

## Southern Scholars and Emerging Universities in the South

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The American university in the first half of the 20th century was a success. Yet, the history of this "national" institution includes little mention of southern scholars or universities in the South. The purpose of my dissertation is to explore and reconstruct the discussions and debates about university structure and mission that took place in the South between 1920 and 1950. Largely my study concentrates on the social science institutes funded first by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, and later by the Rockefeller Foundation, at three universities in the South between 1920 and 1950 - namely the University of North Carolina, the University of Virginia, and the University of Texas. My hypothesis is that the individuals and ideas attracted to and supported at these institutions were a fertile source of ideas and influence about what the southern university ought to be.

In my thinking prior to my visit to the Rockefeller Archive Center I had proposed that Southern state universities gained national recognition and legitimacy in large part because this group of scholars participating in Rockefeller Foundation (RF) supported social science research institutes combined their influence and efforts to later create institutions such as the Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB). Furthermore, I conjectured that the SREB effort in regional planning brought coherence and influence to disparate debates about Southern higher education and changed the direction of higher education in the region. Rather than confirm my original ideas, however, my research at the Rockefeller Archive Center contradicted my assertions and added new levels of complexity to my analysis. This essay presents an initial effort in sorting through these

various complexities to understand how the Rockefeller-funded research institutes at Virginia, North Carolina, and Texas influenced southern higher education from 1920 to 1950.

Between 1923 and 1928 the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM) appropriated \$25,200,000 towards the promotion of the social sciences, specifically for boosting scientific efforts to solve significant social problems.<sup>1</sup> These unprecedented resources resulted from the Memorial's ambitious program, which was anchored by support for outstanding institutional centers of research and advanced training in the social sciences at Harvard University, Columbia University, the Brookings Institute in Washington D. C., and the University of Chicago.<sup>2</sup> The plan also contained a regional component involving the creation of social sciences research institutes at Stanford, North Carolina, Virginia, and Texas; thereby establishing institutes that were more modest in mission and design but nevertheless charged to emulate the standardbearers.<sup>3</sup> Although Rockefeller gifts to these regional institutes would ultimately represent but a small portion of the larger program,<sup>4</sup> grant appraisal documents suggest that Rockefeller funding greatly stimulated the research and publication efforts of faculty at each institution.

Nevertheless, I began my research at the RAC focused upon the simple question: of the southern universities, why North Carolina, Virginia, and Texas? Very much in line with foundation policy and preference to give to the reputable universities, North Carolina and Virginia had each earned membership in the prestigious Association of American Universities by the time they received LSRM funds, and Texas was on the verge of becoming a member. Yet, in the matter of taking on funding responsibility for the designated programs, another primary consideration for Rockefeller funds, my research confirms that if these institutions were the South's jewels, they were a little rough, with some needing polish and others, purpose.

Under the leadership of sociologist Howard W. Odum, the University of North Carolina understandably first received funding for its Institute of Research in the Social Sciences (IRSS) in 1924. To the officers of the LSRM, Howard Odum stood out among his peers as someone with a strong academic lineage,<sup>5</sup> the endorsement of Chicago's famed sociologist William Ogburn, and a sincere scholarly interest in race and the economic and social plight of Negroes. Also to Odum's credit, he had the support of North Carolina's president, Harry Woodburn Chase, and within a few years of his arrival, Odum organized both the School of Public Welfare and the sociology department, and he launched the journal, *Social Forces*. The significant amount of personal correspondence between North Carolina's dedicated academic and RF officers, particularly Sydnor Walker, documents Odum's enterprising goals and his zealous work ethic. Chided on occasion for taking on too many tasks, Odum maintained the respect of foundation officers and served as a southern academic "broker" by introducing promising scholars to foundation officers and planning and leading foundation trips to southern universities.

While the University of North Carolina's IRSS and its leader Howard Odum held the highest esteem among the southern social science research institutes, foundation appraisal documents reveal that even this institute ultimately fell short of the foundation's goals for

advancing the social sciences.<sup>6</sup> Characterized by a "plethora of sociological and literary projects" and reputed as a "fact-finding agency emphasizing the regional point of view," the institute did not earn a national reputation.<sup>7</sup> To soften this criticism however, North Carolina's IRSS realized incredible achievements on short purse strings-for the university could not come through with sustaining budgetary appropriations, especially during its formative years and the 1930s depression period. It is to Odum's credit, his regional acclaim, and the quality of work completed by institute participants that Rockefeller funding continued at all despite the foundation's preference for supporting efforts that were guaranteed of future funding.

Why Virginia's Institute for Research in the Social Sciences (IRSS), established in 1926, and the University of Texas' Bureau for Research in the Social Sciences, established in 1927, received substantial LSRM support remains more puzzling, given that neither institution housed a faculty leader in the social sciences, nor had offered many incentives for research in their social science departments or programs. In Virginia's case, the initial LSRM grant is more likely attributed to the increased university support from the legislature in the early 1920s and the invitation and diligent wooing of President Edward Alderman, who had increased the number of social science faculty during his tenure and stated his intention that the first building built during his administration would be a "home for the Social Sciences."<sup>8</sup> Another factor which enhanced Virginia's cause is collegial contact between the future director of its IRSS, Wilson Gee, Professor of Rural Economics and Rural Sociology, and Howard Odum. Odum's mentoring and endorsement of the university's plan for the institute to study "Virginia problems" resulted in a good match between neighboring institutions. But in the end, the foundation's claim of Virginia's "prestige in the South" along with "presence of a number of capable men keenly interested in objective social inquiry,"<sup>9</sup> coupled with lower faculty teaching loads, meant that the LSRM could enact its regional social sciences plan without much risk. In the case of Virginia, the IRSS lived up to smaller mission and lower expectations (than North Carolina). Ultimately, the risk paid off and, despite some lean years of university support during the height of the Depression, within two grant cycles totaling ten years, the institute became fully funded by the university and state legislature.

In the case of the University of Texas and funding of its Bureau of Research in the Social Sciences, RF documents state that the LSRM selected Texas as its representative institution from the South Central states based upon the state's condition of an "abundance of natural resources, relative sparsity of population, vast distances, and the complexity of racial adjustments among white, Mexican and negro populations" and the University's "strong faculty, library facilities and archive material."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps because of Texas' resources and the Memorial's experiences with the other southern universities, the Memorial required a more sophisticated agreement for matching contributions from the university but, strangely, the LSRM and the RF also evidenced more leniency in the development of the bureau's research program. For example, during the first grant cycle from the LSRM, administrators clearly misunderstood what constituted social science research.<sup>11</sup> Thus, during its formative years the Bureau gave a significant share of its funds to business research through outright grants to the Bureau of Business Research! While it seems that both North Carolina and Virginia's social science institutes had spin-

off institutes and research efforts, in the case of Texas, foundation documents show that a fair amount of reprimanding and monitoring accompanied the nurturing of this Southern social science research "gem".

Once I had gained an understanding of why the LSRM and RF funded institutes at North Carolina, Virginia, and Texas, I turned my attention to discovering more about some of the conflicts that characterized the development of southern higher education. Interestingly, within the correspondence between Southern academics at social science research institutes and foundation officials there are a few letters from different sources. At a closer look, these "different" sources are rival academics from different academic disciplines (sometimes from the same universities), complaining about lack of foundation support for their fields, particularly the humanities. One particular interest of mine has become analysis of a very public dispute that occurred between Howard Odum and other social scientists and the well-known Southern Agrarians at Vanderbilt about the proper development of Southern universities. Although this important debate was an extension of the southern philosophy of states' rights - it became known as the "the old sectionalism vs. the new regionalism"<sup>12</sup> -- at the core of this debate remained a real disagreement about whether Southern universities should accept the national model of the emerging university or create a confederation style, distinctively southern university to serve the region. In the months ahead, further analysis of these disagreements will add depth to my study and enliven my account of Southern universities between the 1920s and 1950s.

Quite clearly, my research has refuted my assertion that southern state universities had gained national recognition and legitimacy in large part because the group of scholars participating in Rockefeller-funded social science research institutes combined their influence and effort to later create institutions such as the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). While the scholarly task of my dissertation is to convey the contributions and influence of the academics involved with Rockefeller regional institutes, foundation documents evidence little support for the SREB on the part of Southern academics and foundation officials. The Rockefeller-supported General Education Board did offer an initial grant for a study of Southern graduate education, but to foundation officials the leaders of the newly formed regional agency increasingly appeared as eager for money with few effective plans. To southern academics, especially Howard Odum, disapproval from the black community around the SREB's earlier maneuverings of the issue of segregated medical education and the maintenance of Meharry Medical College in Nashville caused him to distance himself from the organization for fear it stood in contrast to his work supporting integration. Thus, there are multiple layers of analysis awaiting my work in the months ahead.

Most immediately my research project, "From Ideas to Institutions: Southern Scholars and Emerging Universities in the South, 1920-1950," brings to the forefront an untold narrative in southern university growth and development. Thanks to the support of the Rockefeller Archive Center, my study also promises to offer additional insight into the intriguing history of higher education philanthropy. My belief is that this pre-war period of university-building in the South offers a refreshing reminder about how to talk about important higher education issues and academic excellence before the postwar frenzy for

federal research dollars and number one rankings in fall college guides become a primary motivator and measure-full of sound and fury but signifying nothing.

## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Beardsley Ruml, "Recent Trends in Social Sciences," a speech delivered at the dedication of the Social Science Research Building at the University of Chicago, December 17, 1929, p. 8, folder 12, box 2, series 910, Record Group 3, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York (hereafter designated RAC).

<sup>2</sup> "The Social Sciences Under the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, 1923-1928," April 11, 1933, p. 69, folder 12, box 2, series 910, Record Group 3, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> There is some difficulty determining the total amount of appropriations to each institute because of overlapping grants. However, I approximate that the IRSS at the University of North Carolina received \$518,000 from the LSRM and RF funds, the University of Virginia's IRSS received \$242,500, and the University of Texas' BRSS was granted \$470,000. As a condition of their grants, each university had to provide funding at varying levels or "matches." As a part of my dissertation study, I will continue to analyze the value of these grants to each university.

<sup>5</sup> Odum earned a Ph.D. in psychology from Clark University under the direction of G. Stanley Hall, author of *Race Orthodoxy in the South*, and a Ph.D. in sociology from Columbia.

<sup>6</sup> "University of North Carolina-Institute for Research in Social Sciences," folder 130, box 11, series 236, Record Group 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Alderman to Rose, April 3, 1925, folder 812, box 78, series 3, subseries 6, Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Archives, RAC.

<sup>9</sup> "University of Virginia-Institute for Research in the Social Sciences," December 10, 1930, folder 26, box 2, series 252, Record Group 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.

<sup>10</sup> "University of Texas-Research-Social Sciences," April 13, 1932, folder 38, box 4, series 249 S, Record Group 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Charles W. Pipkin, "The Southern Philosophy of States' Rights: The Old Sectionalism and the New Regionalism," an address given at the American Political Science Association, December 27, 1933, folder 137, box 11, series 236, Record Group 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.