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PRACTICAL EDUCATION AND IDENTITY:
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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which the rhetoric surrounding higher education informed the development and identities of the American land-grant university system. Focusing primarily on the original 1862 Morrill Act and the later Hatch Act, this paper examines how late nineteenth century views and ideas about higher education set the foundation for what it means to be a land-grant university. Drawing from the language of the Morrill Act itself and the surrounding discourse, a rhetorical reading of this land-grant legislation reveals a vision for American higher education that: 1. Emphasizes agriculture and the mechanic arts without excluding other areas of study. 2. Is meant for the industrial classes (now called the middle class). 3. Focuses on practical education...”in the several pursuits and professions of life” (“The Morrill Act”). The central focus of this paper is on the ways in which the vision for higher education embodied in the Morrill Act of 1862, and later the Hatch Act, served to produce and reproduce the identity of these land-grant universities. Through an emphasis on the academic value of study in the industrial and mechanic arts “without excluding other scientific and classical studies” (“The Morrill Act”), the Morrill Act of 1862 provided a vision for a type of world-class research university that also carves out space for the type of education useful to the industrial classes. The rhetorical shift that established what it means to be a land-grant institution continues to reflect in the identity of these universities today. Examining the rhetorical purpose of the land-grant university identity provides insight into how the communities associated with these institutions continue to propagate that identity and why this identity remains relevant in a higher education landscape that has evolved dramatically since the original legislation was passed.

Introduction

Among the robust landscape of the American higher education system, the land-grant university stands out as separate from others in this space. With the passing of the Morrill Land Act of 1862 (“The Morrill Act”), this type of institution would come to represent a rhetorical shift in the ways that American society began to think of higher education in the 19th century. Though the roots of the land-grant university are essential to understanding the impetus for this type of education, the legacy of what it means to be a land-grant university continues to influence how those universities represent themselves today. By exploring the concept of identity and what it means for a land-grant university to have an identity, this paper seeks to explore how the legacy continues and may have changed in the years since the original Morrill Act of 1862. By examining rhetoric through the lens of group enculturation (Fredal 184), this paper posits that the nature of the land-grant university informed by the original Morrill Act continues to shape the collective reality of how members of these University communities see the university and their connection to it. The communities that have emerged associated with these universities have crafted an identity reflecting the land-grant university ideals. This rhetorical analysis of the land-grant university serves to inform how this identity may drive universities as the higher education landscape evolves, and how the associated communities will align with this identity. In a world that looks drastically different from the one that saw passage of the Morrill Act, does what it means to be “a land-grant university” still reflect what it did in 1862?

In considering the residual impact of *The Morrill Act* and what it means to be in this first generation of land-grant universities, a rhetorical perspective offers an avenue for examining the larger culture represented by this view of higher education. Departing from a traditionally Aristotelian view of rhetoric, this paper will utilize a broader view of rhetoric as “an ongoing

circulation of culturally significant rules and plays, conventions and practices, of expectation and fulfillment...” (Fredal 183). These rules not only serve to establish the boundaries of acceptable behavior, but more importantly provide the framework for the ideas that help to shape specific identities:

Rhetoric as enculturation is primarily communal and social and always multi-modal, concerning the formation of groups and the facilitation of symbolic exchange within and between groups to forge bonds of unity and division, but it is also individual as new members are brought into groups and communities and taught how to participate in their characteristic modes of symbolic exchange. (Fredal 184)

Through this lens, *The Morrill Act* does more than provide for the means to establish Universities with public funds: it lays the groundwork for the symbolic exchange of ideas that constitute the identity of a land-grant university and the identities of those individuals connected to that university. With the emphasis on the type of education represented by this type of university, those who enter into these communities also enter into the debate over what higher education is meant to represent. The *Morrill Act* of 1862¹ marks a pivotal moment in American higher education not because it marked a first in terms of public education or in a focus on the *mechanical arts*, but because it marked a first in a national effort to develop an *American* form of University. Shifting from a focus on either State-specific or regionally specific needs, the *Morrill Act* of 1862 represents an American need for a well-educated *industrial class*. This paper will explore the complexity in the idea of what it means to be a *land-grant university* and how this rhetorical shift continues to shape the identity of these universities and the communities that emerge from them.

¹ Though named for Justin Morrill, Professor Jonathan Baldwin Turner of Illinois College original ideas for a land-grant university heavily influenced the land-grant legislation’s focus on industrial and mechanical arts (Brown 378).

The Morrill Act and the Land-Grant University

The middle of the nineteenth century marked not only a significant moment of change for the United States of America as a country, but this period also provided a new opportunity for how the country began to think about higher education. Heavily influenced by the system of higher education in Great Britain at the time, colleges in the early years of the United States were predominantly geared toward the training of clergy and aristocracy (Berlin 56). Influenced by the changes taking place across the country, 19th century America began to reconsider the American college and what role it might serve to this country (Berlin 58). This moment represents a shift in the rhetoric that surrounds American higher education, specifically in terms of what a university education could look like. This shift is especially visible through an exploration of the Morrill Act of 1862 (“The Morrill Act”), with its deliberate use of language to emphasize a “practical education”. Though other land-grant Acts would come in later years, this first establishment of the land-grant university represents a shift in the cultural rhetoric of what universities are meant to represent. Serving to symbolically stress a need for universities which focused on Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts (“The Morrill Act”), the Morrill Act puts forward a view of University Education that shifts away from the classic imagery of an ivory tower.

Prior to the Morrill Act, the higher education landscape still bore a heavy influence from the classic rhetoric that shaped attitudes surrounding higher education. This view of education can be seen when we look at the university as a whole, but it is especially noticeable when we examine the ways in which Hugh Blair’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* influenced the American College system with an emphasis on the cultivation of “good taste” as a path to higher intellectual pleasures and virtuous behavior (RT 947). Whether speaking to the specifics of a

rhetorical education or the larger university system of the day, this conservative and classically minded approach to higher education is one focused more on personal enrichment for young aristocrats than one designed for the middle class. Though public higher education predated the original Morrill Act and the first land-grant universities (Lucas 146-147), these institutions followed a range of models from universities and seminaries to the “normal schools” and institutes (Thelin 41-42). As higher education expanded in the South and across the changing country, the universities that arose reflected a growing diversity in structure rather than a unified model (Thelin 52). Whether aimed at the education of the aristocracy, teacher education, or women’s education (Thelin 55), the higher education institutions prior to the Morrill Act represented a focus on specific and/or regional needs. With the passing of the Morrill Act in 1862 (“The Morrill Act”), there is a clear shift in the rhetoric surrounding universities toward meeting the broad needs of an evolving country.

Though his early efforts in 1858 ran into staunch opposition at the time, Senator Joseph Morrill advocated a vision of higher education that would later come to be known as the *land-grant university*. Morrill’s efforts resulted in Abraham Lincoln’s signing the Act into law in 1862 (Lucas 147). The Morrill Act allotted every state (not in the Confederacy at the time) 30,000 acres of land scrip² for each senator and Congressional representative of that state for the purpose of creating what we now refer to as land-grant universities (“The Morrill Act”). While this investment of land and the establishment of endowments for at least one university per state is noteworthy in terms of students impacted, it is also necessary to look at the rhetorical views of

² Land scrip was “a certificate entitling the holder to obtain a certain portion of the public land either by entry or the payment of a portion of the price” (“Land scrip”).

higher education expressed within the Act. More than simply establishing a public university, the Act requires:

the endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life. (“The Morrill Act”)

In the specific language used, the Morrill Act provides a clear focus on what higher education should look like in a late nineteenth century America; this serves not only to provide encouragement around where the Universities should focus their curriculum, but it also provides the foundation for an identity springing from what it means to be this type of university. In less than 1400 words, the Morrill Act establishes a clear rhetorical identity in terms of who education should be for and what this kind of education should prioritize. Central to this identity is the focus on the language in the Morrill Act itself. In this carefully crafted language, three elements stand out: 1. An emphasis on the industrial classes, which we now refer to as the middle class. 2. A clear emphasis on agriculture and the mechanic arts without excluding other areas of study. 3. A focus on practical education (“The Morrill Act”). In looking at each of these three elements, there is a clear division between who is to be served by this type of education and what is to be taught. While the language of the *Morrill Act* itself focuses more on the type of education to be taught, the original 1858 debate around the land-grant bill speaks to a larger emphasis on the farmers and mechanics who stand to benefit (United States Congress 1858, 1694). The language within the act may focus on the fields of Agriculture and Mechanics, but these fields cannot so

easily be separated from those Americans who engage in those fields. Other types of universities could and do engage in the same study of Agriculture and Mechanic arts as the land-grant universities, but those other universities do not owe their founding to “the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life (“The Morrill Act”))” in the way that the universities from this 1862 Morrill Act do. This language speaks to the value that these industrial classes stand to gain from this type of education and the driving values of those universities providing that education.

In the Morrill Act and its specific views of the subject, focus, and value of higher education, the attitudes regarding a university education are clearly on display. These attitudes present higher education as one that expands beyond old ideas of who was meant to attend and why they were there, instead emphasizing “the responsibility of teaching men and women to improve their livelihood” (Fine 34). Though the public “normal schools” predated the model that we see in the land-grant university, the mindset of teacher education as its primary focus, also seen in the colleges established by the Second Morrill Act (Craig 32), represents a distinctly different mission than the emphasis on “a practical education” seen in the 1862 Morrill Act. Whether the land-grant universities aligned precisely with the rhetoric of education outlined in the Morrill Act is unimportant; what matters most is that these rhetorical ideas of education were deeply ingrained in the identity of the land-grant universities from the very beginning. By creating the image of a university specifically focused on those poised to see the most benefit from attending a university, it positions those of the *industrial classes* to align their identity with the land-grant university.

It is this identity formation that stands out when examining the land-grant university, as one that reflects a specific community. In 1891, George Howard praised the Morrill Act as “one

of the noblest monuments of American statesmanship” (Howard 127). Though Howard speaks broadly of the later *Hatch Act* and *2nd Morrill Act of 1890*, his sentiment of “an American system of public universities, at once the complement and the crown of an American system of public schools” (Howard 128), reflects the identity formation of a national and essentially American view of education. In the formation of the land-grant universities and the focus on a *practical education*, these universities represent a view of education in which “the State has joined hands with the nation” (Howard 128). This sentiment reflects a sharp departure from the models of higher education of the day, which sought to focus education around more regional and State needs.

As land-grant universities would continue to flourish in the decades following the Morrill Act, they would come to coexist alongside the previous model of universities (Thelin 77). This diversity in the way higher education would come to be structured represents not only a choice for students to make in terms of academic interests, but also a choice in terms of identity and purpose. Land-grant universities are distinct in their rhetorical presentation of higher education: “[The Morrill Act] came to be heralded as an innovation in federal support for higher education” (Thelin 76) with a legacy of “the accessible state college and university, characterized by a curriculum that was broad and utilitarian” (Thelin 76). While it would be a mischaracterization to say that the Morrill Act created the state university as we know it today (Thelin 76), it did provide a model for a specific type of state university with a specific identity. This identity is crucial to any rhetorical analysis of the land-grant university, especially in considering the idea that the “land-grant college is a peculiarly American institution...The rise of such a system was one phase of an awakening nationalism” (Ross 1). This focus on the land-grant university as specifically American and essentially Democratic can be presented as an education which “has

resulted in a progressive widening of opportunity, secular control on the basis of state initiative and federal aid, a liberal curriculum, vocational training, and an increasing concern over social welfare” (Ross 2). In both the language of the Morrill Act and the sentiment surrounding the land-grant university, there is a clear identity distinct from the other universities across the country. Despite comparable records in academia, these ideas of the land-grant university showcase a particular type of higher education geared toward the average citizen with the goal of teaching them the skills that stand to make for a stronger country.

In the same way that the Morrill Act of 1862 advocates for a particular type of education, land-grant universities saw another critical development with the passage of the 1887 Hatch Act (“Hatch Act”). Underlining the messages emphasized in *The Morrill Act*, *The Hatch Act* is written to promote agriculture and specifically to “maintain an equitable balance between agriculture and other segments of our economy” (“Hatch Act” 2). This balance connects directly to the land-grant university system in the expectation that “State agricultural experiment stations...conduct original and other researches, investigations, and experiments bearing directly on and contributing to the establishment and maintenance of a permanent and effective agricultural industry of the United States...” (“Hatch Act” 2). This language serves to not only reinforce the importance of Agriculture as a field of study, but it also reinforces its place as a central component of the land-grant university through the distribution of direct funds to support related research.

The Hatch Act works to reinforce a particular vision of the *land-grant university* in both a functional and rhetorical sense. Functionally, the value of the Hatch Act is that it carves out a consistent form of funding to support the agricultural needs of a rapidly changing and expanding United States. While this value alone is noteworthy, what stands out in a rhetorical sense is the

way in which the Hatch Act provides language that seeks to elevate the cultural importance of Agricultural research to the levels seen in more traditional “academic” fields of study. Both the financial and cultural aspects of the Hatch Act provide reinforcement for the identity of the land-grant university as serving the practical needs of the *industrial classes* along with the broader country. By specifically directing this funding to the land-grant universities established by the Morrill Act of 1862 (“Hatch Act” 2), this move utilizes these resources in order to reinforce and support the rhetorical messaging of the land-grant university and pave the way for the Research-forward type of university that we see today. In the same way that the original *Morrill Act* shifted the focus of this type of university to *the industrial classes*, the *Hatch Act* shifted the focus to the importance of research on Agriculture. This second piece of legislation serves to validate not only the *industrial classes*, but also one of their chosen fields of study.

Though it would be easy to focus solely on the legislative and academic impacts of the early legislation that shaped land-grant universities, it is critical to also consider the ways in which these early steps shaped the identity of these universities. Exploring the rhetorical identity of the land-grant university relies upon the view of rhetoric we see in Fredal’s work, one which defines rhetoric as primarily communicable and social (Fredal 184). This view of rhetoric concerns the “formation of groups and the facilitation of symbolic exchange within and between groups to forge bonds of unity and division, but it is also individual as new members are brought into groups and communities” (Fredal 184). When considered through this lens, the early legislation of the *Morrill Act* and the *Hatch Act* provides the framework for what can be viewed as the identity of the land-grant university. As Fredal points out, “the culture or community under examination must be established before its rhetoric can be understood” and this is what these landmark pieces of legislation do. Through an expressed goal to “promote the liberal and

practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life” (“Morrill Act”), *The Morrill Act* first establishes the groundwork for who is intended to be part of the community of the land-grant university; the students and future alumni are not some aristocratic class pursuing refinement of culture. They are the American people pursuing better lives. In the *Hatch Act*, the specific allocation of funding solely to land-grant universities does not serve to solely enhance a scholar’s Academic prestige among his colleagues; this funding serves the Agricultural needs of an expanding country still feeling the impact of a brutal Civil War. In both of these acts, the cultural impact can also be seen in the financial investment that backs these larger rhetorical ideas. In their willingness to carve out significant financial resources to support the values of a “practical education” and the “agricultural research stations,” both pieces of legislation also serve as symbolic acts for what the country’s education should look like. These initial pieces of legislation set the stage for the identity of the individual land-grant universities, along with the communities represented by those universities. In establishing what these universities are meant to represent, those who enter into that university community are signing on to also reflect those same ideas as part of their individual identity.

Rhetorical Purpose of the Land-Grant University

Examining the key legislation of *The Morrill Act* of 1862 and *The Hatch Act*, demonstrates how they served as symbolic endorsements of this vision of higher education. Establishing financial support for these land-grant institutions was a necessary first step, but this symbolic endorsement speaks to the importance for this type of university and the rhetorical purpose of this type of education. Beyond the legislative allotment of public lands and investment into agricultural research, the idea of a land-grant university asks us to consider the

larger purpose of education, both practically and rhetorically. Supporters of the *Morrill Act* saw the need for a national engagement with education, speaking to this national purpose. Looking at the original debate surrounding the *Morrill Act*, it was this idea of national engagement with higher education that opponents of the bill saw as inherently dangerous. As Representative William Cobb of Alabama put it at the time, “The bill proposes an inauguration of a new system, the result of which no man can foresee. Certain it is that the result will not be a good one” (United States Congress 1858, 1740). Cobb primarily focused on the ideas of imbalance across the states which would disadvantage smaller states (United States Congress 1858, 1741) and that this bill represented federal overreach (United States Congress 1858, 1742). Though the bill did have initial support, it was not enough to overcome the inevitable veto expected from President Buchanan (Florer 460).

In the efforts to push for a national system of higher education to meet national needs, it was this vision of higher education that original opponents pushed back against. Only with the withdrawal of the South from the Union did space open up for the arguments in favor of the Morrill Act to gain more traction, based on the efforts of Morrill and other supporters in 1861 (Florer 460). In both the House and the Senate, the shift in power resulting from the succession of Southern States provided an opportunity for arguments in support of the *Morrill Act* to overcome remaining opposition. With an additional provision to exclude those Southern states currently in rebellion (“The Morrill Act”), Morrill and his fellows were able to secure the support they needed.

The eventual passage of the *Morrill Act* was a multi-year effort, though its identity remained largely the same from 1858 through to its passage in 1862. Those arguments that shaped the identity of the land-grant university can be seen prominently in Morrill’s original

1858 defense of his bill (Florer 466-7). It was necessary for supporters of the *Morrill Act* to address arguments that challenged the constitutionality and financial impact of the bill (Florer 463), but the arguments central to the identity of what would become the land-grant university focus on a national need for this type of education (Florer 466-7). Highlighting the ways in which the United States was falling behind European peers in Agricultural and Mechanic education (United States Congress 1858, 1695), Morrill stressed the need for investment into these fields at a national level. Morrill's arguments sought to stress that the current state of Agricultural and Mechanical schools were incapable of meeting the needs of the nation, arguing that this segment of society needed strong education in order for the country to thrive:

“Let us have such colleges as may rightfully claim the authority of teachers to announce facts and fixed laws, and to scatter broadcast that knowledge which will prove useful in building up a great nation—great in its resources of wealth and power, but greatest of all in the aggregate of its intelligence and virtue” (United States Congress 1858, 1694).

This line of argument also presents a current state of neglect for these fields, with Morrill stating that those who work in these fields “scratch their education, such as it is, from the crevices between labor and sleep. They grope in twilight” (United States Congress 1858, 1694). This sentiment would also be reflected in the idea that “The farmer and the mechanic require special schools and appropriate literature quite as much as any one of the so-called learned professions” (United States Congress 1858, 1694). Even though this initial debate would not overcome the 1858 opposition, Morrill's argument would serve to define the identity of these *land-grant universities*. Aided by Senator James Harlan's argument for the need to support these laborers suffering under "inferior social position and were unjustly dependent upon the power of those classes above them" (Florer 468), the land-grant university gained support as a path forward for

both the nation and the industrial classes. These ideas are prominently showcased in the language that would eventually become the *Morrill Act* of 1862, in phrases such as “to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life” (“The Morrill Act). This emphasis on practical education of a specific class of Americans underscores ideas like Harlan’s call to support laborers (Florer 468) or Morrill’s appeal to help those farmers scratching together what little education they could in the absence of universities devoted to their enrichment (United States Congress 1858, 1694). These calls to create a university system that is not only funded by the American people, but also designed to meet the needs of the American people, rhetorically shape what it means to be this type of university

Whether looking at the initial debate from 1858 or the final language of the *Morrill Act* in 1862, the concepts highlighted by Morrill and his colleagues provide a vision for the education that will spring from these grants of land. The land-grant university and the rhetorical presentation of it represents two key ideas when discussing the community identity related to these universities: Who is served by a *practical education* and what does it mean to be a *land-grant university*? These questions shape the vision of the rhetorical community as described by Fredal, specifically in order to “extract our understanding of the rhetoric of any culture from [everyday rhetorics of social interactions]” (Fredal 184). To fully understand the culture created by the initial legislation and perpetuated by the land-grant universities themselves, it is critical to consider these two central questions.

Who is served by a *Practical Education*?

One of the most notable elements of the Morrill Act is the emphasis that it places on the industrial classes, specifically in terms of how education is presented as practical for several

pursuits and professions in life (“The Morrill Act”). This shift in the idea of who higher education was intended for can also be read as an effort to democratize higher education (Fine 34), allowing this system to become more easily accessed by these industrial classes (Geiger 153). This aligns well with the narratives that we see in terms of a more democratic education system to drive the future of a growing democracy (Key 197), a system that stood apart from the classical colleges of elitism: “Conventional wisdom of the time thus extolled the public college as a symbol of liberation from the elitist, hidebound collegiate traditions of the past” (Lucas 152-3). In this view of the land-grant university, the rhetoric of a democratic education “[invokes] images of wholesome young yeomen of common sense gone off to school to prepare themselves for a life of honest toil” (Lucas 152). These views of higher education help to reinforce the idea of the land-grant university designed to serve the growing American middle class as the nineteenth century neared its end. Through the Morrill Act’s emphasis of higher education for the industrial classes, this presents a clear rhetorical strategy to shape the idea of who belonged in college in order to best represent the country’s aspirations. In this emphasis on the industrial classes served by the land-grant university, those students who entered into these land-grant university communities were then able to absorb this distinction as part of their student identity. This community of the land-grant university would allow those students to not only benefit from the rhetorical image of a university meant to serve, but it would also provide an identity for alumni to call back to.

A rhetorical examination of the *Morrill Act* and the larger identity of the land-grant university returns the focus back to those served: the industrial classes. This view of the land-grant university as seen in the original legislation can then be reflected back to the larger community identity. When scholars like Scott Key speak to the Morrill Act as meeting “the

educational demands of a growing democracy” (Key 197), this places the emphasis on the people that make up that democracy. This idea of the land-grant university is one that serves the masses who seek to become the middle class, rather than those more elite few served by different models of education. This rhetorical view of the land-grant university presents the goal of making “higher education more available and accommodating to the men of the field and of the machine” (Williams 19, as cited in Key 198). Thereby, the land-grant university provides an opportunity for members of the industrial classes to pursue education without needing to reject their identity as part of the “industrial classes”; rather, the land-grant university offers an avenue for an identity as a member of the industrial classes that does not assume lower education or capability than their privately educated peers. In this vision of higher education, the focus of the Morrill Act on the *who* can be read as an effort to democratize higher education (Fine 34; Key 198), shifting to serve the average people who comprise that democracy. With the emphasis on specific types of education in the Act, this language is specific to education as practical (“The Morrill Act”; Westermeyer 76) to meet the practical needs of the average citizen. With this focus on those who stand to benefit most from a higher education and the opportunities it presents, this leads naturally into the question of what it means to be a land-grant university and how that might reflect on the larger community.

What Does It Mean to be a *Land-Grant University*?

The rhetoric surrounding the land-grant university and what it represents has continued into modern day, building upon the initial focus found in the *Morrill Act* of 1862 and the *Hatch Act*. The legacy of the Morrill Act can be seen in the identities these institutions have crafted, stemming from “a tripartite mission by the federal government: to teach, to conduct research, and

to provide service to communities” (Gavazzi 6). Deriving this sense of “mission” from the original Morrill Act of 1862 (Gavazzi 6; Kopp 2), the rhetorical views from that original Morrill Act have directly shaped the way land-grant universities see themselves. The language utilized by the Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities speaks to the rhetorical views of this type of university, with cultural identity extending beyond the purely academic:

Passage of the First Morrill Act (1862) reflected a growing demand for agricultural and technical education in the United States. While a number of institutions had begun to expand upon the traditional classical curriculum, higher education was still widely unavailable to many agricultural and industrial workers. The Morrill Act was intended to provide a broad segment of the population with a practical education that had direct relevance to their daily lives. (“Land-Grant University FAQ.”)

Though land-grant universities are not the only form of higher education that have served to directly impact the lives of students in ways reminiscent of promoting “the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes” (“The Morrill Act”) and valuable for “the several pursuits and professions in life” (“The Morrill Act”), these ideas are embedded within the foundation of how these land-grant universities see themselves. This idea of a type of higher education that allows us to get ahead in life continues to be deeply ingrained in the stories of how land-grant universities impact the higher education landscape. While these ideas may have sprung from the rhetorical views of education embedded within the Morrill Act, they remain no less vital than the buildings that the original investment of land scrip paid for.

Inseparable from the rhetoric embodied by the initial land-grant legislation is the identity embodied by this kind of education. Examining the land-grant university through this lens

highlights the ways in which a “practical education” needs to be flexible enough to elevate the Agricultural and Mechanical arts without being so prescriptive as to risk being seen as technical colleges of lower academic rigor (Geiger 154). In that first *Morrill Act*, this balance comes from the deliberate wording:

[The] Morrill Act was the key to combining within the same institutions technical or applied forms of higher education and the ‘liberal’ arts and sciences. For this purpose the awkward preposition phrase in the middle of the act’s key provision— ‘without excluding other scientific and classical studies’—assumes crucial importance (Geiger 154).

This language explicitly prescribes a vision of the land-grant university that is for the industrial classes and focuses on practical education, while also serving as centers of academic excellence in the traditional fields of study. This allows the community of the land-grant university to emphasize the value of Agriculture and the mechanical arts without relegating these to the realm of technical education. Through the deliberate use of language that balances both the liberal arts and “the useful arts” (Dorn 74), the Morrill Act presents a view of education that can and should make space for both. This balance between the traditional purview of the university and *the useful arts* provides a vision of an American college that champions academic pursuits without neglecting the practical concerns of career success. This balance among disciplines would prove to be critical to the academic excellence of these universities, providing a space in which a wide range of disciplines could still be taught to those industrial classes.

As land-grant universities have continued on into the present, it is especially important to note that the land-grant Universities have built upon their initial identity to maintain status as Research Institutions on par with those institutions that gave less focus to the disciplines of the

industrial classes. While there was specific language to devote focus to the Agricultural and Mechanic Arts, the 56 land-grant universities designated by the Morrill Act of 1862 have continued to maintain the high levels of research across disciplines to earn the designation of Research-1 University (“R1 Research Institutions”). This designation is utilized to indicate those universities with the highest level of research output, placing these land-grant universities as peers among some of the earliest private universities. Though the initial vision of a land-grant university was one which invested in the Agricultural and Mechanic arts, its focus on doing so without excluding “other scientific and classical studies” (“The Morrill Act”) has provided the space for investment in research that goes beyond the Agricultural and Mechanic arts. This continued legacy of academic excellence serves to reinforce the importance of the financial investments represented by the *Morrill Act* and the *Hatch Act*, underscoring the symbolic gesture of how this type of university had every right to the same level of prestige as those that came before it.

Power and Identity

Connected to the view of the Morrill Act as a move toward democratizing education (Fine 34), it is necessary to note how this plays into larger ideas of power that intersect with higher education. This shift toward the utility of education and how universities stand to benefit individual students and the larger nation cannot be separated from questions of how a higher education represents power to get ahead in life. Though it can be tempting to represent this shift toward utility in education as a “battle between those who believe in classical education and those who feel that the college has the responsibility of teaching men and women to improve their livelihood” (Fine 34), the reality is that this choice in type of education is the same one

students currently face when considering their academic future. Not so different from how many modern students consider higher education, many students of this time sought usage value in their prospective degrees: "...in the early decades of the latter half of the nineteenth century, not many students went to college merely for socialization or for the sake of learning; rather, most attended for the usage value of the degree..." (Edirisooriya 117). Especially when considering the ideas of what might be considered either *practical* or *impractical education* in this context, the goal of higher education can be seen as one to produce value and improve livelihood. Even for those uninterested in the specifics of Agriculture or Mechanics, the land-grant university cannot separate its identity from the promise of a path toward improving one's livelihood and opening this opportunity for those who see themselves in the industrial classes. For those who attended this type of university and realized this promise, it is only natural that they would feel deeply ingrained in the larger community of the land-grant university.

By examining the identity that arises from the designation of a land-grant university, we can also see the ways in which this identity transfers to members of that community. One notable example can be found in the realm of American Politics, specifically concerning former Texas Governor Rick Perry and former president (also former Texas Governor) George W. Bush. In an effort to gain traction during the 2012 presidential race, Rick Perry's campaign sought to draw upon the distinct identity of the land-grant university that Perry attended in order to distance himself from Bush: "But the two come from starkly different backgrounds...It is the difference, said a campaign consultant who has worked with both, between Yale and Texas A&M" (Barabak). This idea of highlighting the distinction between Yale and Texas A&M is no accident, implying the gap between a perceived institution of elitism and the more relatable land-

grant institution. This was a consistent message during Perry's run for presidential office, as he himself argued:

'I am Rick Perry and he is George Bush,' Perry told reporters at the Iowa State Fair. 'And our records are quite different. ... I went to Texas A&M. He went to Yale.'

This not only makes Perry different.

In these anti-elite times, it makes him better. (Amarillo Globe-News)

Regardless of whether this distinction can be considered accurate or not, it represents a clear attempt to draw upon the identity of the *land-grant university* to solidify Perry's own identity as the kind of politician voters could relate to. The Perry campaign attempted to leverage the identity of Texas A&M and its reputation as a stand-in for Perry's to clearly signal to voters that Perry and Bush were not the same. Though the two men may sound the same and appear extremely similar (Amarillo Globe-News; Barabak), their university allegiances were intended to be the key differentiator. Even as Perry's presidential ambitions may have failed, this attempt to call back to his identity as a Texas A&M alumnus represents an effort to draw upon that community and remind his fellow Aggies that they are united by their choice to identify with a noted land-grant university.

Rick Perry is not the only example of political identity overlapping with the community of the land-grant university. In a more recent example from the 2024 presidential season, there was an attempt to similarly draw upon university identity when the Democratic National Committee paid to have small airplanes fly banners over university football stadiums (Weissert). Though different banners flew over the stadiums for Penn State, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of Michigan, the banner flying over Ann Arbor Michigan spoke most directly to identity as it read: "JD Vance 'hearts' Ohio State + Project 2025" (Weissert). Not only does

this effort attempt to leverage the longstanding rivalry between the Michigan Wolverines and Ohio State Buckeyes, it is worth noting that while the University of Michigan is a public university, it is not a land-grant university like Ohio State University. Though some voters may focus first on Vance's law degree from Yale, this effort to sow division among Michigan voters called specifically to his status as an alumnus of Ohio State University. In this highlighting of Vance's association with Ohio State University and his fondness for the politically right-wing Project 2025, this marks an effort to signal to voters 'He is not like us'. Despite the fact that Vance's political views can easily be presented as antithetical to the values highlighted in the *Morrill Act*, this strategy of attempting to leverage Ohio State's identity against Vance speaks to the larger importance of the university's rhetorical identity. In the same way that Yale and Texas A&M are used as stand-ins for Bush and Perry, this pattern is repeated with Michigan and Ohio State.

In both of these examples, the university community provides a necessary component to inform the individual identity of those alumni. This element of communal identity offers a power to not only define ourselves as it relates to a land-grant university, but it also offers a way to distinguish between communities that might otherwise look similar. Despite their many similarities, Michigan State University³ and the University of Michigan can best be defined by those ways in which they diverge: the identities that sprang from how MSU was a land-grant university and UM was not led to early investment in programs that reflected (or didn't reflect) the values highlighted in the Morrill Act of 1862. This same distinction can be found across other examples of Purdue University and Indiana University or the University of Texas and Texas A&M; while all of these universities reflect the highest standards of research output

³ Though it is a land-grant university, Michigan State University's founding in 1855 predates the Morrill Act and marks it as the country's first Agricultural college ("History").

(“Research 1 Universities”), the direction of this research still reflects the focus on “practical education” seen in the first Morrill Act (“The Morrill Act”). As the early legislation of the land-grant universities created a community and culture around the idea of what education should look like, this culture continues to reflect upon both those institutions and alumni who engage in the vision of higher education originally laid out in the 1862 Morrill Act.

Conclusion

Any consideration of what it means to be a land-grant university needs to start with the identity that separates this institution from other universities. In both how these universities see themselves and in how their alumni communities identify, this specific vision for higher education remains prominent in the 163 years since the original *Morrill Act* became law. In both the *Morrill Act* and the *Hatch Act*, the United States developed the necessary mechanisms to fund a system of higher education that was seen as being more open and accessible to those who sought to improve their lives (Fine 46). This idea for a “practical education” served to promote change in the way the country began to think about what a university education meant at a time when this change was sorely needed, resulting in a collection of universities which remain distinct in how they see themselves. This idea of a type of higher education that allows us to get ahead in life continues to be deeply ingrained in the stories of how the *land-grant university* is meant to benefit the industrial classes (“The Morrill Act”), along with how land-grant universities impact the higher education landscape. Springing from these larger ideas of the purpose of higher education, the land-grant university opened new opportunities to work toward the goals of a system seen as more reflective of American democracy (Lucas 152-3) and designed for those students pursuing the American dream through this education. The rhetoric of

the land-grant university reflects a commitment to supporting and building an American middle class, with this identity continuing to gain support from a legacy of academic excellence that supports this identity. These original ideas of what it meant to be a land-grant university not only helped to shape education in the wake of the Civil War, but they also continue to reflect this view of what education can look like. In addition to making higher education easier for more Americans to access, the land-grant university developed an identity that offered an alternative to the models that came before and after.

In looking at this identity first established by the *Morrill Act* of 1862 and the *Hatch Act*, it is critical to revisit the rhetorical value of what this identity means for the land-grant university. Leveraging Fredal's view of rhetoric as a tool for communal and social enculturation, the legislation responsible for the first land-grant universities is especially important as it relates to the "symbolic exchange within and between groups to forge bonds of unity and division" (Fredal 184). Though the financial and political value of the *Morrill Act* of 1862 is indisputable, the calls for education that benefits and enhances the industrial classes ("The Morrill Act"; United States Congress 1858, 1694) serve to symbolically produce the initial culture of land-grant universities. While these symbolic moves served as the foundation for producing the culture of the land-grant universities and the communities they developed, this early symbolism would later reproduce this culture and the concepts of identity that continue to carry land-grant universities into the modern era. In viewing the land-grant university through this rhetorical lens, it exists separate from other higher education institutions: the land-grant university serves as a cultural institution, reproducing the culture reflected in the original *Morrill Act's* language and continuing to evolve in line with those values. Even as the fields studied become more complex or branch well beyond what was possible in 1862, the ideas ingrained in what it means to be a land-grant

university are able to respond to the changing landscape of Higher education. This identity, embodied in the original land-grant legislation, does not need to change in the same way that the world has changed since 1862.

A rhetorical analysis of the land-grant university reinforces the ideas that established this type of university in the first place, reproducing the type of culture reflected in the land-grant mission. In the ever-changing landscape of what it meant to be a modern land-grant university, land-grant universities can maintain an identity that allows them to have it both ways: an identity springing from what the world looked like in 1862 and leveraging this legacy, while also adapting into a vision of education that serves the modern student. This identity remains consistent because the cultural values of this identity remain consistent. Even as the needs of the industrial classes have changed, the land-grant university reinforces the idea of an American dream that serves those industrial classes. These institutions remain culturally influential because they speak to the same American identity as the original 1862 legislation, an identity that sees accessible higher education as the path toward national and personal enrichment. Though the specific needs of the industrial classes have changed and will continue to change, the rhetoric that informs the land-grant university speaks to a need that will never change: the need to improve one's life through education. In the land-grant university, this promise to support the hardest-working Americans with the knowledge they need is as appealing as it was in 1862.

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