

THE SECRET HISTORY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE USA

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While the birth and growth of America's colonial and land-grant colleges have received widespread attention, there has been much less interest in the more exciting developments which were taking place outside the traditional college. Entrepreneur educators during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries taught classical subjects as well as vocational courses in commercial arithmetic, languages, bookkeeping, surveying, navigation, building and mechanical trades. These for-profit colleges enabled non-elites to enter the legal and medical professions and taught subjects in a way that no other college could or would teach.

Important developments within this emerging sector occurred in the 1850s with the opening of a number of chains of business colleges, including the Draughton and Eastern colleges and the more impressive Bryant Stratton chain, which opened in 1853 and would eventually include 50 colleges located in many cities across the USA.

According to the Bureau of Education, by the end of the nineteenth century there were 341 for-profit business colleges operating across the USA, employing 1,764 instructors and enrolling 77,746 students. While these for-profit business colleges were the first to enter the market, they faced considerable competition from correspondence schools. For example, in 1883 the Correspondence University was formed in New York which offered 'at low cost helpful instruction by correspondence to such persons as could not leave their homes for attendance at established institutions of learning'. In 1910, there were over 200 correspondence schools across the USA, with one of the largest being the International Correspondence Schools of Scranton, which employed 500 instructors, provided instruction in 203 subjects and claimed to have enrolled 1,281,800 students over the previous 20 years.

Another important competitor in this sector was the corporation school, with the first being opened in the early 1870s by the R. Hoe Printing Company of New York. The National Association of Corporation Schools was established in 1913 and by 1921 there were

131 'Class A' members. The purpose of the association was to develop the efficiency of the individual employee, increase efficiency in industry and to influence courses of established educational institutions more favourably towards industry. Corporation schools were also organised and operated by trade associations. These included the American Institute of Banking which established the Knowledge City Chapter providing education in banking and the principles of law and economics. It also established and maintained a recognised standard of education by means of official examinations and the issuance of certificates of graduation. Finally, the Chicago Central Station Institute was founded in 1912 as the Bureau of Education for the Commonwealth Edison Company, Federal Sign System (Electric), Illinois Northern Utilities Company, Middle West Utilities Company, and the Public Service Company of Northern Illinois. Its mission was to organise and conduct special educational courses for present and prospective employees of the supporting companies.¹

In short, this new, entrepreneurial and highly competitive service sector was a remarkable success story, helping to improve the level of skills in a rapidly expanding workforce. So why have these early developments in the history of higher education in the USA been largely ignored and what happened to all of the chains of business colleges, correspondence and corporation schools? The following quotation from the Secretary of Commerce, William Redfield from 1913, helps to explain their fate:

'Let me suggest that while we must not forget the great debt we owe to the private vocational schools, the future of this education lies in the hands of the public school. The private industrial schools have the beacons which have lighted the course on which the ship of state must now sail.'

(NSPIE, 1913, p. 94)

1. For a detailed account of these business colleges, correspondence and corporation schools, see *Education for Business* by Leverett Lyon (1922). Available at <http://www.archive.org/details/educationforbusi00lyonrich>.

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