

- The Ph.D. degree does not necessarily indicate high ability or deep learning and educational competence. This is the opinion of famous educators and profound scholars.

## THE PH.D. OCTOPUS

As early as 1908 William James was 'concerned lest "The Ph.D. Octopus" crush its true spirit of learning in the universities. His observations and comments reveal so well the timelessness of some issues of graduate study — and they are set down with such style — that they deserve lengthy quotation:

"Graduate schools are still something of a novelty, and higher diplomas something of a rarity. The latter, therefore, carry a vague sense of preciousness and honor, and have a particularly "up-to-date" appearance, and it is no wonder if smaller institutions, unable to attract professors already eminent, and forced to recruit their faculties from the relatively young, should hope to compensate for the obscurity of their officers of instruction by the abundance of decorative titles by which those

names are followed on the pages of the catalogues where they appear. The dazzled reader of the list, the parent or student, says to himself, "This must be a terribly distinguished crowd, — their titles shine like the stars in the firmament; Ph.D.'s, S.D.'s, Litt.D.'s, bespangle the page as if they were sprinkled over it from a pepper caster."

"Human nature is once for all so childish that every reality becomes a sham somewhere, and in the minds of Presidents and Trustees the Ph.D. Degree is in point of fact already looked upon a mere advertising resource, a manner of throwing dust in the Public's eyes. 'No instructor who is not a Doctor' has become a maxim in the smaller institutions..

"America is thus as a nation rapidly drifting toward a state of things in which no man of science or let-

ters will be accounted respectable unless some kind of badge or diploma is stamped upon him, and in which mere personality will be a mark of outcast estate.

"Our higher degrees were instituted for the laudable purpose of stimulating scholarship, especially in the form of "original research." Experience has proved that great as the love of truth may be among man, it could be made still greater by adventitious reward. The winning of a diploma certifying mastery and marking a barrier successfully passed, acts as a challenge to the ambitious; and if the diploma will help to gain bread-winning positions also, its power as a stimulus to work is tremendously increased... But the institutionalizing on a large scale of any natural combination of need and motive always tends to run into technicality and to develop a tyrannical Machine with unforeseen powers of exclusion and corruption.

"To interfere with the free development of talent, to obstruct the natural play of supply and demand in the teaching profession, to fos-

ter snobbery by the prestige of certain privileged institutions, to transfer accredited value from essential manhood to an outward badge, to blight hopes and promote invidious sentiment, to divert the attention of aspiring youth from direct dealings with truth to the passing of examinations, — such consequences, if they exist, ought surely to be regarded as draw-backs to the system, and an enlightened public consciousness ought to be keenly alive to the importance of reducing their amount...

"Is not our growing tendency to appoint no instructors who are not also doctors an instance of pure sham? Will anyone pretend for a moment that the doctor's degree is a guarantee that its professor will be successful as a teacher? Notoriously his moral, social, and personal characteristics may utterly disqualify him from success in the classroom; and of these characteristics his doctor's examination is unable to take any account whatever...

"The truth is that the Doctor-Monopoly in teach-

ing, which is becoming so rooted an American custom, can show no serious grounds whatsoever for itself in reason. As it actually prevails and grows in vogue among us, it is due to childish motives exclusively. In reality it is but a sham, a bauble, a dodge, whereby to decorate the catalogues of schools and colleges...

"Men without marked originality or native force, but fond of truth and especially of books and study, ambitious or reward and recognition, poor often, and needing a degree to get a teaching position, meek in the eyes of their examiners, — among these we find... the unfit in the academic struggle for existence. There are individuals of this sort for whom to pass one degree after another seems the limit of earthly aspiration. Your private advice does not discourage them. They will fail, and go away to recuperate, and then present themselves for another ordeal, and sometimes prolong the process into middle life...

"We know that there is no test, however absurd, by

which, if a tittle or decoration, a public badge or mark, were to be won by it, some weekly suggestible or hautable persons would not feel challenged, and remain unhappy if they went without it. We dangle our three magic letters before the eyes of these predestined victims, and they swarm to us like moths to an electric light..

"The more widespread becomes the popular belief that our diplomas are indispensable hallmarks to show the sterling metal of their holders, the more widespread these corruptions will become. We ought to look to the future carefully, for it takes generations for a national custom, once rooted, to be grown away from."

Not only observant but prophetic as well. James' proposals for checking "the hold of the Ph.D. Octopus" were threefold: first, let the universities give the doctorate "as a matter of course ... for a due amount of time spent in patient labor," like the Bachelor's degree: second, let the colleges and universities "give up their unspeakably silly ambition

to bespangle their lists of officers<sup>9</sup>; and third, let able students bypass the degree when it interferes with their own independent study and let the faculty protect such

students "in the market-struggle which they have to face." All of this in 1903. — *By Bernard Berelson in the Graduate Education in the United States.*

### CONFERENCES

A conference is a gathering of important people who singly do nothing, but together can decide that nothing can be done. — *Fred Allen*