

Brown's delivered white-collar education

Business colleges played an important but often-overlooked role in American education. For the better part of a half-century, Brown's Business College in downtown Bloomington offered "solid and practical" training for young men and women entering the lower rungs of the white-collar workforce.

The Industrial Age demanded bookkeepers, stenographers, cashiers and correspondent clerks, the training of which traditional four-year colleges and universities generally ignored. Railway, telegraph, manufacturing and express companies needed office workers to keep their increasingly bureaucratic, paperwork-heavy operations running smoothly and efficiently. In addition, the invention of the typewriter—and later other office machines, such as the stenograph (a shorthand machine)—led to the further specialization of office jobs.

Business colleges throughout the nation filled the education vacuum. "In this age of sharp competition there is little chance for the young person who faces the world without the knowledge and skill that comes from special training," read a Brown's Business College student handbook from 1900.

Founded by G.W. Brown of Jacksonville, Ill., the school established "campuses" in mid- and small-size Illinois cities such as Centralia, Champaign, Decatur, Galesburg, Jacksonville, Moline, Ottawa, Peoria, Rock Island and Rockford, as well as Terre Haute, IN and Davenport, IA.

Business colleges such as Brown's enabled young women (who often far outnumbered men in graduating classes) to participate in the hustle and bustle of commercial life, though they were generally restricted to secretarial-like positions. Women were also on the teaching faculty. In 1903, for instance, Margaret King headed the shorthand department in Bloomington.

Brown's also made appeals to farmers, housekeepers, ministers and others. "Be a business farmer," read a November 1919 Brown's advertisement. "A business education is the trotting mate of up-to-date farming."

The college offered classes in Bloomington from the 1890s until the early 1940s, attracting students from the Twin Cities and places such as Heyworth, Atlanta, Paxton, and El Paso. For a while, classes were held on the third floor of the Henry Keiser Building, 505-507 N. East St. (which today is part of the East Street Hardware & Tools building). Around 1909, the school moved into the third floor of the Hoblit Building, located at the southwest corner of Main and Mulberry streets (see accompanying photograph).

Back in 1900, Brown's offered a comprehensive commercial course, in addition to one concentrating on bookkeeping and another on shorthand and typewriting. The regular school year ran ten months—early September to early July—with one week off for Christmas. Daily class sessions ran 9:00 a.m. to 12 noon, and then 1:30 to 4:00 p.m.

Tuition was \$20 for each ten-week term (or the equivalent of \$580 today, adjusted for inflation). To accommodate those already in the workforce, Brown's offered night classes, which in 1900 were held 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. three days a week. There were also summer sessions and a correspondence program whereby one could study via postal mail.

The curriculum was surprisingly rigorous. The full course included bookkeeping (theory and practice), commercial arithmetic, writing, commercial law (including contracts and personal property), business correspondence, spelling, shorthand, typewriting, indexing and filing. There were also detours into business history, political economy, government and other subjects.

Brown's promised a real-world course of study, rather than one "superficial and embellished with frills of fancy penmanship of no practical value."

Completion of a full course of study could take 10 months or longer, though shorter courses could be wrapped up in less time. Brown's graduates, armed with a diploma from an accredited and well-respected business college, usually had little trouble finding employment.

"Businessmen appreciate good help, and while thoroughly qualified stenographers are in greater demand than ever before, the half-trained, or 'shorthand cripples' stand little chance of promotion ... there is surely no greater bore than an incompetent stenographer at one's elbow," declared Brown's.

The commencement program of February 26, 1919 in Bloomington included a dinner at the Illinois Hotel and a ceremony at the Chatterton Opera House. Harlan E. Read, who with a partner bought out Brown in 1911, delivered the address to graduates. "If, through the work you have done here," he said, "you have been brought to see the dignity of labor—the importance of accuracy and speed—the splendid commercial opportunities open to all who will pay the price in effort, then ... your schooling has been profitable to you and will bring credit to the institution from which you have graduated."

During the Great Depression, university-educated men and women turned to Brown's and other business colleges to improve their office skills and hence job opportunities.

Brown's would stage contests and cash rewards for fast and reliable typing, stenography and shorthand. In 1931, Principal Elmer Hubble offered \$10 to the first student reaching 90 words per minute with no more than five errors in a ten-minute span. That same year, Bernice Bartels received the Gregg Transcription Award for keeping a pace of 120 words per minute with an allowance of 30 errors (though Bartels had only 9 errors).

By the early 1930s, recent graduates included Hazel Brucker, who became the head of the records department at Brokaw Hospital, where she found herself taking dictation from surgeons as they operated on patients. Graduates working in Bloomington included Floyd Meiner in the cost accounting department at Meadows Manufacturing Co.; Earl Thomas, bookkeeper and stenographer for Schwulst Lumber & Coal Co.; Martha Ward, secretary for the Illinois Wesleyan University School of Music; Alice Ward, stenotypist secretary for Benson Real Estate Co.; Lester Gerig, stenographer for Capen Investment Co., and many, many others.

The end of World War II and the GI Bill led to an enrollment boom in four-year colleges and universities, while the 1960s brought explosive growth in two-year community colleges. These and other factors led to the decline of business colleges in the mold of Brown's.

On June 4, 1929, local attorney W.K. Bracken delivered the annual Brown's commencement address. The average age of the 37 graduates was 20, with their courses ranging from bookkeeping and accounting to shorthand and typewriting.

"I have become convinced that you not only have learned how to operate certain mechanical devices," Bracken said, "but that you also have learned how to use and operate your head and heart in such a way as will make you real women and men."