

* A Short History of Education

a noted humorist puts tongue in cheek and traces the course of learning through the ages

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Illustrated by John Yack

Prehistoric Times

Little is known about higher education during the Stone Age, which is perhaps just as well.

Because of a weakness in the liberal arts, the B.A. was not offered, and there was only the B.S., or Bachelor of Stones. Laboratory facilities were meager, owing to a lack of government contracts and support from private industry, but the stars were readily available, on clear nights, for those interested in astronomy. (Scholars, who went around without much on, looked at the stars with the naked eye.)

Prehistoric students, being before history, failed to comprehend the fundamentals of the subject, such as its being divided into Ancient, Medieval, and Modern.

There were no College Boards. This was fortunate, because without saw or plane, boards were rough.

Nor were there any fraternities. The only clubs on the campus were those carried by the students or, in self-defense, by members of the faculty.

Alumni organizations were in their infancy, where some of them have remained. The alumni secretary occupied a small cave, left behind when the director of development moved to a larger one. While waiting for contributions to come in, he idly doodled on the wall, completely un-

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aware that art critics would someday mistake his drawings of certain members of the board of trustees for dinosaurs and saber-toothed tigers.

The Alumni Quarterly came out every quarter of a century, and was as eagerly awaited as it is today.

The Classical Period

In ancient Athens everyone knew Greek, and in ancient Rome everyone knew Latin, even small children — which those who have taken Elementary Greek or Elementary Latin will find hard to believe. Universities wishing to teach a language which had little practical use but was good for mental discipline could have offered English if they had thought of it.

Buildings were all in the classical style, and what looked like genuine marble was genuine marble. However, philosophy classes were sometimes held on the steps, the students being so eager to learn that they couldn't wait to get inside.

The Peripatetic School was a college where the professors kept moving from town to town, closely followed by students and creditors. Sometimes lectures were held in the Groves of Academe, where students could munch apples and olives and occasionally cast an anxious eye at birds in the branches overhead.

Under the Caesars, taxation became so burdensome that Romans in the upper

brackets found they might as well give money to their Alma Mater instead of letting the State have it. Thus it was that crowds often gathered along the Appian Way to applaud a spirited chariot race between the chairman of the funds drive and the tax collector, each trying to get to a good prospect first.

The word "donor" comes from the Latin *donare*, to give, and is not to be confused with *dunare*, to dun, though it frequently is.

When a prominent alumnus was thrown to the lions, customary procedure in the alumni office was to observe a moment of silence, broken only by the sound of munching. Then the secretary, wrapping his toga



a little more tightly around him, solemnly declared, "Well, we might as well take him off the cultivation list."

The Middle Ages

In the period known as the Dark Ages, or nighthood, everyone was in the dark. Higher education survived only because of illuminated manuscripts, which were discovered during a routine burning of a library. It is interesting to reconstruct a typical classroom scene: a group of dedicated students clustered around a glowing piece of parchment, listening to a lecture in Advanced Monasticism, a ten-year course. If some found it hard to concentrate, it was because they were dreaming about quitting before exams and going off on a crusade.

Some left even sooner, before the end of the lecture, having spied a beautiful damsel being pursued by a dragon who had designs on her. Damsels, who were invariably in distress, wrought havoc on a young man's grade-point average.

Members of the faculty were better off than previously, because they wore coats of armor. Fully accoutered, and with their visors down, they could summon up enough courage to go into the president's office and ask for a promotion even though they had not published a thing.

At this time the alumni council became more aggressive in its fund drives, using such persuasive devices as the thumbscrew, the knout, and rack, and the wheel. A wealthy alumnus would usually donate generously if a sufficient number of alumni, armed with pikestaffs and halberds, could cross his moat and storm his castle walls. A few could be counted on to survive the rain of stones, arrows, and molten lead. Such a group of alumni, known as "the committee," was customarily conducted to the castle by a troubadour, who led in the singing of the Alma Mater Song the while.

The Renaissance

During the Renaissance, universities sprang up all over Europe. You could go to bed at night, with not a university around, and the next morning there would be two universities right down the street, each with a faculty, student body, campanile, and need for addition endowment.

The first universities were in Italy, where Dante was required reading. Some students said his "Paradise" and "Purgatory" were as hard as "Hell." Boccaccio was not required but was read anyhow, and in the original Italian, so much being lost in translation. Other institutions soon followed, such as Heidelberg, where a popular elective was Duelling 103a,b, usually taken

concurrently with First Aid, and the Sorbonne, which never seemed to catch on with tourists as much as the Eiffel Tower, the Folies Bergere, and Napoleon's Tomb. In England there was Oxford, where, by curious coincidence, all of the young instructors were named Don. There was also Cambridge.

The important thing about the Renaissance, which was a time of awakening



(even in the classroom), was education of the Whole Man. Previously such vital parts as the elbows and ear lobes had been neglected. The graduate of a university was supposed, above all, to be a Gentleman. This meant that he should know such things as archery, falconry, and fencing (subjects now largely relegated to Physical Education and given only one-half credit per semester), as well as, in the senior year, how to use a knife and fork.

During the Renaissance, the works of Homer, Virgil, and other classical writers were rediscovered, much to the disappointment of students.

Alumni officials concentrated their efforts on securing a patron, someone rich like Lorenzo de' Medici, someone clever like Machiavelli, or (if they wished to get rid of a troublesome member of the administration) someone really useful like Lucrezia Borgia.

Colonial America

The first universities in America were founded by the Puritans. This explains the strict regulations about Late House, Compulsory Chapel, No Liquor on the Campus and Off-Limits to Underclassmen which still exist at many institutions.

Some crafts were taught, but witchcraft was an extracurricular activity. Witch-burning, on the other hand, was the seventeenth century equivalent of hanging a football coach in effigy at the end of a bad season. Though deplored, it was passed off by the authorities as attributable to "youthful exuberance."

Harvard set the example for naming colleges after donors. William and Mary, though making a good try, failed to start a trend for using first names. It was more successful, however, in starting Phi Beta Kappa, a fraternity which permitted no rough stuff in its initiations. At first the Phi Beta Kappa key was worn on the key ring, but the practice went out with the discovery of the watch chain and vest.

During the Colonial Period, alumni officials limited their fund-raising activities to those times when an alumnus was securely fastened, hands and legs, in the stocks. In this position he was completely helpless and gave generously, or could be frisked.

Revolutionary America

Higher education came to a virtual standstill during the Revolution—every able-bodied male having enlisted for the duration. Since the ROTC was not yet established, college men were forced to have other qualifications for a commission, such as money.

General George Washington was given an honorary degree by Harvard, and this helped see him through the difficult winter at Valley Forge. Since he gave no com-

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mencement address, it is assumed that he made a substantial contribution to the building fund. Then again, mindful of the reputation he had gained through Parson Weems's spreading of the cherry tree story, he may have established a chair in Ethics.

Unlike the situation during World War I, when colleges and universities abandoned the teaching of German in order to humiliate the Kaiser, the Colonists waged the Revolutionary War successfully without prohibiting the teaching of English. They did, however, force students to substitute such good old American words as “suspenders” for “braces,” and themes were marked down when the spelling “tyre” was used for “tire” and “colour” for “color.”

The alumni publication, variously called the Alumni Bulletin, the Alumni Quarterly, and the Alumni Newsletter, was probably invented at this time by Benjamin Franklin, who invented almost everything else, including bifocals and kites. The first such publication was probably *Poor Alumnus' Almanac*, full of such homely sayings such as “Early to bed and early to rise

makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise enough to write his Alma Mater into his will.”

Contemporary America

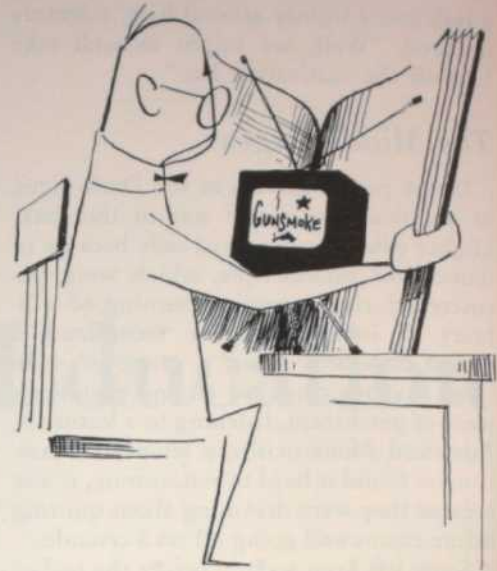
In the nineteenth century, denominational colleges were founded in all parts of the country, especially Ohio. In the smaller of these colleges, money was mostly given in small denominations. A few colleges were not named after John Wesley.

State universities came into being at about the same time, and were tax supported. Every taxpayer was therefore a donor, but without getting his name on a building or being invited to dinner by the president. The taxpayer, in short, was in the same class as the Anonymous Giver, but not because he asked that his name be withheld.

About the middle of the nineteenth century, women were admitted to colleges. This was done (1) to relieve men of having to take women's parts in dramatic productions, (2) to provide cheer leaders with shapelier legs, and (3) to recruit members for the Women's Glee Club, which was not prospering. Women students came to be known as co-eds, meaning that they went along with a man's education, and he could study and date simultaneously. It was not realized, when they were admitted, that women would get most of the high marks, especially from professors who graded on curves.

In the twentieth century, important strides were made, such as the distinction which developed between education and Education. Teachers came to be trained in what were at first called Normal Schools. With the detection of certain abnormalities, the name was changed to Teachers Colleges.

John Dewey introduced Progressive Education, where by students quickly knew more than their teachers and told them so. Robert Hutchins turned the University of Chicago upside down, thereby necessitating a new building program. At St. John's College everyone studied the Great Books,



which were more economical because they did not come out each year in a revised edition. Educational television gave college professors an excuse for owning a television set, which they had previously maintained would destroy the reading habit. This made it possible for them to watch Westerns and old movies without losing status.

Of recent years, an increasing number of students spend their junior year abroad. This enables them to get a glimpse of professors who have been away for several years on Fulbrights and Guggenheims.

Student government has grown apace, students now not only governing themselves but giving valuable suggestions, in the form of ultimatums, to the presidents and deans. In wide use is the Honor System, which makes the professor leave the room during an examination because he is not to be trusted.

Along with these improvements in education has come a subtle change in the American alumnus. No longer interested only in the record of his college's football team, he is likely to appear at his class reunion full of such penetrating questions as “Why is the tuition higher than it was in 1934?” “Is it true that 85% of the members of the faculty are Communists?” and “How can I get my son (or daughter) in?”

Alumni magazines have kept pace with the advancements. The writing has improved, thanks to schools of journalism, until there is excitement and suspense even in the obituary column. Expression has reached such a high point of originality that a request for funds may appear, at first reading, to be a gift offer.

However, if pictorial content continues to increase, it will not be necessary for alumni to know how to read.

This cannot come too soon.

