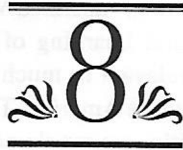

Another Season of Discontent: The Critics

GENERAL EDUCATION RECONSIDERED

Once it became apparent that the era of collegiate turmoil in the sixties was over and relative tranquility had returned to the campuses of the nation's colleges and universities, there were signs in the early 1970s that the American academic community was now willing to take a fresh look at general education. Once again, official enthusiasm for liberal learning resurfaced. Once again there ensued a national debate, an outpouring of books and articles on the subject, a rash of curricular experiments, and a few new proposals which, in the public mind, came to epitomize the movement.

In the aftermath of the Vietnam war and the isolationism that swept the country, many pundits began calling for the development of curricula designed to foster a more global perspective, a larger world consciousness. New learning was called for at a time when it had grown obvious that the nation's destiny was linked inexorably with the fate of other peoples around the world. Others, in the wake of the Watergate scandal of the Nixon administration in Washington, urged more attention to moral training and ethics education. Environmental education took on new urgency. Above all, some sort of general

education was argued for as an antidote to the narcissistic self-absorption allegedly characteristic of the college student generation of the 1970s. Liberal learning likewise was viewed as a palliative for rampant vocationalism and professionalism on campuses. Calls for common learning to counter the elimination of general requirements effected a decade or so earlier in the 1960s were repeatedly issued.[1]

"Contemporary liberal education," declared Willis D. Weatherford, chair of the 1971 Commission on Liberal Learning of the American Association of American Colleges, "seems irrelevant to much of the undergraduate population and, more especially, to middle America. The concept of intellect has not been democratized; the humanities are moribund, unrelated to student interest, and the liberal arts appear headed for stagnation. Narrow vocational education has captured the larger portion of political interest." Weatherford placed the blame equally on faculty, students, and public officials. "The liberal arts college," he alleged, "are captives of illiberally educated faculty members who barter with credit hours and pacts of nonaggression among their fiefs and baronies. Illiberally educated politicians, who want a bigger gross national product with scant regard for whether the mind and lives of the persons who produce it are or are not gross, make their own negative contribution, as do illiberally educated students."[2] As though to confirm Weatherford's indictment, half a dozen years later the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education reported that between 1967 and 1974 general-education requirements, as a percentage of undergraduate curricula, had dropped dramatically. "Today there is little consensus on what constitutes a liberal education," the Council found, "and, as if by default, the choices have been left to the student." General education, the report claimed, "is now a disaster area. It had been on the defensive and losing ground for more than 100 years."[3]

Attempts at analyzing causes for the "disaster" dominated an ever-growing body of literature. Between the mid-seventies and mid-eighties, the total number of published books and articles treating relevant topics registered a tremendous increase, more than doubling the number for the preceding ten-year period, from 1965 to 1975. The same trend continued into the mid-1990s. Throughout, however, there was remarkable unanimity of opinion on what forces threatened to gut the substance of liberal and general education, leaving perhaps only an empty rhetorical shell. Commentators were agreed that the professionalization of scholarship in higher education had been a major factor contributing to fragmentation and specialization. A second factor inimical to the cause of the liberal arts was the modern tendency to treat knowledge as a commodity, something to be "used" or "consumed." Finally, the structural organization of the university itself was identified as a culprit. Such allegations

had been heard before, of course. But they were given new clarity and force in analyses of the apparent decline of liberal educational values.

Clark Kerr, former president of the University of California at Berkeley, had argued in the opening years of the 1960s that the American university had become a "multiversity" under pressure from its many publics.[4] Faced with an explosion of knowledge and rising demands that it serve the needs of business, government, the military, and other groups and causes, the character of the university had been transformed. Too harassed to lead, university administrators had become mediators among competing interests, trying to balance contradictory demands, treating students as consumers, knowledge as a factory product, and course offerings as supermarket wares. In the confusion, general learning was bound to be overlooked. For Kerr, the rise of the multiversity had come about as a result of the radical democratization of higher education and the colleges' inability to resist social, business, and governmental pressures.

Critic Robert Paul Wolff in *The Ideal of the University* (1969), Brand Blanchard in *The Uses of a Liberal Education* (1973), and Christopher Jencks and David Riesman in *The Academic Revolution* (1977) all tended to offer the same diagnoses. Universities, they alleged, had grown complacent, less reflective about their own practices.[5] Bereft of any guiding intellectual vision, most institutions of higher learning had settled for hodgepodge curricula, which thinking students rightly disdained as "required irrelevance." Corrupted by populism, professionalism, and assembly-line scholarship, universities had allegedly given themselves over to turning students to specialized professional careers as quickly as possible. Having abandoned their integrity to marketplace flux and flow, such institutions had lost the will to insist upon any intellectual coherence or unity in their vast offerings. Universities, many further argued, had become knowledge factories. They were the principal manufacturers and retailers of knowledge as a commodity. Their buyers included students seeking credentials to guarantee themselves prosperous futures, industries in search of the skills and products of research, and governmental agencies needing an array of specialized services. In their quest for competitive advantage and prestige, such critics lamented, academic institutions had "sold themselves out" to the highest bidders.[6]

In the absence of a scheme of values commanding broad assent within society, it was said, academic disciplines had sought to be value-free, each imitating the neutral discourse of the so-called "hard" sciences. The result, according to one anonymous wit, was the appearance of social sciences that were not terribly "social" and humanities that were not very "humane." The American university had committed itself to all that was objective,

countable, precise, and verifiable. Its focus, once again, was upon knowledge as a commodity, packaged for consumption in tidy little bundles called credit units, hours, and courses.[7] Further, given the standing assumption that larger questions of human meaning, purpose, or significance are unanswerable, and hence not worth asking seriously, universities had acceded to the popular belief that ultimate questions are nonintellectual, subjective, and not amenable to reasoned analysis or dispute.[8] The proof, or so it was claimed, as Herbert I. London, dean at New York University, phrased it, was the degree to which a so-called cult of neutrality prevailed in academe. Combining behavioristic, reductionist, and positivist leanings, London alleged, it was a mentality or mind-set that had "created a Gresham's Law of curriculum design: That which is measurable will drive what is not measurable out of the curriculum." The "minimalists," he feared, if unopposed, would eventually destroy what was left of the liberal-arts tradition in higher education and make general learning impossible.[9]

Historian Page Smith, founding provost of the University of California at Santa Cruz, later referred to the same phenomenon as a species of mindless reductionism. It was, he alleged, a kind of "academic fundamentalism" at work in the marketplace of ideas, where all ideas are considered equal and no value judgments are admitted or considered worthy of examination. The result, as he analyzed it, was a profound impoverishment of the human spirit within academe, exacerbated by the general demoralization of all of the nonscientific disciplines and a fragmentation of knowledge to the point where it no longer made sense to speak of a "community of learning." What was left, Smith alleged, was an aggregation of specialists scarcely able to communicate with one another, much less with any outside public.[10]

Herbert London, writing in *Change* magazine in 1978, was not optimistic about prospects for liberal and general learning in the modern college or university. Efforts to find a shared view of appropriate undergraduate experiences, in his opinion, reflected compromise among faculty factions, not consensus. The issue of a possible "core curriculum," for example, had become particularly touchy at a time when many academic departments were more concerned with survival than principle. Behind the rhetoric of some holistic approach, specialists were pressing for a wider array of specialized courses. And in the intense competition for space, time, and resources, "a ballot to determine the complexion of the curriculum is very often simply a pork barrel bid." Anxious to preserve faculty jobs and bolster enrollments, one department votes for another's preferred course selection in exchange for support of its own required course in the general education program. "Of what value is debate about academic issues in this climate of academic backscratching?" London asked rhetorically.[11]

Critics of American higher education from the late 1970s through the 1990s sensed the malaise affecting colleges and universities across the country, though less often were they in agreement over its meaning or significance. It had been brought on, it was said, by an economic crunch, by changing student enrollments, by curricular disagreements, and, more broadly, public skepticism over the practicality of any general education whatsoever. Writing in 1978 in *Change* magazine, Barry O'Connell felt college students would not easily be disabused of the persistent notion that general learning had nothing to do with career preparation. But he was inclined to offer a more charitable interpretation of students' expectations and desires. Taking their cues from their elders, he said, students were pressured to elect courses most directly relevant to their chosen careers. Told of the oversupply of graduates competing for fewer desirable jobs, it was understandable that they should feel compelled to hold everything else in abeyance as they prepared themselves for employment. "This process does not conduce to much self-respect among the current student generation," O'Connell commented. "Having lost their faith, as it were, they must now endure the excoriations of their teachers and the media for being narrowly obsessed with careers, and, if one believes most of the curricular reports, inept at writing, incompetent in mathematics, and moral barbarians."[12] Students unquestionably needed a broad general education, he argued, but their disinclination to pursue it was entirely understandable.

Throughout the last two decades of the twentieth century, studies lamenting the state of general learning in collegiate curricula were issued with almost monotonous regularity.[13] In all cases, recurrent themes included pleas for more stringent academic standards, demands that ethical values be given more attention in learning, reiteration of the need to restore citizenship education to a place of primacy, and arguments in defense of a common learning capable of supplying a more coherent unifying purpose and structure to undergraduate curricula.[14]

MULTICULTURALISM AND THE "POLITICAL CORRECTNESS" CONTROVERSY

Were it not for the fact that the so-called PC controversy of the late 1980s and early 1990s received so much attention in the public press, it would be tempting to dismiss it as just another short-lived if curious episode in the history of American higher education. But campus debates over affirmative action, the attempted proscription of "hate speech," and curricular "canonicity" pointed beyond themselves to a host of quite fundamental issues having to do, among other things, with the sociology of knowledge, with academic politics and equity, free speech, multiculturalism, ethnic separatism and feminist activism,

textual criticism in the humanities, the role of general education in higher learning, and, more broadly still, with the very nature of the role of colleges and universities within the social order. To some observers, the various controversies and debates over "political correctness" lacked much sense or substance, amounting to little more than an intellectual tempest in an academic teapot, an exercise in overblown rhetoric soon to be forgotten. To others, the furor symbolized a long overdue protest against subversive professorial radicalism; misplaced egalitarianism; and the moral bankruptcy of academic institutions allegedly brought about by a wholesale politicization of higher learning. To still others of different persuasion, the conflict represented nothing less than a needed effort to expose once and for all the enduring "mystification" of the university's role in the reproduction of social, economic, and cultural inequality and injustice in American society.[15]

National debate over political correctness began in the fall of 1990, with the appearance of a lengthy article in the *New York Review of Books* (December 6, 1990) authored by John Searle, a philosophy professor at Berkeley. A new postmodern generation of professors molded by the radicalism of the 1960s had finally come to power in American academe, he reported, and the results promised to be devastating to the world of conventional scholarship. The new breed of radicals, as he represented them, included radical feminists, gays and lesbians, Marxist ideologues, a diverse assortment of deconstructionists, structuralists, poststructuralists, reader-response theorists, new historicists, and a bewildering array of others. What they shared in common, Searle and others argued, was a desire to expose the facade of objectivity and critical detachment claimed by traditional bourgeois thought, and a programmatic disdain for all standards of judgment—intellectual, moral, and aesthetic—except their own ideologically-driven imperatives, which allegedly they held immune from criticism. Their precepts, according to the indictment, included the denial of any objective difference between truth and falsity, or between disinterested inquiry and partisan proselytizing. These new academic mandarins, or so it was claimed, were distinguished chiefly by a contempt for bourgeois rationality; and by their antipathy toward color-blind justice and advancement based on merit rather than according to gender, race, or ethnicity.[16]

Having come to positions of influence and authority in academe, Searle and others claimed, campus radicals were now engaged in promoting an ideology informed by a conviction that all of Western civilization was hopelessly oppressive and reactionary. Their conviction, it was said, was that general studies had been dominated exclusively by treatments of the accomplishments of "dead white European males" to the virtual exclusion of all others, that the entire historical, literary, and cultural "canon" was "Eurocentric" and "elitist."

Because traditional general education courses were racist, sexist, and homophobic, study of the classic works of Western civilization needed to be replaced with courses devoted to Third-World cultures and victims of oppression. Multiculturalism as a curriculum reform initiative thus implied the retrieval of minority cultural capital from the marginality to which it had historically been consigned. But in process, or so it was alleged, postmodern radicals had generated an atmosphere of fear and repression. In the name of sensitivity to others, under pain of being denounced as a sexist or racist, radicals were forcing everyone to adhere to their own codes of politically correct speech and behavior.[17]

So arcane a controversy might have attracted little public attention beyond the precincts of the nation's ivory towers had it not been for the appearance in 1991 of a work entitled *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* by Dinesh D'Souza, former editor of a right-wing campus newspaper at Dartmouth, manager of a conservative public-policy quarterly, and a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. His book, more than any other single work, served to focus and popularize the debate over political correctness in the first half of the decade of the 1990s.[18] At the root of divisive, often bitter controversies over race and gender simmering on college campuses across the country, D'Souza argued, lay conflicting standards of excellence and justice. The problem as he saw it began with preferential treatment for ethnic minorities. Although university administrators might try to disguise the truth about affirmative-action plans with evasive verbal gymnastics, according to D'Souza, the truth of the matter was that Orwellian "doublespeak" could not mask the inherent unfairness of racial quotas and double standards, no matter how laudable the desire to enhance minority opportunity or to redress historical inequities. Whereas people were entitled to their own opinions about tinkering with standards, he declared, they were not entitled to their own facts: "It is unequivocally the case that affirmative action involves displacing and lowering academic standards in order to promote proportional representation for racial groups."[19]

Precisely because affirmative action depended on unjust means to achieve its goal, he declared, it exacerbated racial tension and made authentic racial pluralism all the more unlikely. Only when measures that exalted group equality above individual justice were decisively repudiated, he judged, would interracial conflict abate. Administrative censorship of derogatory speech, mandated codes of discourse, and etiquette seminars would never suffice to eliminate campus racial tensions. Nor would acceding to the demands of special groups who sought to protect their own racial or ethnic identity on campus through separatist measures or institutions. "No community," he observed, "can be built on

the basis of preferential treatment and double standards, and their existence belies university rhetoric about equality." He warned, "If the university model is replicated in the country at large, far from bringing ethnic harmony, it will reproduce and magnify the lurid bigotry, intolerance, and balkanization of campus life in the broader culture."[20]

D'Souza assailed what he felt was a chilling tendency on the part of campus radicals and some liberals to circumscribe debate about race and ethnicity, to insist upon a special lexicon of words in reference to women and minorities, and to insist that all others adhere to their code—in short, that everyone be "politically correct" in speech and conduct. Worse yet, D'Souza and other like-minded critics alleged, there was something terribly disingenuous about the way leftist radicals obfuscated or obscured their own motives by loudly denying that their intent was to harass or intimidate anyone, or that, indeed, any such thing as "political correctness" existed.

Those, in turn, who stood accused of intimidation from the left responded with criticisms of their own, scoffing at what they characterized as the "alarmist" posturing of a phalanx of dour political reactionaries and right-wing conservatives. The real problem, they argued, was that conservatives had willfully misrepresented their attempt to broaden or widen courses of study to reflect the differing needs and standards of marginalized groups formerly not adequately represented within the academy. To criticize the dominant curriculum as "Eurocentric," for example, was only to point out the obvious: that learning circumscribed by the culture and history of Europe and North America was limiting and no longer functional in a global community.[21] As Catharine R. Stimpson, dean of the graduate school at Rutgers University, expressed it in her 1990 presidential address before the Modern Languages Association, "Multiculturalism promises to bring dignity to the dispossessed and self-empowerment to the disempowered, to recuperate the texts and traditions of ignored groups, to broaden cultural history." She professed not to understand why any such movement would arouse such strident opposition. "I am baffled," she declared, "why we cannot be students of Western culture and of multiculturalism at the same time, why we cannot show the historical and present-day relations among many cultures."[22]

Dinesh D'Souza, for one, remained unconvinced. Multicultural courses, he charged in a television interview in June 1991, had "degenerated into a kind of ethnic cheerleading, a primitive romanticism about the Third World, combined with the systematic denunciation of the West."[23] Roger Kimball, author of a widely-read work entitled *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (1990), took much the same position. Multiculturalist ideologues, he argued, were engaged in the "aggressive politicization" of

academic studies. He deplored what he saw as "a pervasive animus against the achievements and values of Western culture" and the "subjugation" of teaching and scholarship to political imperatives. Celebrating "diversity" would be unobjectionable, Kimball averred, were it not for the fact that the concept or general theme had been converted into a rigid multiculturalist orthodoxy, any deviation from which by dissidents was likely to lead to social ostracism and expressions of contempt.[24]

Studying Western civilization as the appropriate core for general and common learning, defenders claimed, was justified, if by nothing else, by the ineluctable fact that contemporary American society *is* the product of the Western intellectual and cultural tradition, extending from classical antiquity down to modern times. If it was deemed too exclusionary, the remedy then was more inclusion—better representation of the achievements and works of non-European, non-male, non-white figures. Some opponents argued their objections had been misconstrued.[25] Defenders of the Western canon, they argued, were advocating a narrow and specific aggregation of cultural capital and holding it up as a normative referent for everyone. Opening the canon of itself was not enough, not so long as a small and powerful caste was able to claim it for its own. Nor was it a matter of proprietorship alone. The internal history of Western civilization, leftist critics charged, internally is a chronicle of the oppression of women and minorities. Externally, the story is one of imperialism and colonialism. Specific debate over what is or is not hegemonic, patriarchal, or exclusionary was therefore held by radicals to be fruitless. The solution to a closed, privileged club is not to open it to new members, but to abolish the "club" itself. Likewise, authentic cultural and curricular pluralism could not be achieved until old structures had been demolished and new learning configurations erected in their place. The answer to the problem of exclusion, as leftist critics saw it, was the development of an entirely different order of knowledge, a new construction quite unlike anything known before in American higher education.[26]

Curriculum theorist Michael Apple of the University of Wisconsin offered a leftist perspective on canonicity. Basically, his argument amounted to a categorical denial that there could be one textual authority, one definitive set of "facts" divorced from its context of power relations. A "common culture," he labored to show, could never be an extension to everyone of what a minority mean and believe. Rather, and crucially, an authentic shared culture would require not the stipulation and incorporation within textbooks of lists and concepts that make everyone "culturally literate," but the creation of "the conditions necessary for all people to participate in the creation and recreation of meanings and values." He concluded that a democratic process in which all people—not simply those

who see themselves as the intellectual guardians of the "Western tradition"—nevertheless could be involved in the deliberation of what is important.[27]

Inevitably, increased visibility for leftist professorial voices and groups led to the spawning of rightist organizations as well, most notably the National Association of Scholars, a group dedicated to opposing what it characterized as the radical left-wing political agenda being advanced on campuses. By 1983 the eight-year-old organization had grown to nearly 3,000 members and claimed affiliated groups in 29 different states. William Pruitt, a literature professor from the City College of San Francisco, was quoted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 28, 1993), explaining the organization's rapid growth as a backlash to the criticism to which the NAS had been subjected. "A lot of these guys were hiding in carrels hoping the multicultural stuff would go away," he said. "Now they're coming out because they believe American democracy is at stake."[28]

In the 1990s, academe remained deeply polarized over affirmative action, speech codes, the movement toward a more multicultural curriculum, and the treatment of women and members of minority groups. Nevertheless, as the United States approached the end of the millennium, some observers detected a certain muting of inflammatory rhetoric, a greater willingness on both sides to offer concessions, a lessening of extremism. Activists on the left had grown more wary of policies aimed at restricting offensive speech. Scholars on the right appeared to be more open-minded about revising courses of study to include minority perspectives. Cautious experimentation was under way in many colleges and universities with devising new courses incorporating a more pluralistic cultural outlook.

Gerald Graff, an English professor at the University of Chicago and founder of Teachers for a Democratic Culture, a professional group formed to combat charges that campuses were dominated by political correctness, foresaw no immediate or dramatic resolution of issues raised by the PC controversy. But as quoted in the April 23, 1993, issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Graff anticipated greater civility in the discussions to come. "We still haven't constructed regular channels for conflict resolution," he remarked, "and we don't even recognize the need for them. I've been arguing that the place to do that is in the curriculum."[29] If nothing else, protagonists on all sides appeared more willing than formerly to explore the questions anew. In that respect, historically, they stood very much in the tradition of constant curricular revision that had characterized higher learning in America since its inception.

DIAGNOSING THE MALAISE

Despite its apparent robustness, some observers of American higher education in the last years of the twentieth century professed to detect a kind of pervasive

"dis-ease" afflicting academe, what more than a few critics called a spiritual malaise, and others termed a peculiar "joylessness." George H. Douglas, a professor of English at the University of Illinois, writing in *Education Without Impact* (1992), agreed something was wrong with the nation's colleges and universities, though he dismissed claims they were in a state of "crisis." It seemed to him histrionic, alarmist even, to proclaim a crisis in higher education once again, for crisis had been the norm for decades on end.[30]

With the advent of Sputnik in 1957, when the country's technological leadership seemed jeopardized, alarms were sounded proclaiming a state of crisis in education at all levels, higher education included. Toward the end of the sixties, when colleges and universities were under siege by youthful student radicals and dissidents and all forms of authority were being attacked as illegitimate, pundits loudly proclaimed yet another campus crisis of major proportions. Ten years later, crisis loomed anew amidst claims that academic standards from kindergarten to graduate school had been seriously eroded, that the traditional curricular canon had disintegrated, and that compulsory multiculturalism and media-manufactured hysteria over "political correctness" had seemingly transformed each and every pedagogical debate into a life-or-death ideological conflict, a brouhaha threatening to tear asunder the fabric of American intellectual culture and, with it, academic institutions of higher learning.

But crisis by definition cannot be chronic, as Benjamin R. Barber, a professor of political science at Rutgers, observed in his *An Aristocracy of Everyone: The Politics of Education and the Future of America* (1992). As he phrased it, "On tenth hearing, the alarm bells inspire despair rather than action. Tired out by our repeated crises, we roll over in bed."[31] For Douglas, the condition afflicting American academe might have been better likened to a low-grade fever than to a terminal illness. America's colleges and universities, he judged, were suffering from "a kind of lethargy, a tediousness, a middle-age disease of some kind—something like arthritis, shall we say, or any disease that ebbs and flows."[32]

Interpretations of *what* precisely was wrong differed. Critics disagreed over the causes of academic malaise, and still more in their prescriptions for a cure. There was remarkable unanimity, nonetheless, about the more obvious symptoms. Historian Page Smith, in his 1990 work *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America* claimed the current academic scene resembled nothing so much as a vast metaphorical "desert." Sketching out historically what he perceived to have gone awry, he cited as major themes an alleged flight from teaching by the professorate, the egregious neglect of undergraduate education, the meretriciousness of most academic research, and the alliance of universities with corporate and governmental agencies. Each in its own way, he argued,

had contributed to "killing the spirit" of American higher education, leaving behind something that to all outward appearances might appear as vibrant as ever, but within was hollow or dead.[33]

Comparable in its targets but far less temperate in tone was a diatribe unleashed by Charles J. Sykes, author of a widely read, muckraking work entitled *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (1988) and a follow-up work, *The Hollow Men: Politics and Corruption in Higher Education* (1990). Professors, he claimed, were chiefly to blame for the ills afflicting academe; and in his opinion, they had a great deal to answer for. "Overpaid" and "grotesquely underworked," he alleged, they presided over a scandalous satrapy of inefficiency and waste. As a professional class, college and university teachers were typically neglectful of their teaching duties, "unapproachable, uncommunicative and unavailable" to the typical undergraduate, obsessed with research, and prone to turning over their classroom chores to an underpaid and overworked lumpen proletariat—graduate assistants—whenever expediency dictated.

Worse yet, as Sykes portrayed them, professors were guilty of inflicting thousands of useless articles and books upon the world, written in "stupefying and inscrutable jargon" that served only to mask the vacuous and trivial nature of their content. In their lust to fulfill their own professional careers, he claimed, professors were busily engaged filling up whole libraries with "masses of unread, unreadable and worthless pablum." American universities had degenerated to the point where they were now mere factories for "junk-think," their inhabitants devoted to woolly-headed, pettifogging theorizing of no conceivable value to anyone. The ubiquity of dull pedants raking over the dust heaps of learning, dispensers of tiny little packages of abstruse learning, Sykes declared, lay at the heart of almost everything wrong with American higher learning.[34]

CAREERISM AND THE ENTREPRENEURIAL UNIVERSITY

Often cited as a corrupting influence upon academe was its unholy alliance with business, industry, and government. Page Smith rehearsed the familiar story of the rise of the corporate university and its historic entanglement with business enterprise and the military-industrial establishment. "One must ask," he observed, "whether the university can, in the long run, preserve its freedom to carry on . . . in the face of . . . shameless huckstering. Who pays the piper calls the tune. There is no reason to believe that the university is immune to that law."[35] Benjamin Barber's *An Aristocracy of Everyone* went even further: "We may moralize about the virtues of education," its author wrote, "but

higher education has come to mean education for hire: the university is increasingly for sale to those corporations and state agencies that want to buy its research facilities and, for appropriate funding, acquire the legitimacy of its professorate." He emphasized, "I do not mean the university in service to the public and private sectors; I mean the university in servitude to the public and private sectors. I mean not partnership but a 'corporate takeover' of the university."[36]

Barber judged that in the early 1990s the hegemony of markets in academe had grown virtually complete. Free inquiry in many fields had been subordinated to guided—which is to say, subsidized—research. Autonomous pedagogical standards had long since been displaced by market pressures from both immediate consumers (students) and long-term consumers (the private and public sectors). If established trends continued, he predicted, colleges and universities would end up becoming little more than pawns of the tastes, values, and goals of society at large, if they had not already become so.[37] Faculty who acceded to the system would continue to share in the spoils; those who did not would find themselves on second-class career tracks or even out of work. Research, publications, and external grants and contracts were what counted. And where commerce encroached upon higher education so blatantly, he judged, it was not to be wondered at that professors more and more were thinking like capitalists, or more modestly, like proletarians.

Barber's analysis of what was wrong with American higher education hinged in part on two contrasting models of the university, each allegedly a mirror image of the other, neither of them in his view fully adequate or satisfying. The first—the so-called purist model—as Barber depicted it, calls always for refurbishing the ivory tower and reinforcing its monastic isolation from the world. The other, the "vocational," apes the marketplace and urges that the tower be demolished, overcoming its isolation by embracing servitude to the market's whims and fashions, which—*mirabile dictu*—then pass as its purposes and aims. The purist model, essentially an embellishment on the medieval university as favored by nostalgic scholastics, seeks to insulate the university from society at large. Its primary concern is the abstract pursuit of speculative knowledge for its own sake. Learning is for learning's sake, not for power or happiness or career, but for itself as a self-contained, intrinsic good. To the purist, knowledge is "radically divorced from time and culture, from power and interest . . . [and] above all, it eschews utility."[38] The purist ideal of the university "knows a social context exists but believes the job of the university is to offer sanctuary from that context."

As Barber noted, the purist model in a sense was the old-fashioned liberal model of academe as a neutral domain in which free minds "engage in open

discourse at a cosmic distance from power and interest and the other distractions of the real world." While he did not specifically allude to Robert Maynard Hutchins, the Chicago Plan of the 1930s might have come to mind as a prime example of some such model or ideal prominent in the history of twentieth-century American higher education.

The vocational model, in contrast, abjures tradition no less decisively than the purist model abjures relevance. Indeed, it is highly responsive to the demands of the larger society it believes education must serve. The vocationalist, according to Barber, wishes to see the university prostrate itself before the new gods of modernity. "Service to the market, training for its professions, research in the name of its products are the hallmarks of the new full-service university, which wants nothing so much as to be counted as a peer among the nation's great corporations, an equal opportunism producer of prosperity and material happiness." The vocationalist model looks with approval upon the image of the university forging alliances with research companies and with government, plying corporations for program funding and stalking the public sector in search of public "needs" it can profitably satisfy. "In each of these cases," Barber wrote, "it asks society to show the way and compliantly follows."[39]

Again, Barber adduced no specific historical precedents to illustrate his second model. Had he elected to do so, he would have found an ample supply of illustrations, for example, in the rhetoric of post–Civil War proponents of the modern research university throughout the late 1800s, and again in public pronouncements of the role and mission of the American university in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

If the purist model ignores issues of power and influence, the vocationalist model ignores how a focus upon research adapted to the needs of society corrupts, Barber believed. Advocates of the "Entrepreneurial University," he claimed, were impervious to the dangers. They were perfectly willing to subsume teaching to research, and research itself to product-oriented engineering. They showed little concern over careerism in academe. As he phrased it, "If it requires that education take on the aspect of vocational training, and that the university become a kindergarten for corporate society where in the name of economic competition the young are socialized, bullied, and brainwashed into market usefulness, then the curriculum must be recast in the language of opportunism, careerism, and professionalism—in a word, commerce. Every course is affixed with a 'pre' (as in premedical, prelaw, prebusiness, and pre-professional). Academic departments hem in students' intellectual lives with a bevy of technical requirements, which leave no room for liberal or general education and which assume that education for living is in fact education for

making a living. . . . Where the philosopher once said that all of life is a preparation for death, the educational careerist now thinks that all of life is a preparation for business—or perhaps, more bluntly, that life *is* business."[40]

Many critiques of American higher education in the 1990s, like Barber's, were strikingly reminiscent of Thorstein Veblen's indictment in *The Higher Learning in America* (1918), which had appeared three-quarters of a century earlier. Veblen's complaint then, it will be recalled, was that captains of industry (among them Johns Hopkins, Daniel Drew, Leland Stanford and James B. Duke) had captured the nation's sleepy little colleges with promises of largesse and proceeded to turn them—some of them, at any rate—into stone, granite, and marble monuments to themselves. They had inflicted upon the academy, Veblen complained, a certain cast of mind, a crude utilitarianism, an expectation that universities would become more productive and more attentive to output, after the fashion of the businesses through which they as industrial magnates had built up their own fortunes. Under the model prescribed by a business ethos, the university was transformed into a place whose style or mode of operation was shaped by the spirit of business management, that is, by an insistence upon salesmanship, boosterism, bureaucracy, cost-control measures, and public relations, by a constant seeking of competitive advantage within the academic marketplace. The tone set was one of activity, bustle, and intrigue.

The institutional environment thereby created, Veblen labored to show, was one in which professors were reduced to mere hirelings, hemmed in by rigid professional practices and the dictates of the guild, and set to clawing their way up a ladder of career advancement not unlike that prevailing in business and industry. Veblen's somewhat overblown characterization of professors as prisoners of an inhumane and debilitating system, in the final analysis, fully anticipated Barber's equally sweeping claim in the early 1990s that "the vast apathetic mass of faculty . . . do not give a damn one way or another about what goes in [the classroom]."[41] Far too many professors on too many campuses, the latter alleged, "either do not care or cannot afford to. Certainly university administrators give them neither reason nor incentive. They have become 'employees' of corporate managers. . . . The demeaned status of teachers in the modern university gives scholars little reason to measure their career progress other than by how quickly they get tenure, how much they get paid, and how little time they have to spend in the classroom."[42]

SPECIALIZATION AND FRAGMENTATION

Robert Bellah, a professor of sociology at the University of California at Berkeley, who together with a number of associates authored a widely

discussed analysis of American culture entitled *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985), linked the transformation of the nineteenth-century American college into the twentieth-century corporate university with a concomitant array of other social and cultural changes, none of them necessarily healthy for modern academe.[43] Before the Civil War, as he pointed out, liberal-arts colleges were too small to be divided into departments. (In 1872 the entering freshman class at Harvard had only 200 students; Yale had 131; Princeton, 110; Dartmouth, 74; and Williams, 49.) As late as 1869, there were no more than two dozen faculty members at Harvard, and they mostly taught the traditional subjects of classical languages and mathematics. The antebellum college was organized on the assumption that higher learning constituted a single unified culture; and literature, the arts, and sciences were viewed as branches of that whole. It was the task of moral philosophy, often a required course in the senior year, usually taught by the college president himself, not only to integrate the various fields of learning, including science and religion, but even more importantly to draw out the implications for the living of a good life individually and socially. The social sciences, Bellah noted, so far as they were taught at all, were subsumed under the heading of moral philosophy.

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century the research university began to supplant the college as the model for higher education—contemporaneously with the rise of the business corporation. The two institutions were manifestations of the same social forces "Graduate education, research, and specialization, leading to largely autonomous departments, were the hallmarks of the new universities," Bellah and his colleagues noted. "The prestige of natural science as the model for all disciplined knowing and the belief that the progress of science would inevitably bring social amelioration in its wake partially obscured the fact that the unity and ethical meaning of higher education were being lost."[44]

On balance, Bellah felt there had been "great positive achievements" in that transformation of higher education. The new academic system was better adapted to preparing vast numbers of people for employment in an industrial society; and it included as students those who, because of class, sex, or race, had formerly been excluded. In an undeniable sense, the research university and its many spinoffs in the twentieth century brought democratization. Though the full promise did not begin to be fulfilled until after World War II, from the very beginning there was the idea of institutions open to a much wider spectrum of the society than the old colleges had ever been. And the new university, rather than providing the final polish to an already-established upper class, would itself be an avenue of advancement in the world. As Francis H. Snow of the University of Kansas, in his inaugural address of 1890 put it,

"Let it be everywhere made known that the University of the State, every son and daughter of the state may receive the special training that makes chemists, naturalists, entomologists, electricians, engineers, lawyers, musicians, pharmacists and artists, or the broader and more symmetrical culture which prepares those who receive it for that general, well-rounded efficiency which makes the educated man a success in any line of intellectual activity."[45]

But there were costs also. Part of the price entailed by the rise of the modern research university and its attendant specialization and professionalism was, as Bellah put it, "the impoverishment of the public sphere." The new experts in science, in particular, exchanged general citizenship in society for membership within a smaller, more specialized community of experts. Within his field of expertise, the specialist's opinions would be judged henceforth not so much by the literate public at large as by his or her professional colleagues and peers. He was apt to become less intelligible to lay readers. Today's academic specialists, he observed, were writing within a set of assumptions and a vocabulary shared only by other experts. Specialization was inevitable. What was *not* inevitable, as Bellah judged it, was that discourse would tend to confine itself within the narrow limits of subcommunities of specialists without ever addressing any larger audience or informing public discussion beyond those subcommunities. Needless to add, in academe, any sense of integration, any moral dimension whatsoever, had disappeared.[46]

In a later work entitled *The Good Society* (1991), Bellah and his colleagues cited a still more troubling consequence flowing from the enthronement of scientific knowledge as a cultural paradigm for the modern research university. "Within less than two decades of its founding the effort to create an integrated, democratic higher education had degenerated into an early form of what we have come to know as the multiversity cafeteria," he and his associates remarked. "The research university, the cathedral of learning, rather than interpreting and integrating the larger society, came more and more to mirror it. Far from becoming a new community that would bring coherence out of chaos, it became instead congeries of faculty and students, each pursuing their own ends, integrated not by any shared vision but only by the bureaucratic procedures of the 'administration.' "[47] (As a university president was once heard to declare, "A university is an untidy constellation of academic and administrative units sharing in common little more than a heating plant.")

What Bellah referred to as the "multiversity cafeteria," and Barber the "full-service" university, George Douglas called the "giant bazaar" model of academe. "Since the end of the nineteenth century," he commented, "we Americans have gravitated toward the idea that the university is like a giant department store, an emporium, a bazaar of some kind, a place where people

come to shop for things. People come to the university to purchase goods that are prepackaged or made to order. Students, for example, want to obtain degrees so that they can step out into a technologically complex world that requires specialized knowledge. They pay for those degrees and expect to receive them on time and at the right price, just like a person who buys a bolt of cloth in a dry goods store." Yet, as Douglas noted, just as buyers sometimes are shortchanged or cheated, today's students might not be receiving fair value for their investment. Further, there might be something quite fundamentally wrong with their being encouraged to think of knowledge as a consumable commodity, or education as something to be purchased off the shelf. Some such attitude, he felt, might be responsible for the tendency of many college students to consider their education as something simply to be endured, to be gotten over or gotten through, "as a cat shakes its paw to get rid of a few drops of water into which it has unfortunately been obliged to step."[48]

Part of the problem also, as many critics discussed it, was the extent to which "credentialism" had come to dominate students' attitudes toward higher education. The college degree, as Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron noted (*Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, 1979), might not function directly as a guarantee or affidavit of job competency in a given field, but its acquisition signified the acquisition of a certain "cultural capital" recognized by employers and society at large as symbolizing a rite of occupational initiation, and hence required of those aspiring to a certain occupational status. The academic system, in other words, to the extent that it had replaced guild and apprenticeship training, had now become the means of controlling access to jobs.[49] It was not to be wondered at, therefore, that labor market considerations loomed large in students' interpretations of the meaning and purpose of their college education.

THE "PUBLISH OR PERISH" SYNDROME

Bellah's analysis did not explicitly treat university research or discuss it as a social phenomenon. If it had, it could easily have accounted for the importance accorded research in many institutions of higher learning; for how the model of cumulative extension of knowledge as a product of scientific investigation historically gained currency and came to generate separate imperatives for "doing research" in the social sciences and humanities as well as the physical and biological sciences or mathematics; for the ways in which the Germanic research ideal, as peculiarly adapted to the American cultural milieu, had the unintended outcome ultimately of encouraging a "publish or perish" mentality within the professorate; and for the weighty, sometimes mixed consequences of the research emphasis on undergraduate education.

In any case, many critics of American higher education in the 1980s and 1990s seized upon research as another part of the problem plaguing academe. "If there is one thing that the general public has heard about college professors," observed Douglas, "it is that they are somehow burdened with the necessity of publishing the results of their research."[50] He went on to note that in many small colleges the emphasis on research was much less compulsive and in some places virtually nonexistent. Lack of pressure to publish in some smaller institutions, he further observed, was sometimes taken as a token of their mediocrity or inferiority by those holding appointments in the more prestigious institutions—which might or might not be true. But conversely, claims by those in liberal-arts colleges or other smaller institutions that they stressed good teaching rather than publication also might or might not be true. Either way, all observers were agreed that research productivity had become the *sine qua non* of the activist, corporate university. The issue at stake was how to assess the meaning and significance of that emphasis upon research and publication, both on its own terms and as a controlling consideration for academic advancement.

Economics professor Henry Rosovsky, a former dean at Harvard, offered a characteristic defense for university research.[51] University-level teaching is difficult without the new ideas and inspiration provided by research, he argued. Students are apt to interpret an interest in research as a symptom of lack of interest in teaching, and are encouraged to believe that teaching and research are a zero-sum game—that is, that more research leads to a neglect of teaching and vice versa. What they fail to understand, ran his argument, is that for faculty who find it congenial to work in research institutions, some combination of teaching and research is considered ideal. The university teacher is not a teacher who is expected to confine him- or herself to the transmission of received knowledge to generations of students, after the fashion perhaps of the old antebellum college teaching master. He or she is assumed to be a producer of new knowledge as well.

Rosovsky conceded that promotion, tenure, salary, and professional esteem were all closely associated with research and scholarship, and that pressures to publish in some cases could have adverse consequences. But he felt on balance that researchers tended to be "more interesting and better professors."[52] His argument, of course, was a familiar one: that the best teachers are obviously the leaders in any field of academic endeavor, that people who are on the "cutting edge" of inquiry are more likely to be creative teachers as well. Further, because published research is subject to peer scrutiny, it serves as a useful "quality-control" on the scholarship behind classroom instruction.

It was precisely that article of faith that increasingly came under attack in criticisms of higher education in the eighties and nineties. As Page Smith saw

it, academic research had come to be viewed in a perverse sort of way as its own justification, without any real-world referent, producing a corpus of literature "as broad as the ocean and as shallow as a pond." The vast majority of research turned out in a modern university, he alleged, is essentially worthless, does not result in any measurable benefit to anything or anyone, does not push back the frontiers of knowledge so confidently and frequently invoked, and does not contribute much of significance to the general populace or any particular segment thereof—with the possible exception of those external agencies that sometimes subsidize its costs. So far as Smith was concerned, it was all "busywork on a vast, almost incomprehensible scale." The pity of it all was that so many professors had been forced into becoming unwilling accomplices to a system that forced them to write when, it was painfully obvious, they had nothing of significance to say.[53]

For Charles Sykes, research was an absurdly inflated boondoggle, an enterprise of doubtful worth carried on, often at public expense, without any real utility, cultural or otherwise. As for Rosovsky's argument and others like it that research and teaching are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, Barber remarked that the supposed synergy of the two amounted to a very dubious proposition lacking much supporting evidence. To talk about a "balance" between research and teaching, as he saw it, was an exercise in wishful thinking at best, and at worst, a lie. "The dirty little open secret of American higher education," he observed, "known to every faculty member who manages to gain tenure, is this: No one ever was tenured at a major college or university on the basis of great teaching alone; and no one with a great record of research and publication was ever denied tenure because of a poor teaching record. Teaching is the gravy, but research is the meat and potatoes."[54]

Much criticism of academic research fastened on the character or quality of what was being produced. Some alleged that the system forced professors to become even more specialized than the demands of their respective disciplines required, given the common academic expectation that "serious" scholarship confine itself to small problems, narrowly drawn topics or issues, and in-depth analysis of subjects of microscopic proportions and sharply delimited boundaries. Large sweeping theories had become suspect; straying beyond one's accredited field of expertise was now more and more frowned upon—in short, as one commentator expressed it, the message was that professors were safe only as they became intellectual and scholastic miniaturists. Other critics, like Bellah, assailed the withdrawal of much academic scholarship from issues of large public import, its seeming isolation from the cultural mainstream, its abdication of responsibility for forging linkages to society as a whole.

Still others criticized scholars for their alleged preoccupation with method and technique; and their deliberate penchant for writing in specialized,

inaccessible languages intelligible only to other specialists. "They feast," claimed George Douglas, "on a weak gruel of dead abstractions occasionally seasoned with obscure pomposities."[55] Barber, for his part, felt that criticisms of academic scholarship were more than fully justified, and he felt they applied with special force to the new champions of democratic education no less than to others. The oddest feature about radical scholarship on race, ethnicity, and feminism, for example, he commented, "is how inaccessible it is to its purported constituencies. At least Marx's *Manifesto* was a good and popular read. . . . But a good deal of post-modernist criticism is intelligible only to insiders . . . and, trapped in its own metacritical jargon, is no less elitist than the canon it challenges."[56]

Detractors of academic research and scholarship apportioned blame in equal measure. Researchers in the natural sciences, they alleged, had shut themselves up within their respective specializations, each hermetically sealed and locked apart from one another. Social scientists had just as willfully erected fixed barricades around their own disciplines. Plagued by feelings of inferiority to their colleagues in the physical sciences, they allegedly had drawn a cloak of near-impenetrable technicality over their work and, in a vain attempt to ape the conventions of the "hard" sciences, were engaged in dressing up their investigations with ponderous argot and spurious quantification. Humanists—teachers of literature, language, history, and philosophy—according to Douglas, had indulged themselves in a new and deadly form of scholasticism distinguished chiefly by its obscurantism, bombastic prose, and introspective solipsism. The assorted "perversities" of structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstructionism, and other "murky impostures" in literary and historical analysis, he felt, held full sway. The scholasticism of the humanities, Barber agreed, was well illustrated by its tendency to take the very culture that is its putative object of study and to turn it into the study of the study of culture. Thus, he observed, one no longer reads and interprets books; one studies what it means to read books; one does not interpret theories, but develops theories of interpretation.[57] Overall, the constant refrain of a flood of books commenting on the state of American scholarship in the 1990s was that it appeared to have succumbed to a chilling form of "mandarism," that it had grown utterly remote and removed from the vital concerns with which academic inquiry had once been engaged. The ivory tower, it was said, had become a tower of babble.

LOSS OF COMMUNITY

Loss of a sense of community figured as a recurrent theme in several late-twentieth-century analyses of American higher education. Once again, although there were many other studies of the same genre which emphasized

much the same motifs, George Douglas's *Education Without Impact* supplied an incisive case in point. Americans, he argued at length, had long demanded the "wrong" thing of colleges and universities, and institutions of higher learning had responded by developing an educational style well adapted to meeting the technical and commercial needs of society but not necessarily the needs of individuals as human beings, and certainly not the fundamental civic needs of the republic. Universities, he judged, were failing to provide the type of human setting in which education worthy of the term could thrive. They were too big, too full of activity, too busy to be places of authentic learning. Instead they had become merely factories for producing specialized expertise or for imparting information, in both cases doing so in a relatively routine and unimaginative fashion.[58]

For all of their primitivism, social isolation, stagnancy, and detachment, their limited curricula and autocratic paternalism, Douglas avowed, the old-style colleges that had their footing in colonial times were more authentic communities of learners. They offered little that was directly useful or practical; they prepared for an exceedingly narrow range of careers, and they were forced to make do with only a modicum of support, financial or otherwise. Nevertheless, for all their faults and shortcomings, at their best they provided an environment or an atmosphere in which genuine learning was possible. They afforded time and space for intellectual transactions between professors and students, opportunities for youthful learners to pose fundamental questions, chances to ponder and analyze and discuss issues of common interest. They took seriously the challenge to shape and inform character and to engage questions of normative judgment and standards. Their very smallness made for a type of cohesiveness and personal unity that was later lost. They were learning communities. Above all else, even when college authorities treated their charges as unruly schoolboys whose deportment had to be monitored and regulated in every particular possible, they did take them seriously as learners.[59]

Douglas and other like-minded critics might have invoked as an example of the guiding ideal of the old-style college William Johnson Cory's address (*Eton Reform*, 1861) to a group of young men about to embark upon the next phase of their academic careers. "You are not engaged so much in acquiring knowledge as in making mental efforts under criticism," he told them. "A certain amount of knowledge you can indeed with average faculties acquire so as to retain; nor need you regret the hours that you have spent on much that is forgotten, for the shadow of lost knowledge at least protects you from many illusions. But you go to a great school, not for knowledge so much as for arts and habits; for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of

assuming at a moment's notice a new intellectual posture, for the art of entering quickly into another person's thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the habit of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, for discrimination, for mental courage and mental soberness." Cory concluded, "Above all, you go to a great school for self-knowledge."[60]

Something of that arcadian ambience of intimacy and leisured contemplation lingered on as formerly bucolic colleges and universities grew larger and were transformed into something else altogether. "Even when huge institutions grew up in the years just before the turn of our century," as Douglas phrased it, "persistent efforts were made to keep something of that essence of the small, ivy-covered college—otherwise we wouldn't have erected universities with Georgian or 'collegiate Gothic' buildings, with quadrangles and shaded paths. We would have stopped planting ivy."[61] (Interestingly, in another context altogether, historian Daniel Boorstin also discerned a special symbolic significance, albeit of a different sort, in collegiate architecture. If there was to be a new "religion of education," he observed, the universities would serve as its cathedrals, just as the high schools would become its parish churches. It was no accident, he felt, that American universities had adopted the architecture of the great age of European cathedral building. In short, for institutions that could afford it, "Collegiate Gothic" naturally became a standard.)[62]

On balance, critics of American higher education in the nineties did not appear overly optimistic about prospects for re-creating the spirit of a genuine learning community in academe. Gigantism—the sheer size and complexity of the modern university—seemed to militate against recapturing the closeness and intimacy said to be characteristic of higher learning in former times. The likelihood that mega-universities could be downsized to any appreciable extent (even if some such scaling-down was deemed desirable or necessary) seemed remote. Another factor at work, it was pointed out, was a dramatic increase in the percentage of students in colleges and universities attending on a part-time basis. Unable or unwilling to invest in full-time instruction, many students had long since abandoned the traditional four-year time frame for completing requirements for a bachelor's degree. Campuses were now thronged with older, returning students, both graduate and undergraduate, nontraditional collegians in their middle years, men and women whose career and familial responsibilities competed with academic pursuits for their time and energy. Even among the traditional 18- to 22-year-old cohort, economic pressures demanded that many hold down part-time or even full-time jobs while going to school. Under these circumstances, it was observed, chances of

reviving the leisurely environment of the old-time college as a tightly knit community seemed nil.[63]

ACADEMIC STANDARDS

Allegations that academic standards had dropped precipitously was a familiar refrain among observers of the American collegiate scene in the eighties and nineties. Similar complaints had been voiced many times before, of course, and were hardly novel, but they appeared more frequently and seemingly with greater force than ever before. Part of the problem, according to one line of analysis, was that America as a democratic society had set for itself the goal of ensuring that as many of its youth as possible should graduate from high schools and continue on to college. Unlike pyramidal European models in which schools traditionally were called upon to perform a "winnowing-out" function, sorting and screening students and passing on only those of exceptional academic talent to the next higher echelon, the American approach was more radically egalitarian.

No effort was to be spared in seeing to it that everyone completed secondary education, and, further, that virtually anyone desiring access to higher education was afforded an opportunity to pursue a college degree. However, in the absence of national standards of academic achievement, not to mention the prevalence of open admissions policies, or so it was claimed, colleges and universities could take very little for granted in terms of ability or achievement among entering students. The presence on campuses of increasing numbers of students of indifferent or mediocre ability, many of them having graduated from the bottom half of their high-school classes, was bound to affect the rigor of collegiate education.

What was indisputable, in any event, was the trend toward nonselectivity in admissions. Whereas in 1955 over half of the nation's colleges and universities had some type of selective admissions policies in place, three decades later, in 1985, according to the New York Times' *Selective Guide to Colleges*, out of almost 3,000 institutions surveyed, fewer than 175 institutions were classified as "selective." What constituted "selectivity" was always open to debate, but at the extremes, the differences were obvious enough. In 1985, for example, Stanford University accepted no more than 15 percent of those applying; in the same year the University of Arkansas accepted fully 99 percent of all applicants.[64]

Considerable confusion continued to surround debates over the meaning and implications of egalitarian admission policies and practices. Some argued for an unabashedly "elitist" approach based on the concept of intellectual and academic meritocracy. Only the "best and brightest" ought to be admitted.

Sometimes a proviso was added that special efforts be made, in the sports jargon popular in the nineties, to "level the playing field"—that is, to equalize opportunities for anyone to demonstrate his or her potential to profit from higher learning, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. But the principle that higher learning was not for everyone was to be preserved. Others argued that opening the gates of academe to anyone seeking entrance was entirely unobjectionable and innocuous, so long as the principle was kept clear that "opportunity" did not mean "entitlement"—that is, that everyone deserved a chance to succeed, but they would be held accountable to certain institutional standards of academic achievement as a condition for retention.

In response, opponents argued it was a cruel hoax to hold out hope for success by admitting masses of students who, by any predictive standard, were unlikely to succeed. Accordingly, some commentators continued to claim that lack of stringent admission standards threatened to undermine the integrity of the entire academic enterprise. Finally, a few radical egalitarians, possibly a minuscule number, went so far as to urge the abandonment of any proficiency standards whatsoever—in which case, of course, concerns about possible failure would be rendered moot. Everyone would succeed in some way, at some performance level.

Misplaced egalitarianism had contributed to the problem of confusion over standards. Some conservative critics, however, felt that a more important cause of the apparent erosion or loss of academic rigor in colleges and universities was traceable back to the period of campus turmoil of the 1960s and early 1970s. In an era when authority was suspect, when all standards and constraints were under attack, and everything traditional was assailed as undemocratic and elitist, academic administrators and faculty were anxious to sidestep confrontations with angry students. In the face of unrelenting pressure to relax requirements, professors ultimately capitulated.[65] Because they lacked strong convictions of their own about which standards were defensible, professors surrendered by allowing students to decide. They acceded, in other words, to the substitution of easier, less demanding courses for more difficult ones. Additional choices and alternatives were created, even as expectations and workloads were lowered. Foreign language, mathematics, and science requirements were cut back or eliminated. Students were allowed greater freedom to shape their courses of study. The general curriculum became softer, more pliable. Withdrawing from courses became easier, and new pass/fail options were introduced to allow students to protect their academic grade-point averages.

Tacit acceptance of a "market model" for higher education exacerbated the tendency to relax standards. If students were "consumers" and education were a "commodity" available for purchase, ran the logic, then students were

entitled to pick and choose as they saw fit. And if tuition-paying students were not to be denied good grades, more or less independently of their actual achievements, the inevitable result would be grade inflation—which, as critics hastened to point out, was precisely what happened in the 1970s. In the 1920s at Harvard, for example, no more than one student in five made the dean's list. By 1976, over three-quarters—76 percent—did so. In the 1950s the modal letter grade awarded undergraduates was a C. In the 1980s, three decades later, studies showed that among a national representative cross-section of public colleges and universities of varying sizes surveyed, the average grade awarded had risen to B.[66] Because students were the beneficiaries of the new dispensation, they were least likely to complain, even if inflation implied a certain devaluation in the worth of their credentials.

Revelations of lax grading standards continued with depressing regularity well into the 1990s.[67] At Harvard in 1992, for example, 91 percent of all undergraduate grades were B- or higher. At Stanford, no more than about 6 percent of all grades reported were C's. At Princeton, A's rose from 33 percent of all grades to 40 percent in four years.[68] Harvard instructor William Cole diagnosed the cause of the problem as a loss of nerve. "Relativism is the key word today," he avowed. "There's a general conception in the literary-academic world that holding things to high standards—like logic, argument, having an interesting thesis—is patriarchal, Eurocentric, and conservative. If you say, 'This paper is no good because you don't support your argument,' that's almost like being racist and sexist."[69] Similar in tone was the explanation offered in 1994 by Stephen Cahn, former provost and vice-provost at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. The general reluctance of academics to award low grades, Cahn claimed, reflected the temper of the times in its wholesale rejection of the concept of comparative merit. The results, he concluded, were plain for all to see: lowered expectations, misguided egalitarianism, abandonment of standards of quality, and finally, what he characterized as an "eclipse of excellence."[70]

Meanwhile, students seemed unaffected by debates over the quality of their education. For most consumers of collegiate training, their sojourn on campus was considered an entitlement and a rite of passage, almost implacable in its inevitability, something practically everyone was both allowed and obliged to pass through en route to something else—graduate school perhaps, or a job, or another rung on the career ladder. By the 1990s, the suggestion that a college education ought to be appreciated as an intellectual adventure to be savored and enjoyed instead of being merely endured as a conduit to some further destination point might have seemed to many students, literally, incomprehensible.

NEGLECT OF UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

As some critics assessed the situation, the modern university, public or private, all too often had lost sight of the conditions needed for promoting genuine education. Traditionally, it was alleged, the task was conceived of by academic leaders as simply one of "imparting information," preferably in as expeditious a fashion as possible. But students entering college were not looking for, and did not need, yet another experience that only "imparted" data—they had had plenty of that in the lower schools. Whether they consciously realized it or not, they did not need some perfunctory or impersonal handing down of information, more often than not in large lecture classes, often taught by relatively inexperienced graduate teaching assistants or, often reluctantly and only under duress, by faculty members unlucky enough to be assigned responsibility for supervising lower-level courses. Nor was the cause of high-quality undergraduate education well served by framing introductory courses as intellectual antechambers to professional specialization, as devices for recruiting departmental majors to some particular discipline.

Students did not need to be talked "at," but conversed "with," preferably in small seminars and colloquia, recognizing that meaningful learning is inherently "labor intensive" and cannot be conducted on a large-scale, assembly-line basis. Undergraduates, some said, did not need competency testing, and outcomes assessments, and standardized computer-scored tests, or any of the other mechanistic appurtenances of corporate academe. They would not benefit from technological innovations employed in ways that made learning less meaningful and more impersonal. Students, critics asserted (perhaps unfairly), deserved something better than to be allowed by default to pass like stones through the intestinal tracts of the nation's colleges and universities, only to emerge as fundamentally unenlightened and illiterate as they were when they first entered.

What undergraduates allegedly needed in order to be truly educated, it was said, were opportunities to stretch their minds, to be provoked and challenged, to pose fundamental questions, to assess alternative answers, to integrate and synthesize and apply what they had learned. This they were unlikely to receive, unless or until undergraduate education was no longer neglected or devalued as an enterprise strictly ancillary to professional and graduate training. The real imperative for any self-respecting institution of higher learning, it was argued, was to enshrine undergraduate learning once again as the very raison d'être of the college or university. Left unclear in most of the discussions of the nineties were detailed analyses of what it would require in terms of altered priorities, changes in the professorial reward system, and the

transformation of academic culture to effect that proposed restoration of undergraduate education to a position of centrality.

William D. Schaefer, a former vice-chancellor at the University of California at Los Angeles, ranked among those who attempted to offer a diagnosis of the problem.[71] In his view, institutions of higher learning for years had "mindlessly mixed vocational and academic courses without continuity or coherence or anything approaching a consensus as to what really should constitute an education." To him, this was the crux of the problem—one that would need to be addressed with thought and deliberation, not dollars. "I believe," he remarked, "that we should be . . . deeply concerned about this confusion of purpose—a confusion that has led colleges and universities to make fraudulent claims about their goals and missions as they package a hodgepodge of unrelated courses and incoherent requirements."[72]

Schaefer took note of the many national reports and studies on undergraduate education that had appeared throughout the eighties. Criticism of the baccalaureate degree had achieved the status of a national pastime amidst allegations that general education was a "disaster area," that colleges offered a smorgasbord of courses from which students were allowed to pick and choose their way to graduation, that the standards for a bachelor's degree had come to vary so greatly that no one could say what the degree was supposed to represent, that academe had sunk to the point where there was more confidence about the length of a college education than about its substance or purpose, and so on.[73] What, he asked, would be the *least* a college or university should expect its undergraduates to attain in the way of knowledge and analytic skills? His proposed minimum for ensuring that students received a meaningful general education included the following: (1) the expectation that students could read, write, and converse in English at a level sufficient for serious academic discourse; (2) the ability to read and converse in at least one foreign language, and to understand in general how language works; (3) a basic understanding of the studio and performing arts (origins, historical development, theory, and so on); (4) a similar understanding of the world of letters, including sufficient literary criticism to enable one to read literature, including major works in the fields of philosophy, religion, and the social sciences; (5) awareness of the historical development of humankind, its roots, traditions, and achievements, and its civilizations—both West and East; (6) a solid grasp of the scientific approach to knowledge, a more than superficial awareness of the physical sciences, and an understanding of mathematics; and, finally, (7) a similar understanding of the human body and the workings of the human mind. Acknowledging that one might argue for other goals and different priorities, Schaefer insisted nonetheless that "not until such goals are identified

and agreed upon can we talk intelligently about required courses and general education programs."[74]

Schaefer concluded with a plea. "What is needed," he observed, "is a commitment on the part of each institution—without qualification, without reservation, without compromise—that through a carefully organized, coherent program of instruction it will share with its students what today it deems to be the best known and thought, through time and space, in this our world." A viable college education in the twenty-first century, he added, demanded a "complete rethinking" of what an educated person could and should know.[75]

INTEGRATING THE CURRICULUM

In 1959 the English scholar C. P. Snow published a lecture delivered at Cambridge entitled *The Two Cultures*.[76] His judgment at that time was that the university had divided into two camps, consisting of culturally illiterate scientists on the one side and scientifically-illiterate humanists on the other. Between the two, Snow alleged, there had grown up "a gulf of mutual comprehension . . . hostility and dislike, but most of all of lack of understanding." Scientists, as he portrayed them, showed little interest in the social, moral, or psychological dimensions of human existence, and tended to be indifferent to matters extending beyond the range of empirical science. Humanists, he felt, were even more indifferent to, and ignorant about, even the most basic scientific principles. But as regards general learning, Snow's judgment was that scientists and technologists bore the greater burden of responsibility for failing to address questions of how to integrate the college curriculum. Meanwhile, it was later observed, college students had since managed to bridge the "two-cultures" gap with indifference and universal shallowness. Equally ignorant of both, illiteracy and innumeracy had come together to create, as one wit put it, "a splendid egalitarianism of ignorance."

Thirty years after Snow's analysis, Allan Bloom, in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1989), returned to the same issues.[77] The professorate, he claimed, had abandoned liberal learning because it was too difficult to conceptualize or administer. Having trashed the traditional curriculum without having anything coherent to replace it, faculties everywhere had given themselves over to trendy intellectual fads or retreated inward to their specialties. The very idea of a shared general culture was forgotten, and undergraduates were left to their own devices. Universities, Bloom observed sarcastically, can do everything yet "cannot generate a modest program of general education for undergraduates."

Bloom's critique apparently hit some kind of nerve. Overshadowing practically all other issues in American higher education toward the end of the

century was the search for an anchor or "center" for undergraduate liberal learning. Much of the national debate had begun a half dozen years earlier with the publication of a 1983 essay in the *American Scholar* entitled "Cultural Literacy" by E. D. Hirsch, Jr., a professor of English at the University of Virginia. In his essay and in a subsequent book bearing the same title, Hirsch argued that in the absence of a common curriculum, American society was drifting dangerously close to losing "its coherence as a culture."[78] "We need to connect more of our students to our history, our culture, and those ideas which hold us together," he argued. Similar in tone was the declaration by philosopher Mortimer Adler and his associates in a 1982 work entitled *The Paideia Proposal*: "For mutual understanding and responsible debate among the citizens of a democratic community, and for differences of opinion to be aired and resolved, citizens must be able to communicate with one another in a common language."[79]

Responding to the calumny heaped upon his suggestion that school curricula should share common elements, Hirsch took the offensive. Against those who claimed that celebrating multicultural diversity within American society was far more important than imposing "monoculturalism," and that the latter amounted to a form of "cultural imperialism," Hirsch declared, "American literate culture has itself assimilated many of the materials that those who favor multiculturalism wish to include." To those who accused him of ethnic elitism, he rejoined, writing in *NEA Today* in 1988, "It is true that many of the richest and best-educated Americans of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant, and it's true that the literate culture they possessed is still dominantly present in American literate culture. But to think that literate culture is Waspish and elitist just because the educated people who possessed it happened to be, is to reason *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, which an expert in critical thinking will quickly identify as a logical fallacy."[80]

Hirsch's focus was primarily upon the secondary-school curriculum. But the basic terms of the argument played themselves out at the college level also. It reached a crescendo of sorts in 1988 in a pitched battle between then-Secretary of Education William Bennett and his critics over a decision by the faculty of Stanford University to replace a required freshman course, "Western Culture," with a course entitled "Cultures, Ideas, and Values." In its revised edition, the course de-emphasized fifteen "classic" texts and required inclusion of writings by "women, minorities, and persons of color." Bennett's charge that the faculty's action would "trivialize" the university's course of studies set off a storm of protest in the nation's magazines and newspaper op-ed pages.

Critics of so-called "monoculturalism" ridiculed Hirsch's suggestion that one could identify a discrete set list of topics, names, and ideas everyone should share in common. Others argued that in attempting to preserve an exclusionary past, Bennett and his disciples appeared to have fallen prey to a certain mean-spiritedness that was at root both antidemocratic and intellectually elitist. Some theorists took special exception to the notion of a common curricular canon. There can never be a fixed content at the core of liberal learning, they argued; it must be constantly revised, reformulated, reinvented, and then reacquired by the learning community as a function of balanced interests and shifting social values, all of which are dynamic rather than static and always in a state of flux.

The practical problem, as most observers saw it in the 1990s, was finding new and more creative ways of reconciling legitimate demands for diversity with the equally urgent need to find a unifying center—if not a common core, then a fund of experiences that would breathe life once again into the ideal of general or liberal learning. "General education," as Howard Lee Nostrand characterized it a half century ago in his introduction to José Ortega y Gassett's *Mission of the University* (1946), "means the whole development of an individual, apart from his occupation training. It includes the civilizing of his life purposes, the refining of his emotional reactions, and the maturing of his understanding about the nature of things according to the best knowledge of our time." Toward the end of the twentieth century, there was little to indicate there was much consensus on how to achieve that venerable goal of holistic development. Some had abandoned the effort as impossible. Other colleges and universities were still engaged in experiments to preserve the spirit of general learning in an era of rampant specialization and intellectual fragmentation.

ACADEMIC "COMMODIFICATION"

Higher-education controversies in the waning years of the twentieth century had to do mostly with cultural diversity, multiculturalism, finance and governance, accountability, and the limits of academic freedom, among other topics. In the decade following, pundits began to focus on quite different issues—in particular the escalating cost of a college education itself. At the same time, a growing number of critics were troubled by a much broader, overarching ethos that had begun to coalesce in academe, a mindset that promised to highlight several disquieting campus trends: the seeming loss of collegiate community, growing curricular incoherence, the virtual eclipse of the liberal arts, an alleged neglect of undergraduate education generally, and unchecked careerism among a new generation of decidedly non-traditional collegians.

A "foul wind" has blown over the campuses of our nation's institutions of higher learning, warned freelance journalist Jennifer Washburn in a 2005 work entitled *University Inc., The Corporate Corruption of American Higher Education.* Its source, she alleged, was the growing role of purely commercial values in academic life, "the intrusion of a market ideology into the heart of academic life."[81] Rutgers historian Jackson Lears similarly spoke of the growing "menace" of market-driven managerial influence in colleges and universities: "the impulse to subject universities to quantitative standards of efficiency and productivity, to turn knowledge into a commodity, to transform open sites of inquiry into corporate research laboratories and job-training centers."[82]

Lears traced the syndrome back to the early twentieth century when the Prussian ideal of productive scholarship within the university first began to meld with American vocationalism and anti-intellectualism—the love of the practical, the demand for short-term utility and cash value. (In point of fact he might have extended the analysis back to the land-grant college movement of the 1850s or even earlier.) Whatever its origins, the historic outcome underscored an enduring tension between two dissimilar institutional missions. The first was defined by the disinterested pursuit of truth and knowledge as intrinsically valuable ends. The other was constituted by the practical business of supplying technical expertise for government and corporate business.

Half a century later, with the advent of the Cold War, national security considerations lent renewed urgency to demands for a skilled, more highly-trained work force. Federal and state pressures for career-related learning and programming, together with urgings from corporate behemoths that higher education be run more "like a business," made for a potent, nearly irresistible combination. It virtually assured that higher education in the post-war era would be marked by a narrow technocratic orientation. Not without good reason did UC Berkeley Chancellor Clark Kerr in a 1959 commencement address characterize the modern American university as a "knowledge factory."

Traditionally, institutions of higher learning have tried to counterbalance the narrow careerism favored by students and some external constituencies by insisting that sufficient time and space be reserved for a more disinterested academic regimen as well, one consisting of the humanities and arts—the whole calculated to encourage the development of well-rounded persons instead of narrowly-trained technicians. The biggest problem today, Washburn alleged, was that those countervailing forces had been eroded to the point where for all practical purposes they no longer exist at all.

For Lears the inclination among educational leaders to invoke market pressure as an irresistible force and moral absolute demonstrated the same trend. Invoking the overwhelming power of the marketplace as a reason not to challenge its

intrusion into academe (*We're just giving the public what it wants*), he judged, was tantamount to ethical bankruptcy, a form of rationalization that conferred on the "market" a standing resembling that accorded God in medieval theology—the Primum Mobile, the First Cause, the Unmoved Mover."[83] So too for Washburn, in the absence of values capable of constraining how unregulated markets function when left to their own devices, she argued, universities were fast becoming little more than appendages of corporate business and industry, their leaders willfully blind to the deleterious effects of wholesale commercialism.[84]

In higher education today, came the complaint, the liberal arts suffer for their presumed inutility and hence their inability to retain "market share." Professors nowadays, for their part, are rewarded more for garnering research monies and generating publications than for teaching or mentoring students. The all-important introductory courses in the arts and humanities are taught mainly by graduate teaching assistants (TAs), not by experienced academics with a genuine commitment to the task of molding and stimulating young minds. Meanwhile, academic research (most notably in the applied sciences and technologies) is conducted with an eye toward licensing and the short-term development of lucrative products and industrial processes. How long, critics like Washburn and Lears asked, would universities fund research that has no immediate practical application but might offer rewards on a longer-term basis in future? Similarly, it was asked, could disinterested inquiry be sustained in an institutional environment that encouraged professors to behave like entrepreneurs or hucksters?[85]

Indications that the process of academic commodification was already well advanced were not difficult to detect in the early 2000s. The mechanistic discourse increasingly favored by collegiate administrators and academics themselves afforded one clear sign: a parlance that described learning as a commodity; information as a "product" to be packaged and marketed; knowledge bundled into credits and "delivered" via an instructional "system"; students as "consumers" or "resources" or "human capital" awaiting batch processing, and so on.

For Lears, the most egregious illustration of learning as commodity was higher education's preoccupation with the virtual classroom and the effort to substitute cyber-technology for live interaction between teacher and student. "Any use of computers that undermines face-to-face contact is potentially destructive to education," he insisted. "Distance learning is to learning as phone sex is to sex: it may be better than no learning at all, but you wouldn't want to confuse it with the real thing."[86] Summing up, he observed:

> Good teaching is an investment in the minds of the young, as obscure in result, as remote from immediate proof as planting a

> chestnut seedling. But we have come to prefer ends that are entirely foreseeable, even though that requires us to shorten our vision. Education is coming to be, not a long-term investment in young minds and in the life the community, but a short-term investment in the economy. We want to be able to tell how many dollars an education is worth and how soon it will begin to pay.[87]

Perhaps nothing else served so vividly to confirm Lears' claims than the growing presence in American higher education of a quite different type of postsecondary institution: the for-profit college and university. "They have distilled the business of higher education into its no-frills essence," alleged Richard Ruch, author of *Higher Ed, Inc.* (2001), himself a one-time administrator in a for-profit school. "They have taken a simple and straightforward approach to the business of education and applied tried-and-true business practices to meet the needs of a market niche. They are doing so," he continued, "with considerable success in terms of growing enrollments, improved retention, and impressive levels of graduate placement, not to mention high profitability and very good returns on invested capital . . ." Having aligned themselves with the fastest growing part of the American economy, the "knowledge sector of the service industry," Ruch was confident their continued success was virtually assured.[88]

For-profit schools, he explained, do not seek to nurture civic literacy and good citizenship. They do not attempt to instill an appreciation for high culture or a love of the arts either. Their exclusive mission is to provide an efficient, cost-effective route to a degree and subsequent job placement in a high-demand field at a good salary. This essentially is what they do (besides enriching their stockholders). And their phenomenal growth record, he went on to observe, attested to the fact they were filling a popular demand for career- and employment-linked postsecondary education.[89]

In 1991, for example, there was only one for-profit baccalaureate degree-granting, accredited institution listed on the stock exchange—DeVry, Inc., which became a public company that year. Over the course of the next ten years, the number of publicly-traded institutions more than quadrupled, to around 40, attracting more than 4.8 billion in private investment capital. By 1996 there were 669 for-profit degree-granting centers in operation, boasting a combined enrollment of around 305,000 students. Major players by 2005 or thereabouts included the University of Phoenix, the Argosy Education Group, DeVry Institutes of Technology, Corinthian Colleges, Strayer Education, Education Management Corporation, and Quest Education, each with multiple campuses or instructional sites.

All told, by the turn of the century, the number of for-profit campuses had registered a 112 percent growth rate over the preceding ten-year period, increasing from 350 to over 750 sites by 2001.[90] If the for-profit sector continued to grow at anything resembling its previous growth rate, it did not appear unreasonable in the early 2000s to expect that within a foreseeable future, *one in every four or five students attending college would be enrolled in a for-profit institution.*

In an engaging *New Yorker* article entitled "Drive-Thru U," James Traub wrote that "the traditional American university occupies a space that is both bounded and pastoral—a space that speaks of monastic origins and a commitment to unworldliness." Comparing non-profit universities with their for-profit competitors, Traub offered a judgment: "The institution that sees itself as the steward of intellectual culture is becoming increasingly marginal," he declared, while "the others are racing to accommodate the new student."[91]

Ruch, in common with many others, agreed. And in common with other proponents of vocational educaiton, the value added of a college education, he declared, inheres in its capacity to help launch a person's career. The metric to be applied, ultimately, is the greater earning power the college degree affords. Hence, the major consideration shaping a student's decision to attend college, quite simply, is—or ought to be—an economic-return equation.

Having pressed his point, Ruch added a qualification however. "Those time-honored, laudable ideas—the life of the mind, learning for its own sake—sometimes haunt me in my dreams like a secret lover" he admitted. "Something ancient in my heart of hearts resists the notion that efficiency and practicality should define the greatest good. There are real losses in this shift in values, and I suspect that all of us in academia, regardless of our institutional affiliation, have felt them to some degree."[92]

What that shift undergirding the ideology of the free market might portend long-term for American higher education was difficult to discern from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century. But at the very least, it was apparent that many factors were working together to render traditional notions of higher learning more and more obsolete. Which academic degree programs might benefit from an increasingly hard-nosed corporate environment and which might wither or even disappear entirely seemed difficult to predict. The continuing arrival of more and more " non-traditional" students promised one sort of transformational change within academe. So too did increasing reliance on computer technology to supply instruction to students far removed from the physical campus. With the advent of web-based courses and asynchronous learning as a pedagogical norm, bucolic images of the groves of academe as

they once existed now seemed increasingly anachronistic and outdated. About all that could be said with real confidence about the state of higher learning in the United States was that major changes on an unprecedented scale were already underway. What the future might hold in store, as always, awaited its own unfolding.