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Criticisms of Higher Education

By WALTER CROSBY EELLS

Picturesque Exaggerations Found in Current Writings

ESPECIALLY during the past decade there has been a flood of criticism of the American college and university. Much of this has been cleverly, even brilliantly, expressed, but the criticism is often superficial, illogical, and essentially unsound. Some of it, on the other hand, has been sanely constructive and helpful. If we were to believe all that the critics say, we should inevitably be forced to the conclusion that little if anything is right with higher education today.

Criticism of the American college seems to be one of the most popular of indoor sports. College aims, trustees, presidents, faculty, students, fraternities, athletics, morals and religion, curriculums, teaching methods, alumni, and general results—none have been exempt from the caustic pen of the cynical campus critics. What do they say? All of the rest of this article, with the exception of the concluding paragraph, is made up entirely of extracts from such criticisms of the last few years, taken from a wide variety of sources. No quotation marks are used since verbal changes have been made for the sake of unity and harmony in presenting these brief criticisms of the topics just listed.

They say that our universities are aimless institutions that have prostituted themselves to every public whim, serving as everything from a reformatory to an amusement park; they are only service stations for the general public; they are a bargain-counter system presided over by quacks; they are places where pebbles are polished and diamonds dimmed. The trustees according to the critics are men entirely unfitted for their tasks, ridiculously conservative and fearful, controlled body and soul by Wall Street. The presidents are liars and hypocrites, academic Machiavellis, who dull the intellectual life of the colleges, cow the faculties, and stultify the student body. They are circus riders standing on two horses going in opposite directions. Plenty of them are merely strutting pompous windbags; they are primarily money-getters; "when a rich man is dying, Prexie is at his bed with a fountain pen and a dotted line."

In these arraignments the faculty members are weak, cringing creatures, afraid to say their souls are their own; not one of them would trust himself to earn even a poor livelihood in the outside world. The attitude of many of them is cynical blasphemy. What culture the student gets, he gets over

the dead bodies of those intrusted with his development; while students and faculty alike are exploited to advertise the colleges.

As for the students, the fact is that in the opinion of these critics not more than a quarter of the undergraduates have first-rate minds. Not more than half of them are capable of receiving any real intellectual benefit from a college education. The other half simply are not educable; they can neither see, nor hear, nor think; they have no disposition to work, nor capacity for sustained effort. Only a small minority think of anything beyond athletics, fraternities, and social trivialities; education as applied to their training is a travesty on the word. Half of the Seniors are semi-illiterates; anyone can graduate if he is not absolutely a fool. The fraternities are ridiculous organizations, abounding in practices that are cruel, vicious, stupid, and degrading. They are hotbeds of smug self-complacency and snobbishness; their initiations are a symbolic bosh of voodoo ceremony.

College athletics have become a monstrous cancer; they are vast gladiatorial combats; for twenty-five years they have been making college education progressively impossible. The college coach of a successful team is idolized so idiotically that many of the undergraduates seem to get him confused with God.

As judged by these critics, the students morally and religiously are a pretty godless lot. They are being dragged into religious insensibility; they enter college as Christians and graduate as atheists or agnostics.

The curriculum is a mass of inherited rubbish, the accumulated débris of three or four hundred years of hit-or-miss instruction, a petrified anatomical structure which solidified centuries ago. It consists of hidebound notions resulting from accidental happenings back in the sixteenth century. The "practical" courses with which it is adorned cling to the liberal college like ugly leeches, sucking educational blood with businesslike efficiency.

The teaching methods are hopelessly antiquated. The elective system competes strongly with the lecture method as a debilitating influence, and is an unholy bore and a veritable intellectual death mask. The classroom is not the birthplace of curiosity but its tomb, and nothing in the world is so conservative as the academic mind, nothing so frightened by a new idea.

The alumni are the bane of the American college. It is impossible to overstate their follies; they are men who have been branded with an A.B. and put on the market as a pure product, but it is a mere label—a standard bonded label on a bootleg bottle. Their souls are dead, and no spark of intellectual or spiritual phenomena ever arouses them; they are the major educational crime of this generation. If they could only be taught to give money when asked and to keep their mouths firmly shut otherwise, the colleges would make astounding progress, but no such Utopia need be looked for.

The ultimate values of college education are best summarized in the well-known fact that with a Harvard

diploma and a dime one can get a cup of coffee anywhere. The colleges are shamelessly robbing men of priceless years; in a half-century the degeneration of the American college will be complete.

From Upton Sinclair's shrieking catalogue of university faults set forth in *The Goose Step* in 1922 to Abraham Flexner's vigorous attack on the curriculums and methods of the American university in his Oxford University lectures in 1930, there has been a constant stream of criticism, wise and otherwise. It has come from within and from without university halls; from university presidents and deans; from faculty members and students; from journalists, reformers,

sensationalists, and plain muckrakers. The picturesque exaggeration of much of this criticism is in many cases its own best reply. The more serious criticisms, however, have brought forth vigorous and thoughtful defense from those who, while they recognize the faults of the university and the difficult situation it faces in constant adjustment to changing complex problems of the twentieth century, yet believe in its essential soundness. The long and useful history of the university, its many contributions to human progress, its astonishing popularity today are fundamental evidence that it is not quite such a derelict as the campus critics would have us believe.

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Utilizing Student Advisers

By C. GILBERT WRENN

THIS short article on student advisers is written after reading Dean Gaw's helpful article.¹ In an extension of Dean Gaw's principle that "advising means administration" we add the comment that at Stanford University the administration has for some time utilized student advisers in scholastic remedial work with other students. In particular this has been effective with new students.

At the beginning of each quarter a list of all Freshmen who are "on

¹Gaw, Esther Allen. "Advising Means Administration," *JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION*, IV (April, 1933), pp. 179-86.

probation" for that quarter is sent to the student sponsors in the freshmen dormitory, Encina Hall. In the middle of the quarter a similar list is sent of those students who have received scholastic warning slips. Opposite the name of the student is the name of the course in which he has received the mid-quarter warning. The sponsors then assume responsibility for the students in their wing who are in difficulty, promising to see them and offer help, without necessarily telling the Freshman that they know of his scholastic plight.

To assist the sponsors a special list