

The Pursuit of Excellence: Abraham Flexner and His Views on Learning in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

Abraham Flexner, one of the most influential educational critics in early twentieth-century America, faithfully believed in excellence. Excellence epitomized his views on education. "Throughout my life," Flexner wrote in his autobiography, "I have pursued excellence."¹ For Flexner, excellence meant more than surpassing skills, eminence, and dignity; excellence meant intellectual rather than mere mental training. It also connoted honor and spirituality rather than mercantilism and materialism. For Flexner an aristocracy of excellence is "the truest form of democracy."²

The topic of excellence has become conspicuous in the discussions of university reform in Japan. The Twenty-First Century Centers of Excellence (COE) Program was established based on the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's report "A Policy for the Structural Reform of National Universities," under which a new funding mechanism has been implemented to subsidize the formation of research bases.³ Although the goal of the COEs is to promote excellent research results, some scholars have argued that the proposed program could drive researchers to commercially successful projects in order to

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secure sources of funding. "It will be very dangerous," says Tadamitsu Kishimoto, president of Osaka University, "if this competition [among universities] is only geared towards fashionable science such as information technology, nanotechnology or proteomics."⁴ Flexner, the great advocate of excellence, saw this danger as real and hoped to keep it at bay. One of his major reasons for creating for the Institute for Advanced Study [IAS] was to make the institute immune from commercialism.

The current university reform also entails another debate: introduction of American-style professional schools in Japan. The question is more than how to organize law schools. It involves what to teach to whom and what should be the aim of professional education. Law schools are considered to be professional schools, because they aim to train and educate those who prepare to practice law as professionals. Business schools are also considered to be professional schools, but what differentiates business schools from the graduate schools of economics, or normal schools from graduate schools of education? Around the turn of the last century, the reformers of higher education in the United States faced the same questions. Among them, Flexner was the most notable figure, remembered particularly for his provocative analysis of medical education when the research aspect of medicine was neglected. The Flexner Report is known to have revolutionized American medical education. His fame and reputation as an educational critic gave him a chance to create his ideal institution of learning, the IAS, which is often remembered for Albert Einstein's professorship.

While Flexner is well-known in the United States as an educational critic, less is known in Japan about Flexner and his ideal for higher education.⁵ Makoto Saito has pointed out that the creation of the IAS is symbolically significant in the American tradition within which practical knowledge receives respect. Although "useful knowledge" was respected in the United States from the beginning, it always meant more than learning practical skills. In the later period, Jacksonian Democracy and the rise of the mercantile class encouraged educators to make education more relevant to everyday life, and the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862 prepared the university for its service function. Yet the value of usefulness and its place in education were always contentious.⁶ During his ninety-two years of life, Flexner experienced America's first research university as a student at Johns Hopkins, reconstructed professional education, and witnessed the loss of culture as one of the goals of higher education. An examination of Flexner's ideal for the university and professional schools allows us to understand the evolution of higher educa-

tion in the United States and to evaluate the current Japanese educational reform.

I ABRAHAM FLEXNER: FROM THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY TO THE CARNEGIE FOUNDATION FOR ADVANCEMENT OF TEACHING

The story of Abraham Flexner's life reveals some key points in understanding his ideal of higher education. Flexner was born on November 13, 1866, to a German Jewish couple in Louisville, Kentucky. Among his eight siblings, Simon Flexner became a bacteriologist and pathologist and later became the director at the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, while Bernard Flexner became an active Zionist attorney in the 1930s. Simon's connection to the Rockefellers solidified Abraham Flexner's tie to the philanthropist, though Flexner's independent merit as an influential educational critic should not be underestimated.⁷ Another brother, Jacob, saved money to send Flexner to the Johns Hopkins University when their father's itinerant merchant business failed. Jacob's choice to send Flexner to Johns Hopkins was critical in so many ways in molding his ideal for a modern university.⁸

Because of the financial strain, Flexner spent only two years at the Johns Hopkins University.⁹ Despite the short duration of his study, some very fundamental characteristics of his educational ideas were nurtured there. First and foremost, Flexner admired the first president of Johns Hopkins, Daniel Coit Gilman. "I think," Flexner wrote, "it is a modest claim to say that the founding of the Johns Hopkins University by President Gilman was the starting point of higher education, in the modern sense of the term, in the United States."¹⁰ Flexner openly admitted his respect for the first president of Johns Hopkins: "Those who know something of my work long after the Gilman's day, at the Carnegie Foundation, the General Education Board, and the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, will recognize Gilman's influence in all I have done or tried to do."¹¹ In the introduction to Flexner's *Universities*, former University of California President Clark Kerr wonders if Flexner's idealization of Gilman and Johns Hopkins had limited Flexner's views on the aims of the university. Yet the creation of Johns Hopkins was revolutionary because it was proof of the success of university reformers who wanted to transplant the Germanic approach to science and scholarship to the United States. With the donor's support, Gilman built a modern, research-oriented university in 1876.

Some background is needed to understand the importance of the Johns

Hopkins University in the 1870s. According to Laurence Veysey, after the Civil War, university reformers acknowledged the importance of science as a subject and tried to import research as a modern method of teaching.¹² While a traditional college emphasized mental discipline as one of the purposes of education, some reformers like Gilman, who received a post-university education in Europe, wanted to transform colleges into universities. Flexner explains Gilman's vision of university:

To Mr. Gilman's mind, a university was primarily a graduate school, and a graduate school was the congenial home of the ablest scholars and students that could be assembled. The Johns Hopkins "was founded upon the idea of a university as distinct from a college."¹³

The Johns Hopkins University had an undergraduate program, but it was intended to be a supplement to the focus on research. In this research-oriented academic environment Flexner gained first-hand experience of the modern university.

Gilman's radical hiring policies also influenced Flexner. Unlike other colleges that had hired professors from the ranks of their graduates, he recruited professors regardless of age, religion, or race. Furthermore, Gilman's practice of encouraging scholars to pursue their own interests resonates with Flexner's advocacy of *laissez-faire* scholarship he developed at the IAS. Flexner describes Gilman's contribution as follows:

He [Gilman] convinced the country of the importance of untrammelled research in every field of intellectual interest and activity. He exercised no pressure to produce and to print. . . , though he realized the importance of scholarly and scientific journals and shortly proceeded to found and subsidize them. He cared only for what was really first-rate, and having assembled first-rate minds he let them alone. He knew that high intellectual ability has its own idiosyncrasies, and he lived happily in an atmosphere where idiosyncrasy was sacred.¹⁴

This belief that great scholarship requires absolute freedom was the core of Flexner's plans for the Institute for Advanced Study.

In 1886, after two years at Johns Hopkins, Flexner came back to his hometown and taught classics at Louisville High School. His salary at Louisville High was more than nominal, yet the need to alleviate the family's financial burden and his wish to organize a curriculum according to the students' age and capabilities made him take the opportunity to run his own preparatory school. His school, known in Louisville as "Mr. Flexner's School," successfully sent its students to well-known univer-

sities, including Charles W. Eliot's Harvard. Encouraged by Eliot, Flexner published an article "Freshman at Nineteen" in *The Educational Review*, which was "then probably the country's foremost educational periodical."¹⁵

Flexner's life as a classics teacher and a preparatory school principal was not glamorous, compared with his later fame. Yet the anecdotes from this time recorded in his autobiography illuminate some of his basic values. For instance, Flexner quit Louisville High partly because running his own school gave him more money, but also because he could teach what he considered the best for the students. Flexner attributed the problems of American higher education to the low quality of secondary education, where uniformity and rigid rules effaced individuality. Flexner, who had experience teaching diverse students in a uniform way, wished to create an ideal school that "operated without rules, without examinations, without records, and without reports."¹⁶ At his own school Flexner practiced a laissez-faire approach based on his conviction that if the students are mature enough, they would do their work. Later we will see how Flexner's faith in deregulation endured, particularly at the Institute for Advanced Study.

II THE PROBLEMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN FLEXNER'S VIEW, 1908-1930

Mr. Flexner's School was a success in terms of its finances and in the number of graduates it sent to the established universities. Despite the success and the recognition from Eliot of Harvard, Flexner became more and more dissatisfied with running a preparatory school. After fifteen years, Flexner decided to close his school and attend graduate school at Harvard before going to Europe to make a career in education. At Harvard Flexner took experimental psychology and philosophy courses. Although he did not enjoy all his courses, he used his experience as a graduate student to criticize American higher education. In 1908, after two years' sojourn in Europe, he published *The American College*. Although *The American College* did not receive favorable reviews, Flexner, having heard of a project involving medical education reform run by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching [CFAT], contacted President Ira Remsen of the Johns Hopkins University and asked Remsen for a letter of introduction to Henry S. Pritchett, president of the CFAT.¹⁷ Flexner's foresight and his effort to participate

in medical education reform turned out well. The Flexner Report, officially *Bulletin Number Four*, is remembered as a cornerstone in the history of medical education in the United States.¹⁸

The impact of the Flexner Report was tremendous. The Report, Flexner wrote in his autobiography, “produced an immediate and profound sensation, ‘making’ as we say nowadays, ‘the front page.’” Almost a half-century after its publication, on Flexner’s ninetieth birthday, “deans from every medical school in America came to the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York, together with the nation’s top cabinet officials, to hail him as the man who made ‘the greatest single contribution’ in the history of the teaching of medical school.”¹⁹ Although Flexner had no knowledge of medicine, his reputation as the author of the Flexner Report gave him a chance to visit Europe and conduct research on medical education and helped the medical profession to reestablish its professional status. On his return to the United States, John Rockefeller, Jr. asked Flexner to join his family’s philanthropic organization, the General Education Board [GEB]. Flexner worked for the GEB from 1913 to 1928. In 1928, two years before the foundation of the Institute for Advanced Study, Flexner left New York for All Souls College at Oxford, where he spent one year as a Rhodes Trust Memorial Lecturer and developed the ideas for his upcoming book *Universities: American, English, German*.²⁰

During the years between his first book *The American College* (1908) and *Universities* (1930), Flexner wrote six books and a few dozen articles.²¹ His tone and focus changed over the two decades, yet Flexner’s general account of his ideal post-secondary institution can be summarized as follows: American college students were, compared to their German counterpart, “flighty, superficial and immature, lacking, as a class, concentration, seriousness and thoroughness.” This does not mean that American college students were intellectually incapable. Rather, the problem arose from several sources. First of all, American high school does not prepare students for college. High school was, Flexner argues, “too elementary, too broken up, and too miscellaneous to constitute for most students anything more than an elementary education.”²² In addition to the low quality of secondary education, American high school tried to satisfy different students’ needs. The high school used to be a sieve separating the most capable students from the rest, but in a democracy this kind of selection faces objections if it is seen as elitist. As a result, American colleges were crowded with students who are “intel-

lectually considered, an unselected and untrained body of attractive boys and girls.”²³

The large number of students enrolled in college without taking an examination raises issues in areas such as curriculum and administration. While democracy rallied against differentiation, Flexner contends, the college itself was eager to satisfy the democratic demand by offering non-intellectual courses. American universities have “thoughtlessly and excessively catered to fleeting, transient, and immediate demands; they have mistaken the relative importance to civilization of things and ideas; they have failed and they are, in my opinion,” Flexner wrote, “more and more failing to distinguish between ripples and waves.”²⁴ What makes things worse, he argued, the free elective system, which was introduced to modernize the traditional fixed curriculum by giving equal importance to non-traditional branches of learning, atomizes knowledge and ruins the wholesomeness of college education.²⁵ Although Flexner was adamantly opposed to some traditional college supporters’ argument that college education should devote itself to building a well-rounded character with the fixed curriculum, he saw the elective system as both chaotic and detrimental to the desirable college curriculum.

Flexner’s opposition to the enrollment of a large number of immature, unselected students to college or to the university hinged on his criticism of the large university administration. Throughout his life, Flexner strongly believed that the expansion of the university would inevitably destroy the organic entity of the university and would require professional administrators, who would run the university like a business. On the matters of the university’s size and the administration’s harmfulness, Flexner’s words were particularly harsh: “For bigness, intellectual or spiritual, is almost necessarily fatal to real greatness; it involves the devising and operating of machinery in which the finest values are inevitably lost. Size is not democratic; only quality is democratic.”²⁶ He continues,

A genuine university is an organism, characterized by highness and definiteness of aim, unity of spirit and purpose. But it is quite obvious that the institutions which we have used for purposes of illustration—the best that we possess—are not organisms: they are merely administrative aggregations, so varied, so manifold, so complex that administration itself is reduced to budgeting, student accounting, advertising, etc. Such aggregations, even though called universities, simply do not possess scientific or educational policy, embodied in some appropriate form.²⁷

Flexner believed that administrative organizations came to exist as a necessary evil. With the advent of an increasingly complex apparatus and compartmentalization, the universities lost their flexibility.²⁸ Flexner argues, “So rapid has been their [universities’] expansion that they have not taken time to survey critically many of the new activities which they have so lightly taken on.”²⁹

The new activities in the university that Flexner was condemning were the service activities undertaken to satisfy the demand of the public to make college education directly “practical.” The notion of practical knowledge was related to the ideal of “useful knowledge,” which is “the belief that mastery of science would make farmers and artisans more productive.”³⁰ Although the word “useful” invokes a disdain for bookish knowledge, “useful knowledge” was never the same as vocational training.³¹ Yet, facing a challenge posed by the rise of correspondence schools and the popularity of corporate schools, universities had to compete with those other forms of educational opportunities in order to grow. The students’ tuition was critical for universities to modernize their facilities and to hire and retain qualified faculty. Therefore universities gradually implemented both summer schools to certify teachers and vocational training in university extension programs.

However, the question of whether utility should play a role in the modern university curriculum had been always contentious. In 1895, when university reform was still nascent, Nicolas M. Butler of Columbia University tried to differentiate vocational knowledge and useful knowledge by “utilities higher and utilities lower.”³² Such a strong advocate of technical training in the university as Calvin M. Woodward of Washington University was careful to modify Ezra Cornell’s insistence on being a useful university with his remark that the university “was a place where everything useful in a high and broad sense may be taught.”³³ Yet, Flexner saw no virtue in either service activities or adult education. Adult education and university extension “destroyed the very conception of the university as an institution of learning.”³⁴ “American universities,” Flexner argues,

call themselves service institutions or public service institutions, and as such they go into the market place and do a thriving business with the mob. They advertise their shoddy wares in newspapers and periodicals. . . . Many of the activities carried on by numerous universities are little short of dishonest; but the business goes on, because it pays—for that and for no other reason.³⁵

The service activities were “cheap and trashy innovations,” and in Flexner’s view, nothing but “higher activities of predominantly intellectual and cultural character” should constitute the field of the university—these and these higher activities alone.³⁶

Despite Flexner’s denunciation, all of the service activities were not necessarily infatuated with the lure of profit-making. In 1892 president William Rainey Harper of the University of Chicago started a summer session and created an extension division that administered lectures and correspondence courses.³⁷ Like other original promoters of university extension, Harper originally expected summer schools to provide the public with a chance to get a liberal education.³⁸ The New School for Social Research, founded in 1919, was not a typical type of university in its structure and scope, yet the New School intellectuals were disgusted with the established universities, where a business-driven board of trustees was usually in control. Strongly influenced by John Dewey, the New School emphasized the relevance of liberal education to contemporary issues.³⁹

Like the early university extension advocates, Flexner never approved of vocational training in the university. “Practical training,” he writes, “that is, the ability to do different things without profoundly understanding the process therein involved—does not belong to the university.”⁴⁰ For this reason, Flexner dismissed the emerging claim to make the Business School a professional school while he approved of the study of economics as a graduate level of work. This might lead one to ponder whether the medical school’s basic aim was to train physicians. Before we examine Flexner’s definition of professional schools, we shall look at Flexner’s contribution to medical education with his authorship of Flexner Report.

III FLEXNER REPORT IN MEDICAL EDUCATION AND FLEXNER’S VIEWS ON PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS

The conditions surrounding medical education in the late nineteenth century were far from current practice. According to Paul Starr, students came to professional schools with minimal preparation; young applicants without high school diplomas could easily find admission to study medicine; students followed medical courses in any order they pleased; few American medical schools had laboratories, let alone respect for

original research; and students learned medicine through apprenticeship.⁴¹ The public demand for doctors accelerated the production of untrained medical practitioners. Thus, when Flexner took on the surveys of medical schools, there was a pressing concern that the medical doctors thoroughly trained.⁴²

The Flexner Report proposed four major steps to improve the quality of medical education in North America. First, medical schools should be properly equipped. Second, only academically qualified students should be admitted to medical schools. Third, research should be a higher priority. And last, the number of medical schools should be reduced to only 31 from the existing 155 schools.⁴³ As a consequence of the Flexner Report, “nearly half the medical schools then existing had to close down,” though not as many as the author of the report expected.⁴⁴

The Flexner Report endorsed what Pritchett and the American Medical Association [AMA] and its Council on Medical Education wanted to produce: fewer but highly trained doctors at fully equipped modern medical schools.⁴⁵ What Flexner endorsed and hoped to realize in medical education reflected his consistent views on higher education in general. For instance, Flexner required medical school professors to be full-time, which was a stricter requirement than what the AMA originally wished to realize. In fact, when Flexner worked for the General Education Board, he made full-time appointments a condition for grants, which aroused resentment among the medical schools.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Flexner believed that full-time appointments were indispensable for medical schools to be truly educational: providing full-time salaries would keep professors away from private practice. Without financial concerns, full-time professors would concentrate on research and teaching. Full-time appointments also enabled the reconstruction of medical schools, which had been “money-making in spirit and object.”⁴⁷ Flexner’s insistence on providing time and stability for scholars and his belief that higher education is incompatible with business practice were among many principles that remained consistent throughout his writings on education.⁴⁸

Flexner denied business schools’ claim to be as professional as medicine and law because their knowledge was about mercenary matters and their education was basically a form of training. When newly created branches of knowledge such as journalism, library science, and social work claimed that they were professional schools, Flexner defined professions as those that are learned, “because they have their roots deep in

cultural and idealistic soil,” and they “derive their essential character from intelligence.” Professions’ purposes are primarily “objective, intellectual and altruistic.” A profession is, therefore, “an order, a caste, not always in fact free from selfish aims, but in its ideals at least devoted to the promotion of larger and nobler ends than the satisfaction of individual ambitions.”⁴⁹ Professional schools that should be part of the university, in Flexner’s opinion, had to be educational, cultural, and intellectual in character and quality. Flexner excluded certain disciplines such as journalism, business, home economics, and library science from his list of professions based on his six criteria. Flexner’s dismissal of journalism and social work as unprofessional certainly invited criticism. Moreover, Flexner contradicted himself when he dismissed the potential for these new branches of knowledge to form new disciplines that were as consistent with Flexner’s vision of the university as were law and medicine. Presenting these new disciplines as professional schools appeared to Flexner as nothing but the university’s act of selling-out to lure students.

Flexner’s argument for professional schools as altruistic in purpose and intellectual in character would face a challenge when Progressive advocates of popular education saw the university as an ideal vehicle for their efforts to change society. During the Progressive era, many universities sponsored agricultural extension, public health, and parent education.⁵⁰ Each field involved research and provided for the public good. Yet, while Progressive reformers like John Dewey saw education as a means of redressing social evils, Flexner believed that scholars should contribute to society not by correcting but by investigating problems. Flexner called for an institute where “scholars and scientists may regard the world and its phenomena as their laboratory, without being carried off in the maelstrom.”⁵¹ A haven, where the gifted few pursue knowledge for its own sake secluded from the secular world, was the ideal Flexner envisioned for the Institute for Advanced Study.⁵²

IV FLEXNER AS THE FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY AT PRINCETON

In 1930, soon after Flexner returned from Oxford, the prominent Jewish department store owner Louis Bamberger and his sister Felix Fuld sought Flexner’s advice on the use of their fortune. Bamberger and Fuld wanted to create a Jewish dental school near their home state, New

Jersey. Their choice of Flexner must have resulted from Flexner's reputation as the expert on medical education and his work at the GEB. Flexner saw a chance to use the donors' gift to realize his dream to create an institute similar to the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research where his brother Simon had been a director since its opening.

Abraham Flexner persuaded the donors to modify their initial plan and suggested they create "a genuine seat of learning."⁵³ It would be a place where "[s]ympathy, helpfulness, mutual respect, and confidence, informal talk in shifting groups involving director, professors, and members are alone requisite to create an atmosphere free of tension, attractive to men of higher attainments and to students of unusual ability," in short, Johns Hopkins in the 1880s.⁵⁴ The donors approved Flexner's proposal with the condition that Flexner would preside over the Institute as Director. In 1930, at the age of sixty-four, Flexner started making another mark in higher education.

Combining his writings before 1930 gives us an image of what Flexner had hoped to realize for the structure of the Institute for Advanced Study. The Institute, Flexner wrote,

ought to be small and plastic; it should be a haven where scholars and scientists could regard the world and its phenomena as their laboratory; without being carried off in the maelstrom of the immediate; it should be simple, comfortable, quiet without being monastic or remote; it should be afraid of no issue; yet it should be under no pressure from any side which might tend to force its scholars to be prejudiced either for or against any particular solution of the problems under study; and it should provide the facilities, the tranquility, and the time requisite to fundamental inquiry into the unknown. Its scholars should enjoy complete intellectual liberty and be absolutely free from administrative responsibilities or concerns.⁵⁵

By providing the above environment for men of higher attainments and students of unusual ability, Flexner intended to create an educational utopia in Princeton.

Flexner's vision for creating a post-graduate institute illuminates several fundamental requisites for the structure. "American universities were developing," Flexner writes, "so that seekers after a Ph.D. could obtain admirable opportunities; but nowhere did there exist the untrammelled facilities for easy-going and informal work between men who had passed the Ph.D. degree stage, had given promise of unusual ability, and who needed now the informal contact with masters which had charac-

terized the German universities during their golden days.”⁵⁶ In *Universities*, Flexner also outlined his design:

Progress might be greatly assisted by the outright creation of a school or institute of higher learning, a university in the post-graduate sense of the word. It should be a free society of scholars—free, because mature persons, animated by intellectual purposes, must be left to pursue their own ends in their own way. Administration should be slight and inexpensive. Scholars and scientists should participate in its government; the president should come down from his pedestal. The term “organization” should be banned. The institution should be open to persons, competent and cultivated, who do not need and would abhor spoon-feeding—be they college graduates or not. It should furnish simple surroundings—books, laboratories, and above all, tranquility—absence of distraction either by worldly concerns or by parental responsibility for an immature student body. Provision should be made for the amenities of life in the institution and in the private life of the staff. It need not be complete or symmetrical: if a chair could not be admirably filled, it should be left vacant. There exists in America no university in this sense—no institution, no seat of learning devoted to higher teaching and research.⁵⁷

This is the heart of Flexner’s plan for the Institute; further exploration of several points in the above statement will help us not only understand the problems Flexner experienced at the Institute for Advanced Study, but also see his fundamental goals for higher education.

First of all, structurally, Flexner firmly believed that the smaller the size of an institution, the better the quality of education. His support for small size can be traced back to his own experience at the Johns Hopkins University.⁵⁸ His criticism of large educational institutions was related to his hostility toward administrative organizations at universities. Because the universities admitted too many students, Flexner believed, administrative organizations came to exist as a necessary evil. With a complex apparatus and compartmentalization, the universities lost their flexibility.⁵⁹

Secondly, he insisted on the maturity of students and scholars for a post-doctoral institution. Like the structural requirements for the recommended institute, Flexner insisted on maturity and seriousness in learning. For Flexner, maturity was associated with dedication and individual initiative, which he thought inherent in the exceptionally talented, and were essential for allowing those gifted to pursue their own interests at their own will. The mere fact that a scholar held a Ph.D. degree did not assure Flexner that the scholar would be sufficiently mature for his

post-doctoral institute. Students and scholars at the institute had to be mature enough to know their purpose and to have a zeal to learn.

Thirdly, Flexner wanted the Institute to be shielded from the outside world. The proposed Institute was to be a utopia, a haven, a paradise for eminent scholars who were freed from outside concerns and had no social and political responsibilities for their studies. Flexner's advocacy of freedom from outside concerns had two sides: his contempt for the influence of profit-making in academia and his idealization of academia as an ivory tower without responsibility for its product. Flexner persistently scorned the profit-making spirit in the universities. He believed that the drive for wealth inherent in business was "inimical to the purpose" of higher education because it would drag science and scholarship "into the market place."⁶⁰ The school of economics at the IAS was created upon this principle. Flexner's memo recommended gathering a group of economists who could work, "financially independent, unhurried, and disinterested, in closest possible contact with the phenomena of business and government and at this level endeavoring to understand the novel phenomena taking place before our eyes."⁶¹ Flexner's approval of economists and their "disinterested" and "noble" research also explains his disapproval of business schools and their popularity.⁶²

Isolating scholars from worldly affairs in society was the critical difference between Flexner and John Dewey. Dewey envisioned creating a democratic society by teaching individuals the wholesomeness of social interaction. Because of his emphasis on responsible citizenship, Dewey focused more on universal elementary education than on higher education. While Flexner shared opinions about elementary education and its reform with Dewey, the two differed on the role that higher education should play in society. For Dewey, the university should be directly responsible for social issues. The disadvantages of higher institutions in his time were "the unfavorable connotation of 'academic,' the suggestion of living in the past rather than the present, in the cloister rather than the world, in a region of abstraction rather than of practice."⁶³ While Dewey and others saw the scholar's involvement in society for the public good, Flexner thought that if the advancement of knowledge should be accountable, it could be obtained only as a result of pursuing purely academic interest.

Flexner's idealization of "impractical knowledge" was crystallized in his article "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge."⁶⁴ This article, originally prepared for the General Educational Board, exemplifies the

fundamental ideal of the Institute. “Institutions of learning should be devoted to the cultivation of curiosity and the less they are deflected by considerations of immediacy of application, the more likely they are to contribute not only to human welfare but to the equally important satisfaction of intellectual interest which may indeed be said to have become the ruling passion of intellectual life in modern times.”⁶⁵ Necessity was, according to Flexner, not always requisite or desirable for great invention, and the ultimate role of the university was to protect academia from a utility-oriented spirit.⁶⁶

While Flexner recognized that political, social, and economic issues are worth contemplating, he was determined to isolate the IAS and to make it a haven. Higher education, Flexner declared, “must shelter and develop thinkers, experimenters, inventors, teachers, and students, who, without responsibility for action, will explore the phenomena of social life and endeavour to understand them.”⁶⁷ Through isolation Flexner intended to provide scholars with a safe and quiet place for contemplation. However, his rigid enforcement of confining scholars inside an academic utopia brought him into a severe conflict with the faculty, particularly with Einstein, whom Flexner managed to recruit from Nazi Germany. The difference in opinions between Einstein and Flexner eventually, although indirectly, forced Flexner out of the Institute.

In October 1939, Flexner retired from the directorship at the Institute, reportedly because of his declining health. Actually, Flexner was forced to leave. Flexner’s imposition of seclusion on the faculty at the Institute triggered strong criticism against his style of management. Two years after his retirement Flexner published his first autobiography, *I Remember: The Autobiography of Abraham Flexner*. The section on the IAS reveals his disillusionment with laissez-faire scholarship in his idyll.

Most university professors sincerely think that they desire to devote their entire energy and attention to their several subjects; many complain—often justly—of excessive routine; but there are times when complaint is a cover for sterility, staleness, or unhappiness of one kind or another. . . . The Institute was conceived as a paradise for scholars and such it really is. But not all men—not all gifted men—know how to live in paradise. The earth is their proper habitation, and upon the earth, such as it is, most of them do the best of which they are capable.⁶⁸

Flexner might have felt betrayed and disappointed with the Institute, but it was his imposition of his self-righteous idealization of the perfect

academy that forced him out. It is an irony that a promoter of laissez-faire scholarship like Flexner importuned the scholars at the Institute to abide the structure he constructed for higher learning. After Flexner left the Institute, the demand to support the war effort increased. To his dismay, most scholars at the Institute cooperated. John von Neumann's contrivance of a high-speed computing device changed not only the course of the war, but many aspects of our lives.

V ABRAHAM FLEXNER AND HIS VIEWS ON HIGHER LEARNING IN AMERICA

Flexner's definition of the university is clear: it is a haven where mature scholars with clear purposes are devoted to preserving and interpreting knowledge and ideas, to searching for the truth, and to training their disciples. There could not be many universities, not only because only a few would choose to go through such vigorous training of the mind, but also because mature and capable minds would not be so abundant.⁶⁹ While the universities should be kept for the few able scholars with the serious zeal to learn, Flexner contends, American colleges instead lowered their gates, accepting ill-prepared students in order to socialize them.⁷⁰ Making the situation worse, in the wake of the demand to democratize education, colleges themselves had become willing to cater to their customers' whim. American universities had "simultaneously and needlessly cheapened, vulgarized, and mechanized themselves."⁷¹ Mass higher education in terms of enrollment and organization is inconceivable and undesirable, an oxymoron in Flexner's lexicon.

Flexner openly endorsed sorting out students based upon their native capacity.⁷² For Flexner, the German *Gymnasium* was an embodiment of his ideal educational system. In the German system "[a]t the close of the elementary school, various paths open out; they lead in different directions; they invite different kinds of persons," whereas in American secondary education "all are shepherded on one broad highway—the high school, the college, the university—each trying, and of course, failing—to act as a comprehensive institution. Germany accepts diversity of capacity and aim and is trying to provide for it appropriately."⁷³ "The high school [in America] used to be a sieve of a certain kind," Flexner laments. "But American democracy objects to sieves."⁷⁴ Yet, according to Flexner's logic, America needed sieves all the more, because in a society where "social conditions which bear strongly toward mental and

moral sameness, intellectual inequality must be prized and sought, if democracy is to be lifted above the dead level of mediocrity.”⁷⁵ American education suffered indiscrimination, the lack of a systematic form of selection.

It is no surprise to see that Flexner attacks mediocrity in the light of his high respect for excellence. For Flexner excellence meant more than just to exceed the average. Excellence meant something rare, extraordinary, and cultured. “Throughout my life,” Flexner writes, “I have pursued excellence. I have believed and practiced the doctrine of the ‘saving power of the remnant’ as Matthew Arnold had expounded it in his discourse on ‘Numbers,’ included in the volume of his American address. . . . In general, however, I realized early the impossibility of combining a tender regard for mediocrity with a real enthusiasm for learning.”⁷⁶ Responding to a possible criticism that making higher education for the gifted few was aristocratic, Flexner defended his expectation that universities be a place of cultured men. Flexner wanted American higher education to be accountable for civilization. The pursuit of culture, not “ad hoc training for a simple job,” should be the real purpose of the university.⁷⁷ Flexner’s advocacy of culture constitutes the basis of his ideal for the university comprised of disinterested intellectuals who are devoted to the pursuit of the truth.

Flexner’s ideal of higher education is aristocratic in the sense that the purpose of the university is to do research for its own sake without considering applications to the secular world. It is aristocratic because he did not believe that most people would have the desire or capacity to contribute to civilization. To control the quality of higher education, Flexner suggested elevating matriculation requirements. When Flexner anticipated that a college education was “about to become optional for all who have somehow contrived to acquire a specified number of high school credits,”⁷⁸ he was right. Unlike antebellum America where getting a degree of Bachelor of Arts comprised “something of an educational aristocracy,” higher education had become widely available.⁷⁹ Flexner was critical of the tendency for more and more students to come to the university to obtain a degree rather than to pursue knowledge for its own sake. Yet Flexner was not anti-democratic; he did not oppose the popular hunger for culture and knowledge. The problem, he thought, was that he did not see the university as the best place to meet the popular demand. He also was not aristocratic, in the elitist sense of the word, because he strongly believed that the hiring of faculty had to be done

regardless of age, religion, or race at the time when anti-Semitism was in its full strength and quota systems kept the number of Jewish American students limited.⁸⁰ If one defines aristocratic education as one that operates to maintain the social order in which people were robbed of their promotion by merit, then Flexner never endorsed such an educational system.⁸¹

Neither did Flexner see the need to further promote democracy in America by making higher education more widely available to the public. America was already democratic in Flexner's view. His own life—a modest upbringing as a son of Jewish immigrants, yet becoming a distributor of the great American philanthropists' wealth—proved that America is a democratic country with fair opportunities. Unlike Dewey and the New School scholars, Flexner did not see the need to democratize higher education. Rather, he sanctified the pursuit of truth. The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake was *the* purpose of higher education for Flexner.

Flexner's endeavor to create the IAS illustrates the problems he saw in higher education and in the evolution of the research-oriented university in America. The rise of professional schools, the popular demand for the university's social accountability, and the danger of commercialism were all expressed in Flexner's thought. "Universities differ in different countries," wrote Flexner. It would be "absurd to expect them to conform to a single pattern. Moreover, as a matter of history, they have changed profoundly—and commonly in the direction of the social evolution of which they are part."⁸² Even if Flexner was right in principle, the subsequent development of higher learning in America is relevant for those studying the development of Japanese education. Furthermore, Flexner's criticism of this development and the responses to this criticism may shed some light on the current debate over university reform in Japan. Should the Centers of Excellence program appreciate the importance of basic science, humanities, and social sciences, whose contribution to civilization is not always direct and apparent? Should Japanese law schools aim to become university law schools where the goal is conceived from the standpoint of education, or should they simply become legal training schools where the main purpose is conceived from the standpoint of training? The desirability of transplanting Flexner's ideal to Japan's soil may be of interest to the later generations.

NOTES

¹ Abraham Flexner, *Abraham Flexner: An Autobiography* (New York, 1960; revised edition), 45.

² *Ibid.*, 67.

³ “21st Century COE Program” in *Japan Society for the Promotion of Science [JSPS] Quarterly* no. 1 (Summer 2002), available at http://www.jsps.go.jp/english/e-quart/01_summer/05.html. Last accessed on January 25, 2004.

⁴ David Cyranosky, “Independence Days,” *Nature*, vol. 419 (2002), 876. Also see, Asako Saegusa, “Japanese Institutes Wary of Increased Autonomy,” *Nature*, vol. 395 (1998), 211.

⁵ Makoto Saito, *Amerika to wa nanika* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1995); Kayoko Watanabe, “A Study on A. Flexner’s Idea on Higher Education: The Relation between Professionalization and Research Function of Higher Education,” *Studies in the History of Education*, vol. 31 (1988), 112–24. While this article was being written, Thomas Neville Bonner published a monograph on Flexner. Thomas Neville Bonner, *Iconoclast: Abraham Flexner and A Life in Learning* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). Bonner’s book lists nine dissertations and theses on Flexner. *Ibid.*, 357. Flexner has been mentioned in numerous articles both in medical education and social work, yet Bonner’s *Iconoclast* is the first book to discuss Flexner and his legacies in higher education.

⁶ For the evolution of higher education in the late eighteenth century, see Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965). Joseph Kett’s *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties* treats adult education from the revolutionary period to the present. It explores the development of informal adult education, but it also illustrates what educators in formal institutions opposed. Joseph F. Kett, *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties: From Self-Improvement to Adult Education in America, 1750–1990* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1994).

⁷ Bernard’s involvement in the Zionist movement is intriguing when we consider Abraham Flexner’s confrontation with Einstein at the IAS over the rescue of the Jewish scholars.

⁸ Flexner, *Autobiography*. Flexner published two autobiographies. *An Autobiography* was a revised and updated version of his earlier autobiography, *I Remember: The Autobiography of Abraham Flexner* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940).

⁹ Helen Horowitz describes Flexner’s college life as an example of the outsider at campus. *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 62–63.

¹⁰ Flexner, *Autobiography*, 28–29. Flexner’s admiration led him to write a biography of Gilman titled *Daniel Coit Gilman, Creator of the American Type of University* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Veysey, *Emergence, passim*.

¹³ Abraham Flexner, “Failings of Our Graduate Schools,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 149 (1932), 441. For the evolution of the role of research in American universities, see Roger L. Geiger, *To Advance Knowledge: The Growth of American Research Universities, 1900–1940* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). For the history of the Johns Hopkins University, see Hugh Hawkins, *Pioneer: A History of the Johns Hopkins University* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960).

¹⁴ Flexner, *Autobiography*, 29.

¹⁵ Ronald Frank Movrich, *Before the Gate of Excellence: Abraham Flexner and Education, 1866–1918* (Unpublished dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1981), 88.

¹⁶ Flexner, *I Remember*, 75.

¹⁷ It is likely that Abraham Flexner found about CFAT's project from his brother Simon, who at that time had already been the director of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research. Flexner, *Autobiography*, 71. See also, Movrich, *Before the Gate*, 87.

¹⁸ Abraham Flexner, *Medical Education in the United States and Canada: A Report to the Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching* (New York, 1910; reprint edition, 1972), xvii. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching still lists and makes the Flexner Report available at <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/elibrary/index.htm>, last accessed on January 25, 2004.

¹⁹ Thomas Bonner, "Searching for Abraham Flexner," *Academic Medicine*, vol. 73, no. 2 (1998), 161.

²⁰ Abraham Flexner, *Universities: American, English, German* (London, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1930, reprint edition with a new introduction by Clark Kerr, 1968).

²¹ Bonner's *Iconoclast* includes the published writings of Flexner. Bonner, *Iconoclast*, 359–60.

²² Flexner, *Universities*, 49.

²³ *Ibid.*, 67–68.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁵ Flexner, *American College: A Criticism* (New York, 1908), Chapter IV; Abraham Flexner, *A Modern College and a Modern School* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1923), 44.

²⁶ Abraham Flexner, "The University in American Life," *Atlantic Monthly*, 149 (May 1932), 622.

²⁷ Flexner, *Universities*, 178–79.

²⁸ Flexner, *Autobiography*, 237; Flexner, "A Freshman at Nineteen," *Educational Review* 18 (November 1899), 355.

²⁹ Flexner, "American Life," 621.

³⁰ Kett, *Pursuit*, xv.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 230.

³² N. M. Butler, "What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?" *Educational Review* X (1895), 16 in Veysey, *Emergence*, 68.

³³ C. M. Woodward, "The Change of Front in Education," *Science*, XIV (1901), 476, in *ibid.*, 71.

³⁴ Flexner, *Universities*, 339.

³⁵ Flexner, "Life," 627.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 621.

³⁷ Kett, *Pursuit*, 185.

³⁸ Kett, *Pursuit*, 284; Geiger, *Advance*, 17. According to Kett, by the mid-1890s "interest in extension had waned at all of the midwestern university save the University of Chicago," and after 1905 vocational courses dominated extension offerings. See, Kett, *Pursuit*, 187.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 331–69.

⁴⁰ Flexner, "American Life," 621.

⁴¹ Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (New York, 1982), 114; Julia A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 27.

⁴² Kenneth M. Ludmerer, *Learning to Heal: The Development of American Medical Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 181.

⁴³ Flexner, *Medical Education*, *passim*.; Ludmerer, *Learning to Heal*, 177–78.

⁴⁴ *The Washington Post*, B2, 22 September 1959.

⁴⁵ For Pritchett's belief in experts and his role in utilizing foundations' funds for the public good, see, Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *Private Power for the Public Good: A History of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983).

⁴⁶ Starr, *Social Transformation*, 123.

⁴⁷ Flexner, *Medical Education*, 7. The same idea appears in his *Autobiography*, 77.

⁴⁸ As for the development of the school of business in the late nineteenth century, see, Kett, *Pursuit*, 269–77. According to Kett, educators and the philanthropists, who had witnessed the changing financial and business practices, hoped to elevate the knowledge of business to highly intellectual education with a curriculum that would teach commercial and industrial leaders “a broader outlook and a keen awareness of their public responsibilities.” *Ibid.*, 270.

⁴⁹ Flexner, *Universities*, 29–30. Flexner's article “Is Social Work a Profession?” presents the six criteria of a profession. Professions (1) involve essentially intellectual operations with large individual responsibility, (2) derive their raw materials from science and learning, (3) work up this material to a practical and definite end, (4) possess an educationally communicable technique, (5) tend to self-organization, and (6) are becoming increasingly altruistic in motivation. Abraham Flexner, “Is Social Work a Profession?,” *School and Society*, vol. I, No. 26 (1915), 904. See also, Watanabe, “Study on A. Flexner's Idea.”

⁵⁰ Kett, *Pursuit*, 293–330.

⁵¹ “Confidential Memorandum to the Trustees of the Institute for Advanced Study,” September 26, 1931, in Laura Smith Porter, *From Intellectual Sanctuary to Social Responsibility: The Founding of the Institute for Advanced Study, 1930–1933* (Unpublished dissertation, Princeton University, 1988), 156–57.

⁵² Flexner thought that there were not many who could pursue knowledge for its own sake, but among the gifted few, he did not see any difference between men and women. See, Bonner, *Iconoclast*, 119–20.

⁵³ Flexner, *Autobiography*, 239.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 240. This image recreates the atmosphere of Athens in the *Symposium* introduced in Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). Flexner, who studied classics at Johns Hopkins, defended himself against the criticism that his idea of the modern university neglects the importance of the knowledge of classics. Flexner never devalued classics. Nevertheless, Flexner did not expect classics to be a mending thread for American college students, whom Bloom considered suffering from relativism and losing the Western cultural tradition.

⁵⁵ Flexner, *Autobiography*, 236–37.

⁵⁶ Flexner, *Autobiography*, 232–33.

⁵⁷ Flexner, *Universities*, 217–18.

⁵⁸ Movrich says that there were 115 other students in Flexner's class. Movrich, *Before the Gate*, 35. There was no class at Johns Hopkins in a traditional sense. Thus, technically speaking, 115 students were enrolled the same year as Flexner.

⁵⁹ Flexner, *Autobiography*, 237; Flexner, “Freshman,” 355.

⁶⁰ Flexner, *Autobiography*, 237.

⁶¹ “Confidential Memorandum to the Trustees of the Institute for Advanced Study,” September 26, 1931, in Porter, *Sanctuary*, 155.

⁶² Flexner, *Universities, passim.*, particularly, 162–72. “Modern business does not satisfy the criteria of a profession; it is shrewd, energetic, and clever, rather than intellectual in character; it aims—and under our present social organization must aim—at its own advantage, rather than at noble purpose within itself.” *Ibid.*, 164.

⁶³ John Dewey, “The Educational Situation,” in Jo Ann Boydston, ed., *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899–1924* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), vol. 1, 301. See also, Kett, *Pursuit*, 297.

⁶⁴ Flexner, “The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge,” *Harper’s Magazine* (October, 1939), 544–52.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 545.

⁶⁶ Flexner also explains his choice of mathematics as the first school to establish at IAS as follows. “It [mathematics] has uses, to be sure, as all the higher activities of the human mind have uses, if the word *use* is broadly and deeply understood. But its devotees are singularly unconcerned with use, most of all with immediate use, and this state of mind and spirit, it seemed to me, ought to dominate the new institute. Nothing is more likely to defeat itself, nothing is on the whole less productive in the long run than immediacy in the realm of research, reflection, and contemplation.” Flexner, *Autobiography*, 243–44.

⁶⁷ Flexner, *Universities*, 10.

⁶⁸ Flexner, *I Remember*, 396–97. I owe this information to Frances Blanshard’s Aydelotte biography. Blanshard’s book is about the life of Frank Aydelotte, but its Chapter 15 is about the creation of and the conflicts at the Institute for Advanced Study. I owe this finding to Makoto Saito’s *Amerika to wa nani ka*, especially Chapter IX. Flexner’s later autobiography extensively revised the section on the IAS. His recollection of his role and evaluation of the Institute are more generous.

⁶⁹ Flexner defines research as “a quiet, painstaking effort on the part of an individual himself, not through someone hired by him, through intellectual coöperation is, of course, not barred, an effort, I say, to reach the truth, the severest that the human mind with all available apparatus and resources, is capable of making at the moment.” Flexner, *Universities*, 126.

⁷⁰ Flexner points to students’ motive for going to college, making personal connections in order to get ahead, as one reason for the low quality of American college education. *Ibid.*, 68–72. Flexner ascribes the immaturity of American college students to the deficiencies in the pedagogical intelligence: “[T]he American college is deficient, and unnecessarily deficient, alike in earnestness and in pedagogical intelligence; that in consequence our college students are, and for the most part, emerge, flighty, superficial and immature, lacking, as a class, concentration, seriousness and thoroughness.” Flexner, *The American College*, 11. Flexner attacks the elective system of American college, assuming that students are not mature enough “to find their way to best advantage in this rich tangle [of all branches of learning].” Flexner, *Modern College and Modern School*, 44.

⁷¹ Flexner, *Universities*, 44.

⁷² Flexner rejected the validity of aptitude test. Abraham Flexner, *Brown University Papers XV: The Prepared Mind Address Before the Graduate Convocation, Brown University June 19, 1938* (Reprinted from *School and Society*, June 26, 1937, vol. 45, no. 1174), 4. See also, Flexner, *Modern College*, xv–vi. With regard to the invention of meritocracy and how it ascended to its position in contemporary American education, see Nicholas Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

⁷³ Flexner, *Universities*, 310–11.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷⁵ Flexner, "Freshman," 356.

⁷⁶ Flexner, *Autobiography*, 45. For the dissemination of Arnoldian culture among the public and its influence in the development in education, see Kett, *Pursuit*.

⁷⁷ Flexner, *Universities*, 39 and 63.

⁷⁸ Flexner, *Modern College*, 1.

⁷⁹ Veysey, *Emergence*, 6.

⁸⁰ John Higham, *Send These To Me: Jews and Other Immigrants In Urban America* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 159–62; Porter, *Sanctuary*, 360.

⁸¹ Abraham Flexner, "Aristocratic and Democratic Education," *Atlantic Monthly*, 108 (September 1911), 386–95.

⁸² Flexner, *Universities*, 4.