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Higher Education - A Gift

or a Purchase?

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The system of State-supported collegiate and professional education developed in America, largely in the past seventy-five years, is without any very close parallel in other countries. In fact, we claim credit in large part for the extensive development of tax supported common schools, and the attempt to pass the whole rising generation thro them, as a preparation for citizenship. Whether we deserve all we claim or not, we certainly retain no monopoly of the ~~idea~~^{system} now, and the idea lurks in many minds that our foreign competitors may now be outstripping us in the vigor and efficiency with which they drill their rising generation in schools, and the solidity of the educational results they attain. But so far, the capsheaf and crown of our educational system remains without close analogy.

The spectacle which this country affords, of discharging from the portals of its sixty or seventy State and municipal Tax supported Colleges and Universities each year an ever increasing flood of young men and women - thousands upon thousands of them - trained to the minute in one or other of a hundred different professions and technical occupations, is one which challenges the imagination and

admiration of the world. That it has won the admiration of the citizens of this country can not be doubted, in view of the vast and rapidly increasing cost which our public has paid with remarkably little grumbling or discussion so far. The secret of this ready acquiescence probably lies in the fact that the State university idea represents to the average taxpayer, more than any other thing in life, that unrestricted opportunity for a career for his sons and daughters, of which we Americans never weary of boasting. It is the heritage provided by our American institutions, so we say. "America, the land of opportunity", is a phrase on the lips of all, from the descendent of old colonial days to the picturesque arrivals at Ellis Island. For this reason, higher education at public expense has been carried along as a national fetish and accepted because of the context in which it is presented to the people.

Now, it is wholly right for us to have our National enthusiasms and shibboleths. They may reflect the callow youth and exuberance of our national life - but, even so, they are not only worth while - they are indispensable. May we never see the day when they disappear, for then we shall see the day of our disintegration begin. But, on the other hand, a thing is not necessarily good because it is in being - not even because it is along established institution. The world is full of terrible evils and anachronisms which persist, even when great sections of the people recognize them for

what they are. We may not conscientiously assume that anything in Education is stable or beyond criticism for the very reason that the purpose of education is progress - which is, change for the better. In fact, we have no duty more clearly laid upon us, both by theory and by practical experience, than the duty of eternal self examination. This is true of the individual, and even more imperative of groups of individuals for the group invariably lags behind the individual in idealism, efficiency or steadfastness.

The thing that I want to examine with you today is this:- What should be our attitude towards state-supported higher education. The mere fact that you have been the beneficiaries of the system, - or may be the victims of it, - is not in itself any warrant for assuming that you will be unable or unwilling to apply your critical judgement to the matter.

My first thesis is that no matter what motives of public policy may have lead to the establishment of the University by the State, the motive which fills it with students is a purely selfish one. It is the desire to get all the personal advantage possible out of it. The advantage sought may be economic or cultural or both, but it is personal, so far as the student is concerned.

It would hardly be seriously contended that the individual who comes here to learn to be a civil engineer or a journalist does so for the reason that the state or society in

general is going to profit by his endeavors. He may think that Society needs people who can perform those special functions for which he is preparing, and also that it is better that they should be well equipped for their task than ill equipped, and by qualifying himself to perform the particular function well, that he is making his contribution to society usefully. But, that is not the reason for his coming. The reason is that he wants a place in the world's bread line, and he wants it up near the front of the line.

The last words here are of great importance. Any student knows that he can have his place in the bread line - i.e., can earn a living in this country, with even the minimum of education. He don't have to come to college to get a living. He comes here because he wants a better living - a fuller, broader, bigger life than the mass of his fellow men can get. For the purpose of enjoying, over the bulk of his life, a better living and a richer mental outlook, he is willing to sacrifice a few of his early years to preparation. He is even willing to go slower economically than his hometown mates for a few years, if he is very sure that he will go faster and further in the long run.

In applying the phrase "selfish advantage" to the motives of the young applicant for a place in college, I do not wish to imply anything uncomplimentary or unethical. Indeed, quite the contrary! The man who is willing to practice thrift and deny himself present enjoyment for the sake of future

advantage is potentially a good citizen. A man's first duty in life is to take care of himself - to make himself a self supporting social unit. When he can do that, including the care of his wife and family, and begins to find that he has a surplus, then for the first time does he take his full place in life as a full fledged citizen because he ^{then} becomes able to carry his part of the social over-burden - the care of the misfits, the incompetents, the afflicted, who compose a part of all society and who cannot or will not entirely earn their own way. Hence, effort expended and self denial practiced in order to get an education, the ultimate object of which is to earn a better living and to enjoy a fuller life than those who will not expend the effort or practice the self-denial, is strictly a praiseworthy thing. At the same time, it is for himself and not for society that he does it, and in that sense, it is selfish.

My second thesis is that in affording youth an opportunity for a higher or professional education on easy terms, the public interest is also being served. Education of the masses up to a certain level is necessary for the perpetuity of a self-governing state. And, in the same way, sound political leadership, skill in agriculture and manufacture, commerce and transportation, and competence in the learned professions and fine arts, are also necessary to the strength and perpetuity of a state. In taking steps to insure a supply of people having such knowledge and such skill, commensurate

with the population and development of the country, the state is merely looking out for its own security and welfare. Furthermore, in not depending entirely upon commercial schools or privately endowed institutions, and itself directly providing a part of the requisite higher educational opportunities to its rising generation, the state is wise. This policy finds its roots in our American conception of democracy - or rather, opportunity for all to progress according to their abilities and efforts. In making it possible for the poor man's son to go to college and acquire a profession, the State has safeguarded the foundations of our whole political system. The devitalizing effect of wealth in removing the spur of necessity is beyond dispute. The old adage that "its only three generations from shirt sleeves to shirt sleeves" contains more than a little truth. The turnover of wealth is very rapid, and hereditary social position cannot be long maintained without wealth. Hence, the fresh supply of virility, energy, initiative and thrift which is annually drawn from the great reservoir of the common people and turned into arteries of the professional and administrative class is the best possible insurance that we shall not die of dry-rot in our governing group. I do not mean to imply that the quality of the brains of the working masses is apt to be any better than of those who have enjoyed, for one or two generations, more of leisure and luxury. There would be no biological warrant for that assumption. But what I do mean to say is that fresh contact with the hardships and realities of life is apt to

imply more familiarity with hard work and the necessity of using what wits one happens to have. Thus from several points of view, the interest of the state, which is the interest of all of us, is unquestionably served by assuring a supply of well trained men and women to do the administrative and professional work, and to thus insure a proper balance in the various components which make a healthy well organized community.

My third thesis is that the public now pays too large a share of the cost of higher education and the recipient pays too little. I have shown already that the boy wants the education for his own personal advantage, and the state wants him to have it, for reasons of benefit to the state. Both sides are served by the process. But, the benefits are sharp, clear and personal on one side and general, intangible and theoretical on the other side. The boy pays but little of the cost. The state pays the lions share. It is therefore wholly within the bounds of propriety to consider where the line of division should be drawn in allocating the cost of higher education.

If the proportion paid by the student be increased from its present low percentage, to a considerably higher proportion, it may be expected that its effect would be to somewhat reduce the output of university graduates. There are a number of reasons which lead me to the conclusion that this would not be a wholly undesirable result. I will

discuss these in turn:-

First:- I believe that there is some danger of over saturation of our population with people of the "white-collar" class. There has been some evidence of over crowding in several lines already - notably law and medicine. The claim will probably be set up in both these cases that it is a matter of faulty distribution - not an actual surplusage. It will be shown that in many country districts, the old practitioner is gone, and no new man comes in to take his place, and that more service is needed and less is available. But the fact remains that the cities and towns are full of struggling lawyers and doctors, and the difficulty of getting a start anywhere in these professions without influence or money is admittedly very severe. ~~Under such economic pressure as young lawyers and doctors have to undergo, unethical practices and low professional standards have the best chance of starting, and once started, of maintaining themselves.~~ It is greatly to the credit of both these branches of professional education that they have voluntarily done more to raise their standards and limit their intake by rigid entrance requirements than any other departments of education today. But the situation depicted as to their output still unfortunately holds true.

Doubtless the same over crowding exists in less degree in other professional lines. It is perhaps least felt as yet in the manufacturing and commercial lines, where the employment of trained scientific workers is still rather new, and where

those callings still lack the social prestige that has attached to law and medicine for long periods.

It is a very generally recognized and frequently mentioned fact that the possession of a college education does cause a man to view with distaste the ordinary type of vocation by which the masses get a living, and by which he himself could have gotten a living without going to college. I can recall only a few instances - two, to be specific - in my own acquaintance with university graduates, who having completed their work creditably, went back to positions that bore no direct relation to their training, and would have been open to them without training. I do not know the personal and private reasons which controlled in those two instances, but one can imagine a good many which might be valid.

Katherine Mayo, in her startling book "Mother India" says that the Hindu feels that the mere effort to get an education is so greatly to his credit, that no matter if entirely unsuccessful - his status should at once be raised and he be put into the office holding class. And, if he has persisted and finally in some fashion or degree met the requirements and won his diploma, and is not given a government post forthwith, he fills the air with his outcries and recriminations - viewing it as essentially a breach of faith. If an education does not mean a white collar job, "Why get the education" is the burden of his complaint.

We in America are not willing to be quite so bald and frank about it. Most of us do have at least some

appreciation of the value of an education as measured in other terms than the place in the payroll. The conception of an education as a cultural preparation - as an essential preface to getting the utmost of happiness and satisfaction out of life, ~~the one and only life we know anything definite about~~ has obtained some hold on a large proportion of us. But the extent to which we will sacrifice immediate material prosperity, or even the promise of it, in order to establish a cultural basis for a higher and more idealistic type of satisfaction to be enjoyed later on in life is after all the real test of our appreciation of that culture. Among the general mass of mankind such sacrifice would certainly not be large. Even among us, of the college group, how far are most of us willing to go?

Arthur C. Morgan, President of Antioch College, whom I esteem as one of the ablest and most constructive forces in American education today, in a recent leaflet, entitled "Golden Eggs" wholly disagrees with my position in reference to the saturation point of society for college graduates. His viewpoint is wholly sincere, but in this instance not convincing to me. In brief, his idea is that the absorptive power of society for college products is like the old farmer's ambition in life - to raise more corn, to feed more hogs, to buy more land, to raise more corn to feed more hogs, etc. A sort of endless chain, ~~leading~~ ^{leading} as is the way of circles, to no satisfactory stopping point. Morgan thinks that by passing higher cultural standards along to the

masses, we shall create in them an appreciation of the finer things of life, and thus widen our market for the products of our factories and shops. He visions the continuous evolution of American industry, which is American society, not by capturing the markets of the world, but by creating our own markets by the cultural development of our working classes, and thinks that no such thing as the saturation point for highly trained specialists, the type which our colleges are increasingly producing, is in sight. He freely admits that the saturation point of American markets for flour, and beef, and steel, and cement, may be reached - in fact, has been reached - but he thinks that somehow there is no such limit to the desires for better, finer, more beautiful things as man's taste is refined and his culture is broadened, and that by turning our surplus manufacturing and producing ability from staples into luxuries, we shall find a way to indefinitely keep up the merry-go-round - use more graduates, to develop more culture, to buy more products, to use more graduates etc., like a puppy chasing his tail. A very satisfactory solution, to the man whose business is to manufacture more graduates.

But we are sure that increasing culture when disseminated in the masses is really going to accelerate our demand for the output of our factories which increases almost by geometrical progression the output of each man, and which tends to useless and less man power per unit of output. A glance into the lighted windows of the working class homes, in the course of an evening's stroll on any street in any

American city, will show that mail order houses, chain stores, high pressure salesmanship, and easy credit have already filled these homes with overstuffed furniture, piano lamps, victrolas, washing machines, electric refrigerators and other products of the kind.

It seems to me that somewhere back in the dark ages, I remember getting the idea that real culture simplified the demands on life - that the world of ideas is an inexpensive place to enter, and that its great merit was that it made people more oblivious to the overstuffed furniture; and concentrated their attention on things which charmed much and cost little. If there is any truth in this conception of the effect of education on a man's taste, what becomes of the consumption theory?

It would be idle to deny that there is some force in Dr. Morgan's ingenious analysis. It would be equally idle to accept his conclusions without an exhaustive check-up on the evidence, which some well trained economist is pretty certain to undertake before long. Meanwhile, it is certainly safer to base our educational planning upon more tangible evidence drawn from the existing industrial and social situation. We do find (a) A rapidly accelerating output of candidates for white collar jobs - who will be unhappy and dissatisfied if they don't get them. (b) an increasing stress and strain in keeping our factories busy and our storehouses empty, in competition with the world. (c) A population already earning

the highest wages the world has ever known, and living on a scale of affluence, not to say extravagance, entirely without parallel. To imagine that we can, by some mysterious process like lifting ourselves by our own boot-straps, keep up this merry-go-round of Dr. Morgan's indefinitely, requires a faith greater than mine.

A second reason for viewing with equanimity a lessening of the volume of University output, is the hope that it would lead to a raising of its quality. There is a feeling that the present low cost of getting a degree in State supported schools is leading to too many degrees being granted and to a corresponding falling off in the quality of the graduate.

I can imagine the feeling that is apt to arise in the minds of some of you, at this reference to the low cost of a degree. When I think of the struggle that it has meant to some of you, and possibly to the whole family, to get it, I almost feel ashamed for making the suggestion. I am by no means oblivious or ignorant of such situations, however because I myself went through the latter part of my college course "on my own." But in all fairness, the cost of a degree is now, and from the beginning of these state schools, has been very largely the cost of four years living expenses. And these vary, by two or three hundred percent, according to the idea of the individual as to what living expenses should include. For the purpose of the present discussion, the cost of living may be left wholly out of consideration, and

the cost of the degree is really the cost of official charges only - tuition, as it is called, in privately supported colleges. ~~and which~~ The state schools try to disguise ^{it} under some more euphemistic title. From this standpoint, the charges in state supported colleges are absurdly low - from ten to twenty-five percent of the per capita cost of maintaining the institution, which, in my opinion, is unfair to the taxpayer who derives only an indirect and intangible benefit from it.

I can also imagine the reaction that might reasonably result from the preceding reference to falling off in the quality of the graduates. I beg you not to infer that this remark is made with special reference to present company. It is aimed at a general condition over a considerable period of time, ~~and~~ It refers more directly to the responsibility of the school for its workmanship, than to the graduates themselves. It is safe to assume, I think, that the fundamental quality of young Americans presented to the Universities for admission does not vary materially from decade to decade. Some biologist said recently that the most fixed and indestructible thing in nature is the germ plasm by which life is carried on from generation to generation. Mountains crumble, Continents rise and fall, climates change, but life breeds like thro all vicissitudes. His remark was intended to be picturesque rather than critically exact, but it does carry a useful conception. The youth of a century ago, and those of today are still fundamentally the same. Environment has changed. The things

they know and do and want to do have changed somewhat (tho not as much as many seem to think). Therefore, if there are differences in the quality of the graduates, they are undoubtedly principally due to the changes in what is done to them, after they are fed into the hopper. It is true that the material now reaches the University prepared quite differently than in former days and that many state supported schools are prevented by law, or by political considerations, from culling as rigidly as they would like the high school graduates who flock in for admission.

Time will forbid going into details as to just what the Universities could do to improve their output, under a system of higher fees and correspondingly reduced attendance, but I may roughly indicate a few points: For one thing, it would reduce the evil of over-crowded classes. No instructor can be held to high grade work when struggling from day to day with classes far too large for him to hold to accountability. Everybody knows this. It has been the daily talk here and elsewhere in faculty circles for decades. But, little or nothing has been done to cure a situation which all alike recognize as a serious impediment to good teaching.

Another effect would be to permit the dropping of some formal class instruction - lecturing and recitation ^{and} drudgery - and permit the introduction of teaching by the conference system, where the student largely controls his time and is put under responsibility for covering the ground in his

own way. Every teacher has recognized for a long time past the superior grasp, power, and force of those occasional scholars who have made their way, unassisted, or with but little help, thro the bulk of their course. It is not necessary to refer to Abraham Lincoln, or Steinmetz, or other outstanding examples because every teacher has encountered them in his work. The self taught man may develop crudities, and queer points of view, and he may at first take a longer time to master his case, but these blemishes are of small moment compared to his solid thinking ability. Why we have not adopted this idea and put whole classes to work on it long ago is hard to understand, except as a fine example of the power of custom and the resistance to any departure from established methods.

Still another benefit would come by definitely relieving the faculty mind from this incubus of using factory production methods, and ^{Encouraging them to place} ~~placing~~ a new emphasis upon quality. It has required a constitution of unusual virility and a mind of indomitable optimism to ^{still retain any freshness and enthusiasm, after standing up} ~~stand up long~~ to the grind of teaching in state universities during these years of their rapid expansion, ~~and still retain any freshness or enthusiasm.~~ The only thing that counts in teaching is the transfer of enthusiasm, and University life has got to be kept on a plane where enthusiasm in the teaching force is constant and effervescent. Embalmed enthusiasm is about as useful in a teacher, as it would be in a musician or an artist.

A third reason for expecting benefits to flow from

a stiffening of the process of getting a University degree is the well known trait of human nature which makes everybody value a thing in proportion to what it has cost. What one works for, he values. What he gets free or cheaply, he holds lightly. This is found in savage and civilized man alike. A Boy Scout leader said to me a few days ago - "You're doing a boy no favor at all to let him get a scout badge easy. The harder he plugs to win his badge, the deeper his love of scouting and its principles." He might have extended his remarks to embrace the rest of mankind, for he was stating a general truth.

The commoner University degrees become, the more machine-like the system under which they are granted, the easier they are to get, and the less they cost, the lower will their value be, both to the recipient and to the public. We have already gone quite a way on this path. It is very common to hear employers speak in very disrespectful terms of the University graduate. This does not necessarily mean the employer is right, but it does indicate a trend of public opinion. It is worth while to check the growth of this attitude. It cannot be done by speeding up the graduate mills and grinding them out in increasing quantities. It may be done by making them fewer and choicer.

A fourth reason, possibly as potent as any of the others, for expecting a fairer division of the cost of University degrees to result beneficially to all concerned, lies in the

effect this change might have in the attitude of the student to the state. At present, I fear the attitude commonly held is altogether too filial. His attitude is about that of the thoughtless child at the family table. The child consults his own appetite and not the amount of the steak on the platter, and has no scruples against passing up his plate as often as he can get anything. His worries do not extend to the question of where the steak came from or how it is going to be paid for. I have not infrequently heard of students using up chemicals purposely and even breaking equipment in laboratories, under the queer obsession that they have paid for their share, thro their fees, and that it is up to them to get the worth of their money even if they have to commit waste to do it. It is a queer twist of the mind that could evolve such a view, but it is a fact that this view does crop up every little while.

The attitude of the student at the privately endowed universities differs radically from the above. In general they show a feeling of respect for the school, loyalty for its customers, consideration for its property and willingness in after years to contribute to its support. The student at the state university on the other hand seems to look upon the facilities there offered, as his right and in no sense a privilege. Few apparently stop to ask themselves why the State should spend its money in their behalf so prodigally. Possibly some of this difference in the point of view could be changed, if it were announced that hereafter the state would charge the

same for an education as the well equipped private schools charge, leaving the selection that the student made dependent on his estimate of the relative strength of the faculties and the completeness of the laboratories and library.

That such a change in attitude towards the State and its institutions is desirable seems to me unquestionable. Paternalism in government is contrary to our American concepts. If the young generation are taught or allowed to think that the State owes them anything but justice and equal opportunity, they are laying bad foundations for the Americanism of the future. Such views cannot be held without a weakening of that initiative, that sturdy sense of personal responsibility, and that capacity for leadership which has been our pride and glory in the past.

On the question as to whether the State needs to be relieved of the expense it is ~~pouring into~~ ^{lavishing upon} the cause of higher education, I can only say that taxes are mounting steadily, as our civilization becomes more complex. The functions of government include many things that our ancestors could never have dreamed as being of public concern and the list grows steadily. The education bill of the country is its largest single item. Higher education is not a very large fraction of this item, though in millions of dollars for the country as a whole it is a tremendous sum. In all fairness, I think the cutting of our higher education tax in half would not long be noticed in the swelling tide of state expenses. Its

effect however would entirely out proportion to its actual relief afforded. It would probably be remembered and credited up to the educational group of tax spenders for a long while. But so far as the average tax payer is concerned I don't really think he would be able to notice the difference.

If discussion should ultimately crystallize sentiment among educators in favor of what is herein advocated, the changes should be gradual. It would be nothing short of a calamity to have such a change forced suddenly upon the schools by the tax payers because their pocket book nerves become sore. Such a plan, put into effect gradually by its friends, would I confidently believe bring results which would be good for the schools, and good for the graduates. It should invoke and I think would receive the cooperation of the privately endowed institutions. They now feel that they are subjected to unfair competition, by an adversary who sells his wares below the cost of production. Their principal recourse is to invoke the argument of superior quality for what they have to sell. And, I think in many instances, and in some particulars, they have right on their side in making this claim. If the cost differential were wiped out, the state schools and private schools could compete on a fairer basis, and both would be better off.

Conclusion.

1. You are the product of a system of education of relatively recent origin. It hasnot been in existance long enough to have been thoroughly shaken down into compact and

durable form.

II. You are responsible for the use you have made of the opportunities that have been offered you. If you have the approval of your own consciences on this point, you probably are going forth to your life work, well prepared, and able to compete in the complex life of the times.

III. You did not make the system and are not responsible for its faults or virtues.

IV. From today on, you in your turn must begin to assume responsibility for the system under which you have been educated, because you are now changing your status from that of the more or less powerless victim, to that of the more or less responsible authority. This will be true, whether you elect to follow educational lines professionally, or whether you drop back into the work-a-day world and are heard from hereafter only thro the medium of the ballot box.

V. The topic discussed in this address may seem to you now as being very wide of the mark, so far as giving you any final advice or imparting any final inspiration is concerned. It makes no pretensions in that direction. It merely asks you to help improve, by your own thought and work, the conditions for those who follow. Do this soon. Do it while your emotions are still fresh and vivid, and before your idealism loses too much of its fine edge against the grindstone of every day life.

VI. Finally let me congratulate you from the bottom of my heart that you are stepping out into responsible citizenship,

at this particular juncture in the history of this old world. You are young, fresh, vigorous and trained for the race you are to run. Never has there been such a wonderful period in which to run your race. Measure it what way you will, this is the golden age. Never have climatic conditions more favored the human race. Never before have men understood so much of the physical resources at their disposal. Never before has science placed in the hands of any generation knowledge and power to use these resources so skillfully. Never before has there been more accord and good will among mankind. Your heritage is a princely one. Go forth and take up your stewardship, strong in the will to return to humanity, with good interest, all that humanity and nature have given you.

Edward Dutton (nd)

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