

INSIDER VISIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY

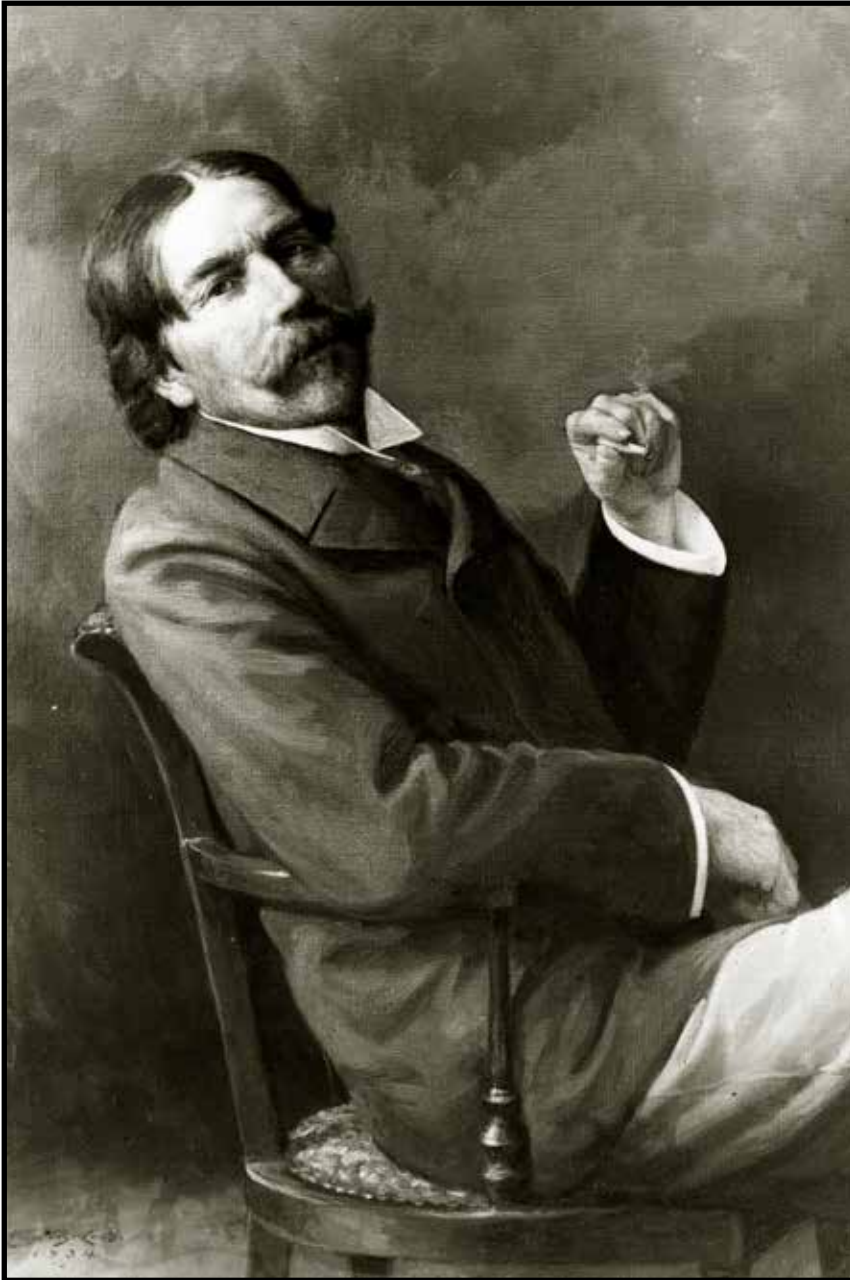
Thorstein Veblen,
William Benton,
and John Gunther

ON THE IDENTITY OF

the University
of Chicago



JOHN W. BOYER



Portrait of Thorstein Bunde Veblen, University of Chicago professor, by Edwin Burrage Child, 1934.

**INSIDER VISIONS OF THE
UNIVERSITY: THORSTEIN VEBLEN,
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A warm welcome to the new academic year. This past year was strange and unsettling, breaking continuities with our customary worlds and exposing us to a future that was profoundly unknowable and thus unnerving. Given that the pandemic has found ways to regenerate itself, we live in a crisis that is not yet over and that is likely to resonate for several years to come. We find ourselves dealing with volatility even more insidious, because it incites not only anxiety but the frustrations of vulnerability. I am especially grateful to you, the faculty, for your devoted and courageous service at a time when the vicissitudes of the virus often seemed to conspire against our best plans and most fervent hopes.

We meet during a formal presidential transition at the University of Chicago. The University's history can logically be structured by the history of its presidential administrations, because the authority of a university president can be striking if he or she chooses to exercise such power in bold and transformational ways. Yet presidential tenures are in other respects hostages to wider social and cultural trends and broader patterns

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of political transformation that also have a profound impact on the future of the University: William Rainey Harper's dependence on the vast but culturally unschooled private wealth of John D. Rockefeller and other capitalists during the late Gilded Age; Robert Maynard Hutchins having to deal with both the Depression and World War II; Edward H. Levi caught up in the firestorm of the Vietnam War and the recession of the early 1970s, etc. Such external encumbrances provide a robust and sometimes unruly "context" for the "text" of presidential initiatives.

The last year was filled with robust memory work about the kind of university this is, about what it stands for, about what differentiates it from our peers, and about its largest aspirations and ambitions. Each member of our community had an opportunity to share his or her views of the University of Chicago in the course of the presidential search. One of the most powerful features of this place is its capacity to generate evocative memories of its own mutable identity among the many members of our community and, thus, to inspire shared images of its singular nature.

Understandings of the University's identity today are closely and intimately connected to how it was perceived by its various publics across the decades and how it understood its mission in different historical epochs. Hence, on the eve of this important transition, I thought that it might be instructive to use my remarks today to explore some of the ways that actors within the University have presented an image of the institution to the world in the past decades, seen through the eyes of three fascinating commentators who wrote unusual books that captured key elements of the ever-shifting character of the University. Taken together, these texts enable us to recreate a three-dimensional image of the University as it manifested itself in the world in three sequential historical eras, each of which helped to shape the manifest institutional realities that we encounter today.

I. THORSTEIN VEBLEN 1900S–1910S

I begin with Thorstein Veblen, the author of *The Higher Learning in America*, published in 1918, but written in segments, beginning around 1904 and completed in 1916. The book originated as the final chapter of Veblen's *The Theory of Business Enterprise* but was cut before that book was published in 1904.¹

Veblen was born in 1857. He studied at Carleton College and Johns Hopkins and received his PhD from Yale in 1884, having specialized in philosophy and social science. In 1890 he then decided to attend Cornell University to work with J. Laurence Laughlin on a second doctorate in political economy. When Laughlin accepted Harper's offer of a full professorship and the chairship in Political Economy, he brought Veblen with him to Chicago. Veblen was first appointed in 1892 as a senior graduate fellow, then a reader in 1892, associate in 1894, and by 1896 an instructor earning \$1,500 annually. This was a common academic ladder in the early University, where many faculty went through a variety of contingent ranks prior to becoming full professors. Salary resentments were also not uncommon.² Veblen was not promoted to assistant professor of political economy until 1900 at a salary of \$2,000, which most likely nourished his feelings of exploitation that underlay some of the rhetoric in *The Higher Learning*. He taught a full load and served as the editor of the *Journal of Political Economy*, while authoring two noted works, *The Theory of the*

1. Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1918); idem, *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (New York: Scribner's, 1904).

2. Charles Camic, *Veblen: The Making of an Economist Who Unmade Economics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 272–73.

Leisure Class and *The Theory of Business Enterprise*.³ A shy and somewhat garrulous person, Veblen enjoyed the strong support of the powerful chair of the Department of Political Economy, J. Laurence Laughlin, even in the face of Harper's displeasure about Veblen's views of university governance. Harper had apparently seen a copy of the last chapter of *Business Enterprise*, which was highly critical about the imposition of corporate business practices on university governance, and became enraged. Harper's negativity also reflected the fact that Veblen actually knew Harper in ways that most junior faculty a hundred years later would find surprising. Given the small size of the faculty and University community before 1914, Harper and Veblen probably had more acquaintance than presidents and junior faculty today, which might help to explain Harper's anger.

Veblen peremptorily resigned in 1906 from Chicago to assume a position at Stanford. This decision came in the face of Harper having confronted Veblen in the fall of 1904 with accusations by Veblen's wife that Veblen was guilty of marital infidelity, which seem not to have been based on any plausible evidence but which greatly disturbed Harper's sense of propriety and convention. Veblen believed, however, that the real reason behind Harper's strident opposition to his remaining at Chicago was Harper's dislike of Veblen's essay that described the modern university as a business enterprise dominated by corporate executives.⁴ Thus, Veblen

3. Idem, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (London: Macmillan, 1899).

4. See Camic, *Veblen*, 341–42. The most detailed account of Veblen's personal marital affairs, based on a careful evaluation of surviving archival evidence, is Russell H. Bartley and Sylvia E. Bartley, "In Search of Thorstein Veblen: Further Inquiries into His Life and Work," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 11, no. 1 (1997): 129–73, www.jstor.org/stable/20019926.

began in January 1906 to cast about for other opportunities and was able to obtain an offer from David Starr Jordan at Stanford University in April 1906. The story of Veblen's semi-coerced departure subsequently became part of campus lore, although the details of Veblen's personal life remain obscure. William H. McNeill, who was a student in the College in the 1930s, later remembered that among Chicago undergraduates Veblen's case was seen as an instance of the University administration violating a faculty member's academic freedom.⁵

Veblen was not a professional journalist or publicist, but he was a powerful public intellectual. He was also a harsh and sometimes unfair critic of President Harper, but through his eyes we can see some of the most distinctive characteristics of the early University around 1900. In brilliantly attacking the model of the University that Harper had created, Veblen called attention to some of its most salient structural and cultural features.

Under William Rainey Harper's leadership the new University of Chicago was eager to establish a distinctive place for itself in the new national system of higher education in the United States. Harper saw the University as an early version of what Clark Kerr would later famously characterize as the "multiversity": an institution of many different parts, with different constituencies and missions, but serving the city, region, and nation as an instrument of cultural enlightenment and research acumen and also cultivating social prestige that could engender additional massive philanthropic support.⁶

Harper's self-appointed task was to create a plan sufficiently innovative yet pragmatic to enable him to generate the kind of enthusiasm and

5. McNeill to Boyer, June 7, 2003, College Archive.

6. See Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

acclaim needed to attract leading scholars and highly intelligent students to a yet untested enterprise. Harper's vision was bold in its capacious goal of encompassing all sectors of society, including adult students and nontraditional learners, with the University functioning as a central station of ideas and cultural impulses, including but surpassing on-campus teaching and research. Harper thought of his plan as nothing less than a revolution in American higher education. He assured Henry Morehouse, "I have a plan for the organization of the University which will revolutionize College and University work in this country. It is 'bran splinter new', and yet as solid as the ancient hills."⁷

The first installment of the plan was issued as the *Official Bulletin No. 1*, January 1891, even before Harper had officially accepted the presidency.⁸ Harper conceived of a university encompassing undergraduate and graduate instruction and supporting an aggressive program of original research. The "work of the University" would encompass the University proper, including academies; several undergraduate colleges (including

7. Harper to Morehouse, September 22, 1890, box 1, folder 11, University of Chicago Founders' Correspondence, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. (All archival sources are from this collection, unless otherwise noted.) Morehouse, a prominent Baptist minister, "played a decisive role" in the creation of the University of Chicago. See John W. Boyer, *"Not as a Thing for the Moment, but for All Time": The University of Chicago and Its Histories*, Occasional Papers on Higher Education 20 (Chicago: The College of the University of Chicago, 2010), 117–41, here 120.

8. *The University of Chicago. Chicago, Illinois. Official Bulletin, No. 1* (January 1891), 6. The plan was presented to the full Board of Trustees on December 15, 1890, having been earlier approved by the board's Committee on Organization and Faculties. On December 26, 1890, the plan was officially adopted, and on December 27, 1890, the board decided to issue the plan in a series of bulletins, the first to be published in January 1891. For a good overview of the plan, see Daniel Meyer, "The Chicago Faculty and the Ideal University, 1891–1929" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1994), 66–80.

one for business and practical affairs); affiliated colleges elsewhere in the city and the nation; and graduate schools (both arts and sciences and divinity), with the creation of a law school, a medical school, a school of engineering, and schools of pedagogy, fine art, and music to be organized as soon as reasonably possible. Undergraduate instruction would be evenly divided between the first two years, termed "Academic," and the second two years, which were designated "University." The Academic program for younger undergraduates was marked by prescribed curricular distribution requirements, whereas in the University years third- and fourth-year students would have more elective opportunities as well as chances to specialize in specific disciplinary research areas.⁹

In addition to the University proper, the University-Extension Work would offer evening courses for adults in various locations around Chicago; correspondence courses for students "residing in parts of the country whose circumstances do not permit them to reside at an institution of learning during all of the year"; a program of public lectures, also in Chicago; and special courses in the study of the Bible, to be organized by University instructors "at times which shall not conflict with University work." Finally, the University Publication Work would include the printing and publishing of books authored or edited by the faculty and of journals or reviews also edited by members of the University faculty.

9. This scheme may have reflected in part Harper's local experience at Yale, which had a curriculum in the 1880s that involved high levels of compulsion in the first two years, followed by significantly enhanced elective opportunities in the second two years. See George W. Pierson, *Yale College: An Educational History 1871–1921* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 73–94, 708. George Goodspeed reported to Thomas Goodspeed in May 1890, "I am surprised at his clear grasp of great university problems. He has been closely studying Yale for the past year." Letter, May 26, 1890, box 1, folder 10, University of Chicago Founders' Correspondence.

Equally revolutionary were the general regulations that would manage the pace and flow of academic work. The University would be organized into four equal academic terms, or quarters, each lasting twelve weeks, and each quarter would be in turn divided into two six-week segments. This would permit the institution to operate year-round and also allow students to begin their degree programs at any time of the year and graduate as quickly as they desired. Faculty, too, gained in flexibility since they were granted one quarter off with pay as a research leave and could teach extra courses to gain additional credits for more sabbatical time. Courses were divided between majors (which met for ten hours a week for six weeks, or five hours a week for twelve weeks) and minors (which met for five hours a week for twelve weeks). Initially, Harper thought that each student might take one major and one minor each six-week segment, thus allowing for in-depth learning and avoiding the superficiality of coverage that Harper despised. Very soon, however, the system evolved into students taking three majors over twelve weeks as a normal quarter's work.

The rhetorical structure governing the whole arrangement was highly systemized. Each part was assumed to be an integral part of a larger whole—from high schools to undergraduate colleges to professional and graduate schools; from part-time courses taught by graduates of such advanced units for working adults to correspondence courses for working adults who did not live near a college or university; to a very ambitious publication system to disseminate the scholarly research of the faculty across the nation and around the world. As an ensemble, the logic was breathtaking, especially since the new university was to be created all at once, in a fully unified format, the parts of which would reinforce or at least relate to each other. The logic of Harper's plan operated on two distinctive, but convergent, levels. Each of the elements was intrinsically related to all of the other parts of the plan within the organizational

machinery of the University. But each element also had far-reaching national policy implications for improving American higher education in more general terms. The University's unity of culture and action—what Edward H. Levi would later refer to as the University's oneness—was defined by the systematic self-understanding and the structural logic of the plan itself. Harper made it conceptually and organizationally possible for the University to imagine itself as a unified whole, or as Levi put it, a “complete university.”¹⁰

Yet Harper's vision also appeared to be slightly ostentatious, seeking fame and wanting to be “noted” in terms of its civic prominence, which meant perforce cultivating the patronage of wealthy businessmen and socially prominent families. On the academic side a search for instantaneous historic distinction was apparent with Harper's extensive publication program for the University (quarterly calendars, yearly catalogues, decennial histories, the like of which none of our peer universities bothered to produce), and the University's grand neo-Gothic architecture gave the University a special dignity and conveyed imaginary “ancient” roots. At the same time, Harper cultivated the public with big-time sports entertainment. The boundary between this new institution and the rest of civil society, as dominated by commercial elites and not by the federal government, might be more porous than we would today feel comfortable with. Harper's peregrinations also attracted heavy attention by the local and national press, and over time Harper came to have a loathing for the vagaries of journalistic practice. He wrote to a friend in 1905 that he made “it a rule never to talk with a reporter on subjects relating to the University as a whole, for in every case the result is injurious. ... It is

10. Edward H. Levi, “The Critical Spirit,” *University of Chicago Magazine*, October 1965, 2–5, campub.lib.uchicago.edu/view/?docId=mvol-0002-0058-0001#page.

absolutely unsafe to deal with these men.”¹¹ Similarly, Harper was often troubled by newspaper articles that exaggerated or distorted the University’s fundraising efforts.

In 1956 the historian Richard Storr commented on Harper’s habits of institutional aggrandizement:

Because he was primarily concerned as first President with the task of bringing into existence something which did not exist, in creating confidence in an institution which had no record, good or bad, Harper had to work in ways foreign to scholarship. He dealt in eventualities and prospects rather than in facts and verifiable conditions. In a sense he had to sell today what could have solid worth only tomorrow or the day after. As in the case with men who have such occupations, Harper had to be a salesman and to some extent a showman. In his own language, he had to bluff on occasion. This side of his activity disturbed at least one or two men just as it amused the public immensely.¹²

In my view what Harper achieved was both extraordinary and astonishing. Harper engendered a sense of visionary movement while also constructing a record of pragmatic achievement. His successes came from a peculiar mixture of scholarly genius, civic courage, and obliviousness to risk. The range of his interventions could never be duplicated today when universities are shaped by overlapping regimes of extensive governmental regulations, densely vested interests of senior faculty buoyed by international market-

11. Harper to W. D. MacClintock, June 8, 1905, box 63, folder 4, Office of the President, Harper, Judson, and Burton Administrations 1869–1925.

12. Richard J. Storr, “From the Old Testament to the New University,” alumni talk, June 2, 1956, 9, box 18, folder 3, William Rainey Harper Papers.

based prestige, and media faintheartedness and financial timidity on the part of trustee boards, ordered through layers of thick managerial structures within the universities themselves.

Thorstein Veblen did not share my positive judgment of Harper. For Veblen, Harper represented the commercialization and trivialization of higher education. His portrayal of Harper in *The Higher Learning in America* is of a man who began as a scholar but whose love of learning was overpowered by his passion for making a public mark as an institution builder.¹³ Veblen’s account of Chicago and of Harper in *The Higher Learning* was indirect but unmistakable. He never explicitly mentioned the man or the institution by name in the text (and he was only a bit more direct in a preface written some years later). Veblen instead used the clandestine presence of Harper throughout the book to make a general argument about the state of American higher education and the effect on it of the businessmen who acted as founders of the new universities in the late nineteenth century.

In his critique of Harper’s model Veblen began with the assumption that the higher learning amounted to the generation of technical scholarly knowledge, stressing that the preeminence of the “intellectual enterprise” in the form of “disinterested learning” had come to function in powerful and suggestive ways in late nineteenth-century modern society, replacing the church or state or private cultural standards and practices as a locus of public loyalty and legitimacy (44).¹⁴ At the same time the political and ecclesiastical realms, which formerly dominated the schools and universities “in shaping of academic life,” were displaced by the power of business:

13. See Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men*, annotated ed., ed. Richard F. Teichgraber III (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

14. In-text page citations refer to the Teichgraber edition.

“The place in men’s esteem once filled by church and state is now held by pecuniary traffic, business enterprise. So that the graver issues of academic policy which now tax the discretion of the directive powers, reduce themselves in the main to a question of the claims of science and scholarship on the one hand and those of business principles and pecuniary gain on the other hand” (68).

This business mentality was manifest first in what Veblen called the “governing boards,” boards of trustees who by their very nature were inclined to pander to popular sentiments related to the external impact of the universities on everyday life (79–80). Unlike in Europe, where universities were state institutions with considerable autonomy because of the civil service status of their senior faculty, in America laypersons, who were neither state officials nor research academics, legally owned universities in their role as trustees. In the past these laypersons had been clerics or clerical leaders, but in Veblen’s time the typical trustee was a successful businessman. Yet boards dominated by businessmen had little ability to direct or shape the university, aside from controlling the budget and helping to pay its bills, and Veblen thought them useless because of their “bootless meddling with academic matters which they do not understand” (80). Their real power lay in their ability to hire professional administrators—men who were plausible speakers with the “a large gift of assurance, a businesslike ‘educator’ or clergyman, some urbane pillar of society, some astute veteran of the scientific demimonde, will meet all reasonable requirements. Scholarship is not barred, of course, though it is commonly the quasi-scholarship of the popular raconteur” (94). In other words, in Veblen’s famous phrase, the “captains of erudition” (100) were “new incumbents ... selected primarily with a view to give the direction of academic policy and administration of a more businesslike character” (90).

The purposes of the new universities included, first, the relentless pursuit of notoriety and prestige in order to serve the institution’s competitive purpose, which was to enroll students in its schools, and, second, a desire to maintain a good public reputation even at the expense of scholarly quality. The following rather abstract, but nevertheless vivid and hostile account of Harper as an embodiment of such a “captain of erudition” is evident in this sample of Veblen’s rhetoric:

Among the indispensable general qualifications [for university leadership] therefore will be a “businesslike” facility in the management of affairs, an engaging address and fluent command of language before a popular audience, and what is called “optimism,”—a serene and voluble loyalty to the current conventionalities and a conspicuously profound conviction that all things are working out for good, except for such untoward details as do not work to the vested advantage of the well-to-do businessmen under the established law and order (206).

In both enterprises alike [Stanford and Chicago] the discretionary heads so placed in control had been selected by individual business men of the untutored sort, and were vested with plenary powers. Under pressure of circumstances, in both cases alike, the policy of forceful initiative and innovation, with which both alike entered on the enterprise, presently yielded to the ubiquitous craving for statistical magnitude and the consequent felt need of conciliatory publicity; until presently the ulterior object was both lost in the shadow of these immediate and urgent maneuvers of expediency, and it became the rule of policy to stick at nothing but appearances (220).

Yet, because the captains of erudition presided over institutions devoted to

the higher learning, their task was all the more complex because they understood that senior faculty needed academic independence and volition as well as material support, all the while being expected to produce tangible evidence of their own market worth. Faculty were, in fact, employees “hired to render certain services and turn out certain scheduled vendible results” (99). In recruiting other administrators to do their bidding, presidents demanded a “ready versatility of convictions” and a “staunch loyalty to their bread.” Presidents had virtual academic life and death powers over the faculty. Hence did a president have to stress “pomp and circumstance” not only for modest traditional purposes but to show that the “university under his management is a highly successful going concern” (95).

Teaching was incidental for Veblen, not in its intrinsic importance to society, which he recognized, but in its limited role within the larger ambient culture of the University as a competitive business. The instruction of undergraduates could be perfunctory and merely passable, given that academic standards could not be universally enforced in the presence of a “contingent of genteel students whose need of an honorable discharge is greater than their love of knowledge” (107). It was necessary “to engage in tawdry exhibition of quasi-academic feats and a somewhat livelier parade of academic splendor and magnitude than might otherwise be to the taste of such a body of scholars and scientists” (110). Both students and the business elites supporting the university also came to need publicity that was based on “marketable illusions” (130). Universities might thus engage in “meretricious showing of magnitude and erudition” (110) and in student activities, fraternities (which Veblen saw as sites for “the elaboration of puerile irregularities of adolescence”), clubs, athletics, and “similar devices of politely blameless dissipation” (118, 120).

Veblen did not deny the legitimacy of administrative systems to support students or to encourage training young people in the “ritual of decorum”

(120) but argued that such interventions had nothing to do with the core mission of a real university. Further, because of their intrinsic financial and cultural costs, they lowered the scholarly ideals of the university by diverting resources away from the faculty and lured college students away from research careers and toward careers in “business and sportsmanship” (127). In Veblen’s critique, Harper had turned the University into a business that emphasized the pleasures of student life, public sports as mass amusement, adult education, professional schools, embarrassing meretricious advertising, and massive undergraduate instruction, along with cheap marketing that pandered to the public’s narcissisms, all of which “submerged” the real purpose of the university. Harper did this because all businesses need to cater to a wide range of consumers, and each of these (in Veblen’s mind) extraneous constituencies afforded more public recognition and monetary value to the University. The public in turn demanded more “practical” efficiency from learning systems, because of the “strain of the price system and the necessities of competitive earning and spending” (64). Hence the more business-like the university, the less it was directed toward fundamental scholarship on the part of the faculty as its real and ultimate goal.

Veblen’s portrait was distorted, neglecting the enormous educational impact that the early University had on its students and the important faculty resources that Harper easily assembled. Veblen overemphasized the effectiveness of Harper’s managerial approach. By the 1920s it became apparent that the administrative structure of the University was too decentralized and inefficient, with too many decisions directed to the top, leading to the radical organizational reforms creating the divisions and the College undertaken in 1930–31. Hence, the early years were functionally very nonmanagerial and hardly constituted a ruthless corporate enterprise. Veblen vastly underestimated the academic standards

routinely used for undergraduate instruction, and his portrait of the faculty as employees was overdrawn as well. So too was his derision about the president's own scholarly acumen, in that Harper was himself an active scholar throughout his career, even after assuming the presidency of Chicago. Even if some faculty (including Laughlin, who was sensitive about the issue of Harper's sometimes imperious behavior) may have secretly agreed with Veblen's strictures against the dangers of presidential domination, they worked gladly and proudly at the new University nonetheless. Most importantly, Veblen's purist definition of the University, and his disdain for student support systems, was actually much more in the self-image of Chicago than Veblen was prepared to admit.

Still, in spite of tenor of *The Higher Learning* as that of a spurned former employee writing with glibness and anger, Veblen's definition of a university as the shrine of the higher learning, disdainful of external commitments and critical of a massive role in undergraduate learning, was a protean ideal that later critics could borrow selectively, both in sanctioning the isolation of the university from the messiness of American life and in rejecting outside influences in the conduct of its affairs. He also highlighted the early and formative power of executive leadership and the University's deep dependence on private philanthropy. Given that Rockefellers were abstemious and did not exert corporate pressure on the administrative leaders of Chicago, the consequences were not as doom ridden as Veblen imagined, but it is essential to remember that the early University as a solely private enterprise was profoundly indebted not to government support of any kind but to the elites of civil society.

Veblen was not the only critic of this process. Max Weber immediately picked up on the more market-oriented and entrepreneurial nature of US universities in his comparison between German and US universities. In Weber's mind they were much more like large industrial or commercial

business corporations than their German counterparts.¹⁵ Nor was Harper himself averse to admitting the need for efficiency in running a university. In a 1905 essay, "The Business Side of a University," Harper wrote with evident relish about the multiple tasks and complex but efficient administrative structures characteristic of Chicago. Yet for Veblen, such enthusiasm was only further evidence of a boyish devotion to bustling efficiency and an indiscriminate pursuit of prestigious enterprises no matter what their cost to the true scholarly purpose of the university.¹⁶

II. WILLIAM BENTON 1930s–1940s

My second writer is William B. Benton, representing the 1930s and 1940s in his *The University of Chicago's Public Relations*.¹⁷ In the aftermath of the Depression and the intellectual revolution that Robert Maynard Hutchins launched, the University found itself in defensive position vis-à-vis the civic elites so carefully cultivated by Harper because of its opposition against early Red scares and its efforts to project (and explain) a more ardent form of intellectualism, freedom of the press and of speech, and intellectual purity and open-ended scientific reasoning. It was as if the University decided to acknowledge some of Veblen's concerns and sought

15. Max Weber, *On Universities: The Power of the State and the Dignity of the Academic Calling in Imperial Germany*, trans. and ed. Edward Shils (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 25.

16. William Rainey Harper, "The Business Side of a University," in *The Trend in Higher Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1905), 161–85.

17. William B. Benton, *The University of Chicago's Public Relations* (Chicago: printed by the author, 1937).



William Benton, vice president of the University of Chicago and US senator from Connecticut.

to repudiate the “showman” qualities that might have been ascribed to Harper (although Hutchins himself was a far more effective public intellectual than Harper had ever been). In fact, Hutchins was himself an admirer of Veblen and his emphatic anti-vocationalism, to the point that his hostility against any utilitarian notion of the University may have been influenced by his reading of Veblen. All this was a repudiation of Harper’s propensity for the solicitous and prudential cultivation of Chicago and New York business elites. Instead of projecting the identity of a corporate-supported, business-like University, Hutchins’s University, in its advocacy of academic freedom and in its reorientation of undergraduate education away from Greek life and big-time sports, now seemed to embrace the opposite image of curricular radicalism and social avant-gardism with a slightly left-wing tinge. The tensions that Hutchins experienced with some members of the Board of Trustees over the practice of academic freedom confirmed that his was a new style of presidential leadership, one less beholden to corporate sensibilities.

Hutchins articulated a point of view about liberal education that was eloquent and vital. He insisted that the University recruit the best and most able students and that they be encouraged to view their education as anti-vocationalist. His was an important voice in debates of the 1930s and 1940s about the mission of American colleges, with a strong commitment to liberal education for life. Hutchins opposed what he called “an education based on credentialism and careerism.” This vision was driven by a conviction that the alternative was truly dangerous: a university without a guiding purpose, forever lobbied by commercial and specialized interests and forever neglecting the intellectual for the sake of the useful. Such a university might claim that it was devoted to learning and research, but Hutchins thought that in practice it would simply do the bidding of professions, corporations, and governments, sacrificing culture to the main

chance. At the same time, we need to remember that almost all of the students in the College in the 1930s wanted professional careers of some sort, and Hutchins knew this, so this kind of rhetoric was both excessive and unduly abstruse, and Hutchins certainly knew this as well.

Hutchins's rise to prominence as a pundit defending liberal education in the early 1930s, via his books on *The Higher Learning in America* (a title most likely gesturing to Veblen) and *No Friendly Voice*, was further amplified by his courageous defense of academic freedom during a decade when such views were routinely scorned in many sectors of American society.¹⁸ It might be strange to see Hutchins's defensive stance as a "positive" contribution to the University's development, but that is exactly what it was, for Hutchins's rigor on this issue reinforced in deeply evocative ways Chicago's identity and reputation as a place for serious, independently minded students and faculty whose educational and research programs demanded that the intellectual and cultural autonomy of the faculty and students be respected. Yet his defenses of academic freedom often grated on conservative elites. The Chicago business leader Albert Sprague told Harold Swift that Hutchins's "attitude in connection with some civic matters creates a very unfavorable impression with a large number of citizens and that he is not popular with me and some of my friends."¹⁹ In his private papers Harold Swift kept a list of prominent Chicagoans

18. "Though not directly influenced by Veblen, Hutchins's book on the Higher Learning bows to Veblen's title, and his hatred of vocationalism matches Veblen's own." David Riesman, *Thorstein Veblen: A Critical Interpretation* (New York: Scribner's, 1953), 102; Robert Maynard Hutchins, *No Friendly Voice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936).

19. See the memo on Swift's conversation with A. A. Sprague, July 17, 1933, and a second memo, reporting a conversation with an unnamed trustee, also July 17, 1933, box 49, folder 4, Harold Swift Papers.

alienated from the University of Chicago, "chiefly in connection with Hutchins's speeches or socialism, or both."²⁰

If Hutchins was the bane of some on his own board, he soon became a hero for academics and foundation officials around the country.²¹ Yet the negative attitudes of some trustees reflected larger currents among wealthy elites in Chicago. A survey of local opinion in the city undertaken by the John Price Jones Corporation in April 1936 in preparation for a new capital campaign indicated that the University projected discordant images. When the authors interviewed twenty-two leading citizens who were "generally representative of that section of the public on which the University must depend for support if it is to raise a considerable amount of money locally," they found that while most affirmed the high intellectual standing and prestige of the University, many were also critical of its teaching "radicalism." The authors concluded, among other things, that "there is a widespread feeling that certain elements within the University are unjustifiably stirring up social discontent, and that the University itself has not been sufficiently diligent in controlling this," that "the giving public is not sufficiently sold on the case for academic freedom," that "although public opinion concerning him is improving, there is a widespread feeling in Chicago that the President is a 'dangerous independent' thinker who speaks with 'no friendly voice' and with a flippant disregard for the established order," and that "adverse public opinion already appears to have influenced adversely the entrance of high school students into the

20. Memo, November 25, 1932, box 49, folder 4, Harold Swift Papers.

21. This is clear in the many letters that Hutchins received after his radio address in April 1935 and after his convocation address in June 1935, both in defense of academic freedom. See Robert Maynard Hutchins, "Radio Address, April 18, 1935," in *No Friendly Voice*, 5–11; idem, "To the Graduating Class, 1935," in *No Friendly Voice*, 1–4.



Robert M. Hutchins, University of Chicago president (left), with Frederic C. Woodward, University vice president, and William Benton, publisher, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (right).

University and to have retarded recovery of giving.” At the same time, the authors found that the recent controversy involving Charles Walgreen had exactly the opposite effect on the students and the alumni: “The general feeling on the Campus was that alumni, students, and faculty were united in defense of the University by this attack as they had never been before.”²²

In essence what Hutchins did was to prove Veblen wrong in his assessment of the realm of undergraduate education, while affirming Veblen’s skepticism about student-life foibles and extraneous activities of “blameless dissipation.” It was not accidental that under Hutchins big-time athletics fell out of favor and Greek life was nearly destroyed, but the academic reputation of the undergraduate programs was completely transformed to

22. “Survey, Analysis, and Plan of Fund-raising for the University of Chicago,” 49, 57, 76–77, box 7, folder 20, University Development Campaigns; for the Walgreen’s affair, see John W. Boyer, *Academic Freedom and the Modern University: The Experience of the University of Chicago*, Occasional Papers on Higher Education 10 (Chicago: The College of the University of Chicago, 2003), 23–66.

make them more congenial to the ideals of the higher learning. Yet changes in the College to make it more scholarly created a still more complex public relations challenge, since as Benton soon realized, a highly intellectual college was neither typical nor easily understandable in the broader reaches of American society, even among those who themselves had attended a college or university in their youth. The Hutchins College of the years 1942 to 1954 became a classic experiment in this vein, and its collapse in the mid 1950s, which damaged the demographic and financial welfare of the University severely, proved that an all-general education college devoted *only* to intellectual rigor and with little or no attention to student welfare would not be welcomed or even tolerated by most talented college-going young people and their parents.

William Benton had been a classmate of Hutchins at Yale in 1920 and 1921. He worked for several New York advertising firms and in 1929 created his own company, Benton and Bowles, which specialized in creative advertising on the new medium of national radio. He later became the owner and publisher of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1943 and was instrumental in establishing the Voice of America in 1945. Hutchins visited Benton in April 1936 with the idea that he join the University as a new administrative secretary to improve the institution’s public outreach and to explore new modes of communication.²³ A delegation of trustees led by Harold Swift issued a similar invitation a month later, and while he rejected the idea of a permanent job, Benton agreed to come to campus and prepare a report on the University’s public relations problems.

Benton subsequently described Hutchins’s situation in a letter to his mother, writing that “the University is widely misunderstood, associated with radicalism and communism, and needs proper interpretation to the

23. Sidney Hyman, *The Lives of William Benton* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 158–65.

public. This is job #1, and is a very broad one because the proper interpretation revolves to such a major degree around the activities of Hutchins himself, with whom I would have to work very closely sort of as a behind-the-scenes publicity man, advisor, ghost writer, and so on. . . . Only against the proper public understanding, and with this publicity work as a background, is it possible for the University to raise funds for endowment or to cover operating expenses.”²⁴

At Hutchins’s invitation Benton agreed to visit the University in late 1936, spending six weeks on campus to survey the public relations’ conundrums facing Chicago and to propose some solutions. What began as a short survey report ended up in a book-length manuscript in fifty copies that Benton privately printed and distributed to the trustees on a confidential basis. The book later became part of the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center and is now available to anyone who wishes to examine the anxieties and aspirations of University authorities in the late 1930s and 1940s.

Benton was proud of the uniqueness of his book; he averred that “a report such as this, to my knowledge, has never before been written; surely never before for any university.” Benton interviewed many administrators, faculty members, and trustees and launched a private survey on the need for better public relations. The premise of the book was that the University had fundamental problems that were harming its philanthropic efforts and its general reputation in the local and national community. Benton acknowledged the problems Chicago had with wealthy donors, but also insisted that the general public was not to be underestimated and that public sentiment about the university should also be a matter of serious concern for University leaders.

24. Benton to Elma Benton, June 1, 1936, box 8, folder 7, William Benton Papers.

As an ad man, Benton was interested in those features that differentiated Chicago, that made it unique, and thus might make it easy to “sell” to several and diverse audiences. Benton found a university that was particularly distinctive and a president who was charismatic, but deeply controversial. He admitted that Chicago “is not today a university as the public thinks of universities, nor is it a college as the public thinks of colleges” (14).²⁵ Public amusement as an integrative strategy was gone. Even in 1937, two years before the University pulled out of the Big Ten, Benton ruefully observed that “football at the University of Chicago doesn’t offer a very glowing opportunity at present” (42). For Benton the University’s emphasis on highly intellectual teaching not of facts or of the ways of amusement but of fundamental principles was a distinctive and at first blush an attractive feature, which Benton considered to be a “chimera-like goal of the university,” but he also acknowledged that “these definitions are too intellectual for public relations: they are grasped in their full implications only by a few. They do not dramatize the university sufficiently in terms of the needs of each and every individual in society” (12). Hence, Benton tried to broaden the mission of the university beyond “the highest standards of teaching and learning” to emphasize the outcomes that such practices had on civil society, namely, “to contribute through both teaching and research to the welfare of mankind, to the happiness of man’s mind and to the health of his body, to a richer, fuller more abundant life” (17). Thus did Benton seek to move the University away from a Veblenesque dedication to the fulsomeness of the intellectual life to stress its positive impact on wide reaches of society, with the University becoming a source of joy, good health, and social progress.

Benton insisted that many of the problems facing Chicago resulted

25. Benton, *The University of Chicago’s Public Relations*.

from the civic economic elites of the city of Chicago being ignorant of the real functions of a real university (19). This ignorance was “widespread” and “profound” in scope. Beyond the hyper intellectualism of the institution, which was after all the creation of the early faculty, including the young Thorstein Veblen, Benton also pondered the personality of his friend, Robert Maynard Hutchins. Much of the book focused on the public role and image of Hutchins, whom Benton admired greatly but who was the source of many of the University’s communication dilemmas. On the basis of numerous interviews with civic leaders, University trustees, and staff Benton found that Hutchins had a powerful impact on the way in which the outside world viewed the University, and often in problematic ways. Hutchins was accused of radicalism, allowing professors to teach “subversive doctrines” and overemphasizing communism, in a pink “New Dealish” way. He was also accused of fostering a bad environment for students, with “too much emphasis on book learning” and too high a set of academic requirements, resulting in the accusation that “there are too many Jews, too many of the big-browed type, too many neurotics and bookworms.” Finally, Hutchins sympathized with radical professors, was unsympathetic toward external complaints, and showed too little regard for venerable collegiate traditions (21).

Benton’s book offered an extensive and extended list of interventions to try to persuade external critics that the University had seen its deficiencies and was prepared to do something about them. These included mobilizing the trustees to use their personal networks to influence key civic leaders to think more favorably about the University; the development of favorable news stories, in print and on radio, about the University²⁶; the initiation of

26. Faculty members gave radio talks beginning in 1926. See University of Chicago Office of Public Relations Records, 1924–1926, box 3, folders 1–19. A *Faculty Round Table* radio series had started in 1931 and was broadcast by NBC in 1933.

more public-facing activities by the University to prove its practical impact on the life of the city and state; training students for government service with special scholarships; committing the University to work with the State of Illinois to develop new methods to improve public schooling in the State; having senior faculty (properly briefed and trained) deliver stirring talks on their scientific discoveries; mobilizing students to create and articulate a new “campus spirit” and to tell stories about student successes; making interventions to make the campus more “personal” for students and then communicating that success to the public via attractive stories; more systematic efforts to engage the alumni and counteract the fact that “Chicago has no class spirit”; developing a University broadcast council to support creative new radio interventions; and subsidizing a program of educational films that might be used in schools and college, thus establishing the University as a leader in modern pedagogical technology.

For Hutchins himself Benton had an equally extensive set of recommendations: the expansion of the radio program, *Faculty Round Table*, first created in 1931, to include regular sessions where Hutchins would discuss controversial issues with leading experts on national radio; special radio broadcasts by Hutchins on key public issues like war and peace; magazine articles for major journals like the *Saturday Evening Post* on such topics as the future of the youth of America; a series of public addresses before key civic organizations like the National Association of Manufacturers, the American Newspaper Association, and the American Bar Association on key public issues, thereby demonstrating both his visibility and accessibility to nonacademic elites who influenced public opinion; the strategic cultivation of journalists and editors to encourage friendly stories; a strategic plan to engage civic elites (one critic told Benton that Hutchins was not really visible and that the elites were “drifting to Northwestern and shouldn’t be permitted to do this because actually there is no

comparison between the two institutions”); the hiring of more effective communications staff at the University, which Benton saw as involving a distinct set of professional skills, who would then advise Hutchins to avoid “all criticism of people with whom the University hopes to work”; and the generation of human-interest stories about Hutchins’s youth and his war record in World War I.

Benton highlighted the role of the president as a symbol and spokesman for the values and identity of the University. In Benton’s mind Hutchins had created a fascinating dilemma: his rhetoric of high intellectualism and the life of the mind reinforced the distinctive role that the University imagined for itself in American higher education, but it also tended to isolate the institution from American civil society and its most prominent supporters. Thus did Hutchins as president symbolize in his person a wider problem: the semantic and rhetorical disjunction of the new “intellectual” research university from civil society that only he could, if he so wished, ultimately resolve.

Yet beyond the foibles and brilliance of Hutchins’s rhetoric, and the University’s public relations challenges because of his wit, flippancy, and defense of educational and ideological “radicalisms,” Benton discovered a more powerful set of realities relating to the changing cultural substance of the University—to wit, the extensive and important role of the faculty by the 1930s in shaping the identity of the institution. Between Harper’s world and that of Hutchins’s lay thirty years of cultural and social development for the universities as national-professional institutions, the rise of major foundations that funded university-based scientific research on a peer evaluative basis, the enhanced prestige of the universities as a result of their war work in World War I, the emergence of “schools” of scientific thought, especially in the social sciences, that began to address chronic social issues, and the relative collapse of Central European universities who were (before 1914) the exemplars of scholarly distinction internationally.

Among the leading US universities faculty self-governance practices became more formal and more structured, making it increasingly difficult for university presidents to act unilaterally without consulting the senior faculty.²⁷ All of this led to a heightened role for the faculty, and especially the senior faculty, whose professional independence was seen as a powerful variable that could not be manipulated by university administrators. Warning those who wanted Hutchins to fire a few “red” professors to prove the University’s loyalty to capitalist principles, Benton insisted that “entrenched academic freedom” could not be “violated by the man who would head a great university. If the university President elects to violate it, he risks losing many of his best men; he cannot attract good new men; he loses his power to develop the kind of faculty through which, and only through which, a university can become great” (51–52). With the Depression the flow of massive private funding slowed, and the federal government had not yet involved itself as a hegemonic regulator and rule giver. This created a new political space for faculty professional expertise such as Charles Judd would advocate for the Department of Education at Chicago.²⁸

Hutchins’s perceived radicalism may have irritated his external critics, but ironically, by the 1930s, the University no longer “belonged” functionally to the president, notwithstanding the facile hopes of distressed commentators who wanted Hutchins to “do something” about the faculty; for it was now in a collective sense a robust community of mature scholars whose professional distinction created a new ambient image for the institution.

27. See Sheldon Rothblatt, “Clark Kerr: Two Voices,” in *idem.*, ed., *Clark Kerr’s World of Higher Education Reaches the 21st Century: Chapters in a Special History* (New York: Springer, 2012), 8.

28. See John W. Boyer, *Charles H. Judd, an Empire of Testing, and the “Science of Education” at the University of Chicago*, Occasional Papers on Higher Education 25 (Chicago: The College of the University of Chicago, 2019).

ution. Benton acknowledged this evolution when he created a new mission statement for Chicago and ended up with a six-point program (16–17) that stressed the role of the faculty above all else. Yet Benton also admitted (54) that most faculty members did not have the public rhetorical skills to be readily able to advance or defend a credible public image of the University to outside communities—this role fell to Hutchins as president.

Tensions between the identity of the University as represented by the faculty and the distinctiveness of the institution as articulated by the president continued throughout the remainder of Hutchins's presidency. Hutchins understood the faculty's need for respect in their role as the primary agent of scholarly legitimacy. Yet he was sufficiently authoritarian and opinionated to intervene in faculty searches for new senior faculty members, and he was skeptical of the capacity of the faculty for administrative and fiscal self-governance. Hutchins remained frustrated at the slow pace at which the University confronted needed institutional changes and saw it as his job to push the faculty and trustees forward to address challenges they might otherwise ignore or refuse to acknowledge. As he later put it to his biographer, George Dell,

You want somebody who is prepared to take the initiative and be responsible for making recommendations. Everything that I did at Chicago may be regarded as the reverse of what I'd been through at Yale. I sat for six years for the Yale Corporation and the President of the University [James Angell] never made a recommendation to the board. Not one. And they would say to him, well Mr. President what do you think? What is your recommendation? And he would say, very skillfully, he would say; on the one hand we have this and on the other we have that, and this is a matter for you to decide. Well, I could see that was no way to run a University. These people

didn't know anything and insofar as they knew anything, they knew what Yale had always been like, therefore they were not prepared to agree to any changes. Therefore, it seemed to me that it was irresponsible on his part. And so I always made recommendations, and always felt that if they didn't accept them that was alright, unless they were fundamental, in which case I would resign.²⁹

In 1938 the then owner of the *Washington Post*, Eugene Meyer, wrote to Hutchins asking about options for his daughter Katherine, who would later run the *Post* under her married name of Katherine Graham. Hutchins noted that other than Chicago, Katherine might consider Harvard as a real educational institution, and then added somewhat gratuitously, "Columbia has some good individuals, but it is not a University."³⁰ Hutchins's casual quip—claiming that Chicago and Harvard were the only two *real* universities in the nation—came at the end of nearly fifty years of institutional evolution in which Harper's rush to create an institution with a singular unified purpose and Hutchins's courageous defense of academic freedom as a hallmark of that mission combined to create a place of extraordinary distinction. Harold Swift would repeat this claim to Benton, who recalled "Mr. Swift tells me that Chicago and Harvard rank as the two outstanding institutions in the field of education today."³¹

29. Interview, May 29, 1973, box 1, folder 9, Robert M. Hutchins and Associates Oral History Interviews.

30. Hutchins to Meyer, April 30, 1938, box 163, folder 22, Robert Maynard Hutchins Papers. Hutchins made a similar assertion in remarks to the student body during his inaugural festivities in November 1929, although at that time such a statement might have been seen as self-indulgent patriotism, designed to please his student audience. See "The Inauguration of President Hutchins," *University of Chicago Record* 16 (1930): 39.

31. Benton to Elma Benton, May 27, 1936, box 8, folder 7, William Benton Papers.

III. JOHN GUNTHER 1960s

I now turn to the third book of my triptych. If Veblen portrayed Harper's University in the 1900s and Benton depicted Hutchins's University in the 1930s, John Gunther presented in his little book, entitled *Chicago Revisited*, a compelling portrait of the University dominated by Edward Levi and George Beadle in 1960s.³²

The world of universities in America in general changed profoundly in the three decades after 1945, entering what some critics have called the Golden Age of American higher education. With the end of World War II, the federal government and many state governments launched massive programs of investment in higher education. Large private foundations like the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations also directed enormous levels of funding toward elite postsecondary colleges and universities. The number of colleges grew and the total size of the undergraduate and graduate populations more than quintupled. In 1950 the United States had 1,851 institutions of higher learning with 2,444,900 students. In 1980, thirty years later, there were 3,152 institutions with 11,589,899 students.³³ These were the years which led to the formation of the California Master Plan for Higher Education of the State of California in 1960 under the leadership of Clark Kerr,³⁴ which so influenced the fate of the University

32. John Gunther, *Chicago Revisited* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

33. Thomas D. Snyder and Sally A. Dillow, eds., *Digest of Education Statistics 2009* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, April 2010), 278.

34. Clark Kerr, *The Gold and the Blue: A Personal Memoir of the University of California, 1949–1967*, vol. 1, *Academic Triumphs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 182.



John Gunther by Howard Coster, 1936.

of California at Berkeley, whence our new president, Paul Alivisatos, comes and where Paul has spent several decades of his professional career. In his inaugural address as president of the University of California in 1958 Kerr captured the enormous ambitions that seemed to be at hand for the universities in what Kerr called a new “Golden Age.” No longer were they closeted, reactionary, conservative places, husbanding known and finite knowledge, but rather they had assumed a new role in a hyper-knowledge society: in a time when new knowledge was growing and accelerating at a dramatic pace, they were now the “architects of progress instead of the protectors of tradition.” They were now the “undisputed headquarters of intellect” for modern societies, and Kerr boldly asserted that “no one can now afford to ignore the classrooms, the laboratories, and the libraries which have become the small back rooms where history is really made.” This meant that the “university over the centuries has moved from its role as the guardian of the past to that of the explorer of the future. ... To create new knowledge, to train the men and women who can use this knowledge, to make this knowledge comprehensible and thus the servant rather than the master of men, to help men know the values this knowledge should be made to serve—these are the great tasks of the university in the advancing industrial society that is sweeping around the world.”³⁵

Yet the massive investments made by the public sector in the universities generated new expectations as to the fiduciary role of the universities in American life. As Philip Altbach has argued, having worked assiduously after World War II to assume central roles of cultural enlightenment across American civil society, American universities now found themselves

35. Idem, “The Worth of Intellect: Inaugural Address,” September 29, 1958, University Archive, Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=hb9m3nb5vv&brand=oac4&doc.view=entire_text.

dragged into the “most traumatic social crises of the period.”³⁶ After 1945 many university leaders had welcomed the chance to reposition their institutions as engines of mass democratic citizenship, eagerly accepting the waves of federal largesse that flowed to them under the mantle of this new role in the 1950s.³⁷ Now the universities discovered that this largesse came with unfriendly strings attached to their self-articulated claims about their own magnanimity and capacities. At our University, leaders like Edward Levi worried deeply about powerful centrifugal forces pulling the universities away from their primary function of the cultivation and generation of new knowledge. These forces grew even more acute in the 1980s and 1990s.³⁸

The University of Chicago of the 1960s—still reeling from the financial disasters of the 1950s and from unrest in the neighborhood over its aggressive urban renewal interventions—found itself in the crossfire of both culture wars and the live war in Vietnam. Yet the University in the mid-1960s was also the late-coming child of Kerr’s Golden Age of university expansion, as Chicago’s leaders brought its deficits under control and launched new initiatives to rebuild the faculty, to modernize the campus physical plant, and to stabilize enrollment losses. If Clark Kerr’s world of ebullient expansion and public service was not ours in the 1950s,

36. Philip G. Altbach, “Harsh Realities: The Professoriate Faces a New Century,” in *American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century: Social, Political, and Economic Challenges*, ed. Philip G. Altbach, Robert O. Berdahl, and Patricia J. Gumpert (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 287–314, here 294.

37. See Christopher Loss, *Between Citizens and the State: The Politics of American Higher Education in the 20th Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 87, 119–20, 160.

38. See the prescient comments of Roger Geiger, “Research Universities in a New Era: From the 1980s to the 1990s,” in *Higher Learning in America, 1980–2000*, ed. Arthur Levine (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 74–77.

Chicago's leaders hoped that the next decade would be more encouraging.

The challenges facing the University of Chicago were apparent in the reaction of the senior staff of the Special Program in Education at the Ford Foundation in 1965 when the University appealed for a huge gift to jumpstart a new capital campaign. Robert Hutchins and William Benton may have routinely claimed in the 1930s that Chicago was one of the two best universities in the United States, but thirty years later the ravages of the postwar era, the collapse of undergraduate enrollments, faculty losses owing to fear of neighborhood crime, and the rise of aggressive competition from other top private universities on the East and West Coasts put Chicago in a different and much less favorable context. The special program staff clearly acknowledged this devolution when they argued that, even though the original version of the special program excluded institutions such as the University of Chicago, there were "special circumstances" at the University that distinguished it from its peers and that might justify making an exception to include Chicago in the grant program: "As a relatively young institution, it does not have nearly the depth of financial support from wealthy alumni that characterizes some of the Eastern seaboard universities. Moreover, there has even been some question as to whether Chicago still belongs among the few American private universities of international renown. It is only now beginning to emerge from a series of academic and financial crises extending back over more than two decades." The board of the Ford Foundation concluded that "the University of Chicago, through quiet but heroic efforts over the past decade, has extricated itself from a state of disarray which could have spelled ruin for a lesser institution with less capable leadership. The Ford Foundation's

ability to make a very large grant to the University at the present time represents a rare opportunity to contribute decisively to the renaissance of what once was and may well again be one of the world's great universities."³⁹

In the midst of the University's rebuilding efforts Fairfax Cone, the chair of the Board of Trustees and one of the preeminent advertising executives of the mid-twentieth century, decided in 1963 that it would be useful to produce a contemporary portrait of the institution by an "interested" outsider. Cone wanted "something to be read in one sitting; something that tells where the University has come from, and why it is so worthy of support today."⁴⁰ Cone further noted that "what we need is a substantial but brief presentation of the University of Chicago for the purposes of background against which we shall make selective solicitations of some hundreds of foundations, corporations, alumni, etc. The solicitations will be made in person by members of the Trustees and the faculty of the University."⁴¹

Cone asked George Beadle to invite a nationally famous journalist, John Gunther, an alumnus of the College, to visit campus for ten days and write an optimistic portrait of the institution. (Cone had first met Gunther in the late 1950s when Gunther interviewed him for a book on the adman Albert Lasker.) Beadle issued the invitation in August 1963, stating that "the university is in an exciting period of new growth. Its

39. Clarence Faust to Henry T. Heald, August 17, 1965, 2–3, 10–11, 14, Grant File PA65-367, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY.

40. Cone to Gunther, January 19, 1964, box 121, folder 7, John Gunther Papers.

41. Cone to Gunther, December 5, 1963, box 94, folder 9, Fairfax M. Cone Papers.

neighborhood problems are in control; our faculty has been strengthened by the addition of many leading scholars; we even ended last year with a balanced budget. Within the next year we shall launch a major campaign and begin to prepare for the University's 75th birthday in 1966. To help us tell our story, I can think of nothing that would be more effective than a book, perhaps to be called 'INSIDE U. OF C.' by John Gunther."⁴²

John Gunther was born in Chicago in 1901 and attended the University of Chicago from 1918 to 1922. He spent the interwar years in European capitals like Vienna and London as a foreign correspondent, eventually producing his first *Inside Europe Today* book in 1937. While a student in the College Gunther wrote for and served as the literary editor of the *Chicago Maroon* and earned additional money by writing short essays for local newspapers and journals. Gunther wrote a lengthy essay on the University for H. L. Mencken's *The Smart Set* in April 1922.⁴³ The style of the essay was similar to that Gunther later deployed for his "Inside" books, providing a conversational and impressionistic tour of the University. The essay contained a graphic description of the power of the fraternities and women's clubs at the University in the 1920s. Gunther also had many flattering things to say about the University, including "anyone who goes there with the expectation of wasting four happy years is an idiot, and, what is more, a comparatively rare specimen." He also confessed that Chicago taught him "to work harder, probably, than one will ever work again"—a remarkable statement given his later output.

42. Beadle to Gunther, August 13, 1963, box 94, folder 9, Fairfax M. Cone Papers.

43. John Gunther, "The Higher Learning in America," *The Smart Set*, April 1922, 67–77.

Gunther mentioned the idea of telling the story of the University in a short passage in his famous book on *Inside U.S.A.* from 1947, where he commented about Robert Hutchins to the effect that

some day I would like to take a year off, return to Chicago, and write a book about the University of Chicago, which by any reckoning is one of the three or four most outstanding in the world. In doing so I would have considerable fun in trying to analyze the character of its chancellor, Robert Maynard Hutchins, a man sensitive, often wrong-headed, stubborn, with as bright a mind as ever you met, and one who will talk back to God, Mammon, or the devil. Hutchins is so much an egoist that it is sometimes difficult for him to be a participant. He boils with vision, likes idiosyncrasy, and is absolutely fearless, honest, and independent.⁴⁴

Gunther's little book was conceived as a local version of his famous "Inside" books, to be based on extensive in-person interviews and styled as a remembrance of Gunther's time as a student compared to the new reality of the University forty years later. Cone was especially interested in a book that could be presented to prospective donors in the emerging capital campaign of the mid-1960s. Hence, the University's history would now be repackaged to make it more lustrous and attractive to the civic elites alienated by Hutchins in the 1930s and 1940s and dispirited by the internal and external battles the University had been forced to fight in the 1950s. What was needed was a success story—as a smart marketing man, Cone knew that it was impossible to sell failure or ambivalence or to raise money to cover deficits.

44. John Gunther, *Inside U.S.A.* (New York: Harper, 1947), 375.



Journalist and author John Gunther in the University of Chicago's Reynolds Club.

Cone advised Gunther in April 1964 of the kind of narrative he had in mind: "Everyone we approach to support the University needs first of all to be told some of its demonstrable virtues and ... aspirations." Cone urged Gunther to make as his major theme the University's distinctive commitment to excellence: "The most interesting and probably most important thing about [the University of Chicago] is its complete dedication to excellence." Listing some of the achievements of the Medical School, Law School, Graduate School of Business, School of Social Service Administration, and the Physical Sciences Division, Cone then argued, "What I hope the above suggests is that the University of Chicago exists to make good to students and distinguished faculty alike this dedication to excellence on all the fronts of education ... at a time and in a place where nothing is so rare as a complete individual." He continued that "specialists are relatively easy to make. And the University makes some. But its fundamental aim is to go much farther, and it has long been successful."⁴⁵

Gunther began working on the book in the late winter of 1963 and had a first draft by June 1964. Gunther's assignment was to retell the narrative of a university that had endured painful struggles and civic isolation, but that had arisen once again to preeminence, and to do so by deploying the story of its key leaders, the courageous Lawrence Kimpton, the down-to-earth George Beadle, and the brilliant and strategically adept Edward Levi. Gunther had no way of knowing the leadership challenges of the early 1960s that had led to Levi's appointment as provost, and he certainly would not have recounted them in his book. Gunther's portrait of Hutchins was generous, stressing Hutchins's inclination to innovate ("he let more air into American education than any university president in fifty

45. Cone to Gunther, April 16, 1964, box 121, folder 7, John Gunther Papers.

years”), but he also allowed that “he kept the faculty under merciless pressure, and has as little tolerance for opposition as Woodrow Wilson, whom he startlingly resembles in some respects” (56).⁴⁶

Gunther deployed the image of the University as a miniature royal principality, dominated by the graduate and professional programs and the senior faculty who ran them. Gunther observed proudly that professional and graduate students outnumbered undergraduates by over two to one, without considering the financial implications of that model for the future stability of the University. He gingerly described the serious problems with the neighborhood and Kimpton’s response in creating an urban renewal plan but insisted that the collateral costs had been necessary and resulted in a stable, interracial neighborhood. His image of the University of Chicago was that of a city-state of learning dominated by and top-heavy with graduate education that produced results useful to the world, with bright undergraduates serving as respectful novices to the higher learning of their elders. (They were the “rock bottom citizenry” of the city-state.) “Gifted youngsters” as opposed to average students came to Chicago from across America on the basis of a successful annual canvas by the Admissions Office. College students were the “scholastic cream of the cream,” making it seem as if the University were overwhelmed with truth seekers who arrived magically at the end of an unusually successful admissions process that led to stunning successes (13). Gunther interviewed current students and learned of their dissatisfaction with tuition levels, their frustrations with the faculty’s conservative views of the “racial problem,” and their frustration with the traditional content of the Core curriculum, but Gunther saw these as minor blemishes in a world in which the University’s “distinctive excellence” in undergraduate education

46. Gunther, *Chicago Revisited*.

reigned supreme (20). Gunther gave special prominence to the faculty, worthy of “one of the three or four greatest universities in the world” who had a “devout belief in research for its own sake and relentlessly acute and incessant speculation and experiments” (49). In this principality the faculty held a privileged life with the lightest teaching loads and nearly the highest salaries in the nation, profiting from the fourth largest endowment in the United States, unrestricted by any cumbersome regulations, and having the privilege and honor to work for years on recondite research projects while their colleagues patiently waited for final brilliance to emerge.

In Gunther’s view, Chicago was “still the most exciting university in the world,” a “lonely colossus” that stood for “freedom of expression, freedom to speculate and experiment, freedom for spacious inquiry, freedom to be a gadfly if necessary, and freedom to be right but to take a chance on being wrong” (91-92).

After much discussion as to how to bring the book out, the University decided to issue it as a separate monograph as part of the *Chicago Today* series of publications. It was published in April 1965 and reissued as a bound book in May 1967.⁴⁷ Local reaction to the book was mixed, and much back and forth was needed to correct errata, revisions which Gunther welcomed and accepted generously. It was telling that the director of the University of Chicago Press, Roger W. Shugg, initially refused to publish the book, observing that “we should consider seriously whether publishing it through the Press as a general book for the public will not do the University more harm than good. Its coverage is so spotty and thin, its ‘puffery’ so obvious and, within the manuscript, so unsupported that to issue the pamphlet . . . as an account invited and approved by the University could hardly produce anything but amazement and ridicule—and, within

47. Ibid.

the University, resentment.”⁴⁸ Shugg’s reaction was not unexpected: he was a professional scholar and in his heart a Hutchins’s man.

Others had far more positive assessments. Alumni leader Burr Robbins insisted that “this is one of the greatest articles that I have ever read. . . . I just wish every graduate of Chicago knew what a great university and establishment we have.”⁴⁹ Norman Cousins, the editor of the *Saturday Review*, praised Gunther for “an immensely informative, engaging account of the University, one that made it come alive for me as if I’d been an undergraduate there. Fairfax Cone and George Beadle scored a ten-strike when they persuaded you to write this fine piece.”⁵⁰ Gunther’s little book generated great admiration among the trustees and other professionals in the national advertising industry. William Benton, by now long gone from the University but still an avid reader of its publicity, sent a particularly generous note to Fairfax Cone, commenting that Gunther’s book was brilliant tour de force: “I congratulate you in persuading John Gunther to write this. . . . I think that you might have, without exaggeration, called him our most distinguished and certainly our most famous journalist. . . . I rather think it’s the best piece of promotion I’ve ever read.”⁵¹ William Benton’s encomium brings my story full circle, given that John Gunther portrayed the kind of University that Benton had always wanted, and as Benton certainly realized, Gunther was able to do so because Robert Hutchins was now long absent from its leadership. Ironically, as noted above, both Gunther and Benton were deep admirers of Hutchins’s radical

48. Shugg to Larsen, August 20, 1964, box 121, folder 8, John Gunther Papers.

49. Robbins to Cone, June 14, 1965, box 110, folder 3, Fairfax M. Cone Papers.

50. Cousins to Gunther, May 3, 1965, box 110, folder 3, Fairfax M. Cone Papers.

51. Benton to Cone, May 5, 1965, box 110, folder 3, Fairfax M. Cone Papers.

schemes, but in the end, the place now seemed to need more placid or at least less disruptive leadership.

Notwithstanding Shugg’s criticisms, the book’s force came from its charming but candid image of a renewed and rejuvenated University that the Board of Trustees might proudly claim and cherish—an institution reconciled with the civic elites and the broader metropolis, a university absence of serious conflicts within or without, including accusations of ideological radicalism.

All in all, John Gunther’s little book was an elegant, but slanted treatise imagining a utopian university, one that glossed over many of the chronic problems still facing the University in the 1960s, which was all the more impressive for that fact. In Gunther’s populist literary hands, the concerns of both Thorstein Veblen and William Benton had magically disappeared and no longer had any relevance. The University was neither a business-like corporation of staid conservatism nor was it a radical and socialist conventicle of revolution. Rather, it was simply devoted to competitive excellence on all fronts, a true American vision of an American institution. In Gunther’s view the University had reentered the mainstream of eudaemonistic institutions in the liberal tradition. It was a winner, pure and simple, but a winner that genially reconciled the liberty and rights of the individual and the needs of society for creative talent and high standards of achievement. If Veblen was a shrewd but unfriendly critic and Benton a friendly but frustrated counselor, Gunther was a brilliant hired gun, combining distant alumni memories with a practical sensibility of what the American public wanted to hear.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Gunther's vision of the University was more monochromatic and digestible than the earlier two and, thus, more appealing to a general audience. Both Veblen's and Benton's visions of the University—the managerial university and the university of free discourse and learning—have sunk deeply into our self-perception, although with different groups, but it would be difficult to say the same of Gunther's. This was most likely because in the decades following John Gunther's utopia, hard realities set in. The Golden Age of the 1960s soon began to seem unduly optimistic, perhaps even illusory. Falling doctoral enrollments led to much soul searching in the 1980s, and these anxieties have repeated themselves in recent years, as the market for young PhDs in the humanities and social sciences has attenuated and arguments about the necessity of heavily subsidized doctoral education for careers outside of the academy and the world of fundamental scholarship have seemed increasingly apologetic. Universities have replaced the uncompetitive doctoral funding patterns of the 1980s and 1990s with generous new funding systems, significantly smaller doctoral cohorts, and the expectation that PhD students will finish their degrees in a timely fashion and not compromise their own futures or waste University resources by failing to complete their degree programs.

The 1990s brought additional challenges to the cultivation of a self-image built upon uniform excellence. Declining endowment values relative to our peers in the Ivy Plus group revealed that the University was locked in an unhealthy financial trajectory. Increasingly uncompetitive undergraduate admissions practices led to self-consciousness about Chicago's isolation within the important world of admissions in the Ivy Plus group and to the existence of stubborn and severe defects within the University's

approach to student-life issues. The collapse of our College's enrollments in the 1950s had endured into the 1960s and 1970s and led to chronic financial shortages. These took decades to remedy, above all because enrollment crises reflected chronic challenges in student morale and student loyalties, best typified by the persistence of high drop-out rates among the University's undergraduate classes. Beyond these policy issues the challenge of recurrent budget deficits continued to stymie University leaders, all the more frustrating since these deficits were increasingly seen to be structural in nature.

Subsequent presidential administrations addressed most of these issues courageously and forthrightly, and most importantly they were able to sustain the intellectual distinction and luster of the faculty and increase the quality of the student body. In the last two decades two profound demographic shifts have also occurred that have and will continue to shape the future of the University in the rest of this century. First, the transformation and growth of the College from 3,500 to slightly over 7,000 students have placed Chicago in a totally different competitive position within the national landscape of higher education. Admissions rates dropped from nearly 70 percent to less than 7 percent, and student retention rates rose rapidly (the College now maintains a 99 percent freshman retention rate), with the College creating a much more attentive and well-supported campus residential and student-life culture, generating strongly positive responses from students and parents alike. I discussed most of these historic transformations in my report last year.⁵² Over the next fifty years this larger College will regenerate the University's alumni body, nearly doubling the number of living under-graduate alumni by 2050.

52. John W. Boyer, *"We Are All Islanders to Begin with": A Century of International Learning at the University of Chicago* (Chicago: The College of the University of Chicago, 2020), 6–9.

Second, the professional schools have emerged as demographic heavyweights within the University and as sites of corresponding scholarly prestige and structural innovation. In 1960, 53 percent of all graduate degrees were awarded by the arts and sciences departments in the graduate divisions, with the professional schools providing 47 percent; sixty years later, this ratio has been reversed, in that the professional schools now award 65 percent of all graduate degrees, with the arts and sciences divisions awarding 35 percent. The University has also invested boldly in new fields of scholarly inquiry, such as molecular engineering, computation, and data science, and has created a major foothold in marine science by its acquisition of the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, in 2013.⁵³ It has also launched in the last two decades new international strategies centered on global centers in Europe and Asia that have redefined the meaning of “global” education for Chicago.

The University today enjoys an eminent reputation, but one that has been constituted, contested, and reimagined over many decades. Paradoxically, Chicago is the same institution founded by William Rainey Harper, but it is an altogether different institution as well. It is still seen as a place of fiercely free and open debate and as a place where merit trumps political or personal connections in admissions and the judgment of faculty appointments. It is one of the rare institutions of higher learning that privileges an uncompromising, indeed ruthless dedication to the production of competitive scholarly ideas. Yet, like its peers among the leading US research universities, it still finds itself in an ongoing arms race for financial resources. It still encounters pressures to compromise its traditions of academic freedom and free speech, and it still maintains a

53. Diana Kenney, “University of Chicago and Marine Biological Laboratory Agree to Form Affiliation,” University of Chicago Marine Biological Laboratory, www.mbl.edu/blog/mbl-uchicago-affiliation.

longstanding normative neutrality from advocates of the Right and the Left who want to assert partisan political values in the work of the academy.

Many of the controversial issues that perplexed our predecessors over the twentieth century remain issues of our generation: the tension between efficiency and effectiveness in structures of doctoral education, the boundaries between liberal and professional education for College students, the role of merit in all domains of the academic enterprise, the difference between intellectual diversity and ethnic diversity, the balance between teaching and research, the challenge of the University’s relationship to the city and the neighborhood, and the role of the University in the world. Clark Kerr saw the modern university as a protean source of rational enlightenment and technical expertise for vast reaches of civil society, whereas our former colleague Gerhard Casper has warned of the political dangers of a “result-oriented” university that defines its role primarily on utilitarian functions beyond its own walls, as opposed to the open-ended and disinterested cultivation of knowledge for its own sake.⁵⁴ Who is right?

All three of the books that I have discussed in this essay assumed that presidential leadership was critical to the definition and protection of the University’s core identity and its most cherished values. Harper may serve as a fortuitous example. In contrast to the negative portrait offered by Veblen, Richard Storr has observed about Harper that

some presidents of academic institutions have, one fears, greater talent for commencement speeches and for pronouncements than for administration. They fail at the delicate and endless job of

54. Ken Auletta, “Get Rich U,” *New Yorker*, April 30, 2012, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/04/30/get-rich-u.

maintaining just the right tension on all those strands which bind a university from day to day together but break if they are tugged too hard. Fortunately, Harper was not one of these men. Starting with an immense interest in all sorts and conditions of men, however humble or callow, Harper through terribly long hours of conversation and correspondence kept in touch with an extraordinary number of men and affairs. As a working administrator he proved to be no time-waster and indeed to be possessed of a gift for firm decision and succinct communication. Sometimes he was decidedly abrupt; but living on less sleep than most men think half of a night's rest and napping easily when he could, Harper made time to listen to and to advise numberless members of the University. He became a presence by being present and responsive.⁵⁵

Storr's image of Harper's University as a community constituted by many interwoven cultural strands that needed to be kept in productive tension with each other is particularly felicitous for today's University of Chicago as well. For the University that has emerged over the past hundred years is one that has been marked by a productive willingness to engage in the most vigorous and open-ended debates, to practice the kind of academic freedom that only comes from a committed engagement with difficult, unfamiliar, and even unfriendly ideas. Chicago is a community of enormous ambition, a place to excel and to avoid the treacherous dangers of mediocrity. It asks the best of each of its members, almost to the point of unbelief. It believes that education does have a transformative impact on human life, endowing our students with a zeal for learning and an under-

55. Storr, "From the Old Testament to the New University," alumni talk, June 2, 1956, 9, box 18, folder 3, William Rainey Harper Papers.

standing of the value of intellectual dispassion and cultural liberty. The University gives to our students the most precious of gifts—minds enlivened by creativity and curiosity, persons strengthened by self-confidence and confidence in the world, and lives enriched by the love of learning.

Let me close by thanking you for your strong support of our students in the College.

I M A G E C R E D I T S

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