



## ***The Structure of Higher Learning in Fin-de-Siècle America***

### **Bureaucracy, Statistical Accounting, and Sociocultural Change**

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**Abstract:** This article draws on the ideas of Thorstein Veblen to diagnose current trends in the higher learning in America. It focuses on the increasing rationalization, bureaucratization and emphasis on statistical accounting as well as the dominance of administrative elites within the middle levels of higher education. It traces the impact of these methods throughout a range of academic areas, including hiring and evaluation of faculty, the place of students, the content and conduct of intellectual programs, and the operation more generally of the academic organization.

#### **VEBLEN'S DIAGNOSIS AND SOME LINES OF INQUIRY**

When Thorstein Veblen's book on *The Higher Learning in America* was published, it bore the sub-title, "A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Businessmen." It diagnosed the varied symptoms of an educational condition dominated by business principles, in his words, "the businesslike administration of the scholastic routine," "bureaucratic organization" and, espe-

cially, "a system of scholastic accountancy" (Veblen, 1918: 162). This condition has become increasingly acute since Veblen's time and its manifestations can be found even in institutions which formerly resisted such tendencies. In this article, I would like, first, to discuss some of the general trends identified by Veblen and, second, relate his analysis to the proliferation of more recent symptoms of the condition he first identified [1].

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Veblen saw that "the large and cen-

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tralized administrative machinery” of higher education, especially at the larger state sponsored undergraduate institutions, were developing a “system of authoritative control, standardization, gradation, accountancy, classification, credits and penalties” aimed at the control of “irresponsible inmates,” requiring them to engage in a round of “distasteful tasks” and forego any “excessive irregularities of conduct” (Veblen, 1918: 162-163). This system of academic management turned higher education into a marketable product “rated, bought and sold by standard units, measured, counted and reduced to staple equivalence by impersonal, mechanical tests” and, therefore, one readily subject to “statistical consistency, with numerical standards and units.” The outcome was to “deter both students and teachers from a free pursuit of knowledge” and substitute for that goal the “pursuit of credits,” thus replacing “scientific capacity and addiction to study” by “salesmanlike proficiency” (Veblen, 1918: 163). Impersonal standards and tests are substituted for personal conference, guidance and association between teachers and students and the staff is subjected to a “mechanically standardized routine,” discouraging any “disinterested preoccupation with scholarly or scientific inquiry” (Veblen, 1918: 165).

This system necessarily creates a “gain in statistical showing, both as regards the volume of instruction offered, and probably also as regards the enrollment,” since, as Veblen puts it, in a formula which might stand as a motto for this investigation, “accountancy creates statistics and its absence does not” (Veblen, 1918: 165). However, this statistical gain serves primarily as a tool to enhance the prestige of the university and its executive officers. In Veblen’s view, the entire system of business principles when applied to higher education is directed toward the goal of increased prestige. In turn, this goal enhances the financial solvency of the institution which, through its statisti-

cally augmented prestige, is able to capture a larger share of the student market as well as attract the attention of alumni and other donors eager to become part of a seemingly successful operation. A strong statistical showing becomes part of the “surveillance of appearances” engaged in by the “captains of erudition” and increasingly supported by the public media, which monitor and rate educational institutions in quantitative terms for the wider public of educational consumers. This practice is usually linked to the establishment of an academic publicity bureau which coordinates the management of appearances and whose office holders, as “captains of consciousness,” perform the function known more simply in other business settings as advertising (Veblen, 1918: 168; also Ewen, 1979) [2].

This improved statistical performance has various consequences. In order to administer such a system, the institution of higher education must expand its bureaucracy. It must engage in “a persistent and detailed surveillance and direction of the work and manner of life of the academic staff” and act “to shut off initiative of any kind in the work done” (Veblen, 1918: 164). The further these tendencies develop, the more the university takes on the character of a “penal settlement,” not only for the student, but also for the academic staff (Veblen, 1918: 163). To borrow a phrase from Max Weber’s sociology, the university becomes increasingly “rationalized,” or, in Veblen’s terms, reflecting related developments in his own country, it becomes subject to the system of “scientific management” (Veblen, 1918: 165, fn.2) [3]. Instead of being first and foremost “a body of mature scholars and scientists,” under the direction of “men of affairs” the university operates in accordance with what Veblen called “pecuniary” standards, as opposed to those of intellectual craftsmanship and the advancement of learning.

Manifestations of the main trends noted by Veblen can be easily identified at

the undergraduate and even the graduate level of higher learning over the past several decades [4]. They appear with particular frequency in the large state university centers and the middle level comprehensive regional state universities, where much of the undergraduate instruction takes place in American higher education. However, they are not entirely absent from any institution of higher education in America, including its best doctoral programs. They take new forms which Veblen would have easily recognized.

In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to briefly summarize some of these internal changes in organizational structure [5].

### **THE HIGHER LEARNING AS BUREAUCRATIC REGIME**

The most obvious symptom of the growth of bureaucratic methods in higher education is the proliferation of new offices within the administrative staff and an increase in the overall proportion of university employment devoted to administration (as opposed to faculty). New Deans and Provosts (the titles vary) are created to head new branches of the academic administration. Offices formerly occupied by one Dean now house two, three or more Associate Deans whose job it is to relieve the senior Dean of those more mundane tasks of accounting as well as the preliminary drafting and enforcement university policies, both regarding the student body as well as the faculty and other staff. These new offices in the expanded university bureaucracy also pose a temptation to the surprisingly large number of faculty members who seek a refuge from the increasingly routinized duties of teaching and scholarship and strive for the rewards of higher status and income which come with "upward mobility" within the university. Indeed, it is remarkable that, in many

state universities, the lowest level associate deanship carries greater pay and prestige than the rank of some full professors.

Many other bureaucratic posts with related administrative staff are created to deal with student needs and demands. These include, for example, the following (the list is by no means complete): offices of admissions, recruitment and academic records; directors and staff for recreational and athletic programs; housing offices; Deans of students and other ombudsmen, representing student grievances; advisement offices which help students negotiate the complex maze of graduation requirements established by the university and its various departments; centers which statistically diagnose the student's level of capacity in various academic fields and channel students into the appropriate level of courses; extensive technology offices devoted to the development and maintenance of academic instructional technology, including computer labs for students, faculty computers, as well as the growing and increasingly mandatory battery of educational technologies used for classroom instruction.

### **THE MANIA FOR ASSESSMENT**

In the pursuit of academic excellence, or, at least, the reputation for excellence—and what university these days does not advertise itself as anything less than "excellent"?—measures must be taken to periodically demonstrate that progress continues to be made to yet further levels of excellence. A prime tool for this purpose is assessment.

The system of business principles and statistical accountancy described by Veblen has resulted in an obsessive concern with the periodic and quantitative assessment of every facet of university functioning, including the evaluation of faculty performance and administrative unit

performances at every organizational level. In turn, assessment has become a professional specialty, with its own typical procedures, arcane language and attendant mentality. An enormous amount of faculty time and energy, as well as university resources, are expended in the fulfillment of administrative demands for "on-going" assessment of "programs." These latter words have come into vogue as shorthand for the continuous review of a given collection of faculty activities, usually envisioned as a "team" effort, rather than the sum of individual contributions [6]. Reviews on a yearly basis are complemented by more comprehensive five year assessments and the assessment of yet longer term goals are grouped under the heading of "strategic plans." Planning and assessment are taken with great seriousness by administrators. It provides them with their *raison d'être*, the oversight and management of the university as a going concern. It is their view that the efficient achievement of the institution's goals can be measured only by the use of arcane assessment procedures employing statistical measures. In the absence of a strong tradition of faculty governance, and even when this tradition is present, these goals are set largely by administrators who, in turn, rely more and more on outside assessors, rather than internal faculty review boards, to certify their effective achievement or identify lapses in progress toward these goals.

Specialists in assessment who come from outside the university present themselves as professionals in education and bring with them expertise in the exact measurement of educational excellence. However, this expertise has not always been gained from extended service in academic institutions, but from experience in other institutional settings such as government administration, the military, business, non-profit organizations and, sometimes, even the university. The techniques they employ represent a set of fungible skills thought ap-

plicable to the estimation of any organization's effectiveness and transferable from one organization to another. In their view, the university differs in no significant way from any other complex organization. Moreover, their very presence implies that faculty and even university administrators cannot be entirely relied upon to render an objective judgment concerning the university's strengths and weaknesses.

Their presence also creates a dual system for the evaluation of the university. At one level, there is the existing organizational structure of the university which certifies through its required programs of study, its grading system, and its methods for the legitimate accumulation of credits and the satisfaction of degree requirements that students have, in fact, come up to an acceptable standard of achievement. In addition, there are the specialists in assessment and their parallel measuring devices, ones which are calculated to not duplicate those already in place. For example, the faculty might think that a required course in social theory was effective if a sufficiently large percentage of students performed well in the course's written assignments and received passing grades, whereas assessors demonstrate the fallacy of such thinking by demanding that instructors initiate special assessment-oriented assignments which measure students' educational attainment in this field both before and after the course and, thus, more accurately measure the course's efficient augmentation of the student's knowledge.

Indeed, such devices measuring "before" and "after" performance by students are common for the assessment of entire majors. The overall outcome is the creation of a system of dual organization and accounting which resembles that used for the management of firms in the old Soviet Union, where the executive's own reports to his superiors were paralleled by those of a Party operative assigned to the firm, who could spy out any irregularities that might

go unreported by the nominal manager and whose judgment could be relied on as a more accurate account of the firm's overall operation.

### EVALUATION OF FACULTY

The evaluation of faculty involves similar processes. Annual reviews for purposes of reappointment have become a major ritual for junior faculty. They require the compilation of an extensive file demonstrating, preferably in statistical terms, his or her "productivity" over the past year—numbers of publications, number of conference papers presented, numbers of committees served on, numbers of courses taught and students processed in those courses, numbers of advisees, quantitative measures of "teaching excellence," numbers of every type submitted in evidence of outstanding performance in those areas deemed important to the university's overall "mission." This "mission," in general, includes not only scholarship and teaching, but also advisement and service to the university (i.e. committee work) and wider community. Accomplishments in the two latter fields are often viewed as significant enough a contribution to override a faculty member's deficiencies in scholarship and sometimes even in teaching.

The same process occurs for tenure consideration, only on a more vast scale. Portfolios grow to prodigious proportions and often include odd memorabilia unrelated to scholarship or instruction (e.g. Christmas cards and other brief notes from opinion leaders testifying to the candidate's valued contributions to university and community). Many hours are expended by department chairs and other senior faculty charged with reading and evaluating these materials. A fine hermetic art emerges among candidates as well as those evaluating them in the construction and subsequent interpretation of

such files. Given the complex demands faced by aspiring faculty members in their quest for appointments, reappointments and, ultimately tenure within the academic bureaucracy, professional associations and graduate programs have recently begun to offer greater formal guidance to graduate students and aspiring faculty in need of reliable tools for career management. Thus, the bureaucratic expansion of the university calls forth further managerial responses as a defense and, thus, entangles larger number of aspects of university life in their nets [7].

Faculty must submit themselves to extensive statistical evaluation of their performance not only by their peers, but also by students. Student evaluations of teaching have become a mandatory part of faculty review in every institution with which I am familiar. Instruction is now broken down into a series of measurable traits thought to be important to good teaching. The faculty member's performance is then measured by a series of scaled questions concerning these various facets of teaching. This allows an overall set of numerical scores to emerge which serve as a summary statistical measure of the faculty member's alleged teaching ability. Excellence in teaching, as Veblen noted, is reduced to statistical accountancy.

The history of this system is worth further investigation. It seems to have first appeared on a large scale as a result of the student demands of the 1960s for greater voice in the evaluation and reappointment of faculty. It was further ushered into existence by administrators who found it a useful way to gain greater control over faculty performance under the guise initially of helping faculty identify weak points in their teaching performance and, thus, improve their teaching ability. When they first appeared, such evaluations were intended to be the sole property of the faculty member, to be used however he or she deemed appropriate. This initial rationale rapidly evolved into a mandatory system in which

faculty had to account for their performance, ostensibly to students, but primarily to administrators. The inclusion of such "evidence of teaching effectiveness" in the faculty member's reappointment or tenure portfolio rapidly became a required practice (one emulated by departments and universities in their hiring practices).

In this way (among others), faculty found themselves caught in an institutional vice. Students pressed from one side, demanding that their pedagogical preferences and needs be met. From the other side, pressure was exerted by administrators, who had the ultimate word in their reappointment and who looked on student evaluations of teaching as one tool for sorting out junior faculty and also managing tenured faculty through the manipulation of financial rewards (e.g. raises, promotions, release time for research and, increasingly, sabbatical leaves) by linking them to such measures of teaching performance. Over time this evaluation process has become a routine and a ritual, despite its serious consequences.

On the one hand, students engage in such evaluations for each of their courses and, with the growing indifference of students in the post-1960s era to serious involvement in academic politics, they generally know little and care less about the ultimate uses of these evaluations. For students, it is another requirement, a meaningless ritual in which they must quickly mark their ratings on a computer page, while adding some brief comments venting their love or hatred or, more frequently, their relative indifference toward their teachers, all of it accomplished in ten or fifteen minutes on the basis of subjective impressions and personal preferences concerning the instructor. On the other hand, for the faculty, they are a vital matter. Any faculty member who cannot demonstrate a creditable performance on many, if not all of the various statistical measures on the evaluation form faces serious question-

ing at reappointment time about his or her teaching ability. A faculty member may be a fine scholar and even a good teacher, if measured by other means, but failure in the classroom as measured in this particular way can be a death knell to a budding career [8].

### **THE BUREAUCRATIC QUANTIFICATION OF HIRING PRACTICES**

Universities operate today with an increasing fear of lawsuits from students, existing faculty and staff, and even prospective faculty. Some of the administrative apparatus and rules governing conduct within the university are a response to this concern. Let us look briefly at faculty recruitment as an instance of this process.

Hiring practices are everywhere governed by offices of "human resources" whose complex rules, aimed at the equitable treatment of all candidates, constrain the actions of faculty and others involved in recruitment and bring their activities into line with the quantitative assessment practices found elsewhere in the university. For example, one common practice is the creation of a system of numerical rating of candidates on a scale of (e.g.) one to five concerning a series of factors thought vital to his or her qualification for a faculty position (e.g., prestige of the graduate program where the candidate was "trained," numbers of conference presentations or publications, number of involvements in professional societies or other organizations, level of achievement on student evaluations of teaching, and so forth). These individual rankings are then summarized into an overall comparative ranking of the candidates. Cut off points are created in this ranking, thus allowing the top three or more candidates to be identified as the best prospects, a middle group retained as a reserve of more or less acceptable candidates

in case members of the top tier prove unavailable, and a bottom group of unqualified or otherwise unacceptable applicants is identified. These overall rankings are submitted to the office of human resources as evidence that candidates' strengths and weaknesses have been quantitatively measured and, therefore, that the process resulting in the final "short list" has been an objective one.

While this procedure appears highly objective, lacking in any identifiable biases, and, therefore, wholly unobjectionable, the interpretation of the actual meaning of these rankings and measures often involves lengthy discussion. The minor differences reflected among candidates in such numerical rankings become the occasion for the interjection of a variety of more subjective estimations of their varying qualifications, especially when these objective measures are combined with the diverse judgments emerging from the review committee's response to the candidates' oral presentations on their teaching and research during their interviews. The rules dictated by the human resources office guarantee that, in the end, the "best candidate" can be demonstrated by quantitative indices to have been chosen and faculty also find it convenient to have subordinated their deliberations to such procedures as a guarantee of their own objectivity, lack of bias and good faith. In retrospect, it is often not entirely clear why one candidate should be rated significantly better than any other, since what Freud once called "the narcissism of minor differences" among the faculty members charged with making the final judgment seems to rule the deliberations as much as the numerical rankings. Given the frequently indiscernible differences among them, the candidates' various personal characteristics, minor utterances, and even their physical appearances, often play an important role in the determination of their fate as their quantitatively rated potential as scholars, teachers and, especially, col-

leagues. In such instances, the quantitative measures of excellence allegedly at the heart of the hiring decision are transfigured into an official mask covering subjective preferences.

### **COURSE SYLLABI AND ACADEMIC SOCIAL CONTROL: THE STUDENT AS CRIMINAL AND THE FACULTY AS PLACE HOLDER**

The rationalization of procedures for evaluating faculty performance, including student evaluations of teaching, is not the only way in which bureaucracy and accounting have influenced faculty functioning. The structure of course syllabi, examination procedures, and other facets of teaching have also been affected.

Course syllabi have grown in size and complexity and their social control dimension has moved to the forefront. Instead of a page or two with a course description, a list of required and supplementary readings, and an account of written requirements or examination procedures, along perhaps with a selection of critical deadlines, the typical syllabus now contains a plethora of materials: statements of course goals, procedures for meeting these goals, and outcomes to be expected from the course; detailed schedules for the completion of required and supplementary reading; directions concerning the formation of groups for study and classroom reports; warnings concerning the baleful consequences for the student of not conforming to all the requirements, especially the due dates for examinations and other written requirements; a statement of standards of classroom behavior and the penalties for violation of these standards; and a host of other items increasing the length of syllabi from several pages to a dozen or to several dozen pages and even longer. (I have personally seen syllabi as long as seventy pages.)

As Veblen noted, the university must insure that students will perform a variety of “distasteful tasks,” foremost among which are regular classroom attendance, close attention while in class, and extensive time devoted to study outside of class. The achievement of these goals relies on the use of various disciplinary methods which make the university resemble a penal settlement. These disciplinary methods are applied especially to students, but also to staff, and faculty. They are often borrowed from other institutions such as business, corrections, and the military, following the principle discussed by Michel Foucault that disciplinary methods found effective in one institution are readily transferable to others, thus forging a greater uniformity in the various spheres of institutional life (Foucault, 1979).

Elaborate syllabi are not entirely voluntary creations, but often mandated by university administrators who, with the collusion of faculty, have created lengthy checklists of items required for inclusion in every syllabus. Such initiatives have been put in place ostensibly for the purpose of informing students at the outset of the structure and requirements—indeed, everything possible—about a given course, that is, as a sort of academic “truth in advertising” requirement, one which binds the instructor as well as the student. However, it is clear that such informational requirements take on a life of their own and proliferate well beyond the accomplishment of the initially envisioned goal. Those functions broadly designated as disciplinary and concerned with the social norms governing student behavior in and out of class are supplemented by further procedures for the surveillance of the student’s work to assure that it is, indeed, his or her own.

The most recent development in this latter area concerns efforts to control student plagiarism through the purchase of essays and other term papers over the

internet. New industries have emerged to supply this increasingly desirable product, further evidence of the fact that many students view their education as little more than a purchasable commodity. On the other hand, new databases and computer programs are made available to universities (also at going market rates) allowing faculty to detect such deviant behavior by students. These and other measures taken by faculty to assure the authenticity of student work turns the inherited practices of reading, writing, learning, and judgment of student performance into a battle fought over the internet. The seemingly laudable effort to combat plagiarism leads to policing rather than learning as the focus of attention. The identification of deviant acts, or, in the case of students, the avoidance of identification, becomes a central activity [9]. Both sides in this competition appear to share the assumption that university education is no longer higher learning, but another facet of the market. The central difference seems to be that students want access to that market, while faculty members hope to exclude them from it. The struggle over access to markets replaces mutual devotion to learning.

The amount of detail concerning the actual course content contained in syllabi is an important sub-topic. The tendency in the longest syllabi is to approximate the lesson plans required for high school courses. In the high schools, lesson plans exist to restrict the teacher to those materials mandated by the state and incidentally allow substitute teachers to fill in when needed with little interruption in the coverage of the subject matter. The antecedent fixity of the course content and the interchangeability of personnel are assumed. Indeed, if there is continued success in the efforts at “vertical integration” of education, that is the creation of increasingly close links and cooperation between high schools and universities in the fluid channeling and retention of students, it is to be expected that



such lesson plans will one day also become a regular part of undergraduate college courses. The displacement of institutional methods of discipline and control from one setting to another in this instance involves the adoption by institutions of higher education of the practices of the lower levels (rather than the reverse). These practices include all those methods which have already made high schools look very much like correctional institutions and which promise in the near future to perform the same service for universities.

### **THERE IS A TEXT IN THIS COURSE**

A further related development in the process of standardization and statistical accountancy is the emergence of a brisk textbook trade. Textbooks are now available for almost every course offered in any typical undergraduate curriculum and have come to replace the reading of major works in the given field. The texts themselves reduce the subject matter to a standardized form based on an alleged agreement concerning the central ideas and findings in the discipline. One text looks very much like the next in terms of "coverage" and even format. They are also accompanied by a variety of instructor's aides, including chapter outlines, test banks, videos, and other related materials, often compressed on a single CD Rom for convenient computerized classroom use. In a word, the texts are self-teaching and transfer knowledge and skill from the instructor into the text and its ancillary technologies. The result is an increased standardization of teaching methods and the "de-skilling" of teaching as an art, as well as an uncoupling of the intellectual personality of the instructor from the material taught [10]. As the older methods of teaching through language interaction come to be viewed as mere "chalk and talk" and as instruction through such technically sophisticated

methods becomes a routine expectation among students and administrators (and even many faculty), a further step occurs in the separation of the instructor from the means of instruction, a process paralleling the already completed process of separation of the scholar from the means of scholarly production (see Weber, 2004: 3-4).

This is often convenient for instructors who have large numbers of students and are already pressed for time to engage in the requisite level of scholarly production. On the other hand, with their pre-digested presentation of the materials (e.g., key ideas in bold type or underlined, glossaries with definitions, up to date statistics, etc.), such texts add to the standardized mediocrity noted by Veblen. Their content offers little intellectual challenge to students. Since they are not "written" by an "author" in any meaningful sense, they lack any discernible individual style, literary or intellectual, and, therefore, are boring and tedious. They further decrease the likelihood that students will become actively engaged in their own education, instead of becoming the passive consumers of educational commodities. As they take center place in higher education, their relative value increases by comparison with that of original scholarly investigations. Debates then rage over the relative worth of each type of intellectual production, especially in the context of reappointment decisions.

Whatever the outcome of these controversies, the production of such textbooks provides an often lucrative form of supplementary income for poorly paid faculty and, thus, becomes a common practice in which faculty utilize a major share of their time compiling texts rather than doing their own research. In this way, as C. Wright Mills noted, faculty at the middle levels of the higher learning become wholesalers and retailers of academic goods through the adoption of "up-to-date" textbooks of the ideas often produced by others (Mills, 1951: 132).

## THE STUDENT AS CUSTOMER

Within the modern university, it might be thought that the system of accountancy and business principles, described by Veblen, rests most heavily on the shoulders of the student body. It is perhaps true that students are the recipients of the largest dose of administration and are subject to a vast number of rules, regulations and requirements concerning their academic studies as well as their extra-curricular activities. In turn, they have reinforced the tendencies inherent in an institution run in accordance with business principles by themselves becoming interested less and less in study and knowledge for its own sake and more and more in the material payoff, or utility, which their studies and degree have on the open market. In this system, the student becomes the consumer of vendible educational commodities, primarily courses credits, certifications, and degrees, and, as such, becomes a valued customer, especially during periods of keen competition among universities for their share of the student body.

The status of customer places the student in a position of considerable advantage, despite the joyless burdens of bureaucratic organization to which he—more often she—is subject. As a result, much of the new administrative apparatus is consciously aimed at helping students successfully negotiate their academic careers, that is, making them happy in various ways as consumers within their chosen institution. First, as Veblen noted, “to the laity, a ‘university’ has come to mean....an aggregation of buildings and other improved real estate” (Veblen, 1918: 101). The expenditure on material infrastructure allegedly benefits the entire “academic community,” but it especially serves the needs of students for comfortable and well equipped surroundings in which to occupy their time during their undergraduate

years. This expanded material infrastructure is linked in turn to non-academic positions operating out of buildings and sites now deemed an indispensable accompaniment of any decent undergraduate education (e.g., athletic facilities, field houses for concerts and other large scale entertainments, up to date dormitories, student unions, general use computer labs, all purpose rooms for lounging and social interaction, and so forth).

The operative assumption here is that a good university education is impossible without an extensive material infrastructure, as though intellectual life were somehow dependent on the sort of buildings in which conversations took place. Second, many of the new administrative offices are created to serve particular student needs, for example, improvement of study skills, advisement beyond or different from that provided by faculty, advocacy for students in cases of conflict with instructors or other administrators, operation of a campus “bookstore” providing textbooks and, more importantly, a variety of products which register the student’s university identity (e.g. sweatshirts, T-shirts, drinking mugs, and so forth), and a myriad of other “support services.” In some institutions, functions traditionally performed by faculty have been taken over entirely by specialized offices (e.g. specialists in advisement able to guide the student clearly through the maze of courses and choices which universally constitute the required programs of study in the contemporary university).

Thus, while the system of academic accountancy facing the student seems initially daunting, administrative facilities are increasingly provided to lift the burden of autonomously organizing their programs of study from the students’ shoulders and help them work around any impediments standing in the way of progress towards their degrees, frequently not excluding those erected by departments and faculty

in their program and course requirements. As bureaucracy and accountancy come to dominate the organization of teaching, scholarship, programs of study, and other academic requirements, making them increasingly complex, further bureaucratic methods are forged for the relief of these initial organizational burdens and, thus, bureaucracy spawns more bureaucracy. Since students are perceived by administrators, and, thus, through a self-fulfilling prophecy, by themselves, as requiring a great deal of support, such services have the dysfunction of keeping the student permanently infantilized and dependent on others for guidance.

## CONCLUSION

The above account represents a sketch of some main trends and does not claim to be comprehensive. Each of these topics could be discussed in greater detail and other related changes in academic life could be readily identified. At this time, I also cannot analyze the economic, political, social and cultural changes which have brought about the developments noted above. My effort has been primarily descriptive, to provide a small portrait of some of the main trends in the organization of the higher learning and some of the consequences of these trends. Veblen's explanation for these changes relied on the idea that universities are now dominated by businessmen and, thus, by business principles. His diagnosis is largely accurate as far as it goes. The introduction of business principles has been a major factor in the emergence of these new trends.

However, this account needs to be supplemented by reference to other factors. Some, but not all of these have been noted above in passing, if not explored in the detail necessary for a full treatment of the subject. They include, for example, the demand by the middle classes for higher education

of their children, combined with their reluctance to support it with higher taxes, the interest of students in the degree as a ticket to upward career mobility, the increasingly enhanced status of the administrative role and the consolidation of a distinctive administrative mentality which values quantitative assessment as the path to academic excellence, the decreasing status of the faculty role with the increasing administrative burdens on faculty, the impact of outside institutions such as the textbook trade on the university classroom, and a large number of other factors which might be explored. These and other topics would need to be explored in a more comprehensive treatment of transformations in the higher learning.

One point does emerge from the above discussion. To state the problem in philosophical terms, "enlightenment" as Kant defines it involves the removal of oneself from tutelage to others and the achievement of moral and intellectual autonomy. If the aim of higher education is to encourage students develop their own intellectual and moral lives as independent individuals, the emerging system prevents the realization of this goal. If we accept this definition (as I do) and envision the aim of the university in such terms, then the overall outcome of the system of business principles and statistical accountancy applied to university education is the creation of a student body lacking any desire or capacity for enlightenment and taught, in turn, by a faculty increasingly divested by the bureaucratic regime of any incentives to promote intellectual inquiry and encourage enlightenment for their own sake. By pursuing the system of bureaucratic accounting, the "captains of erudition" undermine the very reason for the university's existence as a distinctive institution uniquely devoted to the preservation of the intellect and advancement of the life of the mind.

Many readers of the foregoing pages may ask themselves: what alternatives

does the author envision for the reform of the higher learning in light of the above analysis? I think it unlikely that the above trends will reverse themselves any time soon. Indeed, they are likely to become even more pervasive as time passes. However, there are possibilities for the creation of alternative intellectual spaces. These could emerge through the establishment of smaller groups devoted to the advancement of moral and intellectual life and working either within totally new extra-academic institutions, divorced from the current system of higher learning, or as enclaves within already established academic organizations, ones willing to be convinced that experimentation with innovative approaches is vital to the intellectual life of their members. In conclusion, I would make two remarks.

Which of these alternative is pursued, or whether another approach is taken, a key factor would be the encouragement of smaller enclaves of study, learning, and introspection. I would agree with Max Weber when he remarked that, "today it is only in the smallest groups, between individual human beings, pianissimo, that you find the pulsing beat that in bygone days heralded the prophetic spirit that swept through great communities" (Weber, 2004: 30). Of courses, these remarks do not address the many detailed questions which would need to be resolved in the creation of such communities of learning, but merely suggest an overall desirable direction to be taken in the pursuit of such change.

It goes without saying that nothing I have written above is meant to demean the often heroic efforts of many faculty to realize their callings as teachers and scholars, even in the face of the trends I have described, nor to diminish the significance for the university of those (relatively small) numbers of students who demonstrate a devotion to learning and study. However, such cases represent the work of individuals whose propensities go increasingly

against the grain of academic life and whose achievements take place not because, but in spite of, current university organization.

#### NOTES

[1] The following discussion does not claim to be an exhaustive account either of Veblen's own ideas on the subject, or the variety of developments in higher education relevant to his themes. Also, I cannot now address the interesting question of how Veblen, whose observations were made in the first decades of the twentieth century, was able to identify these emerging trends in the higher learning at a time when they had almost certainly not developed to the extent witnessed in more recent decades. I would add only that we need to distinguish between the acuity of an instrument (i.e., Veblen's intellect), its ability to register changes in a particular institutional environment, and the actual extent of structural changes in that same environment. Such finely tuned instruments register small changes as large ones and thus have the capacity to foresee the broad lines of development well in advance of their fuller realization.

[2] Such ratings often produce humorous results. One regional state university center boasted in its website that it had been ranked by *US News and World Report* as one of the twenty top regional state universities in the southeast without telling its readers how many institutions formed the overall competitive pool. The figure could not have been more than twenty-five.

[3] Veblen's reflections on the rationalization of the university represent one of the most thorough and forward looking early analyses of rationalization processes in general, not excepting Weber's own work. His image of modern academic life as similar to a "house of corrections" utilizing the "surveillance of appearances" is strongly echoed in the work of such figures as Irving Goffman (1959, 1961) and Michel Foucault (1979), a fact which would hardly require mention were it not so infrequently acknowledged.

[4] The historical period in question in the following paragraphs is roughly that between the early 1960s and the present.

[5] Most of the remarks below are based on my own observations as a faculty member and also a department chair (for six and a half years) at several state universities in the East, Southeast and Midwest. These observations have resulted in the creation of a file of information which I have utilized in the present report.

[6] Scholarship and teaching—however excellent—conducted by individual faculty members, independently of any more comprehensive plan of faculty work, is widely regarded as lacking the necessary quality of imperative coordination to constitute a “program” and, therefore, is frequently discouraged as uncondusive to organizational efficiency. The language of assessment and that of contemporary university operations generally share the sort of principles identified by George Orwell in his fictionalized depiction of “Newspeak” (see Orwell, 1949).

[7] For an analysis of these new trends in academic career management, see the penetrating essay by Guy Oakes (2003).

[8] Max Weber already noted the tendency of students in his own day to judge their teachers’ classroom abilities by purely personal and subjective criteria, rather than the quality of their scholarship or their intellectual insights (see Weber, 2004:6). The authority granted to students’ subjective judgments has undoubtedly increased since his time and, when institutionalized in documents which claim otherwise to represent a precise quantitative measure of teaching excellence, the result is an oddly contradictory blend.

[9] I have heard faculty confess to spending many hours on the internet attempting to track down the source of a paper which they suspected to have been purchased.

[10] This is an example in the setting of academic work of what Braverman has identified as the “de-skilling” of work and workers under conditions of scientific management (see Braverman, 1974).

*Culture and Society*, 16, 4: 599-611.

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