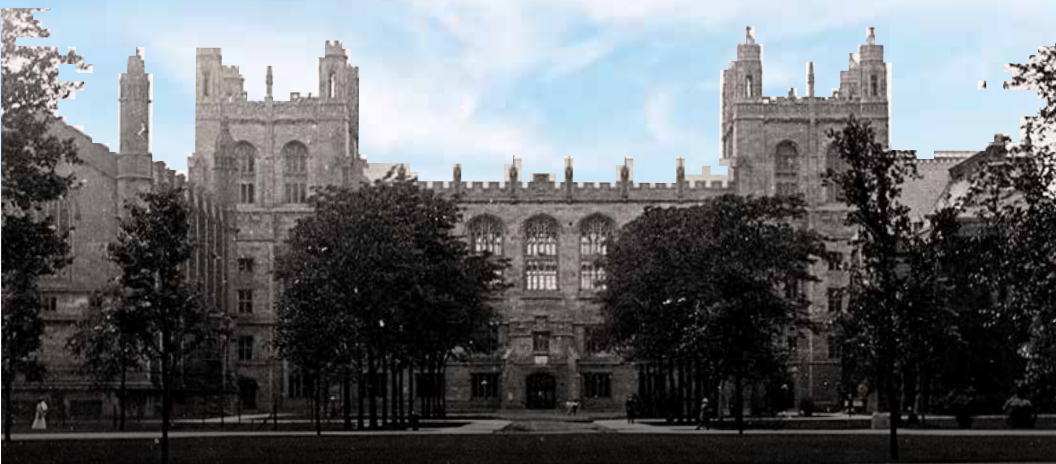


JOHN W. BOYER

THE UNIVERSITIES AND THE PROMISE OF AMERICAN LIFE



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO



THE UNIVERSITIES AND THE PROMISE OF AMERICAN LIFE

INTRODUCTION

My theme today is the identity and mission of the University of Chicago, seen through the eyes of those who have stood both inside and outside our venerable halls. As a point of departure, we can consider the themes of the seminal work that Herbert Croly published on American politics and culture just over a century ago, *The Promise of American Life*.¹ Croly was deeply concerned with the narrowing opportunities for individual economic and social mobility at the turn of the twentieth century, and in this book he analyzed and proposed remedies for these issues by surveying the interaction of two threads of American political idealism, the democracy of Thomas Jefferson and the Hamiltonian ideal of authority. He ultimately argued for a strong federal government that would marry the two with policies that promote access to opportunity and success for all Americans.

1. Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1909). I am grateful to Daniel Koehler and Adam Rowe for their assistance with researching this essay.

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The book had little discussion of the role of universities, but in a subsequent book, *Progressive Democracy*, published as the Godkin Lectures at Harvard, Croly argued that higher education was necessary as a way of creating support and legitimacy for an enlightened administrative elite, who would in turn help to enrich and ennoble society. Universities at the time were de facto preserves of the few and the privileged, and only indirectly involved in the betterment of the general public welfare.²

More than a hundred years later, the issues that Croly raised about the future of American civic life are still timely and worthy of discussion, but the role that universities play in effecting the kinds of values and structures that Croly saw to be of essential import to the nation have changed radically. No longer do we see universities as rarified agencies to spread expert and enlightened administrative technique, but rather as large institutions that promote mass individual social mobility and professional advancement. But in their social capaciousness and self-imposed civic ambitions, today's universities may well have struck Croly as the ideal instruments to assist in the creation of his new progressive national utopia. Certainly the mission that he assigned to the federal government is reflected in the expectations that the public holds today for American universities, both public and private. Universities are integral to sustaining the promise of American life.

External perceptions of universities of this kind in the early twenty-first century have many sources. They are intimately related to how universities themselves understand and articulate their mission and identity, but are also informed by how their many and several publics judge and prioritize those responsibilities. External public perceptions and the internal perceptions by a university itself are often not aligned, and when there is a severe

2. Idem, *Progressive Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), 376–77.

disjunction between the two, the university has a problem on its hands. In contrast to Croly's time, universities have become the focus of significant and often explosive public issues that highlight the tensions between external and internal dialogues: controversies over access, over cost, over campus climate and free speech, and over the worth of postgraduate outcomes. Universities have come to be seen as general agencies for rapid social mobility, as institutions for recreating and defending universal civic values, and as sites for enabling and protecting compensatory social justice. All this makes the understanding of the universities much more complicated and their management and operations much more challenging than in the Progressive Era.

One important feature of their theoretical missions is the capacity of universities to maintain the intellectual resources that are conducive for both learning and research and that permit both to prosper. Let me begin with a contemporary example that has arisen in the last few months relating to the issue of campus climate and free speech. The conflicting crescendo of views about the role of universities as sites of free speech and academic freedom has engendered fascinating debates about how congenial universities are for students and faculty of diverse opinions. Put more bluntly, they have raised the question whether students and faculty who advocate unpopular or minority views feel welcome on our campuses. Do we face a Millian problem in which dedication to free speech means dedication to only certain correct and tacitly approved forms of speech, such that college campuses across the nation, advertently or inadvertently, become trusted homes for certain kinds of cultural values and views and inhospitable to other perspectives?

Recent surveys by the Pew Research Center and by Gallup found significant differences between self-identified Republican and Democratic voters not only in support of higher education but also in their sense that

college campuses were welcoming places for students who shared their cluster of life views. The Pew survey found that “Republicans have grown increasingly negative about the impact of colleges and universities on the United States,” while the Gallup poll argued that

Republicans are not only less confident than Democrats about colleges and universities in general, but the reasons Republicans give for these attitudes differ from those provided by the smaller group of Democrats who are negative. Republicans with low levels of confidence in colleges are most likely to cite their belief that colleges and universities are too liberal and political, that colleges don’t allow students to think for themselves and are pushing their own agenda, or that students are not taught the right material or are poorly educated.³

One analyst employed by Gallup went so far as to raise the question of whether colleges should discard the term “liberal arts” altogether:

“Liberal” is politically charged, and “arts” has a negative connotation regarding improving graduates’ job prospects, which is the main reason why Americans and currently enrolled college students value higher education. Putting the words *liberal* and *arts* together

3. Scott Jaschik, “Why Republicans Don’t Trust Higher Ed,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 17, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/08/17/new-data-explain-republican-loss-confidence-higher-education>; Hanna Fingerhut, “Republicans Skeptical of Colleges’ Impact on US, But Most See Benefits for Workforce Preparation,” *Pew Research Center Facttank*, July 20, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/20/republicans-skeptical-of-colleges-impact-on-u-s-but-most-see-benefits-for-workforce-preparation>; Frank Newport and Brandon Busteed, “Why Are Republicans Down on Higher Ed,” *Gallup Education*, August 17, 2017, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/216278/why-republicans-down-higher.aspx>.

is a branding disaster, and the most effective way to save or defend the liberal arts may be to change what we call them.⁴

Inevitably, what some might see as an issue of the behavior of individual students and professors has now been magnified and ascribed to the institutional identities of the universities themselves, with the universities being tagged as de facto “political” institutions or at least institutions with political colorations, even in the face of protestations that they are neutral places of value-free research and teaching.

The Pew and Gallup surveys must also be viewed in the context of survey data in a recent project by the New America group that found more complex and often more positive attitudes by respondents of all affiliations based on gender, race, region, age, and economic status, although the survey found great divergence in public views on whether four-year public and private colleges and universities, as opposed to community colleges, are “worth the cost.” But even here differences emerged between conservatives and liberals on the questions of whether “higher education leaders generally put the needs and interests of students first” and whether “higher education in America is fine how it is.”⁵ On a related issue—access to universities based on standardized testing—Republicans and Democrats display substantial differences, with Republican respondents in a YouGov

4. Brandon Busteed, “Higher Education: Drop the Term ‘Liberal Arts’,” *Gallup Opinion*, August 16, 2017, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/216275/higher-education-drop-term-liberal-arts.aspx>.

5. Rachel Fishman, Manuela Ekowo, and Ernest Ezeugo, *Varying Degrees 2018: New America’s Second Annual Survey on Higher Education* (Washington, DC: New America, 2018), <https://na-production.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/Varying-Degrees.pdf>; Eric Kelderman, “‘Higher Education’ Isn’t So Popular, Poll Finds, But Local Colleges Get Lots of Love,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 21, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Higher-Education-Isn-t/243468>.

poll significantly more insistent than their Democratic counterparts that applicants to college must provide such competitive examination credentials.⁶ It seems clear that partisan political self-identifications now color individual expectations about the worthiness of the universities and especially about the extent to which universities should provide special forms of compensatory access for students from underprivileged social and economic backgrounds.

These surveys are only the most recent attempts by social scientists, historians, and others to gauge and influence public opinion about many different features and sectors of higher education. From the 1950s down to the present one encounters many interventions, some of which were attempts to test forms of public opinion about the work and accomplishments of the universities per se, while, in the opposite direction, others strove to evaluate or explain internal features of higher education to the various elements of the public in the hope that the latter might become supportive of such evaluations. For example, the university ranking movement that began in earnest with Allan Cartter's survey of US doctoral programs in 1966 was, in formal terms, an attempt to compare the institutional prestige and individual scholarly eminence among leading university departments, but it inevitably attracted broader public scrutiny, making the prestige of college X or university Y a matter of local pride and national resource investment.⁷ The plethora of contemporary ranking surveys, most prominently *US News & World Report*, that accelerated over

6. Scott Jaschik, "Party, Age and Support for Test-Optional Admissions," *Inside Higher Ed*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2018/06/25/younger-people-and-democrats-more-likely-back-test-optional-admissions>.

7. Allan M. Cartter, *An Assessment of Quality in Graduate Education* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1966).

the 1980s and 1990s, indicates that the public has been persuaded that it is both possible and desirable to rank schools as a matter of consumer information, whereas for the colleges and universities themselves a rise in external rankings can bring an immense payoff in enhanced status and prestige.

Clark Kerr's *California Master Plan for Higher Education* (1960) was typical of efforts in the later 1950s and 1960s to reimagine colleges as providing critical national resources and services *out to* society, while also cultivating public opinion to legitimate the universities as efficient, successful, and worthy recipients of massive public philanthropic and financial largesse *back to* the universities.⁸ As Patrick Callan has recently argued,

Several factors account for the political and educational consensus that emerged in support of the plan. The most important was that it resonated with and reinforced civic values, both egalitarian and meritocratic, that were prevalent in California and the nation in the late 1950s and 1960s. Also embedded in the plan was the optimism of Kerr and other leaders of higher education and state government, leaders who had experienced the adversity of the depression, World War II and the ensuing years of prosperity. As Kerr said many years later, "We thought things were getting better, they were going to keep on getting better. What we were doing we could accomplish together. It was not a zero sum game. It was a game where all of us were going to benefit."⁹

8. See John Aubrey Douglass, *The California Idea and American Higher Education: 1850 to the 1960 Master Plan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); and Sheldon Rothblatt, ed., *Clark Kerr's World of Higher Education Reaches the 21st Century: Chapters in a Special History* (Dordrecht: The Netherlands, 2012).

9. Patrick M. Callan, "The Perils of Success: Clark Kerr and the Master Plan for Higher Education," in *ibid.*, 77–78.

Such consensus in turn necessitated that the advocates of higher education explain to the public and their elected political representatives why the universities should be treated with enormous deference, independence, and respect and why they were worthy of massive financial support. Indeed, after World War II, the American system of higher education became deeply dependent on philanthropy and the largesse of state and federal governments. Consequently, the American system has been particularly sensitive to the many populist social and cultural causes that have buffeted higher education since the 1950s. Institutional advocates of higher education since the 1960s therefore deliberately reinforced the image of the university as a broad-based, generative, and ideologically neutral institution of national public service, economic progress, and social welfare, as Cartter and Farrell did when they argued in 1969 that

the nation is accomplishing a goal that was thought unattainable a few years ago, by virtue of a strong partnership among public and private agencies. If the Congress had not acted with determination in the 1958–65 years to support graduate education, and if the States and the private universities had not been willing to invest untold millions in what they believed to be the highest priority task in the nation, the goal of insuring an adequate supply of the best brains and talents for college teaching, research, government and industrial service would not have been achieved prior to the 1980s.... If we are to revitalize the cities, improve the public schools, conquer pollution, improve health standards, explore outer space, and a hundred other tasks claiming our attention and energies, our strongest asset will be an expanding reservoir of highly trained talent.¹⁰

10. Allan M. Cartter and Robert L. Farrell, "Academic Labor Market Projections and the Draft," in *The Economics and Financing of Higher Education in the United*

Clark Kerr himself, in his role as the founding chairman of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, could observe the national landscape in 1969 and discover "a great faith in higher education that gave rise to a tripling of expenditures over the past decade...strong support for public service activities of colleges and universities in solving problems that affect the welfare of the state and its people [and] a favorable attitude toward long-range planning of higher education and centralized coordination as a means of making good use of resources and expressing the will of the state government."¹¹ It was all the more convenient to frame investments in higher education as an exercise in enlightened social utility given that much of the new public support for university-based research focused on the natural and behavioral sciences.

A national survey of public attitudes about higher education undertaken in 1982 confirmed the efficacy of these strategies. According to a report undertaken by the Group Attitudes Corporation on behalf of eleven leading American organizations concerned with higher education, large numbers of Americans affirmed that opportunities for higher education were of salutary national interest and should be extended to more and more citizens and, also, that the federal government did have a significant role to play in financing the continued expansion of higher education.¹²

States: A Compendium of Papers Submitted to the Joint Economic Committee, Congress of the United States (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1969), 374.

11. Clark Kerr, foreword to *State Officials and Higher Education: A Survey of the Opinions and Expectations of Policy Makers in Nine States*, by Heinz Eulau and Harold Quinley (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), iii.

12. Group Attitudes Corporation, *American Attitudes Towards Higher Education: Results of a Comprehensive Nationwide Survey* (New York: Group Attitudes, 1982).

In contrast to the image of social beneficence and positive national interest implicit in the Cartter/Farrell and Kerr quotes from the late 1960s and the Group Attitudes report from 1982, recent decades have manifested strong trends involving the active or passive politicization of higher education. Before World War II, when the federal government had a low, somewhat anodyne profile in supporting institutions of higher education and scholarly research, most observers viewed national policy debates on higher education within a framework of general cultural neutrality, with nonpartisanship on the part of rival political and bureaucratic elites toward the actual functioning of the universities more typical than not. Beginning in the 1960s, however, as federal financial interventions in higher education increased significantly and as American universities became the sites of national cultural wars and student protests, a series of controversies engulfed the universities that, in turn, shaped the ways in which policy makers and their electoral constituents viewed the multiple missions of higher education and the ways in which those missions were executed.

At first many of these issues centered on questions of the scope and appropriateness of regulation and regulatory control. In many cases the simple onrush of federal funding led to a growth in bureaucratic oversight that universities found burdensome in routine structural ways, but as the federal government in the 1960s and 1970s deployed aid to support what Daniel Patrick Moynihan later called a move from “excellence to universalism” ideological conflicts over the purpose and priorities of federal largesse became more common. As Moynihan noted, higher education now became a “means of obtaining goals arising elsewhere in the political system.”¹³ Two key issues were access to higher education—should tax-

13. Daniel P. Moynihan, “The Politics of Higher Education,” *Daedalus* 104, no. 1 (Winter 1975): 128–47, here 133.

payer dollars be deployed to increase access to higher education on the part of lower-income and minority groups within American society?—and the appropriate limits of regulatory control—should the federal government have the right to subject colleges and universities to all manner of interventionist requirements demanding universal compliance with an ever-growing bundle of federal administrative rules that would shape the internal organization and operations of the schools themselves? Concerns about higher education as what William Doyle has called a “personal and societal goal” became more common, focusing on controlling rising costs, the need for greater fiscal accountability, the relative priority of enhancing social opportunity as opposed to operational efficiency, and debates over the principled limits of federal intervention itself, such as were evident in the controversies over the massive expansion of federal direct lending in the 1990s that displaced the role of private banks in the national student loan system.¹⁴ On many of these issues a clear partisan divide soon engulfed Congress and the political parties, such that scholars like Doyle have argued that “higher education has become more of a specific interest group with partisan associations and less a public interest, non-partisan lobby.”¹⁵

14. William R. Doyle, “U.S. Senator’s Ideal Points for Higher Education: Documenting Partisanship, 1965–2004,” *Journal of Higher Education* 81, no. 5 (September/October 2010): 619–44, here 626; as well as idem, “Public Opinion, Partisan Identification, and Higher Education Policy,” *Journal of Higher Education* 78, no. 4 (July/August 2007): 369–401.

15. Doyle, “U.S. Senator’s Ideal Points,” 638, as well as Constance Ewing Cook, *Lobbying for Higher Education: How Colleges and Universities Influence Federal Policy* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998) and Michael D. Parsons, *Power and Politics: Federal Higher Education Policymaking in the 1990s* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

These early partisan divides found resonances within the universities themselves over the condition of humanistic teaching and research in the late 1980s and early 1990s. A national conference on the future of higher education organized in 1991 by Edward Shils on the occasion of the centennial of the founding of the University of Chicago offers a good example. Much of the conference was devoted to secular and structural themes characteristic of the late 1980s: the decline of the relative share of support for research in federal funding under the Reagan Administration; the simultaneous expansion of federal regulations; the underfunding of the national research community; the rapid expansion of new domains of knowledge without a corresponding reduction in more venerable and traditional forms, leading to chronic budgetary problems for university finances; incentives on faculty to privilege research over teaching; and a general sense that effective faculty self-governance was lagging in dealing with all the other challenges facing higher education.¹⁶ But Shils's own contribution verged into anti-left cultural politics with an aggressive attack on what he felt to be impermissible ideological-political slippage in the humanities, decrying the emergence of the "emancipationists, the multiculturalists, and deconstructionists" who pursued "injurious follies" hostile to the academic ethic of the university. For Shils "modern Western humanistic studies" were now "a danger to the idea of the university. They aim to destroy it, as part of the revolution which they hope to bring about

16. See Michael Shattock et al., "The Internal and External Threats to the University of the Twenty-First Century," Harold T. Shapiro et al., "The Functions and Resources of the American University of the Twenty-First Century," and Walter Rüegg et al., "The Traditions of the University in the Face of the Demands of the Twenty-First Century," *Minerva* 30, no. 2 (June 1992): 130–62, 163–88, 189–241.

in society and in the world. They wish to destroy the intellectual traditions which they were appointed to transmit, investigate, and interpret; they wish to destroy the society in which they live."¹⁷ Shils' rhetoric from 1991 was particularly harsh and deeply unsympathetic toward new intellectual movements in university-based humanistic teaching and research, but similar refrains were evident in books like Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (1987) and Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (1990). At the same conference Clark Kerr, now twenty years after his California master plan, observed that the "greatest threats to the university will be those which arise from within the university," by which Kerr meant excessive bureaucratization, the neglect of academic citizenship (the inclination of faculty and students to use universities in balkanized ways), and, paralleling Shils, concerns about "a rise of tribal enclaves based on race and ethnic status," which Kerr interpreted as part of a much broader Tocquevillian tension between the ideals of equality and liberty in the future organization of the modern university.¹⁸ These years also saw the beginnings of a parallel literature within the academy attacking the corporatization and bureaucratization of the universities, decrying their subversion by modern management techniques, strict business plans, and undue

17. Edward Shils, "The Service of Society and the Advancement of Learning in the Twenty-First Century," *ibid.*, 263, 267.

18. Shattock et al., "The Internal and External Threats to the University," *ibid.*, 149–50. For a fairer and more plausible review of the status of the humanities in the 1980s and 1990s, see David A. Hollinger, ed., *Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion since World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

pandering to vocationalism, market principles, and preoccupation with economic growth.¹⁹

The most recent surveys by Gallup and Pew differ from these early concerns in two ways: first, instead of focusing on elite policy makers and their partisan views of higher education as well as the hostile internalist views of politically liberal turned culturally conservative academic leaders, these surveys bypass such elites to go directly to the ultimate source of political agency, the putative voters themselves. Second, the new conflictual sore points seem to have less to do with the traditional range of partisan disagreements that were manifest in the past decades such as efficiency, accountability, and access and much more with the normative inner workings of the practice of teaching and scholarship itself. That is, the criticism of the universities expressed in these surveys reflects the internalist dyspepsia manifest by commentators like Shils and Bloom that was already emerging in the late 1980s and centers on universities' capacity for cultural objectivity, normative dispassion, organizational fairness, and intellectual pluralism, all key elements of the fundamental practice of scholarship itself. In this perspective, the universities now find themselves as unwitting and unprepared agents in a national Kulturkampf, in which their functional integrity is being questioned by large sectors of the electorate and (unfortunately) by some members of the professoriate itself.

All of these interventions have at their core some presumed or putative image of what a university is, what its primary mission is, and what it should or should not do in the world of public affairs. In most cases they assume a broad and capacious set of responsibilities that universities should

19. A recent analysis and summary of these critiques, which joins with them in denouncing the alleged dangers they represent to the traditional university, can be found in the books of Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities* (London: Verso, 2017) and *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012).

provide, both to students and to society at large. But they also carry the assumption that these features and even virtues can be quantified, tested, and set in orderly comparative frameworks by disinterested third-party commentators and researchers. Whatever the range of concerns and interest points that researchers and policy makers have assumed worthy of public discussion and debate, most have depended on an even more fundamental assumption that universities are generically comparable in their constituent features and mission-oriented components. That is, a crucial facet of these evaluations of higher education by both professional politicians and the practitioners of public opinion research is that they presume a nationally competitive system of higher education, in which the quality and efficiency of each member can and should be measured, not only because higher education is now the recipient of massive national investment by federal and state governments and huge levels of private philanthropy, but because in some plausible and compelling way the observers view the universities as one thing, sharing a single replicable and understandable set of operating principles.

Yet the assumption that most universities and colleges are sufficiently alike that they can be scrutinized and measured as belonging to a common institutional category and that all are readily available, almost interchangeable "sites" that can be easily evaluated by external surveys based on a calculus of social utility, intellectual productivity, or social beneficence ignores the fact that many of the established universities already had, before the introduction of rankings, the opportunity to engage in extensive and successful cultural identity work for themselves, creating what marketing specialists would call special "brand identities" that reflected distinctive local cultural practices. Over time, these identities stipulated distinctive virtues and valorized unique practices and traditions that set each institution apart and, from a collective-cognitive perspective, made them more

difficult to compare. Thus, when rankings assemble quantitative measurements of enrollment size, student retention, faculty salary ranges, and such, comparisons between them appear reasonable and justified. But when they move into more qualitative variables involving campus climate, tolerance for dissent, acceptance of the legitimacy of academic freedom, and understandings of the legitimacy of the liberal arts, they run into local traditions and practices that may not lend themselves to common, objective standards at all.

The University of Chicago was one of these institutions. One sees these images recur in everyday language about the University in the rhetoric of many of its presidents. Edward Levi, for example, left little doubt in the minds of the many audiences he addressed as provost and president in the 1960s and 1970s of Chicago's sublime uniqueness: "Chicago has been an innovator at all levels of higher education. Its research has prodded the growth of almost every strategic field of knowledge. At the frequent cost of popularity, it has stood for intellectual freedom. And however irritating the newcomer may have been, the standards of education in innumerable institutions have been helped by its presence."²⁰ Where do these images of distinctiveness and special character come from? How are they transmitted to the various publics that have a stake in the work and the institutional welfare of these universities or who care about their impact and success? Were they uncontested? As we will see, views of the University of Chicago through the mid-twentieth century were often internally inconsistent and reflected the same kinds of divergences in public opinion we see today, but without the strong party-political and culture-wars ambience that now seems overwhelming. Yet all such views of Chicago have also presumed that the institution does stand apart, that it has a special identity and even

20. Edward H. Levi, "The Critical Spirit," *University of Chicago Magazine*, October 1965, 2–5.

a special mission in the world to be celebrated and protected. Lawrence A. Kimpton, one of the most voluble and outspoken of our presidents, once claimed about the unique self of the University that

it may or may not be true that every great university has a kind of *Geist*, or character, or unity; I only know that this one has. As I read our history, we had it the day our doors opened, and there has been no significant change since then. All sorts of people, including me, have tried to monkey with it, but nobody can win. One may like it or dislike it, but there it is.²¹

Let me now explore selective features of this process of identity formation in greater detail.

WILLIAM RAINEY HARPER

The early identity of our University was shaped above all by the programs and rhetoric of its first president, William Rainey Harper, whose vigorous, enthusiastic, and detailed pronouncements about the University and its mission constituted a striking intervention in the landscape of late nineteenth-century American higher education. In a genuine and powerful way, we were and we became what Harper willed that we would be.

Harper's ideals comprehended a set of postulates, some of which he derived from German research university models, but others of which reflected his own, home-grown American notions. Harper's self-appointed task was to create a plan sufficiently innovative yet pragmatic to enable him to generate the kind of ardent enthusiasm and acclaim that he would

21. Lawrence A. Kimpton, *University of Chicago Record* 12, no. 2 (February 28, 1978): 19.

need to attract leading scholars and highly intelligent students to a yet untested enterprise. Harper's plan was bold in its capacious goal of encompassing all sectors of society, including adult students and nontraditional learners. This is what gave the plan its élan and force—its high ambition for the University to become a crucible of new cultural ideas and the central station of research in the American Midwest, including but also exceeding on-campus undergraduate teaching.

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."²² He conceived of a university encompassing undergraduate and graduate instruction and supporting an aggressive program of original research. The first installment of the plan was issued as the *Official Bulletin*, no. 1, January 1891, with the notation that although Harper had been offered the presidency, his "acceptance of this position will be made known during the coming spring."²³ The "work of the University" would encompass the university proper, including academies; several undergraduate colleges (including one for business and practical

22. William Rainey Harper to Henry L. Morehouse, September 22, 1890, University of Chicago Founders' Correspondence 1886–1892, box 1, folder 11, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library (hereafter SCRC).

23. *Official Bulletin*, no. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, January 1891), 6. The plan was presented to the 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, it was decided to issue the plan in a series of bulletins, the first to be published in January 1891. For an overview of the plan, see Daniel Meyer, "The Chicago Faculty and the University Ideal, 1891–1929" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1994), 66–80.

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 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 with the goal of preparing many of them for advanced graduate-level study.

In addition to the university proper, the university extension 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, a university press would print and publish books, journals, and reviews authored or edited by members of the University faculty.

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 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 to twelve hours a week) and minors (which met for four to six hours a week). Each student would normally 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.

At the end of the *Official Bulletin*, no. 1, Harper listed twenty-six advantages of his new scheme of organization. They ran the gamut from enhancing the concentration of students to giving more freedom and flexibility to students by allowing them to study during the summer quarter to preventing students from taking too many subjects at time. Harper even argued that his system would “make it possible for students to take, besides the regular subjects of the college curriculum, such practical subjects as book-keeping, stenography, etc.”²⁴ But it was particularly remarkable that so many of Harper’s imagined advantages had to do with his urgent, almost fanatical, desire to help students and faculty to maximize time and to achieve efficiency, discipline, and economy. Harper’s ideal world was one in which every minute was accounted for, and no day properly concluded without a bounty of productive work. His son, Samuel, recalled Harper’s conviction that “his work, the building of a new university, had to be done rapidly in order to be well done. Dawdling along was contrary to his temperament and, he believed, inimical to the success of any job.”²⁵

The plan privileged flexibility for both students and faculty and a serious expansion of the range of instructional opportunities. Students could enter and leave the University with more flexibility than under a standard

24. *Official Bulletin*, no. 1, 15–16.

25. Samuel N. Harper, *The Russia I Believe In: The Memoirs of Samuel N. Harper, 1902–1941*, ed. Paul V. Harper (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), 5.

two-semester paradigm. Instead of long summer vacations, which Harper thought a waste of time, students would be able to accelerate their academic programs. The summer would be especially attractive to teachers from high schools who wished to obtain advanced instruction to boost their careers. The four-quarter system and especially the use of the summer as a regular academic term had a powerful impact on the subsequent culture of the University. Dean James R. Angell would later argue that these innovations have “done more to capitalize at something like their full value the educational resources of the colleges and universities of the country than any other one thing that has occurred in this period.”²⁶ The major/minor system was also a component of efficiency, since Harper was convinced that the intensive study of a few subjects, rather than loose engagement with many, would eliminate what James Tufts called the “policy of ‘scatter’ which had crept into university programs as a greater variety of subjects had come forward to lure both teachers and students.”²⁷

All this was also set in a normative milieu that, in Harper’s mind, should privilege performance over rank and class background and that was fundamentally democratic in the sense that no one could claim special dignities as forms of entitlement. To quote his son, Samuel, Harper despised any kind of snobbish or presumptuous behavior, even when he saw it among his own faculty colleagues. When plans for a new faculty club were discussed Harper insisted that it be open to all faculty and not merely to those “who were inclined to look on themselves as the chosen

26. James R. Angell to Thomas Goodspeed, April 14, 1915, Thomas W. Goodspeed Papers 1865–1927, box 4, folder 12, SCRC.

27. James H. Tufts, “A University with a New Plan,” in his unpublished autobiography, n.d., 8. James Hayden Tufts Papers 1908–1942, box 3, folder 14, SCRC.

social leaders because of their former relation to famous eastern schools.”²⁸ Harper’s aversion to the social practices of the eastern universities may have reflected his own deep midwestern roots and his pride in having surmounted a very humble personal background to gain success at Yale, but on his own terms.²⁹

Two other features of Harper’s original plan deserve mention. Harper’s long experience as a journal editor and textbook author was a prelude to his support for the University Press with its learned journals and books. As an editor Harper was in his element—playing mediator and coach, enjoining and cajoling, and encouraging novelty and creativity, but also insisting on firm deadlines and high-quality work. For Shailer Mathews, Harper was a “born editor,” a “purist in style.”³⁰ He viewed his journals as crucial agents in public education and professional scholarship that would, in Mathews’s words, “get people to study the Bible by historical methods and to build up in their hearts a religious faith born of biblical study.”³¹ Knowledge would lead to virtue, and virtue to God. Harper’s general intellectual project for the new University was defined by these expectations, and the press thus became a core agent of the spread of enlightenment on and off campus. By 1902 the press had published nearly two hundred books and pamphlets and also issued ten journals, most of them scholarly

28. Harper, *The Russia I Believe In*, 3. William Rainey Harper argued elsewhere that western universities (including Chicago) were more likely to manifest the “modern democratic spirit” and to make “the student and the professor brothers in the pursuit of knowledge.” “Higher Education in the West,” *North American Review* 179, no. 575 (October 1904): 585–86.

29. I owe this insight to Daniel Meyer, director of the SCRC.

30. Shailer Mathews, “As an Editor,” *Biblical World* 27, no. 3 (March 1906): 205–8.

31. *Ibid.*, 205.

but others more popular or for professional practitioners (e.g., *Biblical World*, *School Review*).

Harper viewed his new extension programs as vehicles to infuse higher levels of quality in the nation’s chaotic educational system. In spreading scientific knowledge among the citizenry, they encourage an appreciation of such knowledge among the adult public: “the work of diffusing scientific knowledge and creating a desire for a higher and better intellectual and aesthetic life is no less important than the advance of scientific knowledge itself by original investigation and discovery. Indeed, one may say that the latter will not find the fullest support and the most satisfactory field of progress, except in a community in which interest in a higher education is widely spread.”³² Harper wanted to generate “in the community at large that demand for the best of everything in the intellectual, aesthetic, and moral world which is at once the evidence of, and the surest means towards, the higher civic life.”³³ Just as his Hebrew correspondence courses in the 1880s helped local Protestant ministers improve their linguistic and historical skills, Harper thought that the University’s extension system would be particularly useful to urban and rural teachers who could, in turn, better prepare more students to study at the college and university level: “Our idea is that if you as teachers will undertake this kind of work for one another the young people who come to the university to us will be far better prepared to prosecute the work provided by the university curriculum.” Harper was convinced that the city of Chicago did not send enough students to college and that “this university is here to help the people of

32. William Rainey Harper, “The Eighteenth Quarterly Statement of the President of the University, April 1, 1897,” *University Record* 2, no. 2 (April 10, 1897): 13–14.

33. *Idem*, “The President’s Address on the Condition of the University,” *University Record* 1, no. 1 (April 3, 1896): 6.

Chicago, and especially those in position to receive the more definite character of aid we are able to render. We are here to assist teachers, students, businessmen and women, and particularly those whom circumstances have deprived of educational opportunities once eagerly sought." This would be done by university extension, working with school administrators and teachers.³⁴

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 to 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 put forward the scholarly research of the faculty across the nation and around the world. As an ensemble, the logic was nothing less than 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. On one hand, each of the elements was intrinsically related to all of the other parts of the plan within the organizational machinery of the University. On the other hand, each element had far-reaching national policy implications for improving American higher education in more general terms. The University's unity of spirit and action—what Edward H. Levi would later refer to as the University's oneness—was enabled in part by the systematic self-understanding and

34. "Talk by Dr. Harper: Chicago Does Not Send Enough Young Persons to College," *Chicago Tribune*, September 9, 1894, 13. Between 1892 and 1902, nearly 87 percent of those who had enrolled in correspondence courses were classified as "educators." See *The President's Report: Administration*. Decennial Publications, 1st series, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1903), 314.

the structural logic of the plan itself. Harper thus made it conceptually and organizationally possible for the University to consider itself a unified whole, or as Levi put it, a "complete university."³⁵

Harper articulated these ideals for the University in the many speeches before and after 1890 that he gave about higher education as a national system and about the planned work of the new University of Chicago in particular, in various articles and essays that he wrote discussing topics in higher education, and in his communications and interactions with the local and national press. The press proved to be of particular importance. Most newspapers viewed Harper the president and Harper the person as one and the same, and Harper's own image in the press helped to fix and concretize the image of the new University in new and publicly efficacious ways.

A long article in the *Chicago Tribune* in January 1896 described Harper as a mesmerist and magician, "perhaps the most striking figure today among contemporary Americans." He was a man of "enthusiasm, originality, and practical skill" who overflowed with new ideas and energy to implement them. He attended all baseball and football games, which gave him the image of the common man. He never forgot names, open and friendly to all, no one was too high or low not to be worthy of Harper's interest and attention. He was a great fund-raiser because of "the fascination of his personal enthusiasm and the foresight and originality with which he projects the plans of the University." He was also a great teacher, "the greatest pedagogue of his generation." Using the inductive method, he never presented his own opinion, instead he presented the facts and

35. Levi, "The Critical Spirit," 2–5. Each generation after Harper had to confront the challenge of sustaining and infusing pragmatic meaning into this fundamental, but often intractable norm. For Harper, the teaching of students—young and old, undergraduate and graduate, full time and part time, on campus and off—and the integral membership of students and alumni in our community were part of the logic underpinning the unity of his new university.

allowed students to reach their own opinions. A “relentless worker,” Harper was also an active scholar, editing two journals, *Biblical World* and *Hebraica*, and contributed frequently to them. He was compared to a then modern railroad executive, a high compliment indeed.³⁶ “I can assure you,” F. McCarthy of the *Chicago Times-Herald* wrote to Harper in 1897, “that there is no better news in this town than you and your doings, and every reporter knows, without being told, that he must report them and report them correctly.”³⁷

Harper’s image of the precocious research university was softened and mediated by the fact that he operated the institution like the mayor of a small Christian town, in which he was the elder who would intervene in all manner of local disputes and counsel students and faculty about future careers. As James Wind has argued, even in his time Harper met resistance for this image of the University was slowly challenged by powerful, fracturing pressures of professionalism emergent in the late nineteenth century, with leading scholars coming to Chicago to gain national fame, not to participate in a Baptist intellectual community.³⁸

Yet for all of his eagerness to broadcast the new University’s distinction, Harper was extremely chary of the press in general and daily newspapers in particular. “We are helpless in the hands of the press,” Harper wrote despairingly in January 1901, “and I do not know what can be done.”³⁹

36. “How Dr. Harper Wins,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 19, 1896, 26.

37. F. McCarthy to William Harper, November 5, 1897, Office of the President, Harper, Judson and Burton Administrations, box 63, folder 1, SCRC.

38. James P. Wind, *The Bible and the University: The Messianic Vision of William Rainey Harper* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 161–66.

39. Harper to Miss Talbot, January 15, 1901, Office of the President, Harper, Judson and Burton Administrations, box 63, folder 3, SCRC.

In June 1905 he advised Professor W. D. MacClintock “to make 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 absolutely unsafe to deal with these men.”⁴⁰ Harper’s greatest frustration with the press involved its treatment of the University’s religious affiliation and theological commitments. Given the Sturm und Drang that had defined his own career as a liberal biblical scholar, he was especially sensitive to reports suggesting the University had abandoned its Baptist faith or its broader commitments as a Christian institution. In response to an article claiming the University had dropped Christian doxology for school spirit songs during chapel service, Harper complained that such (false) reports “are hurting us as you can very clearly see they must among the conservative, religious, families who form the most desirable constituency of a University.”⁴¹ Reports, even grossly exaggerated reports, of the University’s fund-raising successes helped establish the University as a fashionable and promising cause, but this narrative threatened to distort the reputation Harper hoped to establish for the University.⁴² Excessive coverage of the University’s sudden splendor threatened to make it the parvenu of academia, opulent in form and empty in spirit. Hence Harper frequently objected to news reports

40. Harper to W. D. MacClintock, June 8, 1905, Office of the President, Harper, Judson and Burton Administrations, box 63, folder 4, SCRC.

41. Harper to Addison Thomas, December 10, 1904, Office of the President, Harper, Judson and Burton Administrations, box 63, folder 3, SCRC. Addison was secretary of the Chicago Associated Press. The article he referred to was published in the *New York World*, December 6, 1904, though Harper thought that similar items “have circulated broadcast through the Press.”

42. The most important social novel about Chicago in this era, Henry Blake Fuller’s *The Cliff-Dwellers* (1893), was positively scathing. The title’s reference to the city’s skyscrapers hints at the irony of opulent architecture inhabited by spiritual and intellectual barbarians.

that exaggerated the university's fund-raising efforts.⁴³ He was even more unhappy with students who worked part time as stringer-like reporters, feeding stories about campus life to the local press. In 1902 he went so far as to prepare a memo that authorized the expulsion of any student who was found guilty of such behavior (which was never implemented).⁴⁴

How were these identity constructions received? The unusual and surprising terms of its founding, the massive philanthropy of Rockefeller, the notoriety of the first senior faculty, and Harper's incessant if discomfiting portrayals in the media, all created the conditions of a university born with a huge splash of self-asserted claims to fame and distinction. Within the American academy the University gained deep national reputations almost immediately, evident in the host of tributes and testimonials to Harper during his life and upon his death, but also in the high general standing that the University enjoyed in the early surveys of academic quality in the 1910s and 1920s, such as the Hughes survey of 1926. The massive publications program of the early University—producing a flood of official

43. For example, an undated memorandum complaining about newspaper coverage claiming the University solicited Rockefeller for money: "statements," the memorandum insisted, "entirely without basis and without warrant...[and that] do injury to the University of Chicago and to the cause of education in more ways than one." Obviously, the University could not deny that it received money from Rockefeller, but his generosity was unsolicited. "The fact of the case is that Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Senior, has sent a letter to the President of the Board of Trustees of the University that he will take pleasure in giving the University to be used for current expenses the same sum of money that he gave last year, namely, \$245,000. This is a large gift and is recognized as such." See Harper, Memorandum on Statements in the Press, n.d. (likely 1898), Office of the President, Harper, Judson and Burton Administrations, box 63, folder 1, SCRC.

44. Harper, Memorandum on Students and the Press, n.d., Office of the President, Harper, Judson and Burton Administrations, box 63, folder 1, SCRC.

announcements, catalogues, curricular guides, and other informational paraphernalia—contributed to this image, conveying a detailed level of comprehensive knowledge, but also a kind of certitude in the thicket of requirements and regulations that left readers both impressed and (most likely) overwhelmed and even disoriented.⁴⁵

Harper's public image was on balance a tremendous asset to the early University. Yet his sometimes exaggerated and jejune rhetoric left him open to challenges. Harper offered a classic statement of his vision of the university in 1899 in his speech at Berkeley on "The University and Democracy" in which he argued that "the University, I contend, is the prophet of democracy; the agency established by heaven itself to proclaim the principles of democracy.... It is the university that must guide democracy into the new fields of arts and literature and science.... It is the university that fights the battles of democracy, its war cry being, 'come, let us reason together.'"⁴⁶ The logic here was impeccable, but could any institution enrolling only a few thousand students really exercise the kind of populist virtues that Harper claimed? Tellingly, when this speech was reprinted in 1899 in the *Cosmopolitan* magazine, the editor added a fascinating commentary:

It is interesting to note that President Harper's definition of a university seems rather to apply to a great modern magazine than to

45. Among our peers in the 1890s, Chicago had an unusually impressive collection of official publications and an unusually detailed set of governance arrangements, all of which suggested a mature institution that had existed for many years. Harper commissioned such documents with the deliberate purpose of elaborating a specific image of weightiness, substance, and institutional authority and independence.

46. Harper, "The University and Democracy," 1899, William Rainey Harper Papers, 1872–1938, box 18, folder 7, SCRC.

the university as we know it. The magazine is conducted by the people absolutely in the best interests of the people. Of this edition of THE COSMOPOLITAN three hundred and fifty thousand copies will be printed. That means easily two million readers—two million students of all that the ablest minds of the world can offer them in science, art, education, history, fiction, economics.... Here is the ideal university which pays a small fortune to a great thinker like Tolstoy to go off alone and think his best thoughts for the benefit of the public. Here is the ideal forum in which men of all political opinions and of every kind of science put forth their conscientious thoughts.... So should the universities, of which President Harper speaks, be! But are they? Are not many of them wrapped up in the prejudices of the centuries? Do they not refuse to permit even their own curricula to be considered in the light of the requirements made by modern life, or on any other basis than the traditions which the centuries have handed down to them? President Harper's ideal is a noble one. All will pray that it will soon become more of a reality and less the dream of a man of high ideals. Meanwhile the new university, the evolution of the century, the low-priced modern magazine, with its two million readers, in comparison with whom the numbers of the greatest universities become insignificant, will continue its work of education.⁴⁷

The quote is fascinating because it culls out a fundamental disjunction between ideal claims about the new University and the reality in which they were grounded. For the anonymous editor, Harper's grand words were splendid for a limited few, but in the writer's view the new university

47. Editor, footnote to "The University as Democracy," by William R. Harper, *Cosmopolitan*, April 1899, 686.

would inevitably have a rather self-imposed and limited scope in the wider reaches of American (mass) society, one for which the middle-brow press of America might happily compensate. It was not that Harper was disingenuous or fabricating achievements, but that his claims were at times simply so grand as to inspire skepticism.

Still, among leading peers, Harper's vision of what the University was and how it should talk about itself engendered a powerful and efficacious rhetoric of distinction. G. Stanley Hall, president of Clark University, an institution that had been ravaged by Harper's famous raid of the Clark faculty in 1892, wrote to John D. Rockefeller in late 1905 that Harper would be "shocked to know that I thought of writing to you," but that

I think no one in the whole field of education has shown such genius for organization, has himself grown more rapidly in office, has given to college and university work so many new and good ideas, has been so unselfish, shown such powers of sustained and effective work, has so admirably combined the enthusiasm of a scholar and that of an administrator. Even his annual Register is full of stimulating new ideas. Eastern college presidents were a little disposed to look askance upon him at first, but their attitude has greatly changed, although even yet I do not think they appreciate him at his full worth. He will go down in the history of education as a man who marks a great and salutary epoch.⁴⁸

Similarly, Edmund James, president of the University of Illinois, commented about Harper in 1906 that "the establishment of the University of Chicago with the announcement of the things for which it was to

48. G. Stanley Hall to John D. Rockefeller, December 18, 1905, Harper Papers, box 17, folder 1, SCRC.

stand, opened a new era in this Mississippi Valley. Every institution of higher learning has profited by these altered standards and these higher ideals.”⁴⁹

The result was an image of the University that saw itself having a special destiny in its region, an intense, scholarly, outgoing institution claiming to encounter all sectors of society, a college that was a creature of professionalist success as well as intellectual rigor, a university seeking to balance the reserve and isolation of the scholarly mission with an ambitious pedagogical engagement on all fronts with wider civil society, particularly in Chicago.

Yet Harper’s aversion to the intrusiveness of the press also revealed an ironic challenge to the identity of the universities, namely, the fact that the press was the first “neo-rankings” system, long before official rankings. Chicago was not alone in this complex and evolving relationship with public opinion and the media, at once mutually beneficial and aversive. These challenges were, rather, a unifying experience for universities in Europe and the United States in the first global system of higher education around 1900. It is thus all the more remarkable that a newspaper like the *Chicago Tribune* scrutinized the quotidian activities of the leaders of the University of Chicago—such as fashion choices, dinner parties, engagements and births—in ways that the *Neue Freie Presse* never covered the University of Vienna or the *Vossische Zeitung* the University of Berlin.

Why was that the case? Perhaps because American universities were deemed to be more student-oriented than their German counterparts? Or because American universities were not state institutions, per se, but more like churches, banks, or other large private organizations with a large,

49. Edmund J. James, “Memorial Address at the University of Illinois,” *The University Record*, Memorial Number, March 1906, 25.

messy social footprint that blended into civil society in ways that a state institution could rarely do? These hypotheses could explain why private American research universities have always struggled with the issue of academic freedom more than their German and Austrian counterparts. Because they do not have the official badge of “stateliness” and an externally imposed orderliness about them, they have to regulate the terms of their engagement with civil society and the conflicts around free speech on their own. Max Weber’s comparison between German and US universities is helpful here: Weber immediately noticed the more market-oriented and entrepreneurial nature of US universities—in his mind they were more like large industrial or commercial business corporations than their German counterparts.⁵⁰ As such, they had more flexibility to define their educational mission and create their own institutional identities, but also greater need to negotiate and set boundaries for themselves with the external social world.

A second possible reason for the popular fascination engendered by the new American university was the more egalitarian social milieu in which it was lodged, which craved new forms of social distinction and differentiation. The great German universities cultivated and protected the dignity of the professoriate as senior civil servants of the state, who enjoyed all of the professional protections that came with that status in the German

50. See Max Weber, “American and German Universities,” in *Max Weber on Universities: The Power of the State and the Dignity of the Academic Calling in Imperial Germany*, ed. Edward Shils (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 23–30. For the background, see Rüdiger vom Bruch, “Wissenschaftspolitik, Kulturpolitik, Weltpolitik: Hochschule und Forschungsinstitute auf dem Deutschen Hochschullehrertag in Dresden 1911,” in *Transformation des Historismus: Wissenschaftsorganisation und Bildungspolitik vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg: Interpretationen und Dokumente*, ed. Horst Walter Blanke (Waltrop: Hartmut Spenner, 1994), 32–63.

Rechtsstaat. But German universities were also corporations chartered by and funded by a state and a society in which other more powerful forms of social stratification dominated the public imagination, particularly the extraordinary attraction of aristocratic ranks and the public fascination with the ideal of the professional military officer. As Norbert Elias observed, “the German University was, in a sense, the middle-class counterweight to the Court.”⁵¹ Lacking a court or a system of established and privileged social corporations as existed in Germany and the Habsburg Empire, American universities were among the few cultural institutions available in the more democratic New World that could produce the kind of post-feudal hierarchies of prestige that were present in Central Europe, but lacking in nineteenth-century Gilded Age America. As the most plausible and easily discernable sources of what might pass in America for a functional social aristocracy, the top private universities not only became the objects of public solicitation and gratification via philanthropy, but as centers of cultural prestige they were also more “porous” and open to public cultural scrutiny than their Central European counterparts.

51. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, vol. 1, *The History of Manners* (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), 24.

HARRY PRATT JUDSON AND ERNEST DEWITT BURTON

Harper's immediate successors were content to stabilize and continue his ideological course. During Harry Pratt Judson's long presidency from 1906 to 1921 the University tended to adopt a rather passive stance—Judson was not nearly the lightning rod of publicity that Harper became, nor did he engage in public rhetoric of any significant impact. The institution rolled along and basked in the cumulative success of the first three decades. In contrast, during his short presidency from 1922 to 1925 Ernest DeWitt Burton, who saw himself as Harper's *adlatus* and intellectual heir, used the first University capital campaign to reinforce, but also modify, many of the identity-generating themes and arguments first articulated by Harper. In a number of key speeches delivered in Chicago and in other cities around the country Burton sketched his plans for the future of the University. The basic theme of the speeches was the need to build on Harper's heritage by making the University not bigger but better. Burton stressed the fundamental mission of research (“this mighty and fruitful thing, the quest for new truth”), but he was also able to translate “research” into a set of practices that involved undergraduate and professional education, instead of restricting research solely to doctoral training in the arts and sciences. He insisted that a new ideal of college life was evolving in the United States, stressing the development of intellectual habits more than the “impartation of known facts,” and the University of Chicago would help to shape it: “The dominant element of that life will be the recognition of the fact that life is more than lore, that character is more than facts; that college life is the period of the formation of habits, even more than of the acquisition of knowledge, and that the making of men

and women with habits and character that will insure their being in after life men and women of power, achievement, and helpful influence in the world, is the great task of the college." What better place to train young minds in the "capacity to think for themselves" than to place them under the influence of scholars "who are striking out new paths, fearlessly attacking the mysteries of truth...it seems logical and right that the work of the colleges should be conducted in an atmosphere imparted by or akin to that of the great graduate schools, in places where freedom of the mind is encouraged." Burton's approach was thus consistent with Harper's values, but with a more capacious and articulate sense of the value of undergraduate work to the intellectual identity of the research university than Harper had ever articulated.⁵²

It was also during the 1920s that competitive reputational rankings began, which among other things are attempts by the higher-education industry to define its own image and reality, not only for the academy but for the wider generally interested educated public. In January 1925 the University of Chicago was the beneficiary of extravagant praise relating to the quality of its graduate programs. One of the first modern attempts to evaluate and rank modern American research universities, developed by Raymond M. Hughes, president of Miami University, gave positive and encouraging news about Chicago's relative prestige among peer research universities, praising the graduate programs in the natural sciences and mathematics, but also ranking Economics, History, Sociology, Political Science, Classics, English, and Philosophy among the top five departments in their respective disciplines in the United States.⁵³ Ironically,

52. Copies of Burton's various speeches are in the University of Chicago Development Campaigns and Anniversaries Records 1896–1941, box 5, folders 1–12, SCRC.

53. Raymond M. Hughes, *A Study of the Graduate Schools of America* (Oxford, OH: Miami University, 1925).

although Hughes's report is now remembered as one of the first vehicles for assessing the prestige of the American research universities, Hughes and his colleagues were also critical of the lack of interest that graduate programs in the United States had shown in preparing their students to be effective teachers, highlighting a policy issue that would soon become a structural challenge in Harper's model. Hughes himself decried the fact that "not a few [PhDs] are coming somewhat imbued with the idea that students are a nuisance and interfere with work, that teaching methods are unworthy of serious thought, that anybody who knows can teach, and a good many other ideas which are only half-truths or are wrong."⁵⁴

ROBERT M. HUTCHINS



With the ascent of Robert Hutchins to the presidency in the summer of 1929 the University came to have a second charismatic leader, a man who would profoundly reshape the public image of the University and not only infuse it with new levels of self-understanding and self-confidence about its cultural character, but seek to mold the content of that character as well. Hutchins dominated the press and public media, and not in the reactive or defensive way of Harper, and thus used the media as new and powerful tools to educate the public about the nature of the University's mission and its values. In sharp contrast to Harper, Hutchins was not unduly worried about the press's or the public's reaction to educational controversies, and in fact Hutchins was effective in deploying a self-confident, outward-looking set of rhetorical strategies that played well with his own talents as a public communicator. Instead of the irritable antipathy that marked

54. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

Harper's attitude toward the press, Hutchins's position was one of serene, almost patrician condescension. He viewed vexatious journalists as a senior professor would treat a difficult student: ill-informed but teachable, unruly but not beyond the reach of a gifted educator, and certainly capable of being enlisted to advance his own cause. Hutchins never personalized criticisms of himself or the University; rather his responses to the press were often wry or a little impatient, but never irate.

William Benton later recalled of Hutchins' talent as a public communicator that

partly because of his remarkable performance as class orator, he was offered the Secretaryship of Yale University within less than two years after graduation.... As Secretary he was the press officer and also responsible for alumni contacts. He spoke hundreds of times at alumni dinners, often to boisterous groups. He developed charm, familiarity and wit. I heard him do a job with my Class along in 1926 or 1927, five or six years after we had graduated, that was spectacular. He spoke extemporaneously, seemingly, and with extraordinary wit. I've heard him do this also many times at Chicago.⁵⁵

Over the course of the 1930s Hutchins turned himself into a national intellectual figure, featured on the cover of *Time* magazine, whose writings presented, in the words of one sympathetic Chicago trustee, a "pungent method of expression [that] is good reading."⁵⁶ Hutchins's speeches were carefully crafted, but delivered extemporaneously, often without reading from a text. Many were given from the high pulpit of Rockefeller Chapel,

55. William Benton to John Howe, July 15, 1956, William Benton Papers 1839–1973, box 409, folder 2, SCRC.

56. Clarence Randall to William Benton, November 20, 1939, Harold Swift Papers 1897–1962, box 49, folder 10, SCRC.

a setting that resonates with the proposition that, like his father, Hutchins was at heart a preacher as well as an orator, if a secular one at that.

Hutchins articulated a point of view about liberal education that was eloquent and vital, and that was distinctive from that of Harper. Whereas much of Harper's rhetoric had focused on the efficacy of research, on the unity of science and learning, on the reconciliation of religion and piety within the academy, and on key structural issues relating to the administrative architecture of the new University, Hutchins chose to drill down much more self-consciously on the purposes of liberal education and on the skills, virtues, and attainments that would be expected of the student who was fully committed to rational self-enlightenment. 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 eloquent voice in various debates in the 1930s and 1940s about the mission of the colleges, with a strong commitment to a liberal education for life. Hutchins opposed what he called "an education based on credentialism and careerism." At the same time, we need to remember almost all of the students in the College in the 1930s wanted professional careers of some sort, and Hutchins certainly knew this, yet it was precisely his excessive and occasionally abstruse rhetoric challenging any form of vocationalism that made Hutchins immensely influential and admired, even among his own student body.

Hutchins elaborated this educational vision in *The Higher Learning in America*, a collection of speeches published in 1936. In 1935 Hutchins had insisted to the Board of Trustees that "the whole course of study [in the College] suffers greatly from a disease that afflicts all college teaching in America, the information disease." *The Higher Learning* was Hutchins's attempt both to diagnose and to provide a cure for the "information disease." His diagnosis centered on the claim that only in the university does

our society have a hope of pursuing truth for its own sake. We ask universities to do this, but we also ask them to train their students for productive work beyond the academy. Hutchins argued that this vocationalism tends to drive out the pursuit of truth, substituting the gathering of useful information for genuine inquiry. With vocationalism removed, universities could devote themselves to the cultivation of the intellectual virtues for the sake of the pursuit of truth through direct study of mankind's greatest achievements.⁵⁷ These early essays and speeches led logically to the crusade of the Great Books in the 1940s and 1950s.

Hutchins's work on the radio was equally prodigious in reaffirming the core mission of the University. In the midst of the Walgreen Affair⁵⁸ Hutchins went on NBC radio to deliver a speech on April 18, 1935, on the subject of "What Is a University?" Hutchins used his air time to define the University as "community of scholars," insisting that "it is not a kindergarten; it is not a club; it is not a reform school; it is not a political party; it is not an agency for propaganda." Given this mission, the university was fundamentally dependent on protecting freedom of enquiry, freedom of discussion, and freedom of teaching. Lacking these freedoms, "a university cannot exist." Hutchins also insisted that "the purpose of education is not to fill the minds of students with facts; it is not to reform them, or amuse them, or make them expert technicians in any field. It is to teach them to think, if that is possible, and to think always for

57. Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1936).

58. In 1935 a local businessman, Charles R. Walgreen, accused University teachers of exposing students to "Communistic influences." Hutchins deftly defended faculty teaching freedom before a special committee of the Illinois State Senate. See John W. Boyer, *The University of Chicago: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 268–75.

themselves. It is of the highest importance that there should be some places where they can learn how to do it."⁵⁹ Hutchins's forthright defense of the importance of academic freedom was all the more compelling, since it connected that norm not simply to the research mission of the university to discover new knowledge, but to its educational function as a trans-generational cultural portal guiding the young to creativity, self-reliance, and compassionate citizenship. That is, the mission of the university is not simply to discover truth, but to teach students how to understand the truth in all of its messy and controversial complexity and to encourage in them the intelligence, the good judgment, and the courage to act wisely in sustaining our democracy. Lacking full freedom, the university and its members—students and faculty alike—can do none of these things.

This speech merited considerable public acclaim in academic and progressive political circles. Paul G. Hoffman of the Studebaker Corporation, who would later hire Hutchins as vice president of the new Ford Foundation in 1951, wrote to Hutchins, "I have just finished reading the written report of your speech 'What Is a University?' I am delighted to have it because it sets forth with utmost clarity certain ideas which I have endeavored to make clear to business friends of mine who have been critical of activities within our universities. There is a certain paradox to me in the attitude of many business men who are clamoring for freedom of action, who at the same time would restrict freedom of discussion and speech. You are to be commended for the dignified manner in which you have met the unwarranted attacks upon the University."⁶⁰ David H. Stevens of the Rockefeller Foundation wrote that "I want to be one of the tribe to

59. Robert Hutchins, "What Is a University?" April 18, 1935, Robert Maynard Hutchins Papers 1884–2000, box 357, folder 18, SCRC.

60. Paul G. Hoffman to Hutchins, May 2, 1935, Swift Papers, box 190, folder 4, SCRC. There are more congratulatory letters to Hutchins in box 190, folder 5.

send congratulations on the stand reported as yours in the Sunday morning newspapers. I should like to write an article giving the reasons why I leave my son in the University instead of taking him out. I hope that things keep coming your way on this job with Walgreen, et al.”⁶¹

Hutchins’s ideal of the University as an empire of uninhibited rational discussion and free debate applied not only to the scholarly authority and intellectual responsibility of the faculty, but also set challenging academic expectations for its students as well. This made the strong dedication to free speech and to academic freedom which was the hallmark of Hutchins’s presidency all the more intelligible, for Hutchins understood that a culture of academic freedom could only be sustained if the broadest base of the University’s community—its student body—had the discernment, discipline, open-mindedness, and commitment to the rational principle that any plausible attempt to sustain academic freedom absolutely requires. Hutchins became justly famous for defending free speech for faculty and students alike, but he did not do this as some kind of superficial act of sympathy or generosity toward the students. Rather, he understood that the faculty would never be fully free if their students were also not free and, even more, unless the students embraced not only the pleasure but also the risk and the discomfort of being free. And surely it was crucial that at the same time that Hutchins was mounting his steadfast defenses of academic freedom he was also deeply involved in challenging the faculty to develop still more rigorous and coherent programs of general education—the famous Chicago Core—that would ensure that our students understood how to practice the scholarly virtues of dispassion, courage, and intellectual discernment. As he put it in his final address to the University in 1951, “our problem is not merely to work out an adequate

61. David H. Stevens to Hutchins, April 16, 1935, Swift Papers, box 191, folder 5, SCRC.

definition of academic freedom, but to induce people to *care* about it.”⁶²

Yet here too the public response was complex and often not altogether positive. Among wealthy social elites in Chicago and even among some of our own alumni from the 1910s and 1920s the University under Hutchins’s leadership got a reputation for left-wing thinking, disdain for athletics and Greek life, and hyperintellectualism among its undergraduate student body. One sees this in alumni interviews conducted in 1950 to survey the fund-raising situation. The results were unhappily mixed.⁶³ Many older alumni from before 1930 were unhappy with the University’s alleged left-wing activities. In their mind, the College was “not getting a fair cross section of youth” and was appealing to “prodigies to become ‘long-haired’ geniuses.” They also felt that little social prestige was attached to the school, that many alumni sent their children elsewhere, and that the abolition of football and “the fraternity situation” precluded sentimental attachment and took away “any reason for return to campus to keep up ties.” Finally, some felt Hutchins to be an unnecessarily controversial figure.⁶⁴ Even so, these individuals almost always admired the University as an institution of higher learning and many wished “to know about what the University is doing and, as one put it, be ‘made to feel proud of having gone to Chicago.’” Perhaps as a result, Kersting found that “there seems to

62. Robert M. Hutchins, “A Farewell Address, *University of Chicago Magazine*, February, 1951, 4.

63. Kersting, Brown & Company, “An Inventory of Fund Raising Resources and Suggested Procedure,” December 1, 1950, Swift Papers, box 83, folder 13, SCRC. The research included interviews with fifty-one alumni in Chicago; New York; Des Moines and Waterloo, Iowa; and Madison and Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and fifty-six interviews with non-alumni businessmen and professionals as well as members of the board, senior staff, and some foundation leaders.

64. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

be on the part of some members of the administration a sort of defeatist attitude toward the University's alumni, a feeling that they are not to be counted on, especially those in the earlier classes who should be more able to give."⁶⁵

These problems were already apparent in a private survey that William Benton did for the trustees in January 1937.⁶⁶ Benton was a talented public relations specialist whom Hutchins had known since his days on the inter-collegiate debate team at Yale.⁶⁷ Benton spent six weeks on campus to generate this confidential book. It was privately printed in fifty copies, with each trustee receiving a copy. So sensitive were its conclusions that Hutchins instructed the trustees to return their copies to the President's Office once they had read it. Benton came to conclusions not very different from those of the professional development officers, although he was more interested in shaping positive public opinion for the University than in the instrumentalities of fund-raising. He concluded that the University needed a dramatic reengineering of its public relations in the face of its unfavorable image as a protector of radical opinions: "wide acclaim would Mr. Hutchins win in some quarters if for New Year's he resolved to fire, or to attempt to fire, certain members of the faculty on the charge of radicalism. These are influential quarters, including some of Chicago's wealthiest citizens, many potential donors to the University."⁶⁸

These ambivalences and negative feelings thus translated into philanthropic giving rates by Chicago alumni substantially below those of private

65. Ibid., 13.

66. William B. Benton, *The University of Chicago's Public Relations* (Chicago: printed by the author, 1939).

67. Sydney Hyman, *The Lives of William Benton* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 68–70.

68. Benton, *The University of Chicago's Public Relations*, 23.

peer institutions, seriously harming the relative financial welfare of the University in the 1940s, 1950s, and beyond. The average participation rate in the annual fund for Chicago alumni was 14 percent, compared with an average of 37.5 percent for five other top private universities, resulting in \$135,304 in cash contributions compared with the average of \$484,320 attained by our peers.⁶⁹ In a word, the University of Chicago prospered enormously but also suffered under the weight of its catchment of admirable and distinctive principles.

Public attitudes of disquiet among urban elites in Chicago about the distinctive features of the University paralleled those of the alumni. The distinguished journalist and Chicago alumnus John Gunther, PhB'22, remembered in 1967 about the views of city leaders that

several old-style Chicago tycoons had ambivalent feelings toward the University in older days. They respected it—perhaps stood in a certain awe of it—but they did not really like it. They thought that it was off-beat, radically inclined, even pinko, although its Economics Department is one of the most conservative in the country. But the old mercantile aristocracy could not abide its devotion to what they called the visionary. And the Irish political bosses thought that long-haired professors dedicated to theory were crazy. They were suspicious of anything 'intellectual'. Chicago has traditionally been 'run' by State Street and the Irish (and other immigrant-descended) ward heelers, and to most of these the University was a puzzle.⁷⁰

69. Kersting, Brown & Company, "An Inventory of Fund Raising Resources and Suggested Procedure," December 1, 1950, Swift Papers, box 83, folder 13, SCRC.

70. John Gunther, *Chicago Revisited* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 70–71.

THE UNIVERSITY TODAY

Both Harper and Hutchins exerted a powerful influence in defining the collective self of the University of Chicago, and both were convinced that the mission and indeed the fate of the University were to serve as a model for other aspiring institutions. Thus, their rhetoric of uniqueness carried with it an inherent contradiction and paradox. A university committed to tough and exacting merit and uncompromising freedom of speech, all the while open to men and women and imposing no formal or informal ethnic or religious quotas, and de facto via the quarter system committed to providing access to as many talented students as possible (even if they had to engage in large levels of part-time work to be able to attend Chicago)—all of these values bespoke an institution that self-consciously sought to offer standards and goals to be copied by others, all the while insisting on its fundamental uniqueness and singularity. Chicago offered itself as a national model, all the while coveting a deep sense of differentiation and cultural self-sufficiency. Subsequent leaders of the University have continued to draw upon and invoke the values articulated by the early presidents, and in ways that framed the mission of the institution and advanced the cultural practices sanctioned and affirmed by its senior faculty. To take but one prominent example, one sees this continuum of discursive practice at work in the collective assumptions undergirding the famous Kalven Report from 1967. This report sought to protect the individual rights of the faculty and students to speak and act freely by articulating the ways that the University would understand and interpret its corporate standing and its collective actions so as to enhance and protect those individual rights. This dualism was anchored on an essential and strong principle, namely, the expectation that only an ideologically neutral University could

and would guarantee each individual member's rights to full self-expression. The report is framed as a universal document, inviting others to join its logic and conclusions, but in fact the basic logic of the Kalven Report flowed from the identity work of the previous seventy years in an almost uncanny fashion. Its genesis in the 1960s was the outcome of the special way that the University's faculty had come of age as an agent of scholarly professionalism and intellectual independence between the 1890s and the 1930s.⁷¹

It was not accidental that, aside from William Rainey Harper himself, the senior faculty member perhaps most admired by his fellow Chicago colleagues around 1900 was the German-born scholar, Hermann von Holst, who served as a powerful example of a senior German-style *Ordinarius* in claiming and doggedly practicing a style of personal intellectual freedom that offered an alluring model for other senior members of the faculty of the early University.⁷² Even in the face of Harper's displeasure over his outspoken anti-imperialist notions on American foreign policy, Hermann von Holst insisted that faculty were "not slaves but free men, everyone entitled to his own opinion and free to avow them."⁷³ This image of a famous, senior, German-born professor, steeped in the dignity and independence of the academic calling and defending uncompromising ideals of teaching, offered his younger colleagues on the Chicago faculty a powerful model for their own professional self-development. The noted

71. Harry Kalven Jr. et al., "Kalven Committee: Report on the University's Role in Political and Social Action," *University of Chicago Record* 1, no. 1 (November 3, 1967): 2–3.

72. See "Is Fiat of a Dictator," *Chicago Tribune*, December 19, 1895, 2; "Von Holst Stirs up War," *ibid.*, December 22, 1895, 1.

73. Von Holst to Harper, December 22, 1895, Office of the President, Harper, Judson, and Burton Administrations Records 1869–1925, box 85, folder 2, SCRC.

economist J. Laurence Laughlin remembered that “the one striking impression that [Holst] made, within the University and without, was that of a great moral force. With his students, as with the public, he not only set the chords of right and wrong to vibrating afresh, but he set every conscience on the right key.”⁷⁴

Laughlin’s encomium for Holst magnificently captured the subtle impact of the nineteenth-century German research tradition on a university that had already emerged as the anchor of scholarly prestige of the American Middle West. The many University of Chicago faculty who had undertaken doctoral studies at one or more of the imperial German universities before 1914 had brought back with them not an innocent or even a naïve nostalgia, and certainly not any admiration for the autocratic politics of the then German government. Nor were they oblivious to the obvious structural differences that later scholars have insisted upon between the German and the American research universities. What they did take from the German model was its high valuation of the authority of scientific thinking, the importance of truth telling and scholarly discovery, the prestige of intellectual erudition, the need to create institutional arrangements like large libraries and scientific laboratories to advance the discovery of new knowledge, and the powerful independence of the senior faculty as the corporate group in university life. Their idealization of German *Wissenschaft* was sober and selective, and they knew exactly what they were borrowing and what they disdained to borrow. Yet the ideal of the professor as a morally *and* politically independent *Gelehrter*, empowered by the bold self-confidence licensed by the hybrid internationalism of the early University of Chicago, set in

74. John Laurence Laughlin, “Life and Character of Hermann E. von Holst,” *University Record* 8, no. 6 (October 1903): 161–69, here 167.

motion collective values of pride and self-possession on the part of the faculty that would resound over the whole of the twentieth century.

Nor was this self-constructed bundle of faculty rights irrelevant to students and student life. The early faculty, steeped in the pride of playing the role of the “German research professor” in America, could be just as chary of attempts to abridge student rights. A classic case of this phenomenon came in 1919 when a young undergraduate student at the University of Chicago ran afoul of President Judson for his pacifist and anti-British statements at the conclusion of World War I. The student, Louis Wirth, was a leader of the local Cosmopolitan Club, a group of about thirty foreign students on campus founded in 1909. (After receiving his PhD in 1925 Wirth joined the faculty of the Department of Sociology in 1931 and became a distinguished expert on urban sociology.) Wirth used one of the club’s meetings in 1919 to denounce the Versailles peace treaty as “the most impudent document ever devised by the hands and brains of diplomats” and as a peace of “vengeance.”⁷⁵ Judson thereupon took the astonishing step of summoning an emergency meeting of the full professors of the arts and sciences to consider whether to expel Wirth and another student, Ephraim Gottlieb.⁷⁶ Two senior faculty members, Ferdinand Schevill and Albion Small (both of whom were trained at German universities), attended the meeting and spoke out strongly in Wirth’s

75. “U. of C. Radicals and Professors Clash at Feast,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 20, 1919, 21; “First Annual Banquet of Foreign Students to Be Given Tonight at 6:30,” *Chicago Daily Maroon*, May 16, 1919, 2.

76. “Minutes of the Faculty of the Arts, Literature, and Science, Special Meeting, June 5, 1919,” 1, SCRC; “Two Radicals of U. of C. Imperil Their Diplomas,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 7, 1919, 3.

defense.⁷⁷ The assembled faculty had the good sense to reject Judson's ploy. As Robert Lovett later recalled, the "two students, about to graduate, made caustic criticisms of the Treaty of Versailles at a dinner of the [Cosmopolitan and] International Club[s], which were reported by faculty spies. The President summoned the faculty to consider the question of withholding their degrees, and was unanimously told that if approval of the Treaty was to be required for a degree, it should be so stated in the entrance requirements."⁷⁸

Chicago has thus regularly been able to invoke and defend Harry Kalven's notion of institutional "neutrality" as a general norm in protecting individual free speech and academic freedom, since that norm flows comfortably out of the local history of our faculty culture and our educational structures and standards, defined by generations of distinguished senior scholars whose professional commitment to protect the practice of independent, value-free research and whose parallel dedication to rigorous teaching in our general-education programs, however controversial such research and teaching might be, has left deep traces on the community.

The university idealized in the words of Harry Kalven and his colleagues in 1967 derived its authority and impact from the fact that it was not and could not become what many people on both sides of the political divide now wish it to be. As a complex cultural community, chartered and constructed over time and devoted above all to the pursuit of rational discussion, it is not a semi-governmental, social, or ideological hardware store, whose mission is to cure all of the extant cultural or ethical ills besetting society. As Edward H. Levi observed in 1967, "A university

77. See the memoir of Mary Bolton Wirth, "1916–1920 at the University of Chicago," 2, Mary Bolton Wirth Papers 1916–1975, box 5, folder 2, SCRC.

78. Robert Morss Lovett, "Democracy in Colleges," 6, unpublished manuscript, n.d., Robert Lovett Papers 1876–1950, box 2, folder 17, SCRC.

which claims to be all things to all people, or as many different things as different groups wish it to be, is deceitful or foolish or both."⁷⁹ In a word: the University is not an agency for good *or* bad social engineering.

In my comments today I have tried to compare some generic external images imputed to the universities via ratings and public opinion surveys with the special and distinctive internal images and cultural-educational practices developed by the leaders and opinion makers of the University of Chicago. I have argued that, as an older and more venerable institution (like Yale, Harvard, Berkeley, etc.), Chicago has had the privilege of constructing "codes" of identity and resulting cultural-educational practices that cannot be easily captured in populist opinion surveys. One can compare enrollment levels, faculty salaries, and endowment size among leading universities, but when it comes to cultural practices, curricular expectations, and social milieu, the comparability of these institutions becomes more difficult to ascertain, since they crucially depend on the self-conscious articulation of educational standards, aspirations, and practices that emerged within the specific context of their history and that the faculty has insisted on defending down to the present.

This uneven dialogue between the educational efficacy of the universities and the metrics of success that the public creates for them has been part of the public conversation about American higher education since the Gilded Age. We have seen that it was nothing new for partisan groups to evaluate universities according to their own, rather fluid standards of what higher education should be, as seen in Harper's and Hutchins's struggles with the press. But the university of 1900 or 1940 was not the target of mass political expectations and mass ideological branding that the university of 2020 has become. Universities have become a primary driver of

79. Edward H. Levi, "The University and the Modern Condition," in *Point of View: Talks on Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 12.

what Herbert Croly imagined as “the promise of American life,” vital agents for multiple forms of social and civic identity transformation. As a result, it is inevitable that the institutional world of American higher education will be judged within the enlivened populist partisanship that has enveloped our public life. But the motives driving the creation of these partisan milieus run deeply contrary to the core mission of the university: to conduct disinterested scientific research and to encourage an appreciation of the higher learning among our students. Therefore, to rely on or accept unquestioningly the frameworks of the Pew and Gallup polls in order to understand our situation is, *a priori*, problematic, because these polls have no way of explaining to respondents the distinct bundle of identities and cultural-educational practices that define the everyday work of great universities in the first place. To ask a Republican or Democratic voter whether a “liberal arts” institution like the University of Chicago is an institution that they would like or dislike, support or not support, based on their party-political proclivities, is irrelevant, since the person being questioned is unlikely to have (or want) sufficient knowledge of Chicago’s historically developed identity, including the fact that it has always been leery of claims that the “liberal arts” should have any kind of presumptive social engagement. To quote Edward Levi once again:

The University has always had a profound sense of its own “self-limiting goals: its recognition that its only uniqueness ultimately arises from the power of thought, the dedication to basic inquiry, the discipline of intellectual training...the University’s role is not based upon a conception of neutrality or indifference to society’s problems, but an approach to the problems through the only strength which a university is entitled to assert. It is a conservative role because it values cultures and ideas, and reaffirms the basic

commitment to reason. It is revolutionary because of its compulsion to discover and to know. It is modest because it recognizes the difficulties are great and the standards demanding.⁸⁰

Our society is filled with sundry temptations and disheartening pressures to avoid individual social and intellectual responsibility. Mass petitions infused with self-righteous partisanship—which denounce the ideas of faculty or students deemed errant by whatever mobile majority of self-appointed censors seizes control of the social-media cycle on a given day—are as easily concocted as proverbial cheap dime novels. In this world, we in universities face the danger of being politicized in ways that we don’t recognize, precisely because, in speaking from our own cultural code, we may find ourselves engaging with correspondents who speak from utterly different referential systems, often on publicly charged issues. How should faculty, students, and administrators respond to these realities? How carefully do we have to weigh or even self-censor our thoughts and our writings in the face of the fact that they may be politicized by others for their own self-interested purposes? When troubles occur, do we have some vague moral responsibility to avoid ideas and statements that will encourage heated controversy? Or, is this not the most dangerous form of censorship, namely, censorship internalized and imposed by oneself on oneself?

More than in the past, universities must encourage engagement with unpopular arguments. They must put public interest beyond private interest and acknowledge the need to engage rationally with a world of contentious and even bitterly rival opinions that need to be interrogated, not repressed. As my colleague Donald N. Levine put it in a decanal welcoming speech to our students many years ago,

80. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

We cannot promise you much about the weather. We cannot promise you an urban environment free from difficulties. We cannot promise that our facilities will always be state of the art. We cannot even promise that we are always able to live up to the educational ideals we are most proud of—though I assure you we do keep trying. But we are able to promise you that at the end of your sojourn here there will be no important areas of general knowledge to which you are utter strangers, and literally nothing you might pick up to read in which you cannot gain at least a foothold of a sense. We promise that you will know that difference between an opinion and an argument, and between a good argument and a specious one, and that you will credit that quality of argument even when it is made in favor of conclusions with which you disagree.⁸¹

But to be able to do these tasks and do them effectively, a university has to have a deep and rich sense of its educational self. A commitment to freedom is illusory if it is not underpinned with a commitment to curricular coherence and to intellectual rigor. To protect the educational standards, the curricular traditions, and intellectual ambitions of a university is to protect the very conditions that have made it possible for us to be free. Universities that have been indifferent toward or unwilling to develop a thorough-going consensus about the logic and purposes of their educational programs will find it, in my view, exceedingly difficult to adopt the Chicago Principles on academic freedom, or anyone else's principles for that matter. Conversely, those universities that seek to affirm a positive commitment to intellectual freedom would do well to begin by articulating

81. Donald N. Levine, "Welcome Address to the Entering Students," September 22, 1985, College Archive.

and defending rigorous norms for the scholarly practice of liberal education. One contemporary critic of the state of the universities, Stefan Collini, has recently argued that "a set of activities whose informing logic requires open-ended enquiry and the exercise of qualitative judgment is always on a kind of collision course with the tendency of modern societies to require quantitatively measurable forms of accountability and utilitarian outcomes."⁸² Yet one might well argue that this particular collision course is not the greatest danger facing universities nowadays. Rather, the most prescient danger seems to be radically different political evaluations of the very experience of "open-ended enquiry and the exercise of qualitative judgment" as the core activity of the universities in the first place. Universities that have a strong and coherent tradition of educational practice that they can explain to the outside world will be much better placed to defend themselves against the alleged dangers of market utility and cost accountability.

Don Levine's words thus reflected a trans-generational devotion to that combination of tolerance and rigor that has defined the educational ambience of this College. But they also presumed that the regular (tenured and tenure-track) faculty and especially the senior faculty would embrace their responsibilities to organize and lead all of our educational programs in the College, particularly those in our general-education Core, and thus serve as vigorous models of the high professionalism, the absence of material self-aggrandizement, the disdain for syndicalist self-interest, an abhorrence for mixing academic virtue with political action in the classroom, and the dedication to the intellectual welfare of our students that has for so long proudly characterized this faculty. Freedom is not free. It comes only with

82. Collini, *Speaking of Universities*, 25.

disciplined educational thought and practice. Or, expressed differently, we do not need academic freedom to protect liberal education as much as we need liberal education to protect academic freedom.

Let me conclude by thanking you for your support of our students and for your loyalty and devotion to the College. *

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