

Research Note
What's in a Number, an Antebellum College?
Or, An Interesting Thing Happened at the Census Bureau in 1850 and 1860

Although it has been decades since the number, distribution, and stability of American colleges during the first half of the Nineteenth Century have been treated as vitally relevant to arguments over educational policy issues such as college certifications or the need for professional control over all aspects of higher education, there are still disagreements over how many colleges were in operation in the United States during the sixty years before the onset of the Civil War in 1861.

Since the 1980s, no historians have supported Donald G. Tewksbury's estimates of over a thousand foundings of male or coeducational institutions (colleges), with approximately an eighty percent failure rate during the first sixty year of the Nineteenth Century. There are still, however, a wide range of estimates of foundings and failures of institutions that awarded degrees for studying the classical curricula.¹

In the mid 1980s, the work, *American Collegiate Populations, A Test of the Traditional View* (ACP), relying on a variety of sources, presented an estimate, of 241 such colleges in operation during the sixty years, with 202 surviving to the end of 1850s or later. The work's author believed that some seventy of those 241 institutions were mainly preparatory institutions but included them to bias his estimation in favor of the earlier ones, such as Tewksbury's, being evaluated in ACP. ACP's estimates faced immediate criticism, ones usually coming from representatives of Twentieth Century colleges who claimed their institutions began operations during the first part of the previous century, or from scholars who had a dislike for the old-time colleges, their supposedly 'elite' students, and their curricula. Those claiming their institutions were 'colleges' before the Civil War did not seem to realize their assertions ran against the Tewksbury and Richard Hofstadter-like interpretations of irrationality and instability during an era of local and denominational support of higher education.

Other than educational stake-holders have had differing opinions about the number of Antebellum colleges. In contrast to the ACP, Roger Geiger has recently changed his estimate of 215 to 280 Antebellum colleges in operation, 1800-1860. More widely known, using the term 'Colleges and Universities' the last official historical publication of the United States' National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) stipulated 381 foundings (and with all surviving past the Civil War). The NCES study's author relied on the post-Civil War reports by institutions of their date of first operation, rather than a verified date when they first began a college level program. He did not state whether or not the 381 figure included female and technical institutions, types that were not regarded as colleges in the Antebellum era.

In addition to widely varying estimates of the Antebellum record, reports of the number of operating 'colleges' immediately after the Civil War have been used to throw light on the pre-Civil War era. The first efforts at tabulating 'college' numbers published in the *Reports* by the new United States Commissioner of Education (RCE), circa 1866-8, yielded 369 institutions. That was soon changed upwards to 266 male/coeducational colleges and universities, 33 female collegiate-level institutions, and 264 other schools and departments of 'Higher Education'. The commissioner's numbers were passed down to the first editions of the *Historical Statistics of the*

United States (HSUS, 1961, 1970) and to the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) *120 Years of American Education: a Statistical Portrait* (1993), each claiming all 'Higher Education' had 563 institutions in operation in 1870. As well, the 1870 *Census of the United States* presented a figure of 600 'Colleges and Universities' (medical and law schools were tabulated separately) with 72% of enrollments being male, suggesting there were approximately 432 traditional male/coeducational colleges open for business in the early 1870s.² After the 1870 census, the nation relied on the Commissioner of Education's (RCE) reports.

The Unseen Elephant in the Evidential Room—Those Other Census Pages

Perhaps it was because of that extremely high United States Census estimate of 600 'Colleges and Universities' in 1870, and the similarly high reports for 'Colleges' in the 1840, 1850, and 1860 censuses that led the author of ACP, and apparently other historians, to dismiss the census as a source for Antebellum college statistics. The 1840 census stated 173 'Colleges' were in operation; the 1850 posited 239; and, the 1860 volume gave a startling 467. That 1860 figure fit more with the high NCES retrospective estimate of 381 and the commissioner's (RCE) report on all institutions that could grant some type of degree, rather than with that in ACP.

To dismiss the 1850 and 1860 censuses was a mistake, although an understandable one because the word 'college' was used in two distinct ways by those who designed the census volumes. If an historian turned to the tables on 1850's page 141 and looked under 'Colleges', that 239 total appeared. Page 505 in the 1860 report held the 467 'College' figure. Those numbers were so disproportionate that it seemed wise to discount them and not proceed any further in the census volumes.

But there are some quite different figures four pages away in the 1850 census and five pages further in the 1860 census—both have tables that separate out 'Literary Colleges' from other 'Higher Education' institutions and departments. 1850 has separate numbers for 'Literary' Colleges, 'Theological Schools', 'Medical Schools' and 'Law Schools'. 1860 has a finer slicing: "Colleges distributed according to their special character". In addition to the 1850's categories there were 'Scientific school or department', 'Agricultural school or department', 'Normal' and 'Military'.

When combined, the 1850 subdivisions account for 90% of the 239 total in the previous 1850 table and the 1860 categories add up to 93% of the 467 given in that census' first table. Even with the problem of possible double counting of schools and departments, the census' experts seems not to have 'lost' many institutions when they used the multiple categories. The 'missing' colleges (some 22 in 1850 and 33 in 1860) were probably female institutions.

The refined 1850 and 1860 census figures are credible over-all, and they are compatible with the series for the remainder of the century's gradual but impressive increases in the number of 'Colleges and Universities'. Thus, the census' totals figures for 'Literary Colleges' during the final two Antebellum decades provide a benchmark for judging other estimates such as those in ACP and in the 2006 'Millennial' edition of the *Historical Statistics of the United States* that relied upon the ACP for its Antebellum estimates.

Total Number of ‘Colleges’ By Initial Year of Decade All Higher Education/Colleges

NCES/RCE College figures are for ‘College and Universities’ only, excluding female colleges; the ACP estimates are based on number of colleges in operation during the previous decade minus the number of failures during that decade, using the table on pp. 15-17 in ACP.

Example: 126/50 indicates 126 ‘Higher Education’ institutions, 50 signifies ‘Literary Colleges’ or ‘Colleges and Universities’, excluding female colleges.

Note that the *Millennial Edition of the Historical Statistics of the United States*’ post Civil War series, while based on RCE reports, used a different classification for what the RCE called ‘Universities and Colleges’ after the Civil War. The *Millennial’s* equivalent category in Bg166, had 327 vs. 266 for 1870, 377 vs. 402 for 1880 and 422 vs. 430 for 1890. The way female institutions were handled may explain most of the differences. However, the *Millennial’s* Bg510 series for “Higher Education”, matched the RCE’s.

	CENSUS	NCES or RCE	ACP
1840	173/-	-/171	-/100
1850	232/119	-/250	-/129
1860	467/204	-/381	-/202
1870	600/432	563/266	-
1880	-	811/402	-
1890	-	998/430	-
1900	-	977 /480	-

The census' figures and the ACP's tabulations are quite close overall for 1850 and 1860, the years when the census first used the 'Literary College' category. The refined census numbers, and the ACP's, are also compatible with the RCE's series for 'Colleges and Universities' for 1870-1900. The Antebellum census and the ACP's estimates are, however, not compatible with the 1870 census' '600' result or with those in NCES. It is clear the 1870 census used differing definitions for institutions of higher education. The disparity between the NCES and ACP's estimates for the Antebellum years are obviously due to institutions later reporting they operated as colleges while they were probably academies or female seminaries, versions of 'secondary education'.

Totals can be misleading, but the fit between the ACP and Census tabulations on a state by state basis also indicate the ACP and the census' 1850 and 1860 estimates are credible. Despite differences in the dates when tallied, disparities in the definition of 'college', and census reporting errors the census and ACP state-by-state reports for 1850 and 1860 fit rather comfortably together.

**Comparison of ACP, NCES and Census Tabulations
1850 and 1860, by State**

Entries for 'Census-ACP' = Census estimate minus ACP's colleges in operation in previous decade minus failures.

Entries for 'NCES-ACP' = NCES retrospective figures for colleges in operation during decade minus ACP's colleges in operation in previous decade minus failures during decade. Explanation of entries: a '-1' = ACP estimate was 1 greater than the census'; a '1' = Census or NCES having one more than estimated in ACP

	1850	1860	1850	1860
	Census	Census	NCES	NCES
	- ACP	-ACP	-ACP	-ACP
AL	0	-1	3	5
AK	0	0	1	1
CA	0	1	0	3
CT	0	0	2	2
SD	0	0	0	0
CO	0	0	0	0
DC	0	0	0	0
DE	0	-1	0	-1
FL	0	0	0	2
GA	1	2	6	6
IA	-1	-1	4	5
IL	-1	-1	4	8
IN	-2	2	6	7
KA	0	3	0	3
KY	2	-2	0	2
LA	2	1	-1	-4
MA	0	1	9	13
MD	0	3	3	5
ME	0	0	2	2
MI	0	0	4	4
MN	0	2	0	3
MO	0	1	2	5
MT	0	0	0	0
MS	-2	-2	-3	-4
NB	0	0	0	0
NV	0	0	0	0
NH	0	0	1	1

NJ	0	0	0	5
NM	0	1	0	0
NY	0	-3	<u>18</u>	<u>26</u>
NC	0	0	<u>13</u>	<u>12</u>
OK	0	0	0	1
OH	-5	-3	4	7
OR	0	1	3	3
PA	-3	4	<u>19</u>	<u>29</u>
RI	0	0	0	1
SC	-1	-1	5	6
SD	0	0	0	1
TN	-1	<u>-7</u>	0	-2
TX	-1	0	3	1
UT	0	0	0	1
VA	1	0	9	9
VT	0	-1	4	4
WA	0	0	0	1
WI	1	3	6	6
	-10	2	121	169

The way ACP's decade estimates were calculated, the probability that the census takers used differing definitions of 'college' in the various states, especially in the West and South, and the timing of the census' surveys suggests that a difference of one or two colleges between the census and ACP's numbers are attributable to what may be tolerated as minor 'measurement error'.

The differences between the ACP and the retrospective NCES estimates seem attributable to two things. The positive figures point to institutions that did not operate as 'colleges' during the Antebellum years but reported they did so to the Commissioner of Education after the Civil War. (Note the high numbers in the Mid-Atlantic States that hosted so many 'academies' and seminaries.)The negative entries in the NCES-ACP columns seem attributable to the ACP's including some institutions not certain to have fully operated as Antebellum colleges. They were included so as to be 'balanced' in favor of the educational history theses the work 'tested'. (Note the pattern in the American South).

That leaves the instances of difference of greater than two between the census' tallies and the ACP's to be dealt with. In 1850 there were only two cases. Both had ACP estimating a greater number than did the census. There was a difference of three in Pennsylvania and five in Ohio. In both cases the numbers of 'perhaps not colleges' in the ACP's tallies were close to the number of differences.

While the series for 1860 are generally compatible, there were more and greater differences for 1860 than for 1850. Some of them are difficult to reconcile and will require a detailed reexamination of the historical record. Seven states had difference of three or more. The census reported four states having more operating colleges than did ACP, and three having less, for total a difference of twenty nine institutions. The states were rather evenly divided between the West and Mid-Atlantic. The greatest difference was for Tennessee, however, with the census giving it seven less than had ACP. That may be the easiest case to resolve. Seven was the number of 'perhaps not colleges' ACP included in its Tennessee total. The differences in the Western states, Kansas (+3), Ohio (-3) and Wisconsin (+3) and those in the mid-Atlantic, Maryland (+3), New York (-3), and Pennsylvania (+4) are more difficult to explain, but the relatively large numbers of academies then having 'college' in their titles and the difficulties of classifying Catholic institutions may prove to be important in explaining the disparities.

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Colin Burke
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