

**THE HIGHER LEARNING IN
AMERICA: A MEMORANDUM
ON THE CONDUCT OF
UNIVERSITIES BY BUSINESS MEN**

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The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men by Thorstein Veblen

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BY
THORSTEIN VEBLEN



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PREFACE

It is something more than a dozen years since the following observations on American academic life were first assembled in written form. In the meantime changes of one kind and another have occurred, although not such as to alter the course of policy which has guided American universities. Lines of policy which were once considered to be tentative and provisional have since then passed into settled usage. This altered and more stable state of the subject matter has permitted a revision to avoid detailed documentation of matters that have become commonplace, with some resulting economy of space and argument. But, unhappily, revision and abridgment carries its own penalties, in the way of a more fragmentary presentation and a more repetitious conduct of the argument; so that it becomes necessary to bespeak a degree of indulgence on that ground.

Unhappily, this is not all that seems necessary to plead in extenuation of recurrent infirmities. Circumstances, chiefly of a personal incidence, have repeatedly delayed publication beyond what the run of events at large would have indicated as a propitious date; and the same circumstances have also enjoined a severer and more repressive curtailment in the available data. It may not be out of place, therefore, to indicate in the most summary fashion what has been the nature of these fortuitous hindrances.

In its earlier formulation, the argument necessarily drew largely on first-hand observation of the conduct of affairs at Chicago, under the administration of its first

president. As is well known, the first president's share in the management of the university was intimate, masterful and pervasive, in a very high degree; so much so that no secure line of demarcation could be drawn between the administration's policy and the president's personal ruling. It is true, salient features of academic policy which many observers at that time were inclined to credit to the proclivities of Chicago's first president, have in the later course of things proved to belong to the impersonal essence of the case; having been approved by the members of the craft, and so having passed into general usage without abatement. Yet, at the time, the share of the Great Pioneer in reshaping American academic policy could scarcely have been handled in a detached way, as an impersonal phenomenon of the unfolding historical sequence. The personal note was, in fact, very greatly in evidence.

And just then, presently, that Strong Man's life was brought to a close. So that it would unavoidably have seemed a breach of decorum to let these observations seek a hearing at that time, even after any practicable revision and excision which filial piety would enjoin. Under the rule of *Nihil nisi bonum*, there seemed nothing for it but a large reticence.

But swiftly, with the passage of years, events proved that much of what had appeared to be personal to the Great Pioneer was in reality intrinsic to the historical movement; so that the innovations presently lost their personal colour, and so went impersonally to augment the grand total of human achievement at large. Meanwhile general interest in the topic had nowise abated. Indeed, discussion of the academic situation was running high and in large volume, and much of it was taking such a turn — controversial, reproachful, hortatory, acrimonious

— that anything in the way of a temperate survey should presumably have been altogether timely.

But fortuitous circumstances again intervened, such as made it seem the part of insight and sobriety again to defer publication, until the colour of an irrelevant personal equation should again have had time to fade into the background. With the further passage of time, it is hoped that no fortuitous shadow will now cloud the issue in any such degree as to detract at all sensibly from whatever value this account of events and their causes may have.

This allusion to incidents which have no material bearing on the inquiry may tolerantly be allowed, as going to account for a sparing use of local information and, it is hoped, to extenuate a degree of reserve and reticence touching divers intimate details of executive policy.

It goes without saying that the many books, papers and addresses brought out on the academic situation have had their share in shaping the essay. More particularly have these various expressions of opinion and concern made it possible to take many things for granted, as matter of common notoriety, that would have appeared to require documentation a dozen or fifteen years ago, as lying at that time still in the field of surmise and forecast. Much, perhaps the greater bulk, of the printed matter issued on this head in the interval has, it is true, been of a hortatory or eloquently optimistic nature, and may therefore be left on one side. But the academic situation has also been receiving some considerable attention with a view to getting an insight into what is going forward. One and another of these writers to whom the present essay is in debt will be found referred to by name in the pages which more particularly lean on

their support; and the like is true for various utterances by men in authority that have been drawn on for illustrative expressions. But a narrow scrutiny would doubtless make it appear that the unacknowledged indebtedness greatly exceeds what so is accredited and accounted for. That such is the case must not be taken as showing intentional neglect of the due courtesies.

March 1916.

In the course of the past two years, while the manuscript has been lying in wait for the printer, a new situation has been forcing itself on the attention of men who continue to take an interest in the universities. On this provocation a few paragraphs have been added, at the end of the introductory chapter. Otherwise there appears to be no call for a change in the general argument, and it has not been disturbed since the earlier date, which is accordingly left as it stands.

June 1918.

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