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The Higher Learning in America

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*How May the American University Make Provision
for the Superior Student?*

MY SUBJECT is the higher learning in America. I am sure that when I have finished you will feel that there is very little of it, and very little hope for what there is. And this last is in a measure true. The universities of the country rest on a foundation of elementary and secondary public schools. Most of the higher learning in America is carried on in tax-supported state universities. The situation of all these public institutions is now so critical that unless there is some change in the attitude or condition of our people there is indeed little hope for the continuation of that higher learning which is my theme.

The principal function of the private universities in the educational system is to supply the leadership or the recklessness which shows the public institutions what they should or should not attempt. They have led

the way in research and in educational experiment and have demonstrated to the legislatures that it is a good thing for the community to pay professors a living wage. Such payment is not charity which the professor should accept with humility and reward with silence on controversial issues. It is an investment in intelligence. The private universities have struggled to maintain the right of the scholar to exercise his intelligence even though it led him to criticize established policies or institutions. Their example has enabled most state universities to take the same position, with infinite profit to their states. These spiritual values the private universities will always have for the educational system as a whole, but their income, like that of other aggregations of capital, is now so much diminished that they cannot hold out much longer in their effort to present education and research in

their proper economic perspective. Our people must, therefore, themselves believe that tax-supported education and research are important and must themselves determine to protect them. At the present time the ordinary American gives little evidence of any such belief or any such determination. We hear, instead, that the cost of government must be reduced.

Although I favor reducing the cost of government if it can be done without crippling essential services, I doubt whether in the long run the total cost of government can be reduced, or should be reduced, or will be reduced; but certain costs of government could and should be reduced. The total cost of government could and should be redistributed, with certain items increased, and other items eliminated. The increases that we may expect in Federal expenditures to support the social services and to provide for the relief of the destitute are far greater than any reductions that can be accomplished by tinkering with bureaus. Even the savings that would come from a reduction in the army and navy and from limiting aid from the Veterans' Bureau to those who deserve it would be swallowed up by the new obligations which the Federal government must assume because of the collapse of our industrial system.

TAKE the case of public education alone. The principal difficulty faced by the schools has been the tremendous increase in the number of pupils. This has been caused by the advance of the legal age for going into industry and the impossibility of finding a job even when the legal age

has been reached. In view of the technological improvements in the last few years, business will require in the future proportionately fewer workers than ever before. The result will be still further elevation of the legal age for going into employment, and still further difficulty in finding employment when that age has been attained. If we cannot put our children to work, we must put them in school.

We may also be quite confident that the present trend toward a shorter day and a shorter week will be maintained. We have developed and shall continue to have a new leisure class. Already the public agencies for adult education are swamped by the tide that has swept over them since the depression began. They will be little better off when it is over. Their support must come from the taxpayer.

It is surely too much to hope that these increases in the cost of public education can be borne by the local communities. They cannot care for the present restricted and inadequate system. The local communities have failed in their efforts to cope with unemployment. They cannot expect to cope with public education on the scale on which we must attempt it. The answer to the problem of unemployment has been Federal relief. The answer to the problem of public education may have to be much the same, and properly so. If there is one thing in which the citizens of all parts of the country have an interest, it is in the decent education of the citizens of all parts of the country. Our income tax now goes in part to keep our neighbors alive. It may have to go in part as well to make our neighbors intelligent.

We are now attempting to preserve the present generation through Federal relief of the destitute. Only a people determined to ruin the next generation will refuse such Federal funds as public education may require.

Federal assistance to public education, however, will not tend to lighten the burden of the states and local communities. Their educational expenditures will increase, too. If in an emergency like the one we are enjoying at Chicago it is necessary to reduce them temporarily, there is one way to do it and only one. Let the duly constituted representatives of the community determine how much it can afford to spend on education. Then give the educational administration authority to determine what specific changes and reductions should be made to bring expenditures within income. This issue has been tried by the Chicago newspapers. Apparently, the general public is to determine not merely how much money can be spent on education, but also how it shall be spent; and we have had extended discussions by laymen as to whether certain subjects should or should not be studied by the young Chicagoan. Yet we have one of the ablest superintendents in America, honest, intelligent, expert. If he had the authority he could, I have no doubt, produce immediate economies in the school system without damage to the education of our children. Independent attempts on the part of the Board of Education to dictate specific economies will merely contribute to the perpetuation of chaos.

I am willing to concede, therefore, that the total sum which any com-

munity may be able to spend on public education this year or next may have to be reduced. If so, the community should determine how much it can spend; the educational administration should determine the manner of spending. But by this concession I do not mean to imply that I think even a temporary reduction in educational expenditures is a good thing. In so far as economy means efficiency, it is, of course, beneficial. But in general the schools of America are undernourished rather than too richly fed.

For years we have been struggling to secure a decent salary level for teachers. We have done this not because we are sentimental about teachers, but because we have realized dimly the importance of education and have tried to get intelligent people to go into it as their life work. Now the easy way to save money is to reduce salaries. It requires no thought, no effort, no reorganization. It can be done by anybody who understands the rudiments of arithmetic, but it is, in my opinion, the most stupid and most shortsighted means of cutting the costs of education. We wish to make the teaching profession attractive by adequate and secure compensation. We shall never have a respectable educational system until we have accomplished this aim. We defeat this aim if we reduce salaries, and, in addition, we miss the only advantage of this depression, the opportunity to increase efficiency through house-cleaning and reorganization, the opportunity, in short, to give a better education at lower cost. A policy of salary reduction will result in lower cost; it will result, also, in poorer education.

THESE remarks apply in general to other governmental costs. We are not interested so much in a cheap government as in a good one. The citizens of Milwaukee, I suppose, do not greatly object to the high cost of local government. They get something for their money. There have been times in the history of Chicago, however, when we were justified in thinking that the administration ought to pay us for living there. Although there is doubtless extravagance in American government, including public education, and although we should make every effort to get rid of it, we should chiefly direct our energies not to the negative task of reducing the cost of government, but to three positive undertakings: getting good government, getting a rational organization of government, and getting a decent system of taxation. This country is still the richest in the world; for the things it ought to have it can well afford to pay. But much of its money is now squandered on a horde of local governments whose organization is simply fantastic. Nor can the country get the money it needs through an antiquated and iniquitous taxing system. As long as the preposterous general property tax is the chief source of local revenues, we shall be unable to meet the demands which our civilization inevitably places on local governments. As long as a person who does not own real estate but has an excellent income may make no contribution whatever to the support of these units, while the farmer who owns real estate but gets no income at all sees his property sold for taxes, we may expect to hear that the cost of govern-

ment must be reduced. Those who believe that the cost of government must be reduced might better direct their attention to correcting the iniquities and antiquities of our revenue system. If they do not do so, they will find that the cost of government, however small, still falls so inequitably upon our people as to justify weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. And they may find, too, that however successful their efforts have been temporarily and in certain areas, the cost of government in the long run and in other areas is greater than ever before.

“Reduce the cost of government” is likely to degenerate into a slogan like those two other meaningless war cries, “Balance the budget,” and “Take the government out of business.” The budget is not balanced, and we should be sorry if it were. The government should know when it can balance its budget; it should know how it can do it. But there is no mystic charm about any particular twelve months. The attempt to balance the budget in the current fiscal year would lead either to back-breaking taxes or the elimination of governmental services which even certain Chicago newspapers would regard as essential. The budget has been unbalanced not less than 48 times in our history. In a business civilization the government cannot be taken out of business. If it could be, business itself would be the first to want it back. Those who want it taken out of business usually mean that they wish to derive every advantage from natural or legal monopoly or from governmental subsidy and protection without submitting to gov-

ernmental regulation in the interest of the general public. If we reduce the cost of government, we must be sure that we are not sacrificing those interests and institutions which alone make our government possible.

NOW you may suppose from what I have said that I regard all educational institutions as perfect and feel that all they need is more money. This is scarcely true. In spite of a life spent entirely in association with them, I have a high opinion of educational people. As the teachers of Chicago have shown, they are likely to be loyal, self-sacrificing, and disinterested. But largely because of their preoccupation with the problem of quantity, colleges and universities have until recently had little opportunity to develop higher learning in America. They have been concerned with teaching. In the last fifty years professors in the great universities have been able to secure a little time and more money to do some higher learning of their own. This they call research. They have even been able to set free certain advanced students and to encourage them to do a little learning, too. This is called graduate study, or preparation for the Ph.D. degree. But the student from the freshman to senior year, from eighteen to twenty-two, has been permitted to do almost no learning. He has been taught. He has continued the process to which he has been accustomed in high school. This has involved taking a course, memorizing it, and repeating as much of it as may be demanded on an examination given by the teacher who taught it. If the facts were handed back with-

out too much mutilation, the course was passed, counted as one point toward college, and forgotten.

In college the student proceeded in the same way. He took thirty-six courses, forgetting each one he passed as he passed on to the next. If he passed them all with a general arithmetical average of the appropriate height, he was sent forth into the world as an educated person. It must be clear, however, that if he was educated it was not the fault of the system. Or to put it another way, he could perfectly well pass without learning anything. The system was a system of acquiring credits, rather than acquiring knowledge. Thirty-six credits with an average of 65 meant that our friend was educated. Thirty-five credits with an average of 64 meant that he was not. It will not surprise you to learn that in a law school of which I once was dean we had to buy an adding machine to tell whether our students graduated.

Since the examinations were always given by the teachers who taught the courses, the intelligent student realized that he should give quite as much attention to the teacher's curves as to the significant features of the subject. Since the subjects were frequently unrelated and the examinations always so, it was unnecessary for the student to do any thinking about the course in relation to other courses. It was unfair for a teacher to assume in an examination knowledge gained in another subject. This game was not hard to beat, and so the bright and restless student naturally turned to one more stimulating and challenging—those highly organized extra-curricular ac-

tivities that have characterized the American institution of higher learning. The college retaliated by requiring attendance at classes. For some reason or other (probably it was connected with the difficulty of dealing with large numbers) the college also set minimum time requirements. The student either had to stay in college a certain period or had to pay extra if he wished to do extra work. Additional obstacles were thus placed in the way of excessive use of the mind.

THESSE regulations affected the deliberate student as well as the brilliant one. The slow but substantial citizen had to adjust himself to his new environment with a fair degree of rapidity or find himself on probation or perhaps expelled. The system was made for the average student; it had to be. But both the brilliant and the slower student of solid worth suffered from it, and I have been unable to think of any compensatory advantage which the average individual secured. The University of Chicago decided two years ago that it did not like this system. It decided to change the system. And what is more startling in academic life, it actually did so.

In the first place, it determined that it would try to give a good general education. It, therefore, created a new college, having jurisdiction over the first two years. The object of that college is to try to find out what a general education ought to be. The members of the faculty of that college are persons who are interested in that problem. They have completely reorganized the curriculum, and have developed four courses in the fields of

the social sciences, the biological sciences, the physical sciences, and the humanities, with a view to presenting the principal ideas in the four major fields of learning as the basis for a general education.

Even in this college the students are not required to attend classes. Even here there are no arbitrary time requirements. Even here credits are abolished; even here there are no course examinations. One quarter after he has appeared for the first time on our campus the student may present himself for the general examinations covering the whole college course, which is expected to take the ordinary student two years. If he passes these examinations, he may receive the college certificate, and may proceed either to try to find a job or go into one of the upper divisions. If he fails in these examinations he may take them again; and he may repeat this process as often as he likes, unless or until he becomes a public nuisance. The general examinations alone, not credits, determine his progress.

The general examinations which test the acquisition of a general education are not given or graded by the teachers who have taught the courses. They are administered by an independent Board of Examinations which has a large technical staff. The purpose of this Board is not merely to administer examinations; it is to study the various kinds of tests and experiment with new ones. By creating it we make clear our belief that the examining function is not simply an incident of the teaching function, but is a central problem by itself that demands the best attention we can give it.

In the same way we are studying the problem of educational and vocational guidance. This question has long been regarded as one that any teacher could answer. But under the Chicago plan a dean of students has charge of the whole group in Arts, Literature, and Science. His staff is engaged not alone in trying to give the best advice in the best way, but also in trying to develop new ideas and new methods. Fortunately, the inauguration of the new plan coincided with the opening of the residence halls for men, where the dean of students is conducting some promising experiments in integrating a housing project with an educational program.

IGNORE here the changes which the new plan has produced in administration, research, and advanced study. For the sake of brevity I shall merely relate that which we have learned about undergraduate education in one year since we smashed the system. In the first place, we have learned about students. We have learned that students have courage. When we entered upon the new plan I was convinced that our enrollment would suffer materially. We were proposing an experiment. I was sure that all but the most brilliant or eccentric high-school graduates would be frightened away. Instead, we had more applications for entrance last year than ever before, and this year we had more than last.

We have learned, too, that the program appeals to the superior student. For four years up to last year our Freshmen had scored 187 on the Na-

tional Psychological Test given to Freshmen in 153 colleges. Last year the new-plan group scored 202, and the University moved from tenth to fourth place in the national ranking. This year's Freshmen have jumped from 202 to 219.

We have learned also that students have independence. Printed syllabi or outlines of every course are available to all students. Sample examinations are placed in the hands of those who want them. As a result the independent student may if he wishes prepare himself for examinations without attending classes. Thirty-nine Freshmen in the past year presented themselves for examinations in subjects which they studied by themselves, without benefit of instruction. They passed, and passed with an average higher than the general average of the class.

We have learned, too, that students are self-respecting. Many educational people predicted that horrid consequences would ensue from the unheard-of freedom we were giving Freshmen. As a matter of fact, we had less wreckage than we have ever had. There was no increase in our almost invisible disciplinary problem. Attendance in new-plan classes where it was not required was 1.3 per cent higher than in old-plan classes where it was required.

In the second place, we have learned a good deal about the curriculum and examinations. We have discovered that it is possible to get students excited about learning. The freshman and sophomore courses are designed to develop that excitement, to stimulate thinking, to present ideas,

rather than to cram the student full of information. We have drastically reduced laboratory work for students who do not intend to become scientists. Furthermore, we now have ready the first educational talking motion picture for college students. These will take the place of costly, time-consuming, and ineffective experiments in the sciences, and will have some influence on science teaching everywhere. We have learned that it is possible to draw up examinations that are really general and comprehensive, in the sense that they compel the student to think, to co-ordinate his information and the ideas he has acquired in his reading and his courses. But most important, we have learned that our examination system produces an absolutely unprecedented relation between the teacher and the student. Since the examinations are not given by the teachers who have taught the courses, we find that the student studies the subject instead of the teacher. And we have found, too, that the teacher actually helps the student to understand the subject, and that the student expects him to do so. When I was a student my idea was to get the best of the teacher. I had frequently more than a suspicion that the teacher's idea was to get the best of me. Now, at Chicago teacher and student join in a co-operative effort to beat the Board of Examinations.

Finally, we have learned something of the possible effect of educational ideas on the higher learning in America. On the one hand, our examinations and syllabi have been sent up and down the country for criticism. On the other hand, twenty-five hundred copies of the syllabi have been sold to educators outside the University. Presumably both sides have profited by the exchange. Since we believe that the great task of educational administration in America is to take the organization above off the neck of the organization below, we have so modified our entrance requirements as to permit the same freedom in the high school that we arrogate to ourselves.

And this, I venture to think, will be the most important consequence, if it has any consequences at all, of the new plan of the University of Chicago: it will be its influence on education throughout the country. It is an experiment. I hope it will always be one and that it will never solidify into a system. We have learned a little. We trust we shall learn more. If we do not learn what to do, perhaps we shall learn what not to do. The new plan means, therefore, that the University of Chicago, either as a model or as a horrible example, may sometime, perhaps, make some contribution to the higher learning in America.

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