I decided to study the history of American higher education shortly after May 1, 1968. Early that morning, over a thousand New York City police officers cleared the Columbia University campus of demonstrators and the occupants of five university buildings. Upwards of 800 were arrested; perhaps the same number of students, faculty, and police needed medical attention. The next afternoon, the leaders of Students for a Democratic Society gathered on the balcony of the Columbia Law School building, looking at over a thousand demonstrators protesting the police action. The images of the police action initiated by the Columbia administration still haunt me. But so does the brief triumph of “manipulatory democracy” practiced by SDS members.

It did not take a criminal justice specialist to predict what would happen if the police came onto the campus. The Columbia administration, having lost touch with students, faculty, and the surrounding community, could think of nothing to end the crisis short of bringing predictable violence to the campus. Conversely, SDS exposed its hand when sociologist Allan Silver asked its leaders if they found anything at Columbia precious, even indispensable, and if so, would their answer place any restraints on their actions. The leaders huddled, but came up with no answer. Neither side was willing to assume responsibility for its acts.

Shortly after the police bust, I joined the staff of a faculty committee charged with reforming the governance of the university. I spent the summer attending committee meetings, discussing the university’s past and future relationships with its students, faculty, and surrounding community, and writing about university governance. This was my way of helping to rebuild a flawed university to which I owed much. Columbia had opened new intellectual and social worlds during my undergraduate years, so much so that I had decided to stay there for graduate work in history after receiving a BA in 1967. When staff colleagues learned that I majored in history, they asked questions about prior student demonstrations and protests at Columbia and elsewhere. No one knew much about Columbia’s recent history, much less its formative years, or about the history of student protest or campus governance.

At that time Columbia possessed an unequalled faculty of historians of higher education including Walter Metzger, who became my thesis adviser, Lawrence Cremin, Richard Hofstadter, and Douglas Sloan. The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States, published in 1955 by Hofstadter and Metzger served as an invitation to study the history of higher education. Sloan demonstrated the
centrality of religion for understanding American history. Cremin insisted we look beyond the classroom to understand educational processes. All four taught tolerance for, even appreciation of, different points of view—a difficult lesson in politicized times. The Columbia History Department and Teachers College also attracted a cadre of graduate students destined to shape our understanding of the history of American education—Alison Bernstein, Paula Fass, James Fraser, Sheila Gordon, David Hammack, Ellen Lagemann, David Ment, Deborah Dash Moore, and Steven Schlossman—all of whom became lifetime friends and colleagues.

While studying for doctor’s orals in 1969, I noted a prescient sentence in the bibliographic essay in Frederick Rudolph’s The American College and University: A History: “Thus far, we have little more than educated guesses as to what a history of college preparation in the United States might tell.” The previous spring, Black and Puerto Rican students staged a sit-in at City College of New York (CCNY). Their key demand: admit more students of color to this college, known historically for promoting educational opportunity.

New York’s demographics changed rapidly during the postwar years, but the city’s four-year municipal colleges—short of space, and reliant solely on SATs and GPAs as admissions criteria—excluded many working class and minority students. The City College sit-in forced the parent City University of New York (CUNY) to open admission to all New York City high school graduates. Supporters and opponents debated the history and politics of college admission—open and selective. State universities, Open Admissions advocates asserted, traditionally opened their doors to all high school graduates. But this was done only to flunk out many of the entrants before the end of their first year, opponents charged. Better politically and educationally, advocates replied, to give all high school graduates a chance at college than to alienate students and their taxpaying parents and to intensify a contentious racial climate. The times are different, they added. Unlike the state universities of old, CUNY sought to provide admitted students with the academic support needed to succeed.

During the 1960s and 1970s, debates over admissions policies frequently invoked the word “quota,” usually in the context of the Ivies and Seven Sisters. Quotas were also debated when contemplating changes in CUNY’s admissions