold War, McCarthyism, and Civil Rights

(1946–1964)

1946 The US government establishes the Fulbright Program to foster global educational exchanges with the goal of promoting friendly relations and reducing the potential for future international conflicts.

1947 The President's Commission on Higher Education (a.k.a. the Truman Commission) calls for universal

access to higher education, civic education, elimination of racial and religious discrimination, and increased federal aid. It also recommends the creation of a nationwide network of tuition-free public community colleges.



1949 As McCarthyism takes hold in the US, the Loyalty Oath Crisis begins when the University of California requires faculty members to sign an anti-communist oath, leading to a wave of resignations and firings nationwide. The oath, which denied membership in the Communist Party, was met with resistance from some professors who refused to sign it on principle, citing concerns about academic freedom and free speech.

1950 The US Supreme Court cases *Sweatt v. Painter* and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma* chip away at the "separate but equal doctrine" in higher education by ruling that racial segregation in graduate programs is unconstitutional.



1953 KUHT at the University of Houston becomes the first college television station.

1954 In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the US Supreme Court declares racial segregation



in public institutions illegal, leading to the desegregation of colleges and universities.

1957 The Soviet launch of *Sputnik* ignites the Space Race. As a result, US colleges and universities receive massive federal investments through the National Defense Education Act of 1958 for scientific research and education.

1960 The California Master Plan for Higher Education establishes a three-tiered public university system (UC/CSU/community colleges) to provide affordable, accessible, and mission-specific education to the state's growing population.

1964 Title VI of the Civil Rights Act bans discrimination at federally funded institutions, including public universities.

ERA FIVE

Campus Unrest and Transformations

(1965–1979)

1965 The Higher Education Act authorizes federal aid programs to support individuals pursuing post-secondary education and to strengthen the educational resources of colleges and universities.



1968 Columbia University students occupy campus buildings to protest military research ties and a

proposed Harlem gym seen as discriminatory. A police sweep ends the standoff, sparking wider campus activism and reshaping debates over governance and student power.



1968 Organized by the Black Student Union and the Third World Liberation Front, a San Francisco State University strike leads the campus to establish the nation's first College of Ethnic Studies.



1969 Harvard University students strike over ROTC and the institutions' involvement with the Vietnam War. The Stonewall uprising sparks LGBTQ+ campus organizing. The first graduate student labor union forms at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.



1970 Law enforcement and National Guard members fire on student protesters at Kent State University and Jackson State University. The shootings underscore the deep divisions in the US at this political moment.

1970 San Diego State College launches the first women's studies program in the US.

1972 Congress enacts Title IX of the Education Amendments, prohibiting any education program or activity that receives federal funding from discriminating against someone on the basis of sex. Patsy Mink of Hawaii, the first woman of color and the first Asian American woman elected to Congress, is the main author of Title IX.



1972 Congress creates the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant, later renamed the Pell Grant program, to help low-income students pay for college.

1974 The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act gives students key privacy rights over educational records.

1975 The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990) ensures that students with disabilities have access to education.

1978 In *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, the US Supreme Court rules against racial quotas in university admissions but allows race to be considered as one factor among many in the admissions process to promote diversity.



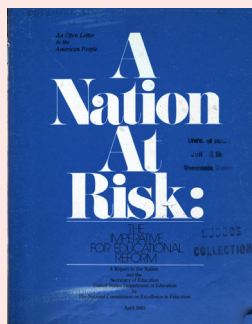
ERA SIX

Retrenchment, Diversity, and Marketization (1980–1989)

1980 The US Department of Education, signed into law by Jimmy Carter, begins operating. Judge Shirley Hufstедler, who was the second woman named to the federal bench, is appointed secretary.



1983 The National Commission on Excellence in Education publishes *A Nation at Risk*. The report warns that educational decline is a national security and economic threat and spurs a nationwide education reform and accountability movement.

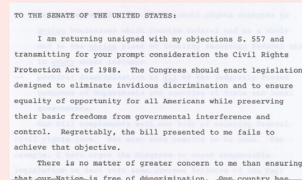


1984 The US Supreme Court's decision in *Grove City College v. Bell* restricts Title IX's scope, prompting the Senate in 1987 to pass legislation that significantly broadens the application of civil rights law to educational institutions.



1986 The Tax Reform Act changes the tax treatment of scholarships, student loans, and tax-exempt bond financing.

1988 Despite Ronald Reagan's veto, Congress passes the Civil Rights Restoration Act, which reasserts broad Title IX application, reinforcing protections against discrimination based on race, sex, disability, and age. It is critical in restoring the original, broader intent of the original, broader intent of several civil rights laws.



1989 The for-profit University of Phoenix becomes one of the first universities to offer online degrees, pioneering distance learning.

ERA SEVEN

Globalization, Technology, and New Right Movement (1990–2008)

1990 The Americans with Disabilities Act mandates that students with disabilities have equal access to programs, services, and facilities, both physical and digital.



1993 President Bill Clinton signs the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, which conflicts with

the internal nondiscrimination policies of many colleges and universities and leads to conflicts over ROTC recruitment.

1996 California Proposition 209 prohibits public institutions from using race, sex, or ethnicity as a basis for preferential treatment in public employment, education, and contracting.

1998 The Higher Education Amendments make college more affordable and accessible by lowering student loan interest rates, expanding student aid programs, and introducing initiatives to improve teacher quality and distance learning.



1999 A for-profit, Jones International University becomes the first accredited fully web-based university.



2001 The 9/11 attacks lead to tighter immigration policies for international students, resulting in a temporary decline in enrollment of these students. New national security-related programs surge on campuses.

2003 The US Supreme Court cases *Grutter v. Bollinger* and *Gratz v. Bollinger* reaffirm limited use of race in admissions.

2006 The US Department of State announces the Community College Initiative Program, which provides scholarships for individuals from other countries to study for one academic year at US community colleges. It seeks to strengthen workforce development worldwide.

2008 The Great Recession leads to a rise in student enrollment as people seek to improve their job prospects but also triggers severe state funding cuts and tuition hikes at many institutions.

ERA EIGHT

Equity, Debt, and Renewed Unrest

(2009–2019)

2009 President Barack Obama launches the American Graduation Initiative, proposing a \$12 billion investment in community colleges to help an additional five million Americans earn degrees or certificates by 2020. He sets the goal of the US once again having the world's highest college graduation rate.



2010 Hamilton College launches its Digital Humanities Initiative, incorporating technology into the humanities.



2010 Kye Allums becomes the first openly transgender athlete to compete in NCAA Division 1 sports, playing on the women's basketball team at George Washington University.



2011 The US Department of Education issues a Title IX "Dear Colleague" letter that clarifies and defines how institutions must respond to allegations of sexual assault.

2012 US Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano establishes the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program to protect undocumented students from deportation and allows them to access state-specific in-state tuition and aid.



2015 Thousands of students participate in the November Million Student March, calling for tuition-free public college, student debt cancellation, and a \$15 minimum wage for campus workers.

2015 Sweet Briar College nearly closes due to declining enrollment and severe financial challenges, symbolizing the small-college crisis.



2017 The first Trump administration begins rescinding Obama-era Title IX and gainful-employment regulations. This eliminates federal protection for transgender students to use school facilities (like bathrooms and locker rooms) corresponding to their gender identity, instead delegating the issue to state and local authorities. The gainful-employment rule had held career education programs accountable for their students' debt and earnings.

2019 Total US student loan debt surpasses \$1.5 trillion. The average debt per borrower for all students is approximately \$35,210. There are about 42.9 million total borrowers.

ERA NINE

Pandemic, Polarization, and Existential Threats

(2020–2026)

2020 The COVID-19 pandemic forces nationwide cancellation of in-person classes. Institutions adopt remote learning, and community-college enrollment plunges.



Fifteen Firsts

These pioneers broke down barriers and helped transform higher education in the United States



| 1823 | **Alexander Lucius Twilight** is the first Black American to earn a bachelor's degree (Middlebury College).



| 1849 | **Elizabeth Blackwell** is the first woman to receive a medical degree in the US (Geneva Medical College).



| 1854 | **Yung Wing** is the first Chinese and first Asian American to earn a college degree (Yale University).



| 1856 | **Martin Henry Freeman** is the first Black person to serve as a college president (the Allegheny Institute and Mission Church, renamed Avery College in 1858).



| 1875 | **Ada L. Howard** becomes the first president of Wellesley College, making her the first female college president in world history.



| 1881 | **Charles Soon** of China enrolls at Trinity College (now Duke University). He is likely the first international student.



| 1904 | **Helen Keller** is the first deaf-blind person in the US to earn a college degree, graduating cum laude from Radcliffe College.



| 1928 | **Mary Gold Ross** is the first Native American woman to earn a college degree (Northeastern State Teachers' College, now Northeastern State University).



| 1933 | **Albert Einstein** receives an appointment at Princeton University's Institute for Advanced Studies, one of the first instances of a US institution offering an academic home to a refugee scholar fleeing Nazism and fascism.



| 1962 | **James Meredith** is the first Black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi, breaking higher education segregation in the Deep South.



| 1973 | **Sally Miller Gearhart** is the first openly lesbian professor to receive tenure (San Francisco State University).



| 1974 | **Ruth Hubbard** is the first woman to receive tenure in biology at Harvard University, making her the first woman in the US to receive tenure in a STEM field.



| 2000 | **Brooke Ellison** is the first quadriplegic person to graduate from Harvard University.



| 2003 | **Pat Summitt** at the University of Tennessee becomes the first women's NCAA basketball coach, and only the fourth Division 1 coach overall, to reach eight hundred Division I victories.



| 2021 | **Saúl Jiménez-Sandoval** is the first Mexican-born president of a major US research university (California State University, Fresno).

2021 With the pandemic continuing, the American Rescue Plan allocates nearly \$40 billion to the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund.

2023 In *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* and *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina*, the US Supreme Court rules that race-based admissions policies violate the Equal Protection Clause and are unconstitutional.



2024 Pro-Palestinian protests and student-led encampments grow and spread across US campuses in response to the war in Gaza. Activists demand that colleges and universities disclose or divest from investments linked to the conflict. The demonstrations prompt a wide range of reactions, including police clearances and intense national scrutiny over free expression, student safety, and institutional authority.

2025 Sweeping actions against higher education quickly follow Donald Trump's return to the Oval Office. These include tying research funding to cooperation with new federal oversight measures,

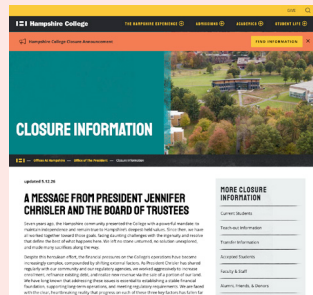


launching dozens of federal investigations into campuses, restricting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, and backing legislation to weaken or dismantle the Department of Education—potentially splintering federal oversight of student-aid administration and weakening legal protections for colleges and universities.



2026 Florida advances a plan to transfer the University of South Florida's Sarasota-Manatee campus to New College of Florida, expanding the state government's political influence over public higher education.

2026 The US Department of Education announces that more than three hundred colleges and universities have eliminated DEI requirements, closed DEI offices, removed diversity statements, and/or revised DEI policies.



2026 Hampshire College, Anna Maria College, and Providence Christian College announce plans to close by year's end, citing debt, enrollment declines, and rising costs.

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