

THE IDEA OF THE UNIVERSITY, TAKE ONE:  
ON THE GENIUS OF THIS PLACE\*

Donald N. Levine

**Challenges**

While the public has been napping, the American university has been busily reinventing itself. In barely a generation, the familiar ethic of scholarship—baldly put, that the central mission of universities is to advance and transmit knowledge—has been largely ousted by the just-in-time, immediate-gratification values of the marketplace. . . . Gone . . . is any commitment to maintaining a community of scholars, an intellectual city on a hill free to engage critically with the conventional wisdom of the day. (Kirp 2000)

So speaks David Kirp, professor of public policy at the University of California, Berkeley, in a recent article entitled "The New U." Grant him the margin of hyperbole that writers love to grab the attention of an audience, and you will still have to admit—at least, if you have been in touch with the world outside of Hyde Park—that Kirp's words capture one central tendency of today's academic world.

Sociologist Robert Bellah provides context for the change Kirp notes by tying it to the recent tendency in American thought to identify freedom with the free market. Challenging that linkage, Bellah argues:

What is freedom in the market is tyranny in other spheres, such as the professions and politics. A decent society depends on autonomy of the spheres. When money takes over politics, only a facade of democracy is left. When money takes over the professions, decisions are made on the basis of the bottom line, not professional authority.

In the sphere of higher education, Bellah argues, the tyranny of the bottom line is beginning to dominate decisions in many ways, including the assessment of programs in terms of "faculty productivity" and "consumer sovereignty" (Bellah 1999, 19).

Diagnoses of this sort should not surprise you. Had you heeded analysts around here you would have known of many ways in which universities were departing from their historic mission. Back in 1983 President Hanna Holborn Gray devoted a major public lecture to a critique of "The Higher Learning and the New Consumerism." Mrs. Gray had been stunned, she said then, by a piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that urged the higher education industry to take lessons from our domestic automobile industry, lessons that signaled a need for universities to "redesign, repackage, and sell their products" in response

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to shifting consumer priorities. This attitude, she explained, subverted the assumption that "universities exist to keep alive and to create subjects and ideas that may not be fashionable and may never be popular and to educate others to understand how and why those things are important" (Gray 1983, 16).

And the year before Mrs. Gray's talk, Edward Shils, dean of analysts of universities, delineated ten contemporary social developments that conspired to weaken the commitment of universities to their historic mission. These included

- expansion in size, which he called "massification"
- an increased demand to provide public services
- the politicization of academic work
- the growing intrusion of governmental constraints
- expansion of bureaucratic administration
- reduction of financial support from government
- distortions due to the quest for publicity
- obsessive assessment of academic performance by research productivity
- disaggregation of universities as communities
- demoralization of intellectual life.

As a result of these tendencies, Shils argued,

in recent decades, the sure moral touch has weakened and the self-confidence of the academic profession in its devotion to its calling has faltered. . . . The academic profession has done very little to promulgate a set of guiding principles which should govern its custodianship of knowledge in teaching and research, its role in the internal conduct of universities and its participation in the public sphere. (Shils 1997, 7)

In a follow-up essay in 1992 entitled "The Idea of the University," Shils reviewed these secular developments and concluded that by that point universities had changed "nearly out of recognition." If they continued in that direction, he prophesied, "they will cease to be universities, except in name. They will cease to nurture and inculcate the moral and intellectual standards and aptitudes indispensable to research; they will cease to deal with fundamental problems for their intrinsic interest" (244). The only thing that can be done to forestall their ultimate disintegration, he asserted, "is that the universities must be alert to save their own souls" (245).

The threats identified by Shils have not diminished. They have been augmented by challenges stemming from the knowledge revolution of recent years, challenges so novel he could not have anticipated them a decade ago. If we follow Shils's advice to alert universities to save their souls, then they must have some idea of what soul it is they ought to be saving. They must articulate afresh what it is that constitutes The Idea of the University.

## Local Discourse

The Idea of the *University*? Ask that question around here and people will assume you mean *The University*, i.e., Chicago. Call it obnoxious, call it lovable--this parochial arrogance affects all who have sojourned hereabouts for any length of time. Please note: in taking pride about "the University," faculty and students are thereby *owning* it--in marked contrast to many institutions where "the university" connotes a distant administrative entity with interests alien to those of the working faculty and students. What is more, the attitude reflects more than local hubris: it gets reinforced by those all over the country, indeed, the world, who look to us as a beacon--by those who say, in words I have heard many times from colleagues elsewhere: "Hold the course; The University of Chicago is the only *real* university we have left."

What is it about this place that marks it as embodying so distinctively the idea of what a university should be? The question is not new. Representative figures of the University love to formulate what they find so special about it. They do so in convocation addresses and committee reports as well as presidential addresses and the statements of provosts and deans. Listen to Paul Shorey, professor of Greek, at the Convocation in 1909, describe the University as animated by a spirit that "recognizes diverse and even contradictory kinds of excellence. . . . And thence arises that indefinable sense of freedom which those who have long enjoyed it here miss bitterly when they go away. . . . The University of Chicago is the freest place in the world . . . a place where a [person] may work out his own destiny and *be* the thing he will" (Shorey 1909, 240, 242).

Then fast forward to Elaine Fuchs, professor of biology, nine decades later, at the June convocation of 1999, when she extolled "the University of Chicago's tradition and reputation for teaching individuality, independent thinking, and questioning," and observed "we are taught here to water and tend the seeds of imagination that rest within each of us" such that "The University of Chicago has come to stand not for talking *at* students, but rather for traveling *with* students down the unknown paths to which questions point" (UCR 2000, 2).

And recall the March Convocation in 1972, when Richard McKeon observed:

The genius of the University of Chicago derived from the conviction that the discovery of knowledge is inseparably related to the transmission of knowledge. The University . . . has maintained a problem-oriented attitude in research, and it has tended to subordinate erudition and information to inquiry and [to] the questioning examination of positions and arguments in its teaching. (McKeon 1972, 71)

As for committee reports that descant on the virtues of this place, hearken to the Report of the Committee on Criteria of Academic appointment in 1970: "The University of Chicago is, by its tradition, an institution where . . . students are trained [to acquire] the skills,

knowledge, discrimination, and motivation to make original discoveries or will begin to be ready for the effective performances of roles in society where these qualities will bear fruit." (UCR 1970, 2; Shils 1997, 130). Or go back to 1927, when a Committee on the Theory of Education formulated the University's distinctive spirit with this terse definition: "a combination of the desire and the ability to participate in the advancement of knowledge and in the application of knowledge, as it advances, to the development of human welfare" (RTE 1927, 1). Or boot up the preface to the Greenstone Report of 1986: "The University of Chicago has prided itself on a distinctive commitment to intellectual excellence [which] implies a willingness—in fact a determination—to examine what we are and where we are, and thus an openness to reform, when circumstances warrant and a persuasive case can be made." (UCR 1986). Or consult the Faculty Handbook of 1999, citing the words of the Faculty Committee for a Year of Reflection:

Chicago has developed a celebrated--some would say notorious--brand of academic civility. It is a place where one is always in principle allowed to pose the hardest question possible--of a student, a teacher, or a colleague--and feel entitled to expect gratitude rather than resentment for one's effort.

And of course, we find an abundance of such conceits in the orations of our administrators. Indeed, an entire book of selections from papers of our first eight chief executives is entitled, yes, *The Idea of the University of Chicago* (Murphy and Bruckner, eds. 1976). From that copious source I limit myself to a few lines by Robert Maynard Hutchins:

What is it that makes the University of Chicago a great educational institution? It is the intense, strenuous, and constant intellectual activity of the place. . . . We like to think that the air is electric, and that from it the student derives an intellectual stimulation that lasts the rest of his life. (40)

And these:

The University of Chicago has never cared very much about respectability. It has insisted on distinction. Neither its faculty nor its trustees would be interested in it on any other terms. If the time comes when it is impossible for this university to set standards in education and to make significant contributions to the advancement of knowledge, there is no reason for its existence. (39-40)

Love of diversity, quest for individuality, zest for questioning, lavish freedom, electric intellectuality, concern for human welfare, openness to thoughtful change, disdain for respectability, breadth of discourse--the list is long, and could be grown longer. Given this wealth of local rhetoric, perhaps we should now sift an assortment of such statements with an eye to melding them into a composite formulation.

But perhaps not. That approach runs the risk of bogging in a morass of opinions; it precludes taking a fresh look at our history and broaching a conceptual grasp of our subject.

What I propose instead is to use Edward Shils's formulations to construct an ideal type about Chicago, and see how far that takes us in understanding some concrete features that seem to instantiate the special character of this place.

### **Humboldt's University**

My first thesis is this: what distinguishes the University derives from its having been born at the cresting of the University Movement in the United States. As is well known, before the 1880s all American universities had grown out of liberal arts colleges designed originally to educate young men for the ministry and then the professions of law and medicine. What I am calling the University Movement followed the vision of planting on American soil the type of research university that had grown so lustily in 19th-century Germany. In the United States this movement was inspired by the visits of many hundreds of American scholars to Germany in the decades after the Civil War. It was pioneered by the founding of Johns Hopkins University as a graduate research institution in 1876, and grew in tandem with comparable efforts at Stanford and the University of Southern California in the following decades.

Of course, the Idea of the Research University did not just descend from the heavens into Hyde Park any more than the idea of the modern state simply descended out of the World Spirit onto post-Bonapartist Prussia. It took a devout Baptist capitalist from New York and a band of young cultured Chicago plutocrats to provide resources and support, and a driven young scholar of Semitics to make it happen. But at Chicago as elsewhere, the mind of the founding president envisioned an institution shaped by the notion of what Edward Shils has aptly called the "Humboldtian university."

As Shils reminds us, Wilhelm von Humboldt's memorandum, which inspired the creation of the University of Berlin in 1810, projected a university based on three formative principles: unity of research and teaching, freedom of teaching, and academic self-governance. The first of these principles—the unity of teaching and research—countered those systems in which research goes on independently, by private scholars or in separate research institutes, without the stimulation of sharing those investigations with young minds, and in which higher education was carried out by scholars who failed to engage in original inquiry. The second principle, *Freiheit der Lehre und des Lernens*, meant that professors should be free to teach in accordance with their studiously and rationally arrived at convictions. The principle of academic self-government, only implicit in Humboldt's memo but increasingly apparent as an integral component of his vision, was meant to protect academic work from distortions of governmental control.

William Rainey Harper seized that vision and landed at Chicago running with it. In one bound he strove to create a research university without peer. Harper's zeal for research was shared by the faculty he recruited, stellar scholars eager to make Chicago the premier

research university in the world.<sup>1</sup> Chicago took shape as an intentional community designed to promote excellence in the quest for truth.

Brimming self-consciousness about this mission has disposed Chicagoans to reflect with special intensity about the goals, concepts, and methods of disciplined inquiry. One expression of that intensity is that these reflections often engendered distinctive schools of thought. As Milton Friedman once remarked,

To economists the world over, "Chicago" designates not a city, not even a university, but a "school." The term is used sometimes as an epithet, sometimes an accolade, but always with a fairly definite—though by no means single-valued—meaning. . . . One impression that I have formed . . . is that the University of Chicago is a particularly fertile breeding ground for "schools." (UCR 1986)

This was true from the get-go. A contemporary of the founding generation, philosopher William James at Harvard, was struck that Chicago so quickly managed to produce what historian Darnell Rucker has described as the first authentic school of American philosophy (Rucker 1969, vi). After reading the volume of papers that emerged in 1903 from John Dewey's seminar, James exclaimed:

Chicago University has during the past six months given birth to the fruit of its ten years of gestation under John Dewey. The result is wonderful—a real school, and real Thought. Important thought, too! Did you ever hear of such a city or such a University? Here [at Harvard] we have thought but no school. At Yale a school but no thought. Chicago has both." (3)

Historians of science describe the early years of biology at Chicago in a similar vein (Pauly 1987; Maienschein 1991). And the Divinity School produced what are recognized as "Chicago schools" at two different periods: an early phase that blended the social gospel, pragmatism, and socio-historical method; and later, a florescence of theological work inspired by Whitehead's process philosophy.

Chicago Schools have had such enduring impact that generations later, scholars continue to talk about them. The Chicago School of literary criticism made its mark in the 1930s, yet continues to form a key point of reference for literary intellectuals in our time. The Chicago School of Sociology flourished in the 1920s, yet a bibliography of writings about it in the past quarter-century numbers in the dozens; one of the first of these asserted: "Chicago sociology had a major impact on the profession world-wide by institutionalizing *collaborative* sociological research that stimulated theory and research interacting in the same university

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<sup>1</sup>Their mission was dramatized by issuing scholarly publications through their own university press, whose centrality to the institution appears in its location right inside the central administration building for over three decades—just as earlier, for more than three decades, the central administration had existed inside the main research library.

department" (Bulmer 1984, xv). In the last few years alone, scholars from England, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Switzerland have researched in Regenstein, organized conferences, and issued publications about the only "school" in the discipline to be named after an institution.

Even when their work has not been tied to schools, Chicago departments and schools have often manifested a distinctive cachet. The extraordinary women who founded the School of Social Service Administration made it distinctive by fusing rigorous social research with spirited social reform. Our Department of Physics has been noted for inventing experimental methods that achieve optimal results with the simplest and most economical tools and techniques. This was true from Albert Michelson's investigations into the nature of light and how it fit into the frameworks of Maxwell's electromagnetic theory and Einstein's relativity theory (which made Michelson the University's first Nobel Prize Laureate), through the work of Enrico Fermi and his young colleagues on the Manhattan Project, to the more recent work of John Simpson, whose lab here was, for many years, the only university laboratory in the country to design and build entire NASA experiments.

Across the Quadrangles, our Department of Music defied the usual drift of music departments to segregate the subdisciplines of theory, history, ethnomusicology, and performance by blending them into productive harmonies—as with Leonard Meyer's studies of historical styles, rooted in models from Gestalt psychology and information science, and pianist Edward Lowinsky's analyses of Renaissance masterworks in a context of cultural history. This fusionist mode continues today, with documentary ethnography that overlaps with the methodology of historical musicology; work on 16th-century Milanese music conceptually driven by work in urban ethnomusicology; and contributions to music-making by department faculty distinguished for operatic coaching and composing contemporary music.

Engagement in full-throttled, trail-blazing research has not, of course, always been a collective affair. Chicago has been known no less for its hospitality to perky, quirky individuals who marched to drummers no one else ever heard. One thinks, for example, of Harry Kalven, the modest intellectual populist who involved his law students, colleagues, and anyone else within earshot in playfully energetic inquiries that he would dramatize with elaborate chalkboard matrices. Shifting from class-action lawsuits to no-fault insurance to slavery, Kalven never strayed far from his favorite subject: free speech and the need to listen to, not just tolerate, dissension.

One thinks of Charles Otis Whitman, the crotchety biologist whose obsession with pigeons led him to discover the imprinting process and whose penchant for naturalistic observation projected a vision of a biological farm and lake and marine observatories, and prefigured the discipline of ethology.

One thinks of Frank Knight, the contrarian economist who founded the Chicago School approach by making "economic man," possessed of given means and ends and operating in "perfect competition," essential to precise analysis; and who went on to be the Chicago School's most forceful critic, seeing every human as multiplex-romantic fool, unreflective drone, law-maker, and law-breaker—and spurning economic theory as a tool to explain actual human behavior or to guide social policy.

One thinks of Richard McKeon, intrepid dean with what some call "the greatest mind of the twentieth century," who not only launched four interdisciplinary doctoral programs and helped frame the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, but also startled colleagues by decentering philosophic texts and making all discourse move relative to mutually exclusive paradigms that exhaust all possibilities.

In line with this hospitality to radically creative personalities, Chicago seems readier than other places to gamble on young talent that might appear risky and disruptively innovative. This brings to mind an experience some years ago when my department sought to recruit a talented young scholar who would probably have grabbed an earlier offer by a prominent state university had it been extended. When I discussed the matter with a colleague at the state university, he said: "I wanted that guy so much; he was just brilliant, really interesting. But my university can't take a chance on someone like that. Chicago is the only place that can handle someone so offbeat and innovative."

Chicago has also gambled on new fields. The University practically invented a number of disciplines, including human ecology, particle astrophysics, psychometry, "client-centered" psychotherapy, the interdisciplinary study of human development, and the analysis of ideas and the study of methods. The University Press started a number of journals that embodied new intellectual approaches and fields of study, including the *American Journal of Sociology*, the first professional journal of sociology in the world; *Common Cause*, the journal of the Committee to Frame a World Constitution; *Critical Inquiry*; *Economic Development and Cultural Change*; the *Journal of Labor Economics*; *History of Religions*; *Law and Social Inquiry*; and *Signs*, the first journal of Women's Studies.

### **Newman's University**

One could go on and on to show how thoroughly the University has adhered to the Humboldtian model. All parts of the institution—faculty, administrators, students, library, press—have conspired to maintain the primacy of original scholarship and the teaching programs that relate to it. In accord with this model, all elements of the University's curriculum are geared to the kinds of committed, specialized work that produce either future investigators or future professionals whose work depends upon a sophisticated knowledge base.



Carried to its logical conclusion, where does this model of a Humboldtian university lead? Let's face it: might it not rid a university of any responsibility to teach undergraduates, at least in their first two years (as has been the case in Germany)?

Don't think that thought never occurred to anyone here. Soon after the University opened, President Harper observed that "If the income of the University is used in providing suitable instruction for the great army of undergraduates, it will be impossible . . . to make provision for the . . . more important body of graduate students" (Harper 1892, sec. VIII). Later on, Harper tried repeatedly (without success) to farm out the first two years of college work to academies in the area, so the faculty could "devote its energies mainly to . . . strictly University work" (University of Chicago 1891, 3). Responding to swelling College enrollments after World War I, both President Judson and the University Senate bemoaned the diversion of University resources to the undergraduate teaching function. In the mid-1920s respected graduate dean and university press director, Gordon J. Laing, lamented that the burden of teaching undergraduates at Chicago "probably cuts the productivity of many departments in two" (PR 1926-27, 7). Laing dreamed of the level of graduate work that might be possible "if the institution were entirely free from undergraduate entanglements" and imputed to those who thought the contrary "a delectable simplicity and charming naiveté" (Laing 1927, 201).

In his inaugural address of November 1929, young President Robert Maynard Hutchins noted that many faculty members wanted the university to "withdraw from undergraduate work, or at least from the first two years of it" (Hutchins 1930, 12-3); and a few years later, Hutchins tried in vain to relocate the bulk of the undergraduate body to the Northwestern campus in Evanston. Indeed, as recently as 1969, following a protracted student sit-in, there was talk about reducing the College enrollment to around 500, and a prominent colleague advised me, "Don, if this sort of thing keeps up, maybe we'll just have to abolish the College."

As I guess you all know, nothing of that sort happened. On the contrary, beginning in the 1920s, and taking a page from Harper's own other statements on the matter, the University embarked on what became perhaps the most radically imaginative program of undergraduate liberal education the country has ever seen. It did so by moving to a model of the university that differed from the one propounded by Humboldt and Shils.<sup>2</sup> Let us refer to that alternative model by alluding to some famous lectures published in 1852 as *The Idea of a University* by John Henry Cardinal Newman. With the experience of his beloved Oxford in

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<sup>2</sup>It should be noted, however, that Humboldt himself was an early and ardent exponent of the ideal of a general intellectual education. Long before his initiative to establish a research university in Berlin, he composed an eloquent argument on behalf of *Bildung*, the ideal of harmonious development of all the faculties of the individual most notably in his 1792 tract, *The Sphere and Duties of Government*.

mind, Newman evolved a vision of a university that ministered to the education of students by means of *cultivating the general powers of the intellect*.

The decision to advance toward this Newmanesque model can be located precisely. It happened in 1923 when President Burton appointed an outstanding educator, Ernest Hatch Wilkins, as Dean of the Colleges. "[T]he very reasons that require us to retain the colleges," Burton said at the time, "require us also to make them the best possible" (Burton 1923, 22). The page they took from Harper was his idea of dividing the four undergraduate years into two segments, two years to acquire a general intellectual discipline, in what he called the Academic or Junior College; and two years to prepare for the specialized training of graduate work, in what he called the University College. They reasoned, as did Harper, that to do its job well the junior college presumed special kinds of curricular principles and faculty qualifications. So they turned to the intriguing question of how a junior college curriculum could be devised in ways that measured up to the University's standards.

My second thesis is this: if the time of the University's founding was propitious for an institution on the Humboldtian model, at the cresting of the University Movement, that time was not so propitious for a concerted upgrading of the undergraduate program. The latter had to wait until the early 1920s, with the cresting of a very different sort of movement for academic reform.

Undergraduate education in the U.S. during the late 19th century reflected changes promoted by Charles William Eliot of Harvard. Reacting to complaints about the traditional liberal education based on classical languages and literatures—its failure to accommodate new kinds of knowledge, its association with an aristocratic elite, and its apparent neglect of the diverse talents of students and the capacities for choice essential to free citizens—Eliot's forceful rhetoric transformed the common liberal curriculum into a field for freely chosen electives. (At the same time, Eliot's rejection of a prescribed common curriculum was intended to afford faculty and graduate students more time to engage in original scholarship.)

Eliot's assumption that college students would already have received a sound general education in high school proved unrealistic. Drawn by opportunities for specialization and free choice, undergraduates were jumping into specialized work without thought of where their specialties and predilections fit into a broader scheme. In consequence, cries for reform of liberal education in the early decades of this century took the form of upholding the idea of a common learning. In the pithy words of Archibald MacLeish,

The latter part of the last century was made forever famous in the history of higher education in America by the introduction of the so-called elective system . . . under which each individual student was to supply his own definition of education and set out to save his soul under the uncritical eye of a faculty which was to offer only what was demanded of it. (MacLeish 1920, 366)

Thus it was that efforts to reform the liberal arts in the decades around World War I converged under what came to be called the General Education Movement. Energized by concerns about privatization, excessive specialization, a descent toward mediocrity, and intellectual anarchy, this movement generated a wide range of innovations in liberal learning, at Columbia University and at colleges as diverse as Antioch, Lawrence, Reed, and Swarthmore. The General Education Movement captured the attention of many Chicago faculty in the 1920s and after. In this spirit, luminaries such as Thomas Chamberlin, Fay-Cooper Cole, and Horatio Newman in the 1920s; Merle Coulter, Ronald Crane, Richard McKeon, and Louis Wirth in the 1930s; and, in the 1940s and beyond, William McNeill, Robert Redfield, David Riesman, Joseph Schwab, and many others put their minds to the work of fashioning an educational program grounded on the notion of appropriate ends of learning and fashioned with an eye to constructing the most suitable means to those ends. The result was to recast the notion of general education in ways that captured the attention of educators around the world.

Of the many hallmarks of this program, often linked (to some extent erroneously, I have explained elsewhere [Levine 1983]) with the name of Robert Maynard Hutchins, I shall mention four: a curriculum geared to the end of cultivating human powers; pedagogical methods geared to that end; examinations geared to that end; and procedures for periodic experiment and assessment of all these elements.

The University's focused attention on an undergraduate *curriculum* constructed to develop specific habits of the mind burst forth with the landmark Report on the Future of the Colleges produced by Ernest Wilkins and educator Henry C. Morrison in 1924. Their formulation broke new ground in curricular thought by rejecting any definition of the aims of general education "in terms of units, courses, majors, [or] any standards of mechanical measurement such as grades and degrees." Instead, it demanded a definition of aims couched in terms of human powers. The Report describes those powers, not in terms of pre-professional preparation, but as "the three types of power necessary to a proper adjustment of the individual to modern society": independence in thinking, aesthetic appreciation, and moral understanding (2-3).

Broadly speaking, these three categories came to generate the three blocks of general education sequences that constituted what may be called the second Hutchins College, which took shape under Deans Clarence Faust and F. Champion Ward in the 1940s. The sequence in natural sciences was devised to promote capacities for conceptual and empirical analyses of natural phenomena; the humanities sequence was devised specifically to cultivate capacities for appreciation and critical judgment of works of art; and the social science sequence was designed to promote understanding of social problems and dimensions of practical judgment. Each of these sequences, as well as the capstone courses which sought to

integrate them, was designed and taught by a staff of faculty drawn from different departments.

One of the most powerful inventions in the history of the University, the multidisciplinary staff, is to general education what a Chicago school is to scholarship: a collegial forum where persons of different backgrounds and opinions join, "one in spirit," to realize a part of the University's mission. The level of discourse such staffs attain at their best may be illustrated by a look at the committee that designed the three-year sequence in natural sciences between 1942 and 1946. As described by its brilliant chairman, Joseph J. Schwab, the committee members began by assuming that their goal was to create a course that imparted nontrivial understanding of scientific method, but they were startled to discover that they held radically disparate views of what they had assumed to be a common methodology in natural science. A normal consequence at such a juncture would have been to abandon the effort. But "the level of goodwill was so high in the group," Schwab recalled, "that rather than beg the question of the nature of science or disband in mutual dissatisfaction," the committee members engaged this difficulty as an interesting problem in the philosophy of science (McGrath ed. 1948, 71-2).<sup>3</sup>

After a row of strenuous meetings, the Schwab committee formulated their insights about the diversity of scientific methods and the best ways to help students acquire scientific understanding. They identified desiderata for selecting materials for such a curriculum, conducted library searches, and subjected the materials to small-scale trials in classes. The course that emerged from their deliberations departed radically from the customary science course by dispensing with lectures and textbooks entirely. In their place it substituted three hours per week for discussions, and two for laboratory work. For course materials it substituted research papers, monographs, and chapters that represented the sciences by means of problems. It also provided a set of queries and problems designed to draw the papers together and to show students how to pursue inquiry in natural sciences.

As this example shows, Chicago's attempt to cultivate intellectual powers involved more than the selection and organization of materials. It also led to the invention of novel *teaching methods*. In particular, through trials, errors, and measured successes, the Chicago faculty hit on a distinctive pedagogical approach to which it has adhered to this day, involving a marked preference for original sources in place of textbooks, and teaching by what they have called "structured discussion" instead of through formal lectures.

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<sup>3</sup>Schwab's account, and my own experience in many such staffs, brings to mind that luminous passage where Cardinal Newman envisions what transpires in a university devoted to liberal learning:

An assemblage of learned men, zealous for their own sciences, and rivals of each other, are brought, by familiar intercourse and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation. They learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other. Thus is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the student also breathes. (Newman 1959, 128-9)

The quest to devise programs geared to the cultivation of human powers has also led to distinctive forms of *examinations*. The focal point of this was the Office of University Examiner. Although that office existed from the beginning of the University, it really got going with the appointment in 1937 of an inspired educator, Ralph Tyler, who recruited a bevy of bright young scholars to assist in constructing novel examination forms. The work of this office fit the general project of upgrading liberal learning in two respects: by giving the testing function to professionals properly equipped for the task; and, in removing that function from classroom teachers, by making the latter less menacing and so better able to elicit the affection and collaborative friendship essential for the most effective teaching.

Besides creating distinctive curricula, teaching methods, and examination forms, the University organized periodic attempts to evaluate those elements and experiment with new ones. ("Unity of teaching and research" takes on new meaning in this context.) Of numerous assessment projects of this sort, perhaps the most consequential was that carried out under Benjamin Bloom, one of Tyler's associates. In the early 1940s Bloom investigated ways and means of assessing the extent to which the curricular practices of the new College attained their stated objectives. Before long, he expanded his study from its original goal of examining the Chicago college only, to studying three groups of matched students elsewhere. Bloom's studies culminated in a *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, perhaps the most famous schema ever devised for this purpose (Bloom 1954; Anderson and Sosniak 1994). More recent projects of this sort include investigations by the Little Red Schoolhouse writing program, which examined hundreds of student papers with an eye to identifying differences in papers written by first-year or fourth-year students, and determining qualities associated with papers graded as honors.

Finally, consider the rhythm of restless innovation. The quest to find better ways to cultivate human powers has inspired a continuous disposition to invent new courses, new programs, new teaching methods, and new forms of evaluation. One wonders how the University ever won a reputation for stodginess and conservatism; it is, in fact, the university of continuing revolution. Reflect, experiment, reflect, revise--*that* has been the University's script for organizing undergraduate education.

In sum, with efforts adumbrated in Harper's notion of the junior college and the faculty reports of the 1920s, and continuing throughout the Hutchins presidency and onto the present day, the University has labored creatively to pursue the kind of vision articulated by Cardinal Newman.

### **The Genius of This Place**

Let us take stock. If you ask me what really is *the* genius of this place—I just knew you would ask, sooner or later—I would have to face the question: what are we *really*, the university of von Humboldt (and William Rainey Harper) or of Cardinal Newman (and

Robert Maynard Hutchins)? Don't we either have to be one or the other, or else confess that ultimately we are a dysfunctional system, divided into two endlessly warring parties? For surely: the ethos of specialized research and of the teaching that spins off such research programs is quite at odds with an ethos that seeks to forge the array of habits needed by cultivated human beings and citizens. And, to tell the truth, in the 1930s and 1940s, people around here actually identified one another as Harper's men or Hutchins's men.

Of course, all universities manifest some tension between the values associated with promoting the capacities for investigations into fundamental questions that advance our stock of knowledge and the values linked with the cultivation of excellence in human beings and citizens. If I *had* to hazard a formulation of the genius of *this* place, I guess I would suggest that it is a *capacious openness to scandalous contradictions*. Perhaps it is our genius not to conceal contradictions, nor to commit mealy compromises, nor to sacrifice one pole for the other—but to embrace them both. It is with the body of the university as with the muscular-skeletal system: strength and flexibility are attained by allowing each individual muscle to stretch without being constricted by adjacent muscles, as well as to permit muscular flexion to be balanced by muscular extension. Or, putting it another way, let me cite an author to whom part of my own work has been devoted, Georg Simmel. In his luminous *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* of 1907, Simmel treats the opposition between those two philosophers by saying their positions "cannot be reconciled in a 'higher unity,' because there is no identity between them. . . . By sensing the reverberations of intellectual existence in the distance opened up by these opposites, the soul grows, despite, indeed, because of, the fact that it does not decide in favor of one of the parties. It finally embraces [these opposites] as the poles of its own expansion, its own power, its own plenitude of forms. And it enjoys that embrace" (Simmel 1984, 181; *translation altered*).

In the past half-century, we at Chicago have learned to enjoy that embrace—and to grow from it. In the process, some of the sheen of each party has rubbed off on the other. Following the reforms promoted by Provost Edward Levi in the mid-1960s, the faculties of our graduate research and professional training programs played an ever-increasing role in the life of the College. Pioneering research projects eventuated in exciting new courses; one thinks, to begin with, of the offerings in South Asian, East Asian, and Islamic civilizations spun off from the research programs of Robert Redfield and Milton Singer in the 1950s (the story of which has been told in a gripping essay by Dean John Boyer [1999]). Opportunities to participate in sophisticated research programs have been extended to undergraduates in increasing numbers, through research practica and through the College Research Opportunity Program which, since the mid-1980s, has involved hundreds of undergraduates each year in the labs, field projects, and libraries of the University faculty. The modal

appointment form of our arts and sciences faculty is now the *joint* appointment in one or more graduate departments *and* the College.

At the same time, just as the professional ethos has seeped downward, so the ethos of a liberal and humanizing curriculum has seeped upward. At the level of upper-class College work, one finds an array of broad-gauged concentration programs, like Environmental Studies, FIAT (Fundamentals: Issues and Texts), PERL (Politics, Economics, Rhetoric, & Law), and HiPSS (History, Philosophy, and Social Studies of Sciences and Medicine). More recently, what was just a glimmer in the eyes of Dean Booth and his colleagues in the 1960s—the idea of a senior year integrative course—has taken shape with the creation of Big Problems courses. The upward flow of the College ethos is no less true at the level of advanced graduate work. Just think of the remarkable graduate workshops in humanities and social sciences, instituted some two decades ago, which bring faculty and doctoral students from many disciplines together to converse about problems of wide scope and significance. (It is telling that the chairman of the council that administers those workshops is the very same person who currently serves as dean of the College.) And comments from Nobel laureates and others on our faculty attest to the impact that engagement with unspecialized undergraduate minds has had on the quality of their own work.

Well, if I have convinced you that the Humboldtian and the Newmanesque models form a constitutive antinomy in which we flourish, I would like now to take one further step and suggest that they form but *one pair* of such antinomies that encompass our communal being. Consider the following:

- We live for our departments, priding ourselves on their special qualities, traditions, and achievements and striving might and main to advance our disciplines; yet we pride ourselves on interdisciplinarity, not in an ad hoc or artificial way but because, as Provost Geoffrey Stone observed recently, "other universities try to be interdisciplinary; at Chicago it is bred in the bone."

- We think of ourselves as utterly democratic, saying Mr. & Ms. instead of Dr. and Professor, making graduate and even undergrad students co-authors of papers and, as Elaine Fuchs happily put it, we "stand not for talking *at* students, but rather for traveling *with* students down the unknown paths to which questions point." And yet, we are intolerant to the point of arrogance in our dismissal of mediocrity, with an aristocratic hauteur that is, I suspect, also bred into our bones.

- We pride ourselves on our irrepressible individuality, yet find ourselves continually drawn to expressions of communal commitment. Our communal sentiments have been fostered over the years by a variety of distinctive features: the intimacy of the Hyde Park neighborhood; annual faculty dinners; round tables of the Quadrangle Club; periodic ceremonies that occasion expressions of a shared vision. Even so, our individualistic faculty

has always bristled at efforts to centralize activities, and divergent opinions within and among departments have been our lifeblood. In the case of university libraries, this antinomy has played itself out in long-standing oscillations between movement toward a unified, central library, and toward preserving pockets of departmental and individual libraries (Meyer 1994).

•And finally, to take up a theme with which I opened, we relish our poverty as well as our wealth. For sure, we relish the rich resources that our historic endowment and many benefactors have contributed. We know those resources have played an indispensable role in our perennial quest to recruit the very best scholars and teachers. We are also proud that our College leads the pack in the amount of resources it devotes to student financial aid, and have historically offered the best graduate students generous support.

Yet there is another side. We live fairly simply. We trim our administrative overhead to lean proportions. The work of many departments follows the pattern I mentioned for the Department of Physics, in its ingenuity for constructing outstanding experiments that are simple, elegant, and cost-effective—a model currently described as "smaller, faster, cheaper, better." A particularly telling illustration of this point comes from a study of the College carried out in the mid-1980s. Two esteemed academic administrators funded by an esteemed foundation came for an intense site visit of our College and the college of one other elite university. Their report concluded that the other university had far more resources to devote to undergraduate instruction, but that this place offered a much better educational program. How, they asked, could this be possible? Their answer: two things, energy and brains. (Not just energy *tout court*, I would say, but energy directed by passion and commitment.)

This passion and commitment leads us to do things that entail significant costs for no gain other than the satisfaction of remaining true to our principles. We have historically refrained from carrying out money-making ventures that did not live up to our academic standards. Our Press has at times committed itself to projects that are hopelessly cost-ineffective, such as the monumental Dictionary of American English published in fascicles over a period of seven years starting in 1936 as well as many distinguished scholarly monographs that other presses simply could not afford to risk. We have resisted income that infringes on our commitment to freedom of thought and expression. One thinks at once of Hutchins's rejection of pressures to pacify donors by soft-pedaling his stance on academic freedom when attacks by the Hearst papers and Charles Walgreen accused the University of preaching communism in the 1930s—not to mention Hutchins's withering attack on Illinois state legislators who sought to impose loyalty oaths on faculty in the late 1940s. One thinks of President Edward Levi's willingness to let the administration building be trashed—at a cost later estimated at about a million dollars—rather than call in the police to evict students who were sitting-in there. I suspect that nearly every president at this institution has rejected



offers of funds to which expectations were tied that violated the fundamental integrity of this place.

THERE ARE THOSE WHO SAY that *neither* kind of excellence that the University has striven for, the excellence of pursuing fundamental intellectual problems because of their intrinsic interest and the excellence of cultivating the intellectual powers of human beings and citizens, can last much longer in The Age of Money. Bellah and Shils both worry that this may be true; yet both believe that it can be resisted by determined efforts to clarify and voice our authentic purposes and reclaim our legitimate authority. Although it is terribly important for all our administrative officers to articulate that mission, it no less important for our faculty to do so—in Bellah's words, for faculty to "speak with authority about the aims and goals of higher education, about its intrinsic goods, about the kinds of institutions we need, and about the kind of graduates we should produce" (Bellah 1999, 21).

If I am not mistaken, it is both the ability to embrace these opposed routes to the quest for truth, and an adamant refusal to be sidetracked by temptations that would distract us from that quest, that defines our spirit. Didn't Paul Shorey capture it well, when he proclaimed that the spirit of the University "recognizes diverse and even contradictory kinds of excellence"?

So now back to the present moment. What are we to do in the face of such challenges to our fundamental values as the disposition to subordinate all decisions to commercial criteria, and the stunning revolution in ways we acquire, assess, retrieve, and communicate everything we know? Fortunately, I do not have to address those questions here and now. What is clear is that in addressing those questions, we would do well to get a broad historical perspective on those values, and a considered look at possible alternative developments in the future—matters that will be addressed in the following two lectures in this colloquium. What is also clear is that holding to our course requires a rejuvenation of traditions of discourse about our mission. In that spirit, I invite you to continue today's conversation about those values as they are refracted in the experience of this, yes, very special place.

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