The Critical Spirit

By Edward H. Levi

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and Provost of The University

The paper that follows was the Convocation Address at the University's 310th Convocation, in June, 1965.

This is a time for congratulations. We are proud of you. There is even a certain amount of envy in this edifice as we think of your future. The degrees to be conferred today by President Beadle represent a hope for further work to be done, for a deepening of understandings, and for that service which comes from those specially endowed and trained. I trust you carry within yourself, in response to these expectations, the proper mixture of confidence and anxiety.

It is the University which brings us together. Each of us has been touched and changed by the experiences of this place. We do not all share the same values. The skills which have been perfected here vary enormously. Yet the power of this institution—because of its restless, critical spirit, its hospitality to many cultures, the supremacy which it gives to the intellectual disciplines, the recognition it asks for excellence—compels a unity among us.

It is a tribute to the Founders of this University that the institution they created is now so much taken for granted. When it was organized, almost seventy-five years ago, it was a new kind of institution, borrowing from the structure and aims of German and English Universities, joining the gentlemanly tradition of zeal for good works of the New England Colleges with the con-

(Continued on page 2)

The University of the Future

By Philip B. Kurland

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One of the more engaging customs at the University of Chicago is the annual dinner given by the University's Board of Trustees for all Faculties of the University. Traditionally, there are three speakers at these occasions, the President of the University, a Trustee speaking for the Board, and a representative of the Faculties. Professor Kurland spoke for the Faculties on January 12, 1966.

Mr. Cone, Mr. Beadle, Mr. Ranney, Reverend Parsons, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I hope that you will excuse me if I read this paper to you. But, as some one once said—I've forgotten whether it was Archie or Mehitabel—"Art Is Long and Life Is Short" and if I'm to get through this masterpiece in the hour and a half allotted to me, I shall have to adhere very closely to my text. (The fact of the matter is that the paper was written for me by a graduate student who thereby fulfilled his thesis requirement for his degree.)

Not too long ago a vacancy was created on the Supreme

(Continued on page 3)
The Critical Spirit—
(Continued from page 1)

fidence and brashness of the Middle West. "No episode," a recent study of American Higher Education declares, "was more important in shaping the outlook and expectations of American higher education during those years than the founding of The University of Chicago, one of those events in American history that brought into focus the spirit of an age." The creation began and continued as one of the leading universities of the world. A national survey in 1925 placed this University as first in its graduate departments, followed by Harvard, Columbia, Wisconsin and Yale. During that period, as another commentator has recently written, "The University of Chicago . . . was unquestionably the greatest single University, department for department, school for school, that this country has seen."

This University did not create itself. It did not come into being spontaneously. It was not the God-given right of the region to have it. Many forces and groups made it possible. But these were effective because of the leadership of John D. Rockefeller and William Rainey Harper. This was not a reluctant partnership. Without this partnership, this University, as we know it, would not exist. The course of American education would have been different. Harper and Rockefeller were joined by other leaders; by teachers and scholars whose later careers would justify the confidence placed in them. All realized they could not take the existence of the University for granted, for it was to be the work of their hands. Men do make a difference. And, if I may be excused for saying so—since it runs contrary to one of the many contradictory themes of American folklore—so does money, creatively given and creatively used.

The decisions made in those early years and so often magnificently reaffirmed have fixed the character of this institution. Harper’s innovations gave the University multiple functions, but he created one university, graduate and undergraduate, although Harper was told the mixture would not work; always interdisciplinary, never as much as we say, but more than we have a right to expect. There never was any doubt of the importance of teaching. Never any doubt of the duty to investigate and to speak out. At bottom there was a religious faith, which because of the spirit of the times converted itself into a belief in the mission of the human mind to understand the universe and the civilizations of mankind, and to transmit that understanding both to the elite and to the unenlightened. The mission was deemed sufficiently important to justify what appeared to be arrogance. At many times and in many ways this has been an embattled institution, regarded as too liberal by some, too conservative by others, and unsettling by many. For the most part this has not been a quiet place.

You may say this is a view of history through tinted glasses, and, of course, it is. There was a time, for example, approximately forty years ago, when the University Senate suggested a limitation on undergraduate instruction because of the greater importance of the University’s graduate and professional work, and when, as a later dean of the College described it, "undergraduate work was grossly neglected . . . the College came to be regarded by some members of the family as an unwanted, ill-begotten brat that should be disinherited." But this period was followed by one of the most courageous, influential and far reaching efforts to rethink the fundamentals of a college education, and to change both the materials and methods of instruction. The fact is that the basic liberal arts programs in most colleges have been influenced by the Chicago experiment of many years ago. Chicago has been an innovator at all levels of higher education. Its research has prodded the growth of almost every strategic field of knowledge. At the frequent cost of popularity, it has stood for intellectual freedom. And however irritating the newcomer may have been, the standards of education in innumerable institutions have been helped by its presence.

Between 1950 and 1955, the University went through a most difficult period. There was a grimness to the neighborhood and to the campus; both were considered doomed by many. The crime rate in the police district became the highest in the city. On top of this, gifts and income declined by more than a million dollars annually. This came at a time when the buildings, libraries, and laboratories of the University, as is still the case, were inadequate because of appropriate prior choices to maintain salaries, fellowships and scholarships over the need for bricks and mortar. The regular academic budget was severely cut. In 1953, the budget cut was more than 9 per cent. There was a flight of faculty from the University reminiscent in reverse of Harper’s raids which originally had established Chicago. It was extremely difficult to make replacements. At a time when the University should have been building on strength, it found itself in a fight to stay alive. Enrollment in the entire University declined from 8,500 in 1947 to 4,600 in 1953. College enrollment declined approximately 60 per cent. The University considered moving. Then in an act of courage, the full extent of which probably never will be known, it decided to remain, not as a declining, middle-aged, mediocre institution, which those careless about excellence would have considered good enough, but to remain, rebuild and recapture its academic strength.

Rebuilding meant going far beyond what had been previously considered central academic concerns. The leadership in a unique neighborhood redevelopment program had to be assumed. New methods of approach of importance to all urban communities had to be devised. The cost to the University of this program became about
twenty-nine million dollars given or pledged at a time when the academic work of the institution was starved for funds. The income on this money would be sufficient to pay every member of the faculty $12,000 in each ten-year period, or to establish a fellowship program of the kind we still need for top students, awarding 230 top students each year a stipend of $5,000. The twenty-nine million dollars would have given us the projected new graduate library, and made possible in addition the restoration of Cobb Hall for the College, new facilities for Chemistry, the new science library, new quarters for the Music Department, and possibly a much needed new theatre. If anyone thinks I speak with feeling concerning these matters, as one concerned with academic budgets and the academic strength of the institution, he is not far wrong. But these steps had to be taken, with the partnership of many, and a certain amount of free advice from many more.

One can speak of these matters now, for the University is again strong. Its neighborhood is an asset. The University in fact has gained in meaning, in understanding, in opportunity because of the responsibilities it assumed. The crime rate has been cut in half; on any comparable basis it is the lowest in the city. Almost every academic unit has responded to the challenge to rebuild or increase its strength. The faculty is outstanding, equalled in only a very few institutions, and unrivalled in some fields. Under the leadership of President Beadle, for the last three years the strengths and weaknesses and central conceptions of each area have been explored. Innovations of thirty or more years ago are now no longer new; sometimes they are no longer appropriate or at least not the best possible. We have subjected our own ideas to criticism—which is more difficult and less enjoyable than criticizing the views of others. It is the kind of experience which might well be built into any curriculum. We must do more of this. There are still quite a few sacred cows about, not worth the grass they eat. The reference of course is to faculty, or indeed to persons at all, but to ideas. The studies are continuing. We know, for example, that the divisions, created to further an interrelationship among subject matters now sometimes constitute artificial barriers splitting growing fields of knowledge, imposing unnecessary restrictions on training and research. In some areas a multiplicity of departments provides unnecessary artificial pockets, obscuring the University’s resources in related areas, complicating the life of the student.

The College has been reorganized into five colleges to preserve and further its unique values, including the appropriate relationship of concern among faculty and students. The reorganization will bring the University’s strength into more direct confrontation with the problems of undergraduate education, and should give impetus to the kinds of experiments which have characterized Chicago’s leadership. Chicago with a total student body of 7,000, a faculty of more than 900, and a college of approximately 2,000, has a superb faculty-student ratio in aid of this venture, even though not all faculty will be involved, of course. This is the opportunity to demonstrate that preparatory instruction in a variety of disciplines may be recast within the structure of knowledge to become through its questioning discipline a genuine part of liberal education. In many areas this is already being done; so much the better. I trust that both tolerance of plans and an insistence upon high intellectual demands will characterize all our programs. It is better to develop diverse challenging programs suited to the growth capacity of students, as an adjunct to whatever programs we have, than to compromise on what is acceptable to all. Through their partnership in these new programs, at a time when students feel the need to witness, I hope we can remind them, indeed as I believe our present college program does, that learning itself is a form of witnessing, and in some ways the highest form. At the same time, possibly we should respond also in a more structured way to the desire of students to break the seven or more years of expected undergraduate and graduate training with some opportunity for meaningful service. I hope attention will be given also to the opportunities for cultural enrichment for students beyond the bounds of the formal curriculum. Surely Chicago is not at the point where credits, formal courses, or even examinations must be the measure of inclusion in the total academic program.

During the period of the greatest difficulties, it was natural for the University to lose its voice on issues of public affairs. I do not mean the University should take an institutional position on matters of public importance, but rather through commissioned papers, seminars and conferences, it should stimulate disciplined discourse to elevate the understanding of both sides of public issues. We hope the organization of an Academy of Public Affairs will provide the mechanism for this and will add also a new dimension to student life. We must rethink the University’s participation in the training of scholars for public service, not losing the inhibitions which have guided us, but recognizing this is one of the missions of scholars, and that in some areas, of which the education of the underprivileged is one, and, in a quite different way, international studies programs is another, greater involvement is required both for training and for research.

American education is now going through a somewhat tumultuous period. New temptations and necessities have been placed upon the schools. New responsibilities have been added without in any way diminishing the old. The universities have been unable to avoid being caught in a conflict between old ways and new demands. No one thinks it is sufficient any more, if it ever was, for colleges to exist for the custodial care and feeding of young adults. But just at the time when increased seriousness about undergraduate education might have established
some principles and priorities, colleges have become universities, universities have greatly expanded their graduate and postgraduate work, and research has become more expensive, more exciting and more threatening to the entire educational process. The resulting turmoil has been stirred by placing additional service functions upon the schools. Universities have outposts throughout the world, advise foreign governments, redevelop neighborhoods, run hospitals, and have become instruments for social change. The service functions of the American university have always been present but now they are more embracing. In this situation universities find themselves, as scholars frequently do, forced to take stock of cherished beliefs, forced to learn new techniques, forced to establish new frontiers.

In meeting these challenges universities will be responsive, as they always have been, to the popular demands and views of the society they serve. But the response must not be automatic acceptance. Universities are expected to be masters in their own house, and if they are not, their value diminishes.

In the midst of these conflicting pressures and demands, Chicago finds itself in a most fortunate situation. Almost the entire educational process is here represented. Our facilities range far and wide. Our incredible lack of rules and regulations has made possible a variety of University experiments and ventures. We are, to a considerable extent, the complete university, as Harper intended. We have not been afraid to take on projects which remade the world. Yet we are of small size. The dialogue among us is real. We can know what we are doing, and we can talk about it to each other. The greatest dangers to us are our prior successes, our desire for the comfortable life, our willingness to rest on the creations of thirty years, the insidious and reasonable thought that mediocrity also has its uses.

I have taken this occasion to speak to you about your University because it is just that. There are many colleges and universities. All have important functions to serve. But if Chicago cannot be of the best, its particular mission will have been performed, its role ended. You have the right to the knowledge of the effort it has taken throughout all the departments and schools and in the College, and particularly by the eminent faculty who stayed and those who came, and who by their presence have attracted others, to restore this University to the excellence which its view of itself and its mission demand. And you have the right to share in the pride of this achievement. I will not flatter you by telling you that students add to the intellectual environment, as much as faculty do and perhaps more. But of course it is true.

Institutions are wonderful inventions because they can transcend all of us. To this University is given the power to link the cultures of many ages. In a more immediate sense through this institution you are not only joined to each other and to us but to graduates of long ago and hopefully of many years to come. In other than the strictest legal sense, no one owns this institution—not even the students. In a more genuine way it possesses all of us. It calls upon us to enter into its fellowship of the intellect. In this fellowship no place is more honored than that of the graduate who carries this University in his mind and heart. I welcome you to that place.

A Unique Program Continues

Several previous issues of the Record have described visits of the Courts to the Law School. It is gratifying to report that this important program is continuing. On January 27 the Supreme Court of Illinois sat in the Weymouth Kirkland Courtroom hearing argument in two cases from its regular calendar. The Court consists of the Honorable Ray I. Klingbiel, Chief Justice, and the Honorable Harry B. Hershey, JD'11, Byron O. House, Walter V. Schaefer, JD'28, Roy J. Solfsburg, and Robert C. Underwood, Associate Justices.

Law students are provided with the briefs and records in cases heard, and are subsequently required, as part of the work of the Tutorial Program, to write papers on appropriate aspects of those cases. After the January 27 arguments were concluded, Albert E. Jenner, Jr., Thomas Sullivan, and Owen Rall, of the Chicago Bar, and the Honorable Raymond Terrell, State's Attorney of Sangamon County, lunched with law students and informally discussed the preparation and handling of the cases they had just argued.
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A session of the Eighteenth Annual Federal Tax Conference, held in October in the Assembly Hall of the Prudential Building.