Flexner, Abraham (1866–1959)

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FLEXNER, ABRAHAM (1866–1959)

Author of the monumental survey *Medical Education in the United States and Canada* (1910), Abraham Flexner contributed to a period of reform in American medical education that hastened the closing of commercial medical schools and strengthened university-affiliated institutions adopting scientific approaches. A Louisville, Kentucky, native who earned his A.B. degree at Johns Hopkins University, Flexner established his own preparatory school in Louisville. However, he gained prominence as an educator through his critical essays, surveys, and reports about American educational institutions and practices. Throughout the early twentieth century, Flexner's ideas wielded influence through the sponsorship and largesse of powerful corporate foundations. Finally, from 1930 through 1939, Flexner designed and directed the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton.

Early Learning and Teaching Experiences

Born into a poor but ambitious family, Flexner developed an appetite for reading and studying outside of school. The endorsement of a Johns Hopkins alumnus sent Flexner to Baltimore in 1884, and an older brother's modest business income provided funds for his college tuition and expenses. Although inexperienced in the prerequisite studies of Latin and Greek, Flexner exercised industry and gained mastery of the classical languages. Against the norm, Flexner earned his bachelor's degree in two years.

Flexner returned to Louisville and secured employment in the Louisville High School, where he taught primarily Greek and Latin for four years. Supplementing his salary through private tutoring after school proved challenging and lucrative, however, and in 1890 Flexner opened his own school. This endeavor allowed Flexner to practice a rigorous and progressive student-centered pedagogy without the customary rules, tests, and reports. "Mr. Flexner's School" earned the reputation for preparing wealthy and sometimes troublesome boys for college. Furthermore, Flexner's work caught the attention of college presidents in the Northeast, who noticed that Flexner's students outperformed graduates of eastern prep schools. Flexner's pedagogical authority increased through articles he authored about his work in *The Educational Review* and *The International Journal of Ethics*.

Attaining Status as Educational Expert

In 1904 Abraham Flexner closed his school and left Kentucky with his wife, Anne Crawford Flexner, to pursue advanced study at Harvard University. Despite Flexner's initial enthusiasm, he left the university after a year, disappointed in his professors and assistantship. Never to earn an advanced degree, Flexner embarked instead upon an extended period of observation of all types of schools and
universities both in New York and Europe. In his study and travel, Flexner benefited from sponsors and social acquaintances, including those of his brother Dr. Simon Flexner of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research. Thus, Flexner enjoyed unequalled access to institutions and introductions to professors, researchers, and foreign ministers. Settling at the University of Berlin and later Heidelberg, Flexner penned his first book, *The American College: A Criticism*, an overall critique of Harvard, which was based upon his personal experiences, including a scathing indictment of the elective system. This book, published in 1908 upon Flexner's return to America, received little notice except by the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Dr. Henry S. Pritchett. Pritchett soon offered Flexner the opportunity to conduct the survey of medical schools that elevated him to national prominence.

To Henry Pritchett, Abraham Flexner was a "layman educator" capable of completing a key assignment in the Carnegie Foundation's larger institutional classification scheme, (i.e., differentiating colleges from secondary schools; universities from colleges, and accounting for appropriate work at each level). A vanguard force in the early-twentieth-century movement to increase standardization, efficiency, effectiveness, and the use of scientific methods, Pritchett deemed the Carnegie Foundation a champion of the public good. Pritchett presumed that Flexner's exhaustive survey of medical schools would improve American medical care by exposing society's overabundance of poorly trained physicians and the inferiority of its commercial medical schools. In combination with other social trends, Flexner's observations and scathing critique nurtured the scientific and professional practice of medicine. Specifically, schools labeled inferior eventually closed, the competing practice of homeopathy lost momentum, the admissions standards for prospective medical students increased, and the professional authority and status of university-trained physicians soared. Flexner's report earned him accolades and afterward he conducted a complete study of medical education in Europe.

Flexner continued to be a part of the elite circles of foundation administrators and consulted often in matters of benefaction. In 1913 Flexner's foundation role became formalized through an appointment as assistant secretary to another Rockefeller-funded philanthropy, the General Education Board (GEB). Flexner worked for the GEB until 1929, having advanced to the position of executive secretary and member of the board. Importantly, Flexner's "expertise" as an educational reformer achieved new significance, with the philanthropy of the GEB behind him as a powerful incentive for institutional change. For example, from his studies of medical education Flexner advocated full-time appointments for clinical teachers in medical schools. Thus, those university medical schools first willing to require full-time clinical staffs (e.g. Johns Hopkins, Yale, Chicago, Cornell, Vanderbilt, and Iowa) received large foundation grants.

However, Flexner's GEB work was not limited to medical education. Flexner continued to practice sponsorship by offering financial support to promising scholars for research and travel. Also, Flexner directed extensive surveys and evaluations of public school systems. Maryland, Delaware, North Carolina, Indiana, and Kentucky, to name a few, contracted with the GEB for these services. Finally, Flexner created and established the Lincoln School at Teachers College, Columbia University, through a GEB endowment gift. Highly regarded for its experimental pedagogy, the Lincoln School eschewed the classical curriculum for modern languages, science, and social studies.

**Retirement and the Institute for Advanced Study**

Upon his retirement from the GEB, Flexner accepted the prestigious invitation for residence at Oxford for the Rhodes Trust Memorial Lectures, which later he published as *Universities: American, English, German* in 1930. Extolling the intellectual vigor of the German research tradition, this work became institutionalized as Flexner obtained a gift of $5 million to create and direct the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. Ironically, the intellectual life of Flexner's institute benefited from the increasing repression of German universities, as foreign scholars, most notably Albert Einstein, found a place for research in the United States. Flexner left the institute in 1939 to spend his final years producing his autobiography and several other books.
See also: Education Reform, subentries on Overview, Reports of Historical Significance; Graduate School Training; Master's Degree, The; Medical Education.

bibliography


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