

# Introduction

This book is based in part on the seventeen historical monographs that I wrote about various aspects of the history of the University of Chicago between 1996 and 2013.<sup>1</sup> The monographs have an interconnected logic, and they reflect the political, cultural, and intellectual challenges I have faced as dean of the College during the radical transformation of the College and the University over the past two decades. The University of Chicago's recent history has seen an acceleration of changes, accompanied by both conflicting memories and, for some, no memory at all of the deeper past that has defined and constituted the work and identity of the University and its several communities. There are dangers in a-historicism or even anti-historicism,<sup>2</sup> and it is hazardous for an institution to live simply in the present, with no sense of its past. Lacking a past, we have no plausible ways to understand the choices that previous leaders made about their (and our) future, much less to embrace and intelligently shape the futures that the present faculty wish to create. This book is an attempt to delineate the past of the University of Chicago, in hopes that readers will better grasp the deep complexity of its origins and development.

I began to write the monographs in the mid-1990s at a critical point, when institutional changes led by then president Hugo F. Sonnenschein and other academic leaders ran up against often clamorous opposition from faculty, alumni, and students. These expressions of *ressentiment* were often based on forcefully articulated conceptions of what the University should “stand for,” and many invoked an imagined noble past to justify a pleasing status quo. I was both fascinated and frustrated by the ways in which random (and often misunderstood) tidbits of Chicago's history shaped these conversations, even when most observers acknowledged that they lacked knowledge of the institutional history. I could not help recalling Thucydides's sense that traditions are received as they are deliv-

ered, “without applying any critical test whatever.”<sup>3</sup> Out of vexation but also curiosity, I decided to find out for myself what had “really happened.” This book is the product of extensive archival research, and the topics that I have selected reflect certain basic themes. The University’s archives are unusually rich and varied, and they offer a vast array of fascinating information about many known and unknown events and larger cultural trends in Chicago’s history. Of course, an archive itself is not a history, and as Arlette Farge has noted, if archives have the ability to “reattach the past to the present,” the meaning of their story “takes shape only when you ask a specific question of them, not when you first discover them, no matter how happy the discovery might have been.”<sup>4</sup>

The University has an unusually complicated and often controversial history, which is shrouded at many points in layers of myth and hearsay. It is an institution that loves to generate and then to repeat myths about itself. Like all great universities, its history also encompasses a vast sea of private memories, friendships and enmities, personal conversations, individual stories, and fascinating rumors. A university’s history can be most accurately and fairly discovered by addressing questions to sources that can be authenticated and compared to other, similar sources. This is why a thick, archival source base is crucial to the logic and identity of this book.

This is not a history of every department and every school at the University, nor is it a running biography of the renowned researchers who have populated our campus. It is the story of the emergence and growth of a complex and diverse academic community, particularly the College, focusing on the nature of its academic culture and its curricula, on the experience of its students, on its engagement with Chicago’s civic community, and on the financial resources and developmental conditions that have enabled the University to sustain itself. This means that many noteworthy and even fascinating subjects are not included in this book. Edward Levi once observed that no single person could ever “own” the University of Chicago, and this is true of the history of the University and its historians as well.

This is also a history written by someone who has played a modest role in many of the events of the past twenty years, so the book consciously walks a delicate line between the principle of scholarly objectivity and access to sensitive and sometimes confidential knowledge. This position affords advantages but also hazards, and the reader should be aware of both. In writing about the contemporary University, I faced the special difficulty that many of the dynamics narrated in the final chapter are still unfolding, and cannot be consigned to a settled past. As the narrative moves toward the present, some elements are necessarily presented in broad strokes. At the same time, I have tried to account for the ways in

which the University's long-running themes have intertwined and resolved themselves in the recent past, in the process bearing upon issues that have aroused strong reactions. In general, I have striven to follow the red thread of the narrative while trying to respect the sensitive blend of issues and personalities implicated in certain episodes.

The history of the University of Chicago has been marked by extraordinary continuities of normative values and educational practices, despite stormy ruptures and discontinuities. Both continuity and change are inevitable features of the lives of individuals and of institutions. These patterns of change and continuity are not simply heuristic devices that a historian imposes on the messy details of the past.<sup>5</sup> Rather, they involve fundamental approaches to educational policy, administrative structures, and normative rhetorical traditions that have endured over many generations, in the midst of often disruptive changes, to define the workings of the University. Institutions like universities have an embedded, historical reality and a baseline organizational logic, which makes histories of them different from those of cultural phenomena like national identity, taste, and religious prejudice. This book discusses various facets of the University's commitment to educational innovation and its capacity to sustain its core values while sponsoring (or enduring) significant change. As Robert Maynard Hutchins once observed about the long-term welfare of universities, "The real question is how do you get a place to be continuously vitalized and re-vitalized."<sup>6</sup>

This book also focuses on two issues particular to undergraduate liberal arts colleges that are set within larger research universities. First, the University's engagement with the College and undergraduate education has varied and often been unpredictable, but that relationship has had enormous influence on the intellectual identity and fiscal health of the larger institution. When the College has been neglected, underresourced, or treated as of a lesser priority, the result has meant "a near-death experience for the entire University, at least as an institution of the first rank."<sup>7</sup> Second, Chicago's history reveals a different chronological flow in that its "Golden Age," a term most often deployed to describe the fiscal bounty and rising ambitions of American higher education in two decades after 1945, came earlier than that of most of its peers. Indeed, the tendency to elevate the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s is very clear in President Edward Levi's speeches in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This reflected genuine pride that Chicago had achieved suddenly and with great intellectual style what few other universities could possibly have accomplished before World War II. And yet, as we will see, these successes proved fragile and were subject to great stresses after 1945 precisely because Chicago ended up on a different (and disastrous) demographic trajectory apart

from almost all of its peers, with an unintended and unplanned collapse of its undergraduate enrollments in the 1950s that, in turn, profoundly disadvantaged the longer-term welfare of the University over the next forty years.

The claim of this book that the University's ambitious present and future are anchored in the decisions of its past is captured by a phrase that President Ernest DeWitt Burton used in 1924 in his eulogy in honor of Charles L. Hutchinson, an early trustee and leader of the University. Hutchinson was deeply involved in the design of the neo-Gothic buildings that still form the aesthetic nucleus of the early University's built environment. Burton argued that Hutchinson "had a keen sense of the influence of architecture on the formation of taste, and a strong desire, happily shared by many of his associates, that what the University built should be so built that it would stand and be worthy to last. He built for a long future."<sup>8</sup> Today's University lives in its own time, but that present is an intricate cultural and intellectual ensemble shaped by the continuities and changes wrought by previous times. Chicago lives in the long future that scholars and trustees like Burton and Hutchinson created, but it is also obliged to re-create that future for its successors.