

## Guide to Reading Primary Sources

Historians distinguish between secondary and primary sources. Secondary sources are produced to explain the past. The term is usually used to refer to scholarly articles or books, but encompasses other genres such as documentary films and class lectures. Primary sources, on the other hand, were produced in the past by, or by people who participated directly in past events. All kinds of things produced in the past are primary sources: letters, diaries, government reports, novels, newspaper and magazine articles, scientific studies, songs, paintings, photographs, buildings, household appliances, television shows, clothing, etc. Interviews with people about their past experiences, memoirs, and autobiographies are also considered primary sources.

Historians accord primary sources an authority that they do not give secondary sources. Primary sources provide direct evidence about the past. This does not mean that their "meaning" is absolutely clear or that they can be taken at "face value." For example, a historian cannot assume that *Father Knows Best* accurately represents family life in the 1950s. All primary sources have to be interrogated and interpreted.

In this course you will read a number of primary documents. The main question you want to ask yourself when reading them is: what can I learn about higher education in the period we are studying from this document? To answer this, you should consider a number of other questions:

1. Name and date of document
2. Historical context
3. What is the purpose of this document (summarize content)?
4. How does the purpose shape the document?
5. Who is the author of the document?
6. What is the author's relation to the subject matter discussed in the document? What stake does the author have in the subject matter?
7. How does the author's relation to the subject effect our interpretation of the document?
8. What aspects of the stated topic does the document address? What possible aspects does it omit?
9. What aspects of the topic does the author stress? Why?
10. What assumptions and values can you identify as operating in the document?
11. What is the historical influence/significance to higher education, present day?