Description: Who should provide higher education, to which people, and why? These questions have been variably answered over the long arc of US history. I identify five general accounts educational entrepreneurs have used to mobilize public, private, and philanthropic support for the provision of higher education to steadily larger proportions of the polity. These accounts have never been reciprocally exclusive, creating ongoing ambiguity about who is responsible for the successes and failures of the postsecondary sector. Surfacing this historical ambiguity offers fresh insight for contemporary policy debates about what some regard as existential problems of college cost, access, persistence and completion.

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