

# Land Grant Institutions: An Overview

---

July 12, 2022, marks 160 years since the passing of the 1862 Morrill Act, which began federal support of postsecondary education in the United States. Land grant colleges and universities represent the country’s historical commitment to the democratization of higher education by providing federal support for the establishment or extension of state-sponsored postsecondary institutions. Initially funded through three legislative acts, land grant institutions provide students with affordable access to career-oriented higher education in the areas of agriculture, science and engineering, military science, and the liberal arts. The 105 public and 7 private land grant institutions<sup>1</sup> in operation today serve students in every state, the District of Columbia, and the five inhabited U.S. territories and include 19 historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and 35 tribal colleges.

This brief—the first of a series on land grant colleges and universities—examines the history of land grant institutions and the major legislation that supports their establishment and funding. Federal appropriations for land grant institutions have been authorized through more than two dozen pieces of legislation; this research brief highlights the main sources of funding supporting the 1862, 1890 HBCU, and 1994 tribal land grant colleges and universities. Future research briefs will explore sources of funding and changes in appropriations, faculty composition and salaries, the distribution of non-instructional staff and their salaries, and student enrollment. Specifically, each brief will explore discrepancies between HBCU and non-HBCU land grant institutions.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1 marks the name and location of the 112 land grant colleges and universities operating in the United States today. The legend indicates the institution type and the year in which funds were appropriated to establish or expand each land grant.

## Figure 1: Land-Grant Colleges and Universities



### DEVELOPMENT OF THE LAND GRANT SYSTEM: 1862-1887

The first of the land grant acts—the Morrill Act of 1862—was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln during the height of the Civil War and provided each state with 30,000 acres of public land for every senator and representative in the state. States could either sell this land to fund the creation of a new public college or university or use this land to physically expand an existing institution. U.S. Congressman Justin Morrill had originally introduced the bill in 1857, but it was vetoed by President James Buchanan in 1859.

The United States rapidly grew during the first half of the 19th century. To keep pace, the bill's enactment reflected national interests to expand research in agriculture and mechanical arts through postsecondary institutions. The Morrill Act not only provided educational opportunities to a growing population, but it was also a major step in federal intervention into public education.<sup>3</sup>

Although the 1862 Morrill Act provided indirect financial support, the passage of the Hatch Act of 1887 provided federal appropriations to land grant institutions for the establishment and support of agriculture experiment stations to advance research in the areas of farming, ranching, and food production. To this day, these funds are determined by a set formula based on the number of small farmers in each state. As a result, the funding varies annually. The Hatch Act also requires that states must match a major portion of the federal funds.

---

## RACE AND THE LAND GRANT SYSTEM: 1890 HBCU LAND GRANTS

White males from the middle and industrial classes were the primary benefactors of the 1862 Morrill Act. The Civil War and the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution ended slavery, extended citizenship to all persons born in the United States regardless of race, and expanded voting rights to Black American men, respectively. Despite these positive steps, state-level systematic racial oppression under the name Jim Crow often relegated Black Americans to second-class citizenship.

Concerns over segregation in the former Confederate states in the years following the Civil War led to the passage of the second Morrill Act of 1890—the Agricultural College Act of 1890—which required these states to create land grant institutions for Black Americans or provide evidence that race was not an admission criterion for their existing land grant institution.<sup>4</sup> Any states that failed or refused to provide land grant schooling to Black Americans had federal funds withheld. Under the 1890 act, 19 HBCUs were established. Prior to this enactment, Black Americans had limited options regarding postsecondary education. HBCUs that existed prior to 1890—for example, Fisk University and Howard University—were typically private institutions.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike the 1862 land grants, the 1890 HBCU land grants were given financial support instead of land. Eligible states were granted \$15,000 the first year and an additional \$1,000 each subsequent year, with the annual amount capped at \$25,000.<sup>6</sup>

---

## EXPANSION OF THE LAND GRANT SYSTEM: 1914–1977

Additional federal funding was allocated to the 1862 land grants through the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, which mandated the dissemination of the research conducted by the agriculture experiment stations through a Cooperative Extension Service at each land grant institution. Using a formula similar to the Hatch Act, the Smith-Lever Act also requires states to provide matching funds. The 1862 Morrill Act was expanded in 1967 and, again, in 1972 to extend land grant status to the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Micronesia, Northern Marianas, and the Virgin Islands. These jurisdictions and territories received federal funds but did not receive land, and they are eligible to receive research and extension funds under the Hatch and Smith-Lever Acts.

The 1890 HBCU land grants are not eligible for Hatch and Smith-Lever Act funds; however, they initially received federal appropriations through the now defunct Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1935 and currently receive funds through the Evans-Allen Act of 1977, which provides 1890 HBCU land grants with a minimum of 15 percent of Hatch Act funds to support agriculture research.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, the National Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching Policy Act (NARETPA) of 1977 provides 1890 HBCU land grant colleges with federal funds to support agriculture extension programs.<sup>8</sup> Unlike other legislation, NARETPA disburses these funds directly to the institutions as opposed to the states.

---

## EVOLUTION OF THE LAND GRANT SYSTEM: 1994 TRIBAL LAND GRANTS

The land grant system was again expanded to include 29 existing tribal colleges under the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act of 1994,<sup>9</sup> which authorized a \$23 million endowment from which the colleges receive annual interest payments. Also included in this legislation is a \$1.7 million agriculture and natural resources grant program and \$50,000 per tribal college for agriculture and natural resources postsecondary programs. This legislation also authorizes \$5 million to the Cooperative

Extension Service in states that have both 1862 land grant colleges and 1994 tribal land grants to facilitate collaboration.<sup>10</sup> Currently, there are 35 tribal institutions with the land grant designation. Located mostly in the Southwest and Midwest, tribal-controlled colleges enrolled about 23,000 students in 13 states in the 2019–2020 academic year. These institutions are unique among land grants in that they offer a wider range of services, including high school equivalency (GED), developmental education, college credentials, and job training. They also serve as community, economic, and child/elder care centers.

---

## LAND GRANTS TODAY

Although land grant colleges and universities comprise a small percentage of all postsecondary institutions in the United States—approximately 3 percent of public and private not-for-profit two- and four-year institutions—they have helped to expand access to higher education in each state. A majority of land grant institutions (52 percent) are funded through the 1862 Morrill Act, followed by the 1994 tribal land grants (31 percent), and the 1890 HBCU land grants (17 percent). Many states have more than one type of land grant institution, such as Oklahoma, which is home to 1862 land grant, 1890 HBCU, and 1994 tribal land grant institutions (see [Figure 1](#)).

The land grant system has evolved over the past 160 years, and multiple pieces of additional legislation have allowed for the expansion of the original mission and added various streams of funding opportunities, including those focused on teaching, research, and agriculture extension programs. In sum, in 2019, land grant institutions received a total of \$1.5 billion in federal support for capacity and competitive grants.<sup>11</sup> Capacity grants are recurring, based on formula; competitive grants are awarded to specific projects, and institutions must apply for them.

The next brief in this series explores the major land grant funding streams in more detail, highlights important differences in funding allocation among those streams, and documents changes in funding over time.

## Endnotes

- 1 There is no requirement that land grants be public institutions. Cornell University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) were granted land grant status under the Morrill Act of 1862, and Tuskegee University has been included in this brief as an 1890 land grant despite not officially authorized as such because it received 25,000 acres of public land and has a mission consistent with land grant institutions.
- 2 Because tribal colleges receive the vast majority of their funding from the federal government, they are not included in this comparison. Therefore, any differences in how they are impacted by the legislation in which they are authorized is not as apparent.
- 3 Lee, J.M., Jr., and Keys, S.W. (2013). "Land-Grant but Unequal: State One-to-One Match Funding for 1890 Land-Grant Universities." Association of Public Land-Grant Universities.
- 4 Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities. (2012). *The Land-Grant Tradition*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from [aplu.org/library/the-land-grant-tradition](http://aplu.org/library/the-land-grant-tradition).
- 5 Lee, J.M., Jr., and Keys, S.W. (2013). "Land-Grant but Unequal: State One-to-One Match Funding for 1890 Land-Grant Universities." Association of Public Land-Grant Universities.
- 6 Committee on the Future of the Colleges of Agriculture in the Land Grant University System, Board on Agriculture, and National Research Council. (1995). *Colleges of Agriculture at the Land Grant Universities: A Profile*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Lee, J.M., Jr., and Keys, S.W. (2013). "Land-Grant but Unequal: State One-to-One Match Funding for 1890 Land-Grant Universities." Association of Public Land-Grant Universities.
- 9 United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). 1994 Tribal Land-Grant Colleges and Universities Program. Retrieved from [usda.gov/partnerships/1994-program](http://usda.gov/partnerships/1994-program).
- 10 Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities. (2012). *The Land-Grant Tradition*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from [aplu.org/library/the-land-grant-tradition](http://aplu.org/library/the-land-grant-tradition).
- 11 Ibid.

This brief is an update to the following publication: National Education Association (2017). "The Establishment of Such Institutions Separately ... A Brief History of Land Grant Institutions." NEA Research Land Grant Brief No. 1.



284462 | 03.22 | vn