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William M. Chace: One Hundred Semesters

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Introduction

Most people do not stay in school for a long time. For them, the world after and beyond school is more attractive than the academic enclosure. For them, the ladder of education—kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, high school, and college—is climbed once and then laid aside. They go on to “real life” and obtain jobs, establish careers, and look back on formal education as a moment, just a moment, that happened when they were young. Their youth ending, their formal education ends too.

But school never stopped for me—that is the subject of this book. My continuing education on six different campuses defined how I came to terms, year after year, with classrooms, with teachers, and then with the institutions of learning themselves. Briefly describing the years before college, the book mainly focuses on the time thereafter: at Haverford College, where I was an undergraduate; the University of California at Berkeley, where I was a graduate student; Stillman College in Alabama, where I taught for a year; Stanford University, where I taught for twenty; and Wesleyan University and Emory University, two campuses where I was president for six and nine years respectively. I have been in school—inside the campus gates—for half a century, one hundred semesters—and my faculty life continues today.

That is a long time, but this is not a long book. It would be longer were I to tell about my life when higher education did not mark my days or fill up my emotions. My wife, JoAn, and our children, Will and Katie, are only faint presences in what I have written here. Their considerable importance to me rests securely outside these pages. I have sought to tell only the part of the story that can be found in the customs, manners, and procedures of American higher education and the way those things have figured in my life.

I have worried about these confessions becoming a selfish account, even a self-indulgent one. I hope that the stories I tell here, the information I give, and the spectacle of success and absurdity I portray, will move the center of attention away from me and onto the landscape of higher education. In any case, what I have seen in school makes up these pages.

My beginning assumption is a simple one: going to a college or university never turns out to be, for anyone who has done it, a trivial step. If you have been to college, even only briefly, you don't forget it. Memories of who you were then and what you did surge up to please or embarrass you; certain moments of time are fixed indelibly in your mind. That is because college puts you on your own, often before you are ready to stand by yourself. Your strengths and vulnerabilities are on display and you can surprise yourself by how ready you are to do some things and how ill prepared you are to do others. That which surrounds you, the distinctive landscape known as "the campus," is at once reassuring and yet foreign, your home for a while but a mysterious location of studies, pursuits, and preoccupations unknown to you and carried on by countless others. It is bigger than you and retains a power over you. Because of its mysteries and its strengths, you will always remember how it looked, smelled, and felt to the touch.

Going to my first campus, Haverford College, in the fall of 1956, I acquired an interest in what such places do. Now, never having lost that interest, I write about what I saw on that campus and five others. The terrain and culture of each is different: Haverford, a small liberal arts college near Philadelphia founded by Quakers; the University of California at Berkeley, a large and powerful public university; Stillman College, a small and poor institution in Alabama established for African-Americans; Stanford, a distinguished private research university; Wesleyan, another small liberal arts college, this one in Connecticut; and Emory, an enterprising private university in Georgia. At all of these places save the first, I taught. At two of them I was a student. At two I was the president. Taken together, these six schools provide a mirror of much, but not all, of higher education in this country for the last half-century.

Given my experience, none of the rooms where the work of a college or university occurs is now a secret to me; I have been inside all of them: laboratory, seminar room, library stacks, classroom, stadium, student residence, treasurer's office, operating room, training facility, power plant, dean's office, recycling center, lecture hall, presidential suite, board room, and professorial office. These places have made up my world.

As a student, I studied in library carrels. As a professor, I read countless student essays. As a president, I watched the payroll office issue monthly checks to thousands of employees. When students killed themselves, I called their parents and grieved with them and with fellow students; when commencement day came, I congratulated and hugged the graduates. I had the honor of appointing scores of people to administrative positions and the discomfort of dismissing others. For what I did over the years, I received both praise and blame. The praise, I learned, is often no more appropriate than the blame.

A witness of higher education for that half-century, I continue to find the American campus an attractive and even a good place. Most informed people believe that American higher education is the best the world has to offer. They are right. Our colleges and universities might also be the best of America's achievements. Inventive, responsive, energetic, and endlessly productive, they are the cynosure of the world and a tribute to the possibilities of the human mind. I champion them and, in this book, offer an enthusiastic defense of them. But I also find, and report on, things about them to lament.

In this report, I ask one basic question about our colleges and universities: what sustains and fortifies them? What makes a collection of people congregate in a special place, pursue difficult studies, share understanding, wrangle over matters both crucial and insignificant, invest prodigious amounts of money in abstruse investigations, maintain high standards of excellence, for the most part treat each other decently, and come back, year after year, for more of the same? Without the consolation of yearly profits, often in the face of public ridicule or censure, and aware of the massive infusions of money required to keep them solvent, what allows

these institutions to survive, indeed to prosper? Put it another way: if we did not have them, would we know how to invent them? Indeed, would we want to invent them? Given their expense, and given also the ways they do and do not comfortably exist within the prejudices and pressures of American life, would a sufficient number of the nation's people want them to dot so handsomely, as they now do, the nation's landscape?

But my question is only "academic." We know that our universities and colleges are not going to disappear. They have become part of the fabric of the lives of many young people, their parents, and alumni, as well as the great number of others whose livelihood depends on their continuing existence. Part centers of learning, part businesses, part havens for the young, and part the places where millions of our fellow citizens are employed, they are central to what we are as a nation. Characterized by their profitless behavior within a profit-making culture, and representing a dedication to intellectual excellence in a country that historically has been ambivalent about such excellence, they are at once admirable, unique, troubling, and permanent. Here I write about them.

My praise is mixed with descriptions of some tough problems they face. The best schools are too expensive, and only a tiny fraction of the young people who could benefit from them even apply to them, much less gain admission to them. Those who arrive on most campuses do not now find what once was the mission of America's best colleges and universities: a commitment to the kind of moral development that produces an informed and responsible citizenry. That kind of education, to which I was introduced decades ago at little Haverford College, is now in danger of being lost. It is sinking beneath the waves of faculty neglect, administrative busyness, preprofessional frenzy on the part of students, and the depressing uncertainty on almost every campus about what moral development might even mean. But it is what some parents want their children to have, and it is a realm of learning that no other entity in the country is prepared to provide. That the nation's best schools cannot, or will not, provide it is profoundly lamentable.

Over the years, many of the leaders of these schools—whose extravagant compensation, I argue, should be reduced to levels closer to that of the faculty—have joined with others to permit, witlessly, the growth of irrelevant entertainments and amusements for students. Chief among them is big-time athletics. On many campuses, it now diverts attention from, and even undercuts, the academic pursuits that are the schools' fundamental reason for being. Not classrooms or libraries, but football stadiums and basketball arenas become the focus of student attention. The climax of the week becomes Saturday afternoon.

In addition, many schools have become overly concerned with marketing, "branding," and the competitive commercialization of the life of the mind. Colleges and universities should combine their strengths rather than wasting energy in emphasizing the small differences between them. And, most distressing to me as an English professor, America's colleges and universities have witnessed a decline in the force and relevance of the humanities, once a source of delight and wisdom to students and graduates, and now, for many people within and outside the academy, an arid, unattractive, and inaccessible subject.

I would not write about these institutions as I do if I did not cherish them. My respect is mixed with anxiety; my affection is tempered by misgivings. But about their importance to this country I have no doubt. As a nation, we have invested a large share of our hopes and dreams in our colleges and universities. As a student, teacher, and president, I have seen for five decades the extraordinary dividends of that investment. In the pages of this book, I show what living so close to higher education for so long has meant to me.