



The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Businessmen

Veblen, Thorstein
Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015

Book Review

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While often repeated, at least by scholars of the original 1918 document, it bears retelling here that the original subtitle of Thorstein Veblen's *The Higher Learning in America* was "A Study of Total Depravity." And while such language was sanitized for publication the author's irritation with the "bootless meddling" of governing boards and the "skilled malpractice" of university presidents, was no less strident and prevalent throughout his text. The recently published, first-ever annotated edition of Veblen's important - and, unfortunately, still timely - report put this reviewer in mind of much more recent such studies, and thus will be reviewed here in the context of these recent contributions to what Veblen called "the professors' literature of protest" (for example, see Ginsberg [*The Fall of the Faculty*, Oxford University Press, 2011] and Menand [*The Marketplace of Ideas*, Norton, 2010]). Richard F. Teichgraber's excellent "Introduction," as well as his editorial notes throughout, make this timeliness clear.

Veblen retrospectively joins a host of prominent scholars who have engaged a broad institutional critique of higher education, and he was by no means the first to caution against the threat to the American university's independence, by its uncritical adoption of the methods - and its serving the needs - of the business community. In this Veblen presages the pessimistic diagnosis of American undergraduate education offered in 1996 by the late Bill Readings in his much-quoted *University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press), in which the author excoriated the contemporary American "corporatized" university as a "ruined institution" hopelessly "enmeshed in consumerist ideology" (Veblen's "salesmanlike proficiency"). Many have since echoed this sentiment, not least among them Harvard professor, James Engell, who in 1998 painted a similarly discouraging picture of the current state of affairs for undergraduate study, calling particular attention to higher education's rush

to fall in line with business and government calls for greater “relevance,” “application,” and “preparation for working life” outside the academy – all measured by metrics of cost, efficiency, and productivity. In an article entitled “The Market-Model University: Humanities in the Age of Money,” (Harvard Magazine) Engell cites persuasive evidence that economic pressures have negatively, if not irrevocably, impacted American collegiate education – for instance, declining enrollments in traditional liberal arts disciplines, with the corresponding reality for faculty equally gloomy: the lowest faculty salaries compared to colleagues in the pre-professional disciplines (full-throatedly denounced by Veblen), the most onerous teaching loads (“notoriously underpaid and so scantily filled as seriously to curtail their working capacity,” according to Veblen), and the least academically prepared and intellectually engaged students. Such a move toward “aggressive mediocrity,” with faculty “managed according to the principles of the consumer-driven marketplace,” as Veblen put it in 1918, has resulted, as essayist and critic William Deresiewicz would have it, in American higher education “slouching toward a glorified form of vocational training” (“Faulty Towers: The Crisis in Higher Education,” *The Nation*, 2011). “The liberal arts university,” argues Deresiewicz, “is becoming the corporate university, its center of gravity shifting to technical fields where scholarly expertise can be parlayed into lucrative business opportunities.” “Vocational training,” Veblen had long ago warned, “is training for proficiency in some gainful occupation, and has no connection with the higher learning” (168).

These and numerous other recent interventions, all resonant of Veblen’s prophecies, have contributed to a complex and increasingly polarizing debate on the future of higher education in America. They argue that an increasingly career-focused (market-driven) education has pressured colleges – even those with strong liberal arts traditions – to become more occupation-focused, and they offer a spirited defense of the value of liberal (Veblen’s “higher”) education on its own terms against the encroachments of economic justification, assessment paradigms, the uncritical embrace of digital technology, and the general misalignment between scholars and professional higher education. “The underlying businesslike presumption accordingly appears to be that learning is a merchantable commodity, to be produced on a piece-rate plan, rated, bought and sold by standard units, measured, counted and reduced to staple equivalence by impersonal, mechanical tests,” Veblen writes in 1918 (190).

While in tone Veblen implicitly seems to hold out some hope that genuine compromise could be made between the needs of “higher learning” and the demands of the marketplace, he offers little in the way of solution beyond indignant critique. What he does suggest is that any effort at meaningful reform in higher education will have to originate from within the domain itself, and from a clear understanding of what constitutes academic organizational culture. Any such understanding will have to begin internally with a frank reevaluation of basic missions and

standards, systems of reward and sanction, and the patterns of decision-making and praxis. To what degree, we need to ask, are the social realities of higher education structured, shared, and perhaps contested by the participants in the organization? Yet the domain of higher education, if it is to survive current public scrutiny, must look externally as well. It must consider, for example, how it defines and what its attitude is toward its external environment – that is, those critical forces that can positively or negatively influence the profession’s effectiveness. The imposition of standards set outside the university goes counter to the concept of the university as an autonomous institution that sets its own standards, free from external pressures. The result is an inevitable clash of views, then, regarding the relationship between the university providing the service and the society that demands it. And to the extent that university performance is measured by external institutions, autonomy is compromised.

The question, presciently suggested by Veblen, is should the profession of higher education engage with its external environment in order to give expression to the latter’s interests, ideas, and needs which are marginalized by self-protective “ivory tower” mentality? If yes, to what extent? Some believe this type of outward focus will ensure the power of the organization to engage practically with the environment’s present concerns in a way that addresses a wider social base as “public” – the true measure of accountability. Others believe this “service to the community” leads only to myopic special interest, bowing to temporary fluctuations in social climate and environmental (political and economic) influences. Until we agree on what the profession is now, and how institutional priorities should be aligned with public needs, it will be difficult to determine how higher education is to engage with its environment, and what direction its leaders are to take.

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