

## FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE HUTCHINS LEGACY

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I propose to consider the era of Robert Maynard Hutchins as a series of efforts to revitalize the major initiatives of the William Rainey Harper era. This being a day of presidential celebration, I shall capitalize on the metaphor and suggest that whereas Harper was our George Washington, the leader who went to battle for resources to secure our independence and presided over our formative years, Hutchins was our Jefferson--a leader who voiced our ideals with eloquent rhetoric and raised extraordinary standards for the liberal arts and sciences--yet also our Lincoln, since he found those ideals threatened by civil discord and certain inept generals, along with external threats to the security of his polity.

I shall begin by touching on three points of continuity between the Harper and the Hutchins presidencies, then focus on a fourth, which is my assigned topic for today: the role of collegiate education in the development of the University.

1) To build a research university of unparalleled caliber, Harper created departments that functioned as leaders of their disciplines, in the sense both of standing at the cutting edge of research and of helping to define the character and directions of their disciplines. Hutchins revitalized this mission. Under his presidency, the University took elevating strides in many areas, including law and medicine, mathematics and physics, English literature and political science. The well-known Chicago schools of philosophy and sociology that got started under Harper were succeeded under Hutchins by the famous Chicago schools of economics and literary criticism.

2) Beyond stellar departments, Harper's vision extended to the formation of a genuine community of scholars, a community of shared purposes and mutually stimulating communication. "The question before us," he said memorably on opening

the first meeting of the University's faculty, "is how to become one in spirit, not necessarily in opinion."<sup>1</sup> Harper promoted intellectual communication through such organs as the University Press, a faculty club, and an extension department. Hutchins not only renewed those initiatives--for example, by using the symbolism of the Quadrangle Club round tables for a nationally renowned series of radio discussions and by associating the University with the Encyclopedia Britannica--but he went on to create two extraordinary new forms of interdisciplinary communication. First he organized some forty graduate departments into four divisions--an unprecedented arrangement for enhancing communication within the four main fields of knowledge. Then he established a number of interdisciplinary programs and degree-granting committees, including the Committees on History of Culture, on Human Development, on Planning, and on Social Thought.

3) A third point of continuity between Harper and Hutchins is one that may surprise you: the area of athletics. Harper defied the fashionable disdain for football as a collegiate sport and proceeded to use it to further the work of the university. Indeed, he once remarked that the playing field offers a venue for learning no less important than the classroom and the laboratory. (Incidentally, Coach Alonzo Stagg's innovations--the "T" formation, the huddle, the passing quarterback, and the direct snap from center--helped to transform the practice of football no less than the changes introduced by Harper's departments helped to reshape academic disciplines.)

Hutchins also defied a fashionable assumption about football: that the purpose of great universities is to maintain commercially successful football teams. And thus it was that, as the University under Harper pioneered in using bigtime varsity spectator sports to build an institutional reputation, so under Hutchins we were the first to abandon them when they appeared to be interfering with the institution's primary

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<sup>1</sup> One in Spirit: A retrospective View of The University of Chicago on the Occasion of its Centennial. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973. p. i

educational purpose. (In this connection, recall that the elimination of Big Ten varsity football paved the way for a flowering of participatory athletics on this campus, and more recently for the exemplary Division-III type of athletic conference which Chicago cofounded.)

In rebuilding stellar departments, enhancing scholarly communication, and attuning athletics to academic goals, the initiatives of the Hutchins era represented fresh applications of ideals set forth by President Harper. In the area of collegiate education the Hutchins era signified not only a restoration but also a substantial transformation of the founding vision.

Harper had aspired to establish a college of exceptional quality, and he favored an organization of schools which combined the last two years of high school with the first two years of college. In this regard the college of the Hutchins era represented a return to Harper's vision. What Harper envisioned, however, was a collegiate program that trained youngsters simply to become more effective graduate students. The business of the colleges was to prepare proto-academics. Indeed, since some of that business was properly the business of the secondary school, as in the European gymnasium or *lysée*, Harper finally wanted to farm out that educational chore to academies in other places.

This signified a moment of ambivalence on Harper's part toward the collegiate function in the research university. The negative side of that ambivalence was amplified during the Judson years. Once the mission of the University became defined as a charge to carry out research and train graduate students, undergraduate education came to be regarded as a distraction at best, and at worst a distortion of its mission. This kind of thinking led President Judson to complain that too many funds were being siphoned off from advanced work into the undergraduate program, and led the University Senate in 1922 formally to propose an end to any future development of the College. As Dean Chauncy Boucher later described the situation,

"the College came to be regarded by some members of the family as an unwanted, ill-begotten brat that should be disinherited."<sup>2</sup>

What a strange conceit, to consider college students a financial drain on the University! Our presidents and provosts of the past four decades would be amused. Aware that no research university can be viable without recruiting a healthy number of tuition-paying students, they adopted a more positive and reassuring rhetoric. Instead of occurring at the expense of research, undergraduate teaching gets portrayed as fully compatible with research. By fiat, research and collegiate education are held simply to reinforce one another, and conflicts between the two functions are simply declared not to exist.

A rather different position on this question evolved during the Hutchins years. Against the assumption of the Harper presidency that the mission of the College was to prime students for specialized academic work, the faculty of the Hutchins College insisted on the importance of a broad-gauged general education for achieving such goals as the proper exercise of citizenship and the right uses of leisure and freedom. Against the notion of the later Judson presidency that collegiate education posed the threat of distracting University resources from its proper mission, the Hutchins administration affirmed collegiate general education as an integral part of the University's mission. Against our latter-day piety that College teaching presents no conflict with the research and graduate training functions, however, Hutchins held that general education clearly involves cultural resources, professional competences, and commitments of time that often contrast markedly with those involved in specialized research. Accordingly, Hutchins sought to promote and support the distinctive functions of collegiate education by establishing a differentiated

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<sup>2</sup> Chauncey S. Boucher *The Chicago College Plan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), p. 1.

administrative structure, with a College that had its own dean, its own budget, its own faculty, and its own infrastructure. He did so from the conviction that college faculties face a specific intellectual challenge of no mean proportions. The College, he said,

must resolutely face the question of what is important and what not. It cannot teach everything that any student thinks he would like to hear about or that any teacher thinks he would like to talk about. It cannot pile course on course. . . . It must set up clear and comprehensible goals for its students to reach. It must articulate its courses, squeezing out waste, water, and duplication. . . . The college that wishes to solve the problem how to develop and administer a liberal education must have a faculty devoted to this task.<sup>3</sup>

With its separate administrative structure in place, the College finally stepped forward to tackle its basic charge--as Hutchins framed it in his 1930 charter, "to do the work of the University in general higher education." This eventually led to what was probably the most distinctive contribution of the Hutchins presidency to the question of the role of collegiate education in the research university: **the pioneering ways in which it connected the research function with the undergraduate teaching function.**

These connections ran in both directions, from the research enterprise to the College experience, and from the College enterprise to the research function. At the outset of his presidency, Mr. Hutchins proclaimed his conviction that the College of the University of Chicago would "contribute to the advancement of knowledge because it will be an **experimental** college. If this were not so," he added, "I should recommend its abolition. . . . [For] few institutions in our area can do what we can do

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<sup>3</sup> "The University of Chicago and the Bachelor's Degree," *Educational Record* XXIII (July, 1942), 569.

in collegiate education, and that is to experiment with it with the same intentness, the same kind of staff, and the same effectiveness with which we carry on the rest of our scientific work."<sup>4</sup>

And so they did. For example, in the second half of the Hutchins era the College faculty experimented with a technique of instruction that differed from the lecture format which dominated course work during the 1930s. They called this the method of "structured discussion" to distinguish it not only from lectures but also from so-called discussions in which students merely asked questions to clarify or to challenge something an instructor has said as well as from "shooting the breeze." In 1949 Joseph Axelrod and four of his colleagues produced a report of a two-year investigation of this approach to teaching, which attempted to set forth the key features of this method and to show its relevance to the goal of getting students to organize their own learning.

In another project, Henry Sams, Robert Streeter, and others investigated the effects of different writing assignments in the College and the ways in which student writing styles tended to differ according to the subject matter in which they were being written. Over a period of many years, Benjamin Bloom and his associates in the College Examiner's Office conducted numerous research projects on the specific kinds of intellectual competence fostered by the College's distinctive general education courses as well as on differences in collegiate grading practices and on the performance of our College alumni in other academic venues. Finally, in one of the last research endeavors sponsored by the University on the College, the sociologist William Bradbury, Jr. investigated the adjustment problems of students in the College.

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<sup>4</sup> Statement to American Council of Education 1942 cited in Donald N. Levine, "Challenging Certain Myths about the 'Hutchins' College." *The University of Chicago Magazine*. Winter, 1985: 36-39, 51

The Bradbury Report, issued in 1951, analyzed sources of emotional distress experienced by a majority of students in the College. It also proposed an array of institutional reforms in the areas of faculty practices, College facilities, the advising system, and student peer culture--a proposal which guided administrations over the succeeding four decades in making a wide range of improvements affecting the quality of College student life.

Even more consequential, perhaps, was the kind of investigative activity involved in constructing the curricula of the Hutchins College--or rather, Colleges, since (as I have described the matter elsewhere<sup>5</sup>) the New Plan College of 1931-42 differed substantially from the "14-comp" College initiated in 1942 and brought to fruition in 1947. The task of organizing broad fields of knowledge, such as those of the natural sciences or of the study of entire civilizations, required special kinds of understanding and analytic skills. Still another sort of scholarly ability was required to identify and edit--often enough, to translate for the first time--the original works that could serve as suitable means of leading students toward an in-depth engagement with key issues of those fields. Some of the scholarly work that went into this daunting curricular effort was reported in the volume edited by then Dean F. Champion Ward, The Idea and Practice of General Education, published in 1950 (and reprinted as a centennial publication of the Press in 1992). Richard McKeon and Joseph Schwab, two of the most outstanding progenitors of those curricular structures, also produced a number of seminal papers on the principles involved in such educational programs. For example, McKeon's unpublished paper on different ways to conceptualize the history of Western Civilization, though not fully utilized at the time by the Western Civ staff, can be viewed today as an intellectual tour de force of continuing relevance. Schwab's thinking about the natural sciences curriculum led to his paper, "What Do Scientists

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Do?", which analyzed the different modes of intellectual work in science, anticipating directions taken by specialists in the history and philosophy of science decades later.

Now if the Hutchins College had served simply to carry out the University's mission to provide general higher education and to do so in an experimental manner that provided opportunities for faculty research into the outcomes of different aspects of its programs, that in itself would have been an enormous achievement. But the interaction between the two domains extended in the other direction as well. I refer now to the role of the intellectual milieu of the Hutchins College in broadening the scope of the research faculty and of graduate training, and in stimulating new kinds of research programs.

The project of creating and teaching general education courses of great intellectual breadth gave rise to institutional innovations of two sorts. One was the appointment of faculty with distinctive interests that did not fit with the intellectual agendas ensconced in the established departments. The other was the institution of interdisciplinary teaching staffs. Faculty who participated in these courses participated in regular staff seminars that long provided the main home for interdepartmental communications on this campus. Both of these departures provided opportunities for intellectual stimulation that time and again worked their way subtly into the scholarly productions of participating faculty. As Louis Wirth, a nationally renowned sociologist, wrote of his experience of participating in such an interdisciplinary staff:

Each of us who has participated in the general education courses . .  
. . has acquired an acquaintance with a number of other disciplines  
which have extended his range of vision, of interest, and of



knowledge. Each of us has at least begun to see interrelationships of which hitherto he was more or less oblivious.<sup>6</sup>

Another major form of impact of the College programs on research came and continues to come from the experiences of faculty in interacting with students in the general education courses organized during the Hutchins era. Faculty who teach those courses often remark on the differences between first- or second-year College students and their graduate students. The latter, they report, often exhibit a certain narrowness and rigidity owing to the need to develop as professional academic specialists. The former, having little at stake professionally, feel free to express the curiosity that has been awakened by their evocative experiences in the general education courses. They exhibit what teachers in East Asian spiritual disciplines often refer to as "Beginner's Mind." Time and again I have heard scholars in fields as diverse as physics and anthropology report that they have been stimulated into major new insights and research agendas as a result of ostensibly innocent questions raised by students in their general education classes.

Dennis O'Brien, president of the University of Rochester, once remarked that the debates stimulated by Hutchins became the directives of innovative and experimental programs more daring than anything which emerged from the supposedly radical 1960s. It has been the burden of my remarks today to suggest that not the least significant of that universe of innovations was a set of mutually fruitful interactions between the collegiate teaching and the graduate research functions. What remains of that aspect of the Hutchins legacy today?

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Wirth, in *General Education: its Nature, Scope and Essential Elements*, ed. William S. Gray, Proceedings of the Institute for Administrative Officers of Higher Institutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), 6: 29

Under Presidents Edward H. Levi and Hanna Holborn Gray truly heartening moments of renewal have occurred. In the Levi years the faculty showed great initiative in experimenting with new curricular structures, both in a number of Common Core areas and in the concentration programs. Under President Gray the spirit of interdisciplinary collegiality affecting an interaction between teaching and research functions gravitated upward. The institution of interdisciplinary graduate Workshops now make the kind of experience previously reserved for those teaching in the College staff courses regularly available to advanced graduate students and their mentors.

Yet there can be denying that what David Riesman and Christopher Jencks long since described as the revolution which enthroned research specialization as the dominant principle in our academic life has, here as elsewhere, consolidated its hegemony. Locally this has taken its toll in the availability of faculty able to devote serious thought to the substance of our general education programs. Moreover, interest in exciting pedagogical and curricular questions necessarily recedes in the face of pressures to find enough warm bodies to teach an ever-increasing College population. Here as across the nation, material constraints continue to push priorities for collegiate administration. Pressures to deal with rising overhead costs and declining federal revenues, install the latest computers, get research faculties not to reduce their teaching loads, and to provide financial aid to worthy but needy students swamp energies for cultivating the intellectual resources to address the demands of liberal education. Now more than ever, the University of Chicago must dare to go against the grain, standing up once again for intellectual quality in a community of inquirers in ways that reflect the ideals of excellence that Harper established but that got transformed--under presidents Burton, Mason, as well as Hutchins, and under deans Wilkins, Boucher, Faust, and Ward and their faculties--into the sets of ideas that guided the University during the Hutchins era and beyond.

To continue to draw on the Hutchins legacy does not mean slavish repetition of its particular achievements. Two anecdotes with which I conclude may make this point. One concerns the response of Mr. Hutchins when he was invited, to an occasion celebrating the opening of the St. John's College in Annapolis--the college that did, unlike our own, adopt the Great Books curriculum that Hutchins himself had advocated. When his hosts at St. John's greeted Hutchins by boasting that they still followed a curriculum identical with what they had at the outset, Hutchins exclaimed: "You mean you are still teaching the selfsame curriculum you taught thirty years ago? That doesn't speak well for the freshness of mind of your faculty!"

The other anecdote draws on one of my most poignant memories from my tenure as dean of the College. This was an exchange I had with the masters of the two natural science collegiate divisions. One day I showed them some curricular materials from earlier general education science programs that the college had spawned. After considering these materials they exclaimed: "You mean the College actually had programs like this? This is what we are just now struggling to find. Why did we ever give it up?" Their subsequent response, I am delighted to say, was to gather some colleagues and invent a pair of utterly novel two-year sequences which continue to offer thoughtfully conceived, coherent programs of study in the natural sciences viewed as a single grand enterprise.

Perhaps that experience has something to teach us about how to use the Hutchins legacy. Perhaps, in facing our second century, this may be a promising way to draw inspiration and counsel from the *experiments* of the first.