
American Correspondence Schools in Context

JANE SHAW STROUP

◆

In 2015 and 2016, Corinthian Colleges and ITT Technical Institute, two large for-profit schools providing online education, closed their doors. About the same time, others, including the University of Phoenix and DeVry Institute, experienced drastic losses in enrollment. The downfall of these schools was the result of a targeted campaign by the Obama administration and leading congressional Democrats, who charged the schools with unfair practices such as misleading promotions, low graduation rates, and high student-loan defaults (Grasgreen 2015).

In response, some educational scholars defended for-profit education. Richard Vedder (2018) emphasized its flexibility, innovation, and competition. Jayme Lemke and William Shughart II (2019) observed that when compared with community colleges, these for-profit schools' graduation rates were not that much different, and for-profits provided courses that students could not obtain at community colleges. But for the most part there was little sorrow over the shrinkage of schools that, at their height, accounted for about 10 percent of enrolled college students.

Such mixed attitudes toward for-profit schools providing distance education have a parallel in the American past. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many for-profit “correspondence schools” offered education by mail to people who, like many enrolled at DeVry or Corinthian, were too poor, too isolated, or too busy to go to college or vocational school. Like the modern distance-education schools, these schools experienced “little less than phenomenal” growth (a term used by a contemporary [Marburg 1899, 83]), and they received both derision and praise. A key difference between today’s distance-education companies and the earlier ones was that in the past there were no government-provided student loans. The schools

Jane Shaw Stroup is the board chairman and former president of the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal in Raleigh, North Carolina.

The Independent Review, v. 27, n. 1, Summer 2022, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2022, pp. 37-52.

were “on their own” in their search for revenues, and for many years they did very well, even though they had no government support.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a balanced description of for-profit correspondence schools in their heady early days, using as a major tool the views of educators and educated people as the schools took shape. We will see that attitudes were quite mixed, but there was a certain amount of respect for these schools, along with curiosity about their future. Thus, serious consideration was given to the technically oriented correspondence schools in the first two or so decades of their existence.

Dramatic changes in the American economy late in the nineteenth century had made traditional ways of learning, including apprenticeships and on-the-job training, less effective than before. Colleges still followed mostly classical curricula, and the slowly growing number of engineering colleges such as Rensselaer Polytechnic sought only top-flight students. Yet businesses needed more technically trained personnel than such colleges could provide.

In his classic book *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (1977), Alfred Chandler shows how big companies changed their day-to-day business in the late nineteenth century. Thanks largely to the railroads, they were now able to sell to customers over vast geographical distances, a fact that spurred the creation of mass distributors such as Montgomery Ward and Sears—and, indeed, that made education by mail feasible. To meet the potential for high-volume production and distribution, companies had to create new ways of operating. Organizationally, Chandler explained, they required better factory design, managerial innovation, and higher-quality labor.

Some of that labor came from those who enrolled in correspondence schools.

Joseph Kett, author of *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties: From Self-Improvement to Adult Education in America, 1750–1990* (1994), ties correspondence schools to the American desire for self-improvement. He observes that they grew most quickly at a time when states began to require workers to pass licensure exams in various occupations from teaching to plumbing. He also noted that the expansion of high schools set the education bar higher than it had been in the past, causing people who felt left behind to try to make up for their lack of education by mail-order lessons.

James Watkinson (1996), who studied one school intensively, the International Correspondence Schools (ICS) of Scranton, Pennsylvania, argues that there was a void in the education available to most workers. “Workers who enrolled in correspondence schools sought a type of learning that would give them immediate socio-economic mobility; they desired to enter the upper echelons of skilled occupations or, more often, enter white-collar work without engaging in traditional apprenticeships or extended formal education” (345). He estimates that more than 4 million people took correspondence courses between 1890 and 1940 (344). Another estimate is that in the mid-1920s between 1.75 and 2 million students were enrolled in

correspondence schools (Noffsinger 1926, 16)—at a time when official statistics on institutions of higher education showed a total enrollment of 941,000 (U.S. Census Bureau 1999).

Historians' Neglect

Yet historians have tended to ignore the correspondence schools. The writers mentioned earlier and Robert Hampel are exceptions. “The dearth of manuscript sources helps explain the paucity of articles and books on this important segment of American education,” Hampel writes. “For the universities that offered home study, there are useful primary sources, but for the private schools, much less material is available. ICS discarded nearly all of its records” (2009, 5). Hampel’s article on the National Home Study Council, the group formed by correspondence schools to police their own industry, is something of a rarity because he found “verbatim transcripts” of the council’s annual meetings (2009, 6). However, his paper describes correspondence schools in the 1920s, not the earliest, mostly technical schools.

Only one major historical study has been made of the largest school, ICS, an essay by James Watkinson (1996) in the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. More common is the treatment of correspondence schools given in C. Hartley Grattan’s history of adult education, *In Quest of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Adult Education* (1955). It relegates proprietary correspondence schools to a long footnote (319–20), even though Grattan devotes several pages to an essay on correspondence study by William Rainey Harper, who later became the founding president of the University of Chicago. Harper, who had taught Hebrew by mail to seminarians, described the strengths of education by mail without differentiating between university correspondence education and for-profit correspondence education. His essay included the statement that someday “the students who shall recite by correspondence will far outnumber those who make oral recitations” (quoted in Grattan 1959, 173–74). Grattan’s treatment implies that Harper’s essay is relevant only to university education.

Examples of Correspondence Schools

Let us look at a couple of for-profit correspondence schools that had staying power. ICS, founded in 1891, claimed to have more than 900,000 students by 1906 (Clark 1906, 332). True, most students did not get a diploma, and many of them became inactive enrollees. But John Jesse Clark, dean of the ICS faculty, reported in *Science* magazine in 1906 that between June 1, 1905, and May 31, 1906, instructors had reviewed and corrected 517,849 “instruction papers,” 192,739 drawings (presumably mechanical or architectural drawings), and 6,364 phonograph records (used in

language courses). Clark said that about 16.6 percent of ICS's "active" students—75,774 out of 455,220—had completed one-third or more of their purchased courses, and he anticipated that the percentage would improve (1906, 332).

As Clark's comments imply, just as Sears and Montgomery Ward sent catalogs and products around the country, ICS churned out textbooks and examination papers. Watkinson describes ICS's method of teaching as a "Taylorite educational factory," in which "scores of women sitting five abreast at desks checked the students' work in assembly-line fashion" (1996, 352). Then the male principals of the "schools" or general subject areas reviewed the papers. Perhaps the genius of the ICS system was the way that the "instruction and examination papers" were written. They were simpler and clearer than most textbooks, written for people with little education but willing to learn step by step. Watkinson also says that some of ICS's advanced-engineering books were purchased by colleges and universities.

The history of ICS goes back to 1870, when Thomas J. Foster, a young Civil War veteran, founded the *Mining Herald* of Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, with his brother-in-law (*Scranton Republican*, May 29, 1935). The paper's motto was: "To fear God, tell the truth, and make money." In 1885, the state of Pennsylvania passed a mine-safety law—in part due to campaigning by Foster, who had expressed alarm at the high rate of miners' accidents and deaths. The new law required mine personnel such as foremen and supervisors to pass safety examinations that posed difficult questions. Foster published a question-and-answer column to help readers prepare for the exams. He began to get so many questions that he decided to publish a course by mail.

In 1891, Foster created the International Correspondence Schools of Scranton, Pennsylvania. He soon added more courses in technical subjects, progressively going from the course in coal mining to courses in mine surveying and mapping, then to courses in mechanical drawing and electrical engineering, and on and on until ICS had 240 courses, ranging from advertising to window trimming (Gibbons 1914). Over time, the school added a textbook publisher (which became the parent company), created a branch in London, and absorbed some competitors. Although the school had its ups and downs (Foster went bankrupt after investing the school's profits in unsuccessful ventures), it did not lose its favorable reputation and continued until 2005.

ICS had some famous alumni. Walter P. Chrysler, who would eventually create the Chrysler Corporation, took courses from ICS in mechanical engineering as a young man in Ellis, Kansas. When Chrysler was a young railroad mechanic, he knew as much as college-trained engineers because he "had continually pounded away at his engineering courses from the International Correspondence Schools for six or seven years and had mastered them all through hard work and diligence" (Curcio 2000, 112). The famed World War I pilot Eddie Rickenbacker left school in Columbus, Ohio, at the age of thirteen but took mechanical and automotive correspondence

courses from ICS and worked as a mechanic until at the age of nineteen he began to race automobiles (Boyne 2000).

Other students included Philip Murray, the son of a coal miner who became vice president of the United Mine Workers and president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (Angelo 2003), and U.S. senator Ralph E. Flanders, who is best known for his fiery speech denouncing Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1954 but who was also an innovator in the machine-tool industry (Weisinger 1947). In her book *Cheap and Tasteful Dwellings* (2005), Jan Jennings found “at least ten winners and four near winners” of a competition for inexpensive housing design who had been schooled by ICS.¹ She also noted that the American School of Correspondence in Chicago also produced some architects (207). How many courses any of these students took at the schools or if they received a diploma is not known. However, they seem to have absorbed valuable knowledge.

Other well-known correspondence schools included law schools and business schools. Sprague Law was founded by William C. Sprague, who had a distinguished legal career (Austin 1915). He was the son of an Ohio congressman who had studied at Denison University and had obtained a law degree from the Cincinnati Law School. William Sprague practiced law in Detroit, helped found the Commercial Law League, which was designed to uphold professional standards for commercial law, and began teaching law by correspondence in 1890. Sprague’s Detroit school operated quietly for a number of years, but in 1904 he began aggressive promotion with an advertisement titled “A Fortune in a Fee.” This ad aroused the ire of the American Bar Association (Ernst 2014), which, in 1907, began a campaign to discredit legal correspondence schools and eventually required anyone seeking entrance to the bar to have formal education—a correspondence school would not qualify. Sprague separated himself from Sprague Law’s operations and subsequently sold it in 1915.

A prominent business school was the Alexander Hamilton Institute, which was closely associated with New York University’s (NYU) School of Commerce, Accounts, and Finance.² One of the institute’s founders was Joseph French Johnson, dean of NYU’s Business School. In 1914, the institute called its program “Modern Business Course and Service.” It was a “systematic, time-saving method of bringing to any man’s office or home the business knowledge and training that he needs and that he cannot acquire through his own experience” (Alexander Hamilton Institute 1914, 29). In addition to NYU’s Dean Johnson, the school’s advisory council

1. The competition was sponsored by *Carpentry & Building* magazine from 1879 to 1909.

2. According to Joseph Kett, NYU’s School of Commerce was founded in 1900 to train bookkeepers so they could pass the certified-public-accountant exam, which began to be given in New York in 1896 (1994, 272).

included the president of National City Bank of New York,³ a named partner in an accounting firm, a professor of government at NYU, and the chairman of the United States Steel Corporation.

The Alexander Hamilton Institute stayed open until 1982. During much of its existence, it appears to have been a respected source of business information. The *New York Times* noted in 1915 that William H. Lough, vice president of the institute, had made a fact-finding trip to South America for the U.S. Department of Commerce (*New York Times*, June 16, 1915).

Correspondence schools had an impact on university education, too, both positive and negative. In Canada by 1904, ICS “had attracted a sizeable business—as many as 1,600 men in Cape Breton alone,” writes a modern historian. “This cut severely into the enrolments of both Dalhousie University’s classes and the government mining schools” (Macleod 1986, 82). On the more positive side, correspondence schools helped the University of Wisconsin successfully adopt home study.⁴ The university had tried home study in the 1890s but dropped it. Charles McCarthy—Wisconsin populist and reformer—brought the program back to life. In a memo to the university’s president, Charles Van Hise, in 1906, McCarthy wrote that “there are at least five private correspondence schools doing business in this state at present and making a big profit out of it. If a young man would pay a big price to join one of these schools, sometimes a thousand miles away, surely he will join a school of this sort under the control of the University if it is run upon the same principles.”⁵

Contemporary Views

A look at what educators (and other educated people) thought of the early correspondence schools better reveals the complicated views about them. As we will see, although they had their suspicions about the schools’ value and rectitude, they saw them as possible legitimate educators, even competitors. Let us start with the views of Edgar Marburg, a professor of engineering at the University of Pennsylvania. A graduate of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, he joined the University of Pennsylvania faculty in 1892 and oversaw the growth of its Civil Engineering Department at a time when many civil engineers were still learning the trade by working at large public-works projects. Along with many other affiliations (he was secretary-treasurer of the American Society for Testing Materials), Marburg was a member of the Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education, so it was not surprising that in 1899

3. This bank president was Frank A. Vanderlip, who had also been assistant secretary of the U.S. Treasury.

4. William Simon Bittner and Hervey Foster Mallory report that 149 U.S. colleges had correspondence programs in 1928–29 (1933, 25).

5. Charles McCarthy to Charles Van Hise, memo, May 1906, reel 1 (P75-3930), “1889, 1905–1931,” Charles McCarthy Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

he addressed that society on the new phenomenon of the technical correspondence school (Marburg 1899).

At the time, formal engineering education was fairly new in the United States, and its role was evolving. Engineering education was split between academic single-focus technical schools such as Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (founded in 1824) and traditional universities that had added engineering departments. As David Noble outlines in his book *America by Design* (1979), there was already a divide between “scientific” and “classical” higher education, so engineering professors often felt like second-class citizens because they didn’t quite fit into either category (25).

The Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education was formed in 1893 to make the profession more scientific and prestigious. Its members were also concerned about where engineering schools would get their students and what kind of preparation they should have. In 1899, the society was about to prepare a report on American industrial education: the confusing world of manual-training institutes, vocational high schools, trade schools, YMCA evening schools—and correspondence schools.

Marburg’s talk on August 17, 1899, was specifically about correspondence schools. He saw them as schools that offered practical technical courses by mail. He called the growth of these schools “little less than phenomenal” and asked his colleagues: “Is the scheme to be regarded simply as a passing fad, or does it contain the elements of real merit and permanency? Are these schools attracting their immense patronage under false pretenses, or are they engaged in a worthy and successful effort to give their students generous returns on their investment?” (Marburg 1899, 83).

Marburg explained one reason for these schools: there were “serious gaps in our educational system.” In the United States, unlike in Germany, “no provision has been made for the specific training of our youth for industrial and commercial pursuits” (1899, 80). Correspondence schools, which enabled working people to study while remaining employed, were attempting to fill that void. At the same time, however, Marburg saw danger. “That the correspondence scheme throws the doors wide open to charlatanism cannot be denied, nor can it be questioned that the opportunities it offers for illegitimate practices have been freely exploited” (85).

His most serious indictment was that “thousands enroll, but few graduate. To complete the more extensive courses, elementary though they are, require[s] a degree of perseverance and self-denial in the utilization of spare moments that few can muster” (Marburg 1899, 92). He cited figures (supplied by ICS) indicating that in the four years before 1899, 30 percent of ICS students did not finish even arithmetic (one of the most basic courses), an additional 40 percent did not finish any course beyond arithmetic, and “only one-half of one per-cent, or five persons have graduated” (93). These figures led to Marburg’s larger point, that correspondence courses cannot give “a broad and thorough education to persons who at the same time follow their daily occupations.” His evaluation concludes with the statement that “their [the schools’]

highest destiny will have been achieved if by their coming they shall but quicken the birth of a system of popular education—industrial and commercial—worthy, in every sense, of this great nation” (93).

So in these remarks we see an effort to grapple with a new type of education that didn’t quite fit within the educational framework that now included engineering schools. Marburg gave respectful attention to correspondence schools but was suspicious of their motives, had already heard of some illegitimate actions, and hoped that some other kind of education would replace them.

A year later, the same society presented at its meeting in New York City the report “American Industrial Education” (Committee on Industrial Education 1900), which included correspondence schools in its coverage. As Marburg had, this report reflected uncertainty about the schools. “These [schools] have sprung up like magic in America in the past ten years and are now thought by many to be serving a great need. Whether they will remain in demand, or are only a passing phase of educational opportunity, may be a question,” said the report (49). At the meeting, George Goodenough, assistant professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Illinois, gave a talk titled “The Possibilities of Correspondence Instruction.” After outlining the nature of the schools, he concluded that although some correspondence schools offered full engineering courses, the nature of the correspondence medium meant that few students could achieve such a level of education by mail. He said: “[I]t may be stated with confidence that these schools will probably retrograde rather than advance, and will finally fill the place of the trade school.” However, he offered the possibility that state-university-sponsored correspondence schools could cover students’ first year or two of college education (1900, 319).

At almost the same time, another engineer was contemplating correspondence schools. Richard Pennfather Rothwell was a prominent mining expert and author of a well-regarded annual statistical survey of the mining industry (see Raymond and Hobart 1901). He discussed correspondence schools in a talk before the American Society of Mining Engineers (Rothwell 1899). He appears to have wanted to be given time to speak, just as an ICS official had been given at the previous year’s meeting.

Rothwell had recently become president of the United Correspondence Schools of New York, and ICS was now a rival. Even by 1899, there were numerous correspondence schools. In his lecture, he listed and briefly described nine schools he considered important, including ICS and his own United Correspondence Schools of New York. He also observed that there were correspondence schools in law, medicine, and literature.

Another contemporary view was provided by William T. Harris, the U.S. commissioner of education from 1889 to 1906. Writing in his annual report of 1901–2, he discussed correspondence schools. He questioned their “hustling for students” (the quotation marks are his) and noted their undignified advertising. He said that many claimed to teach but didn’t have the ability, that most students failed to complete

their courses, that some of the schools were merely booksellers, and that some were “transparently dishonest.” Nevertheless, he also wrote, “Yet the fact remains that a very great work has been done and is being done by correspondence schools. Even inferior ones, with all their shortcomings, have been the means of good. True, they have discouraged many, but they have prompted others to seek instruction who have subsequently pursued their education under more favorable auspices” (1903, 1080).⁶ He went on to compare the schools to John Wesley and William Booth, nontraditional preachers who had brought people to Christianity.

One of the most respected commentators on correspondence schools at that time was Thomas Commerford Martin. Editor of *Electrical World and Engineer*, he was a well-known science writer who had worked with Thomas Edison and written a biography of Nicola Tesla; later he would coauthor a life of Edison. In 1902, his essay in a magazine of political affairs was extremely favorable toward correspondence schools. “Indeed, in summing up the agencies that have contributed to give this country its present high rank among the dominating nations it would be a serious oversight to forget these remarkable educational forces which during the last ten or twelve years have been sharpening the wits and satisfying the thirst for knowledge of hundreds of thousands of our best artisans and engineers—not one of whom ever saw his instructor face to face” (Martin 1902, 1896).

Although Martin stated that such schools are not “a substitute for the university sheepskin,” he did think that they were taking students from some of the weaker colleges. He saw the universities adopting correspondence as a useful technique and noted that he too had become affiliated with a correspondence school but didn’t name which one.

Martin’s comments do not exhaust the early commentary about the schools from educators. In 1910–11, the editor of *Education* magazine in New England, Frank Herbert Palmer, wrote an essay titled “Correspondence Schools” for the magazine. “Instruction by correspondence has passed the experimental stage,” he said. “It has become a world-wide movement and lays its claim upon the attention of the student of educational affairs.” Although Palmer observed that education through the mail would never be the equivalent of personal instruction, he also argued that it was “the next best thing” for many people unable to attend college. He referred to ICS as “one of the largest” correspondence schools but also discussed in some detail the Home Correspondence School, located in Springfield, Massachusetts, which he described as the “strongest and largest school of this kind having headquarters in New England” (1910–11, 47–52).

At the same time, however, as a number of educators indicated, there were some frauds and charlatans. The *New York Times* reported in 1902 that four principals

6. Because no author is identified, I am assuming that the commissioner, William T. Harris, wrote the *Report of the Commissioner of Education*. The report also includes material about university correspondence work that had been supplied by universities.

of the Correspondence Institute of America had been arrested for fraud (*New York Times*, October 16, 1902). The school, according to the *Times*, had advertised a variety of courses and that no tuition would be charged until the student had found a job paying at least \$13 a week. But T. F. Reddington, who answered the ad, found that he had to pay \$15 for equipment and supplies. What he received was not worth more than \$1, the warrant said. The school was located in Scranton, Pennsylvania, probably to confuse it with the legitimate International Correspondence Schools in the minds of potential students.

On August 6, 1905, the *Washington Post* wrote that the chief examiner of the Civil Service Commission was taking action to stop fraud by correspondence schools “who represent themselves as being connected with the commission and thus entice persons desirous of government positions into paying high rates for poor instruction.” The article quoted Frank Kiggins, chief examiner, as saying that he had “letters from parties in all sections of the country complaining of the treatment they have received from the hands of the correspondence schools.”

The Schools in the 1920s

In spite of such examples of malfeasance, educators at the turn of the twentieth century saw the best schools as potentially an important part of the evolving education landscape in the United States. Indeed, correspondence schools proliferated. One illustration of this fact can be found in display advertising in *Popular Mechanics*, a magazine founded in 1902 for those with a technical bent. In January 1906, 18 correspondence schools (plus five booksellers) had display advertising.⁷ Ten years later, in January 1916, the number of schools had grown to 79, plus seven booksellers, and in January 1926 the number was 111, with six booksellers. The subjects advertised were extremely varied, including electricity, cartooning, typewriting, law, grammar, and many others.

But correspondence schools were dealt a body blow in 1926 when the Carnegie Corporation published a book by John Samuel Noffsinger, *Correspondence Schools, Lyceums, and Chautauquas*. Only 145 pages, the book was devoted mostly to Noffsinger’s study of existing correspondence schools, revealing their finances, their enrollments, the typical student profile, their course offerings, and so on. Yet it offered no backup information—no notes, no bibliography, barely even a mention of names (ICS being an exception). It gives the impression of being quite thorough but does not provide evidence to confirm that impression.

Noffsinger described a very profitable, popular industry that addressed the needs of adults who had fallen through the cracks of existing education, especially those

7. In the advertisements, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate schools from publishers and, occasionally, even from sellers of equipment (such as a musical instrument) that also provide manuals, so this is a rough count.

who lived far away from technical or commercial schools. Since the only requirement for correspondence courses was the ability to read and write English, relatively uneducated workers could take them. Noffsinger believed that there were about 350 correspondence schools in the United States. He estimated that 1.75 to 2 million students were enrolled in them in the mid-1920s and that the schools were earning \$70 million a year.

These schools' image was marred, however, by the deleterious practices of many, such as excessive sales pressure, misrepresentation of the potential for success, and weak instructional materials. "As most correspondence schools go now," Noffsinger wrote, "moral questions are uppermost, for an appallingly large proportion of the schools are little better than frauds" (1926, 33–34). To some extent, their image suffered simply because they were run for a profit, but that was not the full picture. "They are commercial enterprises designed to make quick and easy profits. Many of them are in the shady zone bordering on the criminal" (88).

Noffsinger's assessment was mixed—he praised ICS, but his strongly worded dismissive statements may have set in stone a negative image of correspondence schools, influencing writers for decades to come, perhaps even until today. Certainly, the Carnegie Corporation, which financed Noffsinger's report, rejected correspondence schools as a focus of attention, excluding them from the "adult education" that was the corporation's philanthropic theme (it did provide money to help clean up the schools, as discussed later). Yet it is not clear that Noffsinger's report had a lot of direct impact on the schools. Rather, it seems to have arrested historians' inquiry into the early schools. Many books that allude to correspondence schools rely heavily on Noffsinger.⁸

Decline of Correspondence Schools

Robert Hampel says that the schools began to lose students in the 1920s. By the middle of the Depression, he says, half had closed (2009, 7). The decline is illustrated by the number of ads in *Popular Mechanics*. Only 56 correspondence schools advertised in the January 1936 issue, compared with 111 ten years earlier. There was, however, an increase in book publishers (from six to twelve), and there were 15 schools of aviation or automobile repair that required in-person attendance—hardly any had been advertised in the 1906 and 1926 issues. The growth in publishers suggests that as the schools came under greater scrutiny, it was safer to send out books than to represent themselves as correspondence schools. The advent of in-person schools for

8. Works that rely on Noffsinger include *University Teaching by Mail* (Bittner and Mallory 1933, although the authors offered a balanced view of the schools); *Ten Years of Adult Education* (Cartwright 1935); *Correspondence Instruction in the United States* (MacKenzie, Christensen, and Rigby 1968); *Digital Diploma Mills* (Noble 2001); and "Historical Perspectives on Distance Learning in the United States" (Edelson and Pittman 2008).

aviation and automobiles indicated that the knowledge required for those fields by then exceeded what could be conveyed by written instruction.

Hampel noted another factor hurting the schools: increasing credentialism as more states not only required licenses but also specified educational requirements. We have already seen how the American Bar Association went after correspondence law schools, and engineers had to have two to four years of formal schooling in order to be licensed (Hampel 2009, 9). ICS and other schools that taught engineering had provided either an unsuitable credential or, often, none at all. There was pressure on nursing correspondence schools as well. The American Nurses Association succeeded in closing down a prominent nursing correspondence school, the Chautauqua School of Nursing (Bullough 2004).

The formation of the National Home Study Council may have reduced the numbers, too. It was created in 1926 to improve the schools' image. Funded by the ICS and the Carnegie Corporation, it was initially composed of just eleven of the more responsible schools. The group selected Noffsinger as its executive secretary. The council cooperated with the Federal Trade Commission (formed in 1914 putatively to further competition and consumer protection), which sued schools for extreme practices. Presumably, by such legal actions some "bad actors" were removed from the scene, and others were deterred from starting.

Meanwhile, vocational high schools became more widespread. Colleges and universities expanded in size and number, including the land-grant universities, which featured engineering and technical subjects as well as agriculture. Automobiles became a fixture of American society. The combined length of the nation's paved roads more than doubled between 1914 and 1926 (Encyclopedia.com 2018), and the number of cars on the road increased nearly sevenfold, from 477,137 to 3,184,721 over that same period (*Wikipedia* n.d.). The difficulties that had made education by mail so attractive to some people were disappearing.

Once the Depression ended, increasing prosperity enabled more people to afford college, making education by mail unnecessary for serious students. The growth of community colleges that began in the 1950s made it even easier to obtain postsecondary training. So although the Depression may have had much to do with the immediate decline in the number of correspondence schools, other factors prevented a major rebound of education by mail.

Conclusion

Did the correspondence schools of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, on balance, contribute to the growing U.S. economy, or were they a scourge that had to be battled? Let us listen to two people who gave speeches about ICS, one at the fifteenth anniversary celebration of ICS in 1906 and one at the dedication of the ICS education building in 1910. John Mitchell, president of the United Mine

Workers of America, said: “I have known hundreds and hundreds of men denied the opportunity of early education, who have grown to manhood, illiterate and ignorant, ashamed to confess their illiteracy, ashamed to reveal their ignorance by attending the night schools; these men by scholarships in the International Correspondence Schools have secured a good general and technical education, and now hold positions of profit and responsibility” (Mitchell 1907, 140). His words may have been hyperbolic, but the evidence outlined earlier suggests that they were in large part accurate.

A minister who lived in Scranton, Pennsylvania, perhaps best illustrates the continuing ambivalence toward distance education schools. The Reverend Joseph Odell spoke in November 1910 at the dedication of the ICS instructional building. He began by saying that he held the “proud and serene conservatism which the ancient European schools and colleges stamp upon their sons.” As a result, “I was repelled by the International Correspondence Schools because they were frankly and even brazenly commercial. The Schools were owned by a business corporation which said that the world could be educated and the educators could be adequately remunerated for their work. What audacity! What sacrilege!” (Odell 1910, 3).

But the Presbyterian minister went on to explain that he subsequently experienced an “intellectual revolution.” He had come to believe that Thomas J. Foster’s creation, ICS, was “probably the most masterful stroke of genius in the realm of education since the first teacher gathered the first group of scholars into an organized school” (Odell 1910, 4).

It is probable that Odell was an investor in ICS, as were many residents of Scranton, Pennsylvania. Even so, his remarks reveal perhaps more than any other the complicated attitudes brought to correspondence schools by contemporaries and historians alike. The schools were creative. They were helpful. They filled a niche in American education. They defied easy categorization. But they were no angels. Historians would do well to take a closer look at these early correspondence schools to more precisely delineate their impact on the economic growth of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

References

- Alexander Hamilton Institute. 1914. *Forging Ahead in Business*. New York: Alexander Hamilton Institute.
- Angelo, Pat. 2003. *Philip Murray: Union Man*. Bloomington, Ind.: ExLibris.
- Austin, F. R. 1915. William C. Sprague, Chicago. *American Legal News* 26, no. 6 (July): 26.
- Bittner, Walton Simon, and Hervey Foster Mallory. 1933. *University Teaching by Mail*. New York: Macmillan.
- Boyne, Walter J. 2000. Rickenbacker. *Air Force Magazine*, September 1. At <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/0900rickenbacker/>.

- Bullough, Vern L. 2004. How One Could Once Become a Registered Nurse in the United States without Going to a Hospital Training School. *Nursing Inquiry* 11, no. 3: 161–65.
- Cartwright, Morse Adams. 1935. *Ten Years of Adult Education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Chandler, Alfred D., Jr. 1977. *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Clark, John Jesse. 1906. The Correspondence School—Its Relation to Technical Education and Some of Its Results. *Science*, New Series, 24, no. 611 (September 14): 332.
- Committee on Industrial Education, Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education. 1900. American Industrial Education: What Shall It Be? Preliminary Report of a Committee of the Society. In *Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Meeting of the Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education*, 28–58. New York: Engineering News Publishing.
- Curcio, Victor. 2000. *Chrysler: The Life and Times of an Automotive Genius*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Edelson, Paul J., and Von V. Pittman. 2008. Historical Perspectives on Distance Learning in the United States. In *Economics of Distance and Online Learning*, edited by William J. Bramble and Santosh Panda, 72–87. New York: Routledge.
- Encyclopedia.com. 2018. Roads. At <https://www.encyclopedia.com/science-and-technology/technology/technology-terms-and-concepts/roads>.
- Ernst, Daniel R. 2014. Missionary Man: William C. Sprague and the Correspondence Law School. *Legal History Blog*, February 26. At <http://legalthistoryblog.blogspot.com/2014/02/missionary-man-william-sprague-and.html>.
- Gibbons, William F. 1914. Scranton Teaches the World by Mail. In *The History of Scranton and Its People*, edited by Frederick Lyman Hitchcock, 353–57. New York: Lewis Historical Publishing. At <https://archive.org/details/historyofscranto01hitc/page/356/mode/2up>.
- Goodenough, George A. 1900. The Possibilities of Correspondence Instruction. In *Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Meeting of the Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education*, 315–24. New York: Engineering News Publishing.
- Grasgreen, Allie. 2015. Obama Administration Pushes For-Profits to the Brink. *Politico*, July 1. At <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/07/barack-obama-pushes-for-profit-colleges-to-the-brink-119613>.
- Grattan, C. Hartley. 1955. In *Quest of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Adult Education*. New York: Association Press.
- Hampel, Robert L. 2009. The National Home Study Council, 1926–1942. *American Journal of Distance Education* 23, no. 1: 4–19.
- Harris, William T. 1903. Correspondence Schools. In *Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1902*, 1:1069–94. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Jennings, Jan. 2005. *Cheap and Tasteful Dwellings: Design Competitions and the Convenient Interior, 1879–1909*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

- Kett, Joseph F. 1994. *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties: From Self-Improvement to Adult Education in America, 1750–1990*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Lemke, Jayme S., and William F. Shughart II. 2019. Assessing For-Profit Colleges. In *Unprofitable Schooling*, edited by Todd J. Zywicki and Neal P. McCluskey, 201–24. Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute.
- MacKenzie, Ossian, Edward L. Christensen, and Paul H. Rigby. 1968. *Correspondence Instruction in the United States*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Macleod, Donald. 1986. Practicality Ascendant: The Origins and Establishment of Technical Education in Nova Scotia. *Acadiensis* 15, no. 2 (Spring): 53–92.
- Marburg, Edgar. 1899. The Correspondence School in Technical Education. In *Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Meeting of the Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education*, 2:80–92, followed by discussion, 93–103. Lancaster, Pa.: Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education.
- Martin, Thomas Commerford. 1902. The Educational Value of Correspondence Schools. *Independent (1848)* 7 (August): 1896–898.
- Mitchell, John. 1907. Education: The Wage Earner’s Opportunity. In *Fifteenth Anniversary Exercises and Banquet*, 140–41. Scranton, Pa.: International Textbook Company.
- Noble, David F. 1979. *America by Design: Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2001. *Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Noffsinger, John Samuel. 1926. *Correspondence Schools, Lyceums, and Chautauquas*. New York: Macmillan.
- Odell, Joseph H. 1910. The New Era in Education: A Study in the Psychology of Correspondence Methods of Instruction. Speech, November. Hathi Trust Digital Library, “old catalog.” At <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009604676>.
- Palmer, Frank Herbert. 1910–11. Correspondence Schools. *Education* 31:47–52.
- Raymond, R. W., and Frederick Hobart. 1901. Richard P. Rothwell. *Engineering and Mining Journal* 71 (April 20): 486–87.
- Rothwell, Richard Pennefather. 1899. Correspondence Schools. *Engineering and Mining Journal* 68 (July 22): 98–99. (Second part of a speech given to the American Institute of Mining Engineers meeting, New York, February 1899.)
- U.S. Census Bureau. 1999. Table 1425: Education Summary—Enrollment, Graduates, Degrees: 1900 to 1998, and Projections 1999 and 2000. In “20th Century Statistics,” sec. 31 of *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 876. Washington, D.C.: US Government Publication Office. At <https://www.census.gov/prod/99pubs/99statab/sec31.pdf>.
- Vedder, Richard. 2018. Needed: A Revival of For-Profit Education. *Forbes*, December 17.
- Watkinson, James D. 1996. Education for Success: The International Correspondence Schools of Scranton, Pennsylvania. *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 120, no. 4 (October): 343–69.

Weisinger, Mort. 1947. Making Good ... by Mail. *Los Angeles Times*, December 14. At <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/making-good-mail-i/docview/165793267/se-2?accountid=12725>.

Wikipedia. N.d. U.S. Automobile Production Figures (compiled from *Consumer Guide*). At https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._Automobile_Production_Figures. Accessed November 29, 2021.

SUBSCRIBE NOW AND RECEIVE A FREE BOOK!



“*The Independent Review* does not accept pronouncements of government officials nor the conventional wisdom at face value.”

—**JOHN R. MACARTHUR**, Publisher, *Harper’s*

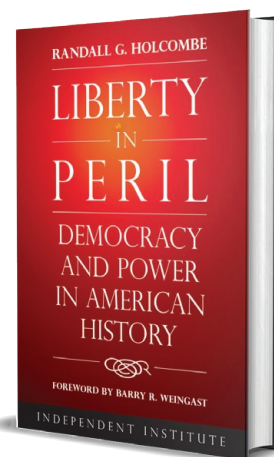
“*The Independent Review* is excellent.”

—**GARY BECKER**, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences

Subscribe to [The Independent Review](#) and receive a free book of your choice such as *Liberty in Peril: Democracy and Power in American History*, by Randall G. Holcombe.

Thought-provoking and educational, [The Independent Review](#) is blazing the way toward informed debate. This quarterly journal offers leading-edge insights on today’s most critical issues in economics, healthcare, education, the environment, energy, defense, law, history, political science, philosophy, and sociology.

Student? Educator? Journalist? Business or civic leader? Engaged citizen? This journal is for YOU!



Order today for more **FREE** book options

SUBSCRIBE

The Independent Review is now available digitally on mobile devices and tablets via the Apple/Android App Stores and Magzter. Subscriptions and single issues start at \$2.99. [Learn More.](#)

