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Author(s): Frank L. Keegan

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Reforming American Higher Education: Robert M. Hutchins Re-examined

Frank L. Keegan
Salem State University

It must surely be the subtlest form of praise for Robert M. Hutchins and his work to be included in a series of essays on American and British education in the last quarter century. Now 78 years old, Hutchins had – more than twenty five years ago – left higher education with his resignation as Chancellor of the University of Chicago, where he served brilliantly and controversially from 1929 to 1951. The editors of this volume are to be congratulated for having perceived that the significance of Robert Hutchins in American higher education pre-dates the limits of this volume and, as I hope to show, will endure long after it.

No less a figure than Clark Kerr has called Hutchins “the last of the giants in the sense that he was the last of the university presidents who really tried to change his institution and higher education in any fundamental way” (Note 1). Throughout the Thirties and Forties, Hutchins, with his sometimes recalcitrant faculty, provided a model of a university, not merely for the Midway and the Middle West but for America. Not by chance did the eminent economic historian and humanist John U. Nef entitle his perceptive account of these years “The University of Chicago and the World” (Note 2).

To understand fully the significance of placing the name of the 20th century Hutchins among the university giants of an earlier age, one must be aware that the late 19th century was, in the words of Richard B. Gummere, “The Creative Period of American Higher Education . . . the era of presidents who brought about the only major reforms in our

history" (Note 3). Like Hutchins, the giants were young men, for according to Ernest Hemingway's wise remark, "hesitation increases in relation to risk in equal proportion to age." When the German university model and the model of the land grant college were being established in America, young men headed our educational institutions, just as they had headed our political institutions a century earlier when the republic was founded.

Andrew White was 32 when, in 1868, he was appointed head of Cornell, while Daniel Coit Gilman, appointed at age 44 to head Johns Hopkins in 1875, had already been president of the University of California. Charles Eliot was 35 when appointed Harvard's president in 1869; Henry Tappan was 47 when appointed Michigan's president in 1852; G. Stanley Hall was 44 when appointed president of Clark University in 1888; and Francis Wayland was a mere 31 when appointed Brown's president somewhat earlier in 1827. Hutchins may indeed have been the youngest, being named Chicago's president at age 29, yet his great predecessor William Rainey Harper was only 32, having earned his Yale doctorate at 19.

Like Hutchins the giants were young men with clear and passionately held ideas about reforming higher education and of defining a new kind of American institution, the university. They were learned men, equipped with what the Yale Report of 1828 calls "the furniture of the mind." Before their appointments, they had proven their worth. Some had had difficulties with previous trustees, faculties or politicians, some had indeed been fired, yet shrewd trustees of that time anticipated long and fruitful presidential tenures. They were right. Andrew White had the shortest term of any of the giants, 18 years, while Eliot was Harvard's president for 35 years.

But the reform of American higher education depends finally upon a confluence of historical causes with individual virtues and style. Great reformers are only rarely self-appointed; their emergence depends on more than personal attributes. Reform depends on the social, economic and cultural environment on which universities depend. As Richard Gummere notes:

One reason why Hutchins succeeded so brilliantly was the nation's need for him. After a war, a boom and a crash, America of the 1930's craved leaders of strong voice, bold character and fresh thought. After another war, a boom and a slump, we need presidents like Hutchins. Can our trustees pick such men again? (Note 4)

Whether university trustees will again pick men like Hutchins is not unrelated to the question of the reform of American higher education and to the policy issues which dominate this volume.

Several of the authors have indicated that America does not have a national educational policy, that even the heavy dependence of some

major universities upon the federal *largesse* does not constitute control or the setting of policy. Surely it is true that there is nothing in the U.S. comparable to the Minister of Education in a European country or even of the traditional rights of faculties as in Oxford and Cambridge. Americans have placed the control of their universities, whether public or independent, in the hands of boards of lay trustees; charters are issued by state governments in recognition of the fact that colleges and universities fulfill a public good. But if national policy in higher education is not — even for “the federal grant university” — determined by the federal, or the state, government, where does policy come from?

The simple and general answer is that policy emerges, often without purpose or direction, from the competitive functioning of both public and private universities as they both educate the citizen and advance the frontiers of knowledge. Policy in American higher education emerges from the growth and development of universities, and from the financial (often federal) sources which encourage a *certain* growth and a *particular* development. The result may not precisely be described as “arbitrary” but it is surely unguided and often chaotic. If for example certain universities in America — the so-called “centers of excellence” — develop powerful scientific research in a number of defense-related fields, is it a higher education “policy” that there is no comparable development in the field of the humanities simply because equal federal resources are not available?

Mr. Sam Halperin in his essay appearing earlier in this volume notes the following:

Foreign observers, particularly in the Washington scene, are appalled, or intrigued by the absence of talk about *what it is we are trying to do*. If you want to do something for compensatory education, how does that fit into a philosophy of life, a vision of the future society? It is one of the questions that is increasingly troublesome to some people and certainly to me. Everything then, tends to be considered *ad hoc*; what passes for priorities are politically derived (Italics mine) (Note 5).

Halperin’s remarks are pure Hutchins. Commenting recently about the influential 2 volume work published by Daedalus entitled *American Higher Education: Toward an Uncertain Future*, Hutchins notes:

Apart from those writers who could not free themselves from the disorders of the 1960’s, from the troubles with the government, from the terrible financial situation, or from similar minor and evanescent perplexities, all the old questions were still there. The principle one now, as fifty years ago, is *what are we trying to do?* (Note 6).

What was it exactly that Robert Hutchins himself was trying to do? In the space of this short essay it is not possible to develop the major elements of Hutchins’ policy concerning higher education, his support

of Thomas Jefferson's view of free and compulsory education for all, his critical distinction between the college, with its function of providing the liberal arts and sciences for all citizens, and that counter-cultural institution, that center of independent thought, known as the university. Even without that development, it is, however, necessary to note that, for Hutchins, the distinct, yet symbiotic, purposes of colleges and universities — the one in teaching and learning, the other in scholarship — are corollaries of political democracy for, without an intelligent citizenry, freedom and self-government will perish. When men are bound by custom, prejudice and ignorance, they easily fall victim to myths and tyrants. Hutchins is fond of quoting Jefferson: "A nation both ignorant and free never was and never will be."

¹ What Hutchins was trying to do can best be illustrated by noting some of the things he actually did while president and chancellor of the University of Chicago. This approach has the added advantage of addressing those economic issues which Richard Gummere mentioned above, issues which today, as in Hutchins' time, burden the whole question of establishing policy and initiating reform in American higher education.

The painful economic realities of the present day were a fact of life 40 years ago. In the Thirties colleges and universities were also struggling to find their purpose, to gain public support and private money and to reform their structure. Note this text from Hutchins in 1936:

Up to the onset of the present depression it was fashionable to call for more and more education. Anything that went by the name of education was a good thing just because it went by that name. I believe that the magic of the name is gone and that we must now present a defensible program if we wish to preserve whatever we have that is of value (Note 7).

Hutchins knew that budget cutting can mean education building. When he was appointed president of Chicago in 1929, his inaugural coincided with the Great Crash. He was urged to make "across-the-board" cuts, but chose rather to make judgments, *policy* judgments, about educational quality. He overhauled the university's structure by reducing 54 departments to 22, reformed the undergraduate college and still managed to impress businessmen and donors with his charm; during the Depression years, he raised 52 million dollars in nine years.

The same opportunities exist today. Last year one of the colleges of the City University of New York proposed to the chancellor that one-third of its courses be eliminated and that faculty salaries be reduced by 25%. It is simply not true that presidents and professors do not sometimes suggest sound educational and fiscal practices — but today catastrophe has to be knocking at the door. At the time the CUNY chan-

cellor received this proposal, he and the trustees were considering a plan to eliminate the college.

There are other ways to understand Hutchins' policies and his reforms, and perhaps the best way is to read his works. If those presidents and trustees who set our higher education policy, as well as those state, federal and legislative leaders who set "policy" more by default than design, would read Hutchins' small *corpus*, we might avoid the chaotic and piecemeal programs in higher education lamented by Sam Halperin and others.

Today's college presidents and faculty would be especially well advised to stay away from their offices and refuse to answer either the daily mail or the telephone, for as long as it takes to read Hutchins' *The Higher Learning in America*. They would discover an inexpensive solution to their troubled, incoherent and costly undergraduate curricula: reading and discussing great books. They would also discover the difference between a long view of learning and the short view (and false promise) of quick employment after college. Whether one speaks of "marketable skills" (as James Conant used to do) or of "career education" (in the words of Sidney Marland), the same old vocationalism seeps through. Reading a work like Hutchins' *The Learning Society* (1964) will reveal that colleges must develop the intellectual skills to make young men and women employable 25 years after graduation.

Rereading Hutchins will even help college presidents deal with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). He recommended in the Thirties not only that football be abolished at Chicago (it was, by faculty consent), but also that other colleges reduce admission to football games to 10 cents and give tenure to coaches. Surely these are as solid suggestions as those now emanating from the annual NCAA meetings, where a powerful group of athletic directors and football coaches are successfully dictating scholarship policies to college presidents. Hutchins motto was "more athletics and less athleticism." It still makes sense.

Professors, too, should read Hutchins and encourage their students to do the same. The students will be fascinated to read an author they can understand even while he challenges their minds. The pellucid quality of Hutchins' prose was brought home to me recently while in the office of the president of a large Eastern university. A staff member had just drafted a letter for the president's signature to the student governing-board president. After perusing it, the president said, "That's obscure enough. I don't understand it. It must be good." Whereupon he signed the letter. Like an earlier generation, today's students will be stimulated and perplexed by Hutchins' habit of quoting the remark of Woodrow

Wilson: "The object of a university is to make young gentlemen as unlike their fathers as possible."

Perhaps professors have finally the most to gain by rereading Hutchins, for he placed the intellectual quality of the institution squarely in their hands. But professors who spend their time cultivating their scholarly gardens of rare herbs and leafless plants, and professors who teach desultorily to their captive audiences, may find him difficult and dangerous.

Some time ago Professors Werner J. Dannhauser and L. Pearce Williams of Cornell put a question to their president: "If we prove to you that an Arts and Sciences student can now receive a B.A. degree at Cornell, and thus be presumed to have acquired a liberal education, without having been required to read a line of Plato, the Bible, Shakespeare, Marx or Einstein, would you consider this to be evidence that there is a crisis in education at Cornell?" There was no reply. Apparently Cornell's president did not think the question relevant. He was right. The question should have been asked of Cornell's faculty.

Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, Hugo L. Black, once said:

I want to sit at the feet of a man named Robert M. Hutchins whom I have admired for many, many years, a man who has contributed far more to the ideas of liberty than I have. When I first heard about him he was making people think. When I next heard of him he was making people think. Tonight you heard him and he has made you think. What greater service can a man perform in a world that depends more than anything else on what people think — far more, in my judgment, than on what people do?

Just imagine. A university president who makes people think. And a university president who accomplished some of the things he thought about. A study of Hutchins' writings, and his years at Chicago, would do more to improve and unify higher education policy than all the budget meetings, faculty conferences and legislative hearings that crowd the calendars of today's university officials. It would go a long way to clarify the discussion of policy issues contained in the present volume.

American higher education has no national policy, and it does not need one. American higher education is decentralized and represented by many types of institutions drawing on various sources of support. American higher education needs once more strong and diverse voices who not only delineate policy but who implement it.

Robert M. Hutchins has been silent too long. The best suggestion for resurrecting him comes from President John Silber of Boston University; Silber asserts that Hutchins should be cloned immediately so we may have a coherent higher education policy by the year 2000. Let us clone Hutchins many times so that new Hutchinses will emerge in both the public and independent sectors of American higher education. Without

them we will continue to drift toward a “policy” which emerges from political compromises and economic processes rather than a policy of higher education reform which is freely chosen, thoughtfully considered and philosophically sound, one which represents the best of our political traditions, our intellectual history, our common experience and, above all, our promise.

Footnotes

1. *The Uses of the University*. The Godkin Lectures at Harvard. Harvard University Press, 1963.
2. *The Review of Politics*. University of Notre Dame, 1951.
3. *How to Survive Education Before, During and After College*. Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1961, p. 125.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
5. Halperin, this volume, p. 89.
6. *The Center Magazine*, Jan./Feb., 1977, p. 5.
7. *The Higher Learning in America*. Yale University Press, 1936, p. 3.