

# Backlog

A yellowed newspaper clipping came in the mail not long ago from one of the *Sooner Magazine's* most faithful readers. It was an article from the *Chicago Tribune* with a well-known byline, that of the late H. L. Mencken, who called his column, "On Going to College." Mencken made this skeptic's appraisal of higher education in 1927, and yet I had a strange feeling that I was reading something that easily could have been written in 1961.

Mencken began with reference to the traditionally American belief that the study of books "could transform any plowboy into a Lincoln, and, what was more wonderful and alluring, into a successful dealer in high grade investment securities." Although Mencken may have had his doubts, he admitted that this theory "may not be true, but that is no argument against it. The important thing is that it is believed. So long as it is believed the young man or woman who has been through college will have an advantage among us, and though that advantage may not run beyond the first few hurdles of life, it will remain of the utmost value there."

But if the golden-key-to-success theory about college was prevalent in 1927, so was the worry about the explosion in the college population. Mencken refers to the post-World War I prosperity as a time when "all the yokels of the land began sending their progeny to college.

"The result was a great congestion in the halls of learning, and that congestion still continues. In some of the state universities there are so many students that merely keeping track of them enlists the services of whole hordes of bookkeepers, top sergeants, policemen and adding machines . . . There are not enough competent teachers in the country to handle them and so a great many unprepared aspirants have had to be called in to help. These aspirants, I daresay, do the best they can, but certainly it is not much. While they are learning their trade, their pupils are learning nothing. . . ."

Strangely enough, Mencken found a bright note in this situation by concluding that these aspirants "accomplish something else; they throw up in a brilliant light the merits of those of their colleagues who are genuinely men of learning. In the average American college, perhaps, there are not many of the latter, but in even the meanest college there are apt to be a few. The influence of such men upon the stu-

THINGS HAVE CHANGED A LOT SINCE 1927—OR HAVE THEY?

dents is immensely salubrious and valuable. They make it plain to even the dullest that there are ends in this world quite as alluring as material success—that men of high character may and do pursue them, and gladly. . . .

"If a boy emerges from college with an understanding of that point of view, so rare in America, and with a soundly cynical attitude toward the pretensions that fill the world with noise and confusion, he has gained quite enough, it seems to me, to compensate him for four years of his life. His increase in positive knowledge may not be great, but it is very likely to be great enough: two-thirds of the things that are taught in college, even when they are well taught, are not worth knowing. The main thing is to learn the difference between appearances and realities."

A lot of things have changed since 1927; certainly colleges should have been no exception. And yet today we still hear Mencken's comments and criticisms in one form or another. Either things haven't changed as much as we would like to believe or if improvements have been made, they are a fairly well-kept secret. —CJR

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