American Private Foundations and British Colonial Higher Education

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Abstract

This preliminary investigation explores the role played by major American foundations to sustain, finance, and shape British colonial higher education after 1920. It engages first with the philanthropy provided by funders like the Carnegie Corporation to universities in Britain and British settler contexts. Much of this funding undergirded anglophone networks of research and exchange. The investigation then shifts to US foundations’ sponsorship of education-as-development for decolonizing British colonies after 1945. Especially in the case of London’s “special relations” scheme, started in 1947, records held by the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) show the cooperative, even trans-imperial, approach of American and British officials to emerging colonial universities. Nevertheless, and much like British policymakers, American foundation officials applied different logics and forms of funding to colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean than they had to settler institutions in Australasia or Canada.
American Private Foundations and British Colonial Higher Education

The cradle, at least figuratively, of the still-forming West Indian nation is a plot of land a little more than a square mile in area just a few miles inland from the Caribbean on the island of Jamaica. [...] this is the campus of the 12-year-old University College of the West Indies.

At the invitation of the Carnegie Corporation, university leaders from Africa, Asia, Britain, and the Caribbean met upon the banks of the Hudson River in late August 1958, gathering at Gould House, the thirteen-acre estate once owned by the railway magnate Jay Gould. The short, lavish affair brought together members of Britain’s Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas (IUC) and representatives of major American philanthropic foundations and universities. At least three representatives from each of the Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller foundations attended, outnumbering the contingent of seven principals from British colonial universities. Two delegates from American universities, including the president of the Association of American Universities, joined the event, as well. The purpose of the conference, as its chair Sir Charles Morris put it, was to foster and encourage “the participation of the United States in assisting the growth of the [British] overseas colleges.” What had begun as a British project to build Western-style universities in colonial territories would, Morris hoped, soon be led by “a partnership of help between the United Kingdom and the United States based on their traditional friendship.”

The Gould House conference, although not the first occasion upon which representatives of American foundations and British colonial higher education had courted one another, nonetheless showcased American funders’ growing engagement in projects for overseas colonial development. New colonial universities after 1945, for their capacity to train elites and produce knowledge, seemed poised to guide decolonization and shape development. As the editor of the Carnegie Corporation’s Quarterly described it, a university had the potential to become the “cradle” of a nation. Likewise, the president of the Carnegie Corporation, John W. Gardner,
expressed his enthusiasm for, and the Corporation’s “special interest” in, British colonial higher education. Gardner had helped to arrange the Gould House conference. In advance of it, he wrote to the president of the Ford Foundation that “we [Carnegie Corporation] had supported the previous conference of principals in Kingston, Jamaica in 1955 [...] our British friends are becoming increasingly receptive to the ideas which the American experience can contribute.” While not all US foundation leaders shared Gardner’s zeal, American universities and funders had increasingly reached outwards from the interwar period. By 1958, according to one Gould House conference delegate, 184 US universities were conducting 382 overseas projects, of which 92% had begun after 1945. As interest in overseas education grew, British beginnings in colonial higher education became of particular interest to American foundation officials. Their organizations could sponsor, co-opt, and repurpose these existing colonial networks rather than create them anew.

This preliminary investigation explores the role played by major American foundations to sustain, finance, and shape British colonial higher education after 1920. In doing so, it supports two broader research projects. The first of these is my current book project, which charts the expansion of higher education across Anglo-American settlement societies in the nineteenth century. The final chapters of this book examine the networks and interconnectedness championed by anglophone institutions of higher education by the early twentieth century, when organizations like the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations funded conferences, scholarships, exchanges, and research travel between universities in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United States. Secondary research from this book project, in addition, has prompted a separate set of questions about the types of political projects that higher education facilitated. A second research project thus studies one particular development scheme, run by IUC officials through the University of London. Named the scheme of “special relations,” this program aimed to assist British colonies in their transition to independence. Between 1947 and 1970, academics at the University of London managed the curriculum, standards, and examinations of eight colonial colleges in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, shepherding them towards independent university status, while also influencing the formation of many other universities in Commonwealth territories. It was the principals of these colonial colleges, along with IUC members, who assembled at Gould House in 1958.
To these ends, the material I examined at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) highlighted the ways in which American philanthropy undergirded higher education and education-as-development within the British Empire. Especially in the case of London’s “special relations” scheme, these records show the cooperative, even trans-imperial, approach of American and British officials to emerging colonial universities. Eager for funds, British policymakers welcomed American involvement. American foundation officials, on the other hand, initially hesitated to underwrite projects based within Britain’s colonial empire. As Dean Rusk, president of the Rockefeller Foundation, explained “at present there was uncertainty as to what the Foundation’s role in Africa should be, but thought was being given to finding modest ways in which free money would increase the momentum of development.” This short investigation, then, will linger on American funders’ sponsorship of British colonial universities after 1945, although it will first briefly consider foundations’ support for scholarships and research that connected Anglo-American institutions and British settler contexts from the 1920s. Five strands of RAC records relate to these topics, which include: files on the Carnegie Corporation created by the General Education Board; “Projects” files of the Rockefeller Foundation; International Education Board records; Ford Foundation records, especially on overseas development; and files of the Commonwealth Fund.

**Constructing an Anglophone System of Higher Education**

Founded in 1911, the Carnegie Corporation of New York limited its operations to the United States for only six years. The Corporation’s first charter, granted by the State of New York upon the organization’s founding, established it as a private eleemosynary body formed to dispense funds for “the advancement and diffusion of knowledge in the U.S.” A second charter, ratified in 1917 and amending its predecessor, then reached out to British settler states. By the terms of this document, the Corporation was empowered “to hold and administer funds for use in Canada or the British Colonies” for the same purposes as it administered funds within the United States. In line with other American funders and even other Carnegie organizations, such as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the Carnegie Corporation’s leaders thus
increasingly imagined their organization’s role as extending beyond the nation-state.

Even so, this growing internationalism had defined parameters. The Corporation’s emphasis upon “Canada or the British Colonies” signalled its interest in sponsoring academic exchange and interconnection first among the “English-speaking peoples” of America and Britain’s empire. Corporation officials like James Bertram, as the historian Maribel Morey contends, developed “an approach to international order along the color line,” allocating funding in ways that were meant to promote unity among “communities of whites.” Often for reasons of cultural or racial affinity, then, American private foundations in the early twentieth century looked upon young universities in parts of Canada, Australasia, and South Africa with growing interest. New universities in settler societies, in turn – many of which had emerged only decades before – stood to benefit significantly from foundation grants, which would improve their financial security, status, research, and maintenance of educational standards.

Meanwhile, among British educators and policymakers, the swiftness of university-building within British colonies of settlement took many by surprise. Secretary of State for the Colonies Lewis Harcourt expressed his wonderment at university expansion across the Empire at the first Congress of the Universities of the Empire in 1912. “When I was of undergraduate age,” Harcourt asked, “who amongst my contemporaries would have believed that in 1912 it would have been possible to call a Congress which would contain, as this does, the representatives of no less than fifty-three Universities under the British flag?” Yet, despite this late recognition of colonial education’s expansion, Harcourt and other British officials were eager to cultivate interconnection across imperial institutions. The 1912 Congress itself aimed to foster such links. In addition, British officials put up little resistance and often nurtured relationships with American funders who might finance imperial networks even as they co-opted them. The organizers of the Allied and Colonial Universities Conference in 1903 had invited American delegates, even though they excluded delegates from many parts of the British Empire, including representatives from (Anglophone) Indian universities.

As RAC records reveal, one significant scheme of American-funded interconnection and affiliation between universities in Britain, the United States, and British settler contexts was the Commonwealth Fund Fellowships program (later, the Harkness
Fellowships). Like the initiatives of the Carnegie Corporation, this program upheld Anglo-American cooperation – a “unity of thought and purpose” among English-speakers – as one of its primary objectives. This emphasis upon Anglo-American collaboration was due, in large part, to the preferences of the program’s funders, the Harkness family, and of its first president, Edward Harkness. Having inherited significant oil wealth from her husband, Anna Harkness first established the Commonwealth Fund, vesting it with ten million dollars, in 1918. But the design of the Fund’s fellowship program owed more to Anna’s son, Edward, who eventually inherited substantial fortunes through his mother and older brother and became the Fund’s inaugural president. Throughout his life, Edward maintained an interest in Britain and the British Commonwealth, donating to British art museums, hospitals, and educational institutions. At the same time, Edward’s role as president of a significant philanthropic foundation connected him to other educational leaders and philanthropists situated in New York City.

By the 1920s, the success of the Rhodes Scholarships, which were established in 1902, had inspired calls for a reciprocal arrangement. The US educator and Rhodes Trust secretary, Frank Aydelotte, investigated the possibility of setting up a scheme in which British scholars might come to study in the United States. Having spent the summer of 1923 in the United Kingdom, Aydelotte wrote to the director of the International Education Board on the subject of “a scholarship scheme to provide for bringing graduate students from England, Ireland, Australia, South Africa and Canada for study in the States.” According to Aydelotte, the proposed scheme had met with “hearty approval in England.” Rather than the International Education Board, however, it was the Commonwealth Fund that took up the challenge of instituting a graduate fellowship program for Britons to America. In 1925, the program began and limited its fellowships to graduates of UK universities. It expanded within two years to include “Dominion Fellowships” for graduates from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa, followed by “Civil Service Fellowships” for all of these places in 1929.

Perhaps more significant than their origins, however, were the impacts of these fellowship programs. Thirty years after its start, the Commonwealth Fund had awarded 548 fellowships – enough that one review of the program claimed that: “there is not a single university in the United Kingdom without a [Commonwealth Fund] Fellow on
its teaching staff.” At the very least then, scholarship programs like this one had long aftereffects. They established knowledge of, and connections between, scholars in Britain, the United States, and settler contexts at early stages in their careers. Some of the Commonwealth Fund fellows later became significant figures in British higher education. Eric Ashby, for example, who had been awarded a Harkness Fellowship at the University of Chicago in 1929, later headed the ‘Ashby Commission’ on colonial higher education in Nigeria in the 1960s. In another case, Sir James Irvine served as a member of the Fund’s awarding body while at St. Andrew’s University, from 1925 to 1950. After this, he chaired the “Irvine Committee” created to guide the growth of higher education in the West Indies.

By the early twentieth century, British universities and university development within British settler contexts had, therefore, attracted the notice and support of private foundations in the United States. The programs and policies of the Commonwealth Fund and Carnegie Corporation provide two significant examples of this trend and highlight their guiding logic. Not only these organizations, but a large proportion of American funders looked to Britain’s colonies of settlement when they considered making initial investments – or grants for colonial development – outside of the United States. In doing so, they exposed a guiding racial or hierarchical logic about which societies could be trusted with their funding. Individual universities and government departments, who sought private grants for research or collaboration, often upheld or played upon this logic, strengthening imperial and Anglophone networks between institutions of higher education at the expense of other possible networks. Yet this tentative involvement of US foundations in British colonial higher education became more overt after 1945. The end of the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War presented new imperatives for American financiers, many of whom envisaged university-building as a tool for managing and shaping decolonization.

**Higher Education as Development in the British Empire**

In the 1920s, British policymakers and colonial politicians began discussing the role of university education in “preparing” British dependencies for self-rule. This culminated,
two decades later, in several significant commissions on colonial higher education and the decision to sponsor Western-style universities in colonial territories. Staffed by representatives from all UK universities, the Inter-University Council for Higher Education in the Colonies (IUC) emerged to manage the export of British higher education abroad.\(^2\) One of its most significant development schemes was the creation of a system of “special relations” overseen by the University of London.\(^3\) From 1947, academics at the University of London took an active role in shaping the development of eight colonial colleges situated in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Several of these institutions already existed in some form, as with the universities of Hong Kong and Malta. The IUC aimed to regenerate these two institutions following the war. Most of them, however, were entirely new. London’s scheme supported the founding of the University of Malaya in 1949 and the formation of five university colleges in the West Indies, Khartoum, Ibadan, East Africa (Makerere), and the Gold Coast (Ghana). With the exception of Malta’s university, all of these institutions sent representatives to the Gould House conference in 1958.

The University of London seemed a natural choice to provide oversight of colonial education given that it had long assumed an international role. Since the 1860s, colonial students had sat for London’s external exams or travelled to London for their education.\(^4\) But the rise of new colonial colleges after the Second World War provoked fresh disputes over the appropriateness of a classical curriculum and the role of expatriate staff overseas. To colonial politicians such as the Trinidadian prime minister and historian, Eric Williams, the London system locked colonial higher education into a “period of tutelage.”\(^5\) Likewise, the Ghanian politician Kwame Nkrumah, who had studied in London, was critical of the merits of institutional “transplantation” from Britain to African countries, especially without also providing instruction in African languages and culture. For these reasons, among others, historians have sometimes labelled these institutions, such as the University of the West Indies, as “neo-colonial.”\(^6\) Yet new overseas campuses would also, in turn, reshape British higher education. Expatriate staff filtered back into Britain, or went to the United States, bringing colonial lessons to bear upon an era of “new campuses” in the 1960s. More remains to be discovered about this dialectical relationship, and about the ways in which the institutions of “special relations” would become sites for the formation of anticolonial thought, nationalism, and Indigenous culture.
Americans’ interest in this feverish university-building within Britain’s colonial empire, then, intensified during the Cold War. In fact, many IUC members and American foundation officials had the same mission in sponsoring British colonial universities: to train anti-communist elites who might manage decolonization.\textsuperscript{27} Other university administrators, moreover, such as the “Nigeria Liaison Officer” to the IUC, believed that American-funded projects might infuse the benefits of American higher education into British colonies. As this official described it, “America could offer the experience it had gained in building institutions to meet its own needs at different stages of its development.”\textsuperscript{28} Testing the applicability of American “experience” for colonial higher education thus increasingly appealed to US foundations in the postwar period.

Although American foundations eventually created and led their own development projects, many of them also looked favorably upon Britain’s colonial ventures, particularly for ways to collaborate. The University of Khartoum, for instance, was shaped by overlapping British and American agendas and finances. The university’s predecessor, Gordon College, had been established by Lord Kitchener in 1902 and was a British-run organization. In 1951, it was re-founded and renamed “University College Khartoum”, receiving British staff and support as part of the University of London system. Shortly thereafter, it also garnered the financial backing of the Rockefeller Foundation. Between 1959 and 1963, this foundation provided Khartoum’s institution with over $206,000, earmarking another $500,000 in 1963 to support the university’s faculties of arts, social studies, veterinary medicine, agriculture, science, and medicine.\textsuperscript{29} The Rockefeller Foundation similarly provided funds to two other British colonial universities in Africa: Makerere College (University of East Africa) and the University of Ibadan.\textsuperscript{30}

Like the Carnegie Corporation, the Rockefeller Foundation hosted its own “Conference[s] of Overseas Vice-Chancellors”, including one held at Ibadan in 1974. The Ibadan conference offered IUC members a chance to meet and discuss how representatives from the United States, Canada, Australia, and Britain might collaborate on plans for educational development.\textsuperscript{31} Yet the Rockefeller Foundation went farther in its pursuit of education-as-development than almost any other philanthropic body. Based upon the models of higher education run in the British West
Indies and West Africa, the Foundation launched its own “University Development Program (UDP)” in 1961. In proposing the program, the Foundation’s president, J. George Harrar, stated that it “should be carried out for twelve to fifteen years and that the Foundation would probably expend approximately $100 million in executing it.” The UDP focused on the development of universities in Latin America, together with certain Asian and African institutions, and lasted until 1983.

Finally, the Ford Foundation also provided a series of grants to British colonial universities. The University of Ibadan, as well as the universities of Malaya and the West Indies, applied and received funds from the Ford organization in the 1950s and 1960s. In all of these cases, disputes over curricula, educational standards, faculty, and funding regularly stood in as proxies for larger contestations over national self-determination and the appropriate levers of economic development. In addition, the Ford Foundation supported scholarly exchange programs meant to enrich American universities too. Its “International Training and Research Programme” funded academic exchanges between Chicago, UCLA, and several African colleges in order to bolster the field of African studies within the United States. Funding bodies such as the Ford Foundation then rigorously assessed the outcomes and “value” produced by their grants. The techniques of oversight and technocratic management consequently applied to Britain’s colonial empire had not often been applied in the same way for British settler contexts – or the review process had been left to British officials.

**Conclusions**

Although this investigation begins to plot the interactions of American philanthropy, British policymakers, and bodies of higher learning in British imperial contexts, there is a great deal more about these relationships to be uncovered. The ease with which American foundations inserted themselves into the networks and landscape of British higher education has meant that these foundations’ role has barely registered for historians or been difficult to disaggregate. Yet, as records held by the RAC reveal, grant allocations were hardly random – nor were the paths and intellectual geographies of experts, exams, and intellectuals. In many ways, colonial development after 1945
became a trans-imperial project. The ambitions of British officials and American philanthropists overlapped in various regions, such that a loose, Anglo-American “partnership of help” – along the lines of what Charles Morris set out at Gould House – emerged. This partnership operated unevenly and inconsistently, but it highlighted philanthropy’s role in extending American empire. At the same time, it generated significant knowledge-producing institutions in decolonizing countries, many of which have powerfully shaped national industries, research, and Indigenous governance systems – and that still exist today.

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3 Ibid.
4 Rowan, ed. “University in the Sun,” RAC.
6 Recorded proceedings, “Meeting Between American Visitors and Vice-Chancellors and Principals of Overseas University Institutions,” Rockefeller Foundation Records, RAC.
8 The eight colleges included the regeneration of the universities of Hong Kong and Malta following the Second World War; the founding of the University of Malaya; and the formation of five university colleges in the West Indies, Khartoum, Ibadan, East Africa (Makerere), and the Gold Coast.
10 Recorded proceedings, “Meeting Between American Visitors and Vice-Chancellors and Principals of Overseas University Institutions,” Rockefeller Foundation Records, RAC.
12 Ibid.
15 Tamson Pietsch, *Empire of Scholars: Universities, Networks, and the British Academic World, 1850-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 95. The first imperial interuniversity conference to invite and receive Indian delegates was the Congress of the Universities of the Empire, held in London in 1912.
16 Report, “Commonwealth Fund Fellowships to Graduates of the Universities of the United Kingdom, A Review - 1925-1955,” April 1957. Commonwealth Fund Records, Board of Directors, SG 1, Series 7, Special Reports, Subseries 5, RAC.
17 Ibid.
18 Frank Aydelotte to Wickliffe Rose, 7 September 1923. International Education Board Records, Numerical, Subseries 1, Rhodes Scholarship Trust, box 10, folder 148, RAC.
20 Ibid.
22 This body was later renamed the “Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas”.
28 Recorded proceedings, “Meeting Between American Visitors and Vice-Chancellors and Principals of Overseas University Institutions,” Rockefeller Foundation Records, RAC.
29 Many of the college’s British staff left when Sudan declared its independence in 1956. Motion RF 62123, “University of Khartoum,” 1963. Rockefeller Foundation Records, Projects, SG 1.2, Series 300-833, Sudan-General, Subseries 494.GEN, RAC.
30 James S. Coleman, “Professorial Training and Institution Building in the Third World: Two Rockefeller Foundation

31 The second day of this conference featured a panel explicitly on forms of American and Commonwealth cooperation, titled: “Programmes of Co-Operation II - United States; Canada, Australia, and other Commonwealth Programmes.” Pamphlet, Conference of Overseas Vice-Chancellors Programme, January 1974. Rockefeller Foundation Records, General Correspondence, RG 2, England, Series 1974/401, Reel 54: Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas, 1974, RAC.


35 Recorded proceedings, “Meeting Between American Visitors and Vice-Chancellors and Principals of Overseas University Institutions,” Rockefeller Foundation Records, RAC.