

College to University—And After

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# College to University—And After

*An address given December 11, 1963, before the Convocation celebrating the first year of Hofstra's existence as a university.*

JACQUES BARZUN

IT IS AN HONOR AND A PLEASURE to attend this ceremony which marks the first year of a notable change in the life of an important institution. Although everyone is clear about the nature of that change, one does not quite know what to call it: one does not want to say the “transformation” of Hofstra College into Hofstra University, because the College remains; one does not want to say the “elevation” of the one into the other, for the College stands high and any University would be doing well to keep level with it. Finally, one does not want to say the “graduation” of the college—that metaphor is obviously the worst of all. Let us then simply say that Hofstra, following the natural course of things in American higher education, has become a university, having first proved its worth to the demanding public of our day, and received from the guardians of our state system the authority to assume the more comprehensive name.

I shall try in a moment to tell you some of the things that this new name suggests to me—and what it may mean to the country in the future. Right now, as the privileged representative of a sister institution which went through the same mutation eighty years ago, I take leave to congratulate the trustees, the faculty, the students, and the friends of Hofstra on this happy occasion. It is the culmination of many hopes, of a generous vision, of skillful management, and of much hard work, in which the efforts of teachers and students were the determining cause of success. All honor to these men and women, young and old, who for nearly a third of a century have, in the pursuit of their own work, changed the connotation of the name Hofstra from that of a public-spirited family to that of a

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respected seat of learning. Such an achievement is in its quiet way a victory of mind and will, daily renewed, over the forces of error and inertia, over the temptations of sloth and stupidity. It is altogether right that we should rejoice and be grateful to the makers of this spiritual edifice, in which the students now here and those to come can develop and thrive with greater ease, quite as if colleges and universities grew by a natural process, like vegetables.

What I have been saying so far expresses my feelings as an academic delegate to Hofstra University, as a colleague of its members and as a well-wisher to all its works. Now, with your permission, I should like to take a few moments to speak as a detached observer of the larger scene in which the deeds of this day are taking place. What I want to say still has to do with colleges and universities; but it should not be taken as a statement of policy by a university administrator, much less as a program for the future of your university or my own. I want for a few minutes to impersonate the private citizen who looks about him and forms opinions—opinions which may be wrong, but which are at any rate free from partisanship and from professional clichés. Let me repeat that I am not going to *do* anything in pursuance of my remarks—neither start a campaign nor establish an association with seven initials spelling the word HOFSTRA—I shall not even argue with anyone who disagrees with me.

I have just said that I mean to talk about colleges and universities. In casual speech we lump the two together as if they were small variations each of the other. No one here today can continue to think so: there are between a college and a university great differences, which justify our celebration. And we all know what the chief of these differences is: a university gives instruction in professional subjects, gives degrees that open to a man or woman the professions of teaching, medicine, law, business, and the rest. More professions are born every year, for which people qualify by taking combinations of university subjects. Whenever we speak of the country's need for experts in all fields, we imply the existence of universities to provide the training. Nor must we forget the growing shadow of every profession, which is Research, and for which more and more people must be prepared, since so many agencies,

public and private, offer positions of comfort and prestige to competent researchers.

Let me remind you that this national concern is not new or alien to the American university. A hundred years ago, the American university was created on top of the American college to fill this same need of national leaders in government and the professions. You can on this point read the testimony of John W. Burgess, the founder of the School of Political Science at Columbia, which proved to be the first graduate faculty in the United States. Burgess wanted to prevent through better statesmanship and a wiser public opinion a repetition of the catastrophe of the Civil War, in which he had been caught as a youth of seventeen. He wanted native universities so as to train well-informed public servants—teachers, politicians, diplomats, journalists, captains of industry. This training was to rest upon the solid base of college instruction in what he called “universal history and general literature.”

Today, the urge to train has been enlarged by the vast complication of our technological life and the increasing numbers of our population—you know at first hand the intricate details and crushing pressure of these developments. But in all this confusion, what has happened to the American College? Well, there are more colleges than ever before, but I for one find it harder and harder to know what they do and why. There is a very fine sentence in the *Hofstra College Bulletin*, which discusses the difference between college education and university training. It states that whereas “training stresses a tangible salable skill . . . education cultivates reasoning ability, creativity, tolerance, eagerness for new ideas, a sense of history and of potentialities for the future.” This is very sanguine, as it should be, but what is the reality? The reality is that the best colleges today are being invaded, not to say dispossessed, by the advance agents of the professions, by men who want to seize upon the young recruit as soon as may be and train him in a “tangible salable skill.”

This at any rate is true in the colleges attached to universities. Consider the forces at work. First, it seems desirable to have the great scholar teach undergraduates, and he naturally teaches them as if they were future scholars in his own line, as professionals.

Then, the young themselves want to get on as quickly as possible, and in the last two years of college they elect a major which relates directly to their future profession. If they are able, they qualify for honors work, which may be defined as premature research. An even stronger influence is that of the young teachers, all Ph.D.'s, who need to establish themselves. This they can do only in one way: by showing productivity in research. Every moment spent otherwise is wasted. Accordingly, these junior scholars decline to teach anything not related to their own specialties. As one of them said to me, they "do not want to teach second-hand subjects." First-hand subjects are necessarily narrow, and what is worse, they are treated as if everyone in the class were to become a professional, a duplicate of his own teacher.

In short, both teachers and students are responding to the spirit of the times. They are impatient with everything that is not directed at the development of talent into competence. The undergraduate who can assist his instructor in the instructor's research, the youth who can get an essay published in a journal, the senior whose program is half made up of graduate courses—these are the models for general envy and emulation. The meaning of this is plain: *the liberal arts tradition is dead or dying*. We may keep talking about the liberal ideals at Commencement but the Commencement platform is their last and only refuge. During the year, the college pursues a professional ideal; during the summer, those who can afford it accelerate. And that acceleration has only one goal—to qualify for a professional job.

Please understand that I am not objecting or criticizing, but only describing. The trend seems to me so clear that to object would be like trying to sweep back the ocean. It would be foolish to repine or try to prolong a tradition which has run its course. It is far better to understand how we come to be where we are, for at the present moment the idea of a university is as confused as the situation of the college. The reasons are evident: the great movement for General Education, which began after the First World War, has in forty years transformed our entire precollegiate schooling. The good high school now gives the historical surveys, the introductions to social science, the great books, that formed the sub-

stance of general education. What is more, the Advance Placement Program has managed to fill in the old vacuum of the eleventh and twelfth grades with real work, so that more and more freshmen—even without Advance Placement—find the first year of college feeble and repetitious. They've had the calculus; they've had a grown-up course in American history; they've read Homer and Tolstoy—college holds for them no further revelations; it no longer marks the passage from pupil to student, from make-believe exercises to real thought. So that if we stand off and look at the silhouette of the American College—I speak of the solid and serious ones, not the shaky imitation—what we see is the thinning and flattening out of its once distinctive curriculum under pressure from above and below, the high school taking away the lower years; the graduate and professional schools the upper.

What then is happening to the beautiful notion of developing the imaginative and the reasoning powers apart from marketable skill and professional competence? What is happening to contemplation and the cultivating of sensibility and judgment? What is happening to “the four happiest years of my life”? That last boon, certainly, has vanished. If colleges were ever places of elegant leisure, they are so no longer. Look about you on the campus and all you see is anxious preoccupation. Students are married, employed, going to or returning from a conference, apprehensive about examinations, ruled by the clock like the most harried executive. They are not in cloistered halls but in the midst of life—which is why so many are also in the midst of psychiatric treatment.

But the vanishing college and the proliferation of worldly activities on its campus do not mean that the university succeeds in training happy young professionals. They are not happier or younger than they would be if they still enjoyed four years of maturing in the old atmosphere of apparently useless study. They are not younger when they find their footing, because competition forces them to go into postgraduate work—one sheepskin to one sheep is no longer enough. And they are not happier because the professional invasion of college teaching makes for dullness, poor preparation, and a new kind of pretense. No undergraduate can believe that he is going to be at the same time an anthropologist, a

Milton scholar, an historian, and a chemist. Yet that is what the modern teaching assumes about him in successive hours of the college day. This is bad enough for a boy; it is ridiculous for a girl. The motive to study is inevitably lacking in at least three out of four classes when so conducted, that is, when the listener is not addressed as a person or a citizen, but only as that dreadful model of our age: the useful member of society who must be clothed in qualifications and armed with licenses to practice.

Oddly enough, while the liberal arts college, abetted by the graduate school, is squeezing out the old liberal education, the chief professional schools still ask for it in their candidates for admission. The law schools want students who know some history and can read English; the medical schools want well-rounded men; and the engineering schools profess the greatest respect for the humanities and social sciences. In practice, admissions committees often betray these principles and prefer the candidate whose record shows a positive gluttony for science and mathematics. The committee may be right, although the fair words persist. The upshot is that nowadays the only true believers in the liberal arts tradition are the men of business. They *really* prefer general intelligence, literacy and adaptability. They know, in the first place, that the conditions of their work change so rapidly that no college courses can prepare for it. And they also know how often men in mid-career suddenly feel that their work is not enough to sustain their spirits. Such men turn to the arts, to disinterested reading, in a word to self-cultivation as means of keeping their souls alive. Some business firms even provide instruction of this sort to their care-worn executives—seminars in Plato and round tables on political science—in hopes of restoring the energies by feeding an organ of the soul that has been starved during the professional career. This starvation occurs not only in business but also in the other professions, which are growing more and more like business in their paper-pushing aspects.

Obviously, if starvation by routine has killed off the intellectual appetites there will be nothing to restore; and it is likely that no appetite will last very long if it is neglected from the age of sixteen, when it is just becoming aware of itself. What follows? What fol-

lows is a proposition you may cry out against, but which seems to me implied in the situation before us: sooner or later the college as we know it will find that it has no proper place in the scheme of things. It will find that the secondary school has added a year or two to its present curriculum; that the graduate school has kidnapped all the college juniors and seniors into its own departments. All that will be left in college is the dean, and he is the most expendable of creatures.

If this happens—and I ask you to remember that I shall do nothing to bring it about, but on the contrary everything to retard it; if this happens—I say, *if*: then the students and the professions and the universities and the nation will benefit in a number of ways. The cost will be emotionally great: we all feel an attachment to that unique institution, the American college. On the strength of this feeling millions “want to go to college” without quite knowing what they may expect from it. In the past, their innocent hopes were not disappointed; now it is the best colleges that disappoint the most, for the reasons I mentioned. So the first benefit of the change will be that students’ natural desire for exploring the world of ideas will be fed by secondary school teachers, who still believe and practice general education, instead of deserting their charges to indulge in research.

Next, the professions and the university which trains for them will benefit in having their students’ exclusive attention. Finally, that concentrated training can begin a couple of years earlier than now; therefore, the country will benefit through a fresher and larger supply of professionals. Acceleration may then become normal and calm, instead of being special and frantic. All this will occur if—I say again, *if*—the colleges follow, consciously or unconsciously, the tendency evident in their actions for the last dozen years. Their unrest, their sense of futility, are shown in recent proposals to cut the normal course to three years, or to add a fifth year that would bring with it a graduate degree; their impatience is visible in the programs that lead to a four years’ master’s degree in teaching, or to a Ph.D. in chemistry in six years, or to various other degrees more quickly by a telescoping of the upper years. This disquiet can only grow as the high schools improve and the

freshman grows bored, as students begin college in the sophomore year and university work begins in the junior or senior year. At this moment, when one lends an ear, it seems as if a good many bolts were loose in the machine and even though it keeps running, the noises it makes are not reassuring.

All the more reason why we should have at hand the strongest universities we can fashion. Universities are not in any sense a substitute for the college. The mood and tenor of the liberal arts differ from professional training and purpose exactly as the *Hofstra Bulletin* says, and the liberal arts cannot be dispensed with permanently. The question is where to situate them, how to administer them, whom to entrust them to. And in these high matters a strong university which knows what its role is can assist, advise and protect. It can require and enforce the right preparation of its candidates for professional training. In a word, a clear-minded university can dispel both error and confusion. That is why today I am glad that one more university has been added to the older strongholds of learning in the country.