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## Phoenix Risen

How a history professor became the pioneer  
of the for-profit revolution

BY THOMAS BARTLETT

PHOENIX  
**J**OHAN G. Sperling, as he often reminds those around him, is running out of time. At 88, he is in relatively good health, despite a weak kidney and back problems. He still walks the dog, drives himself to meetings, and seems to have no shortage of nervous energy: Forced to sit still for any length of time, he twirls his cellphone between two fingers or distractedly peels the label from a bottle of water, leaving it in shreds on the table.

Even so, he feels the tug of mortality, and he has a lot left to accomplish. Like, for instance, saving the world.

He's had big ideas before. In 1974, at the not-so-tender age of 53, he left a tenured position at San Jose State University with \$26,000 in savings to start an academic program for working adults. In the beginning, he ran the operation out of his house. It soon outgrew those humble digs and later relocated to Arizona, adopting the name of that state's capital. Now the University of Phoenix has close to 400,000 students, more than 200 campuses and 26,000 faculty members, and is valued at roughly \$10-billion.

Not everyone thinks that Phoenix's wild success is a good thing. The university has always had its critics, some of whom simply don't believe that an institution of higher learning should turn a profit. Its occasional scandals have reinforced the notion that Phoenix cares more about shareholders than students. The company has also paved the way for numerous imitators and helped promote the idea of students as customers, none of which has endeared Phoenix to its detractors.

As for its founder, Mr. Sperling is best known for his extracurricular activities, like cloning his beloved dog, Missy, or campaigning to legalize marijuana. Over the years he has been cast as the Eccen-

tric Rich Guy, a wealthy dabbler, a kook.

It is hard to square that with the actual John Sperling, who may just be the least flashy billionaire out there. He tools around Phoenix in a decade-old car (albeit a Jaguar), carries his IBM ThinkPad tucked under one arm, and dons the same outfit almost every day: a blue, button-down shirt and khaki slacks. He loves theater, classical music, and especially poetry. He is easily bored by chit-chat but lights up when the conversation turns to politics or the environment. He sees the University of Phoenix not as a giant ATM to support his causes, but as a force for social good, an enterprise consistent with his left-of-center worldview. These days he is spending millions on solar technology and sustainable agriculture, which he hopes can reel humankind back from the edge of calamity.

What's more, following a brief retirement of sorts, he has returned to the helm of the company he founded and is attempting to steer it through one of the country's choppiest economic periods. So how did a middling history professor become the billionaire leader of the for-profit revolution? And, as he nears his 90th year, is he still up to the challenge?

**J**OHAN SPERLING grew up poor and sickly in the middle of America—Missouri—during the Great Depression, the youngest son of a doting mother he loved and an abusive father he loathed. In his autobiography, *Rebel With a Cause* (2000), the account of his boyhood is filled with startling scenes of suffering and cruelty. Mr. Sperling is a fan of Charles Dickens, and it's no wonder.

His father beat him regularly, and, at age 10, after one humiliating episode too many, the boy threatened to kill the old man in his sleep if he ever hit him again. The threat did the trick, and the beatings stopped. When he was 15 his father

died and John couldn't have been more pleased. His mother told him to at least try to look mournful, but he couldn't help himself: "I raced outside, rolled in the grass squealing with delight," he writes in his book. "There I lay looking up into a clear blue sky, and I realized this was the happiest day of my life. It still is."

After high school, he took a job as a stocker at a department store but was fired for being too slow. With no prospects, no skills that he knew of, and zero self-confidence, Mr. Sperling did what lots of young men have done before and since: He went to sea, snagging a spot on a freighter bound for the Far East.

It was on board that his education began. Fellow sailors introduced him to novelists, like Henry Miller, and philosophers, like Oswald Spengler. He also read Marx and embraced socialism (a position he has modified in the years since). Back in the United States in 1941, he got a night job at a filling station and enrolled at the City College of San Francisco.

During World War II, Mr. Sperling kicked around the military but never saw overseas action. He trained with the Navy, transferred to the Army, was discharged, and was called up again. Along the way, he got married and struggled with anxiety. He learned to sew to make his wife clothes, and to box to improve his self-confidence.

He left San Francisco for Reed College, a significant step up for a young man who had been a below-average high-school student. The competition from his classmates was stiff, and he began to despise those who had grown up with everything he had not, like educated parents, good schools, and money. Still, he excelled and was accepted into graduate school in psychology at the University of California at Berkeley. When he learned that he would be forced to take a slew of prerequisites, though, he switched to history.

He shone at Berkeley, too, winning an endowed studentship at King's College Cambridge. Those days at Berkeley, he recalls now, were the most blissful of his life. "In the cafes, we honed our academic skills by expounding and arguing theory, fact, and fiction," he writes. "It was a movable intellectual feast."

His first marriage had fallen apart, and

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he got married again, this time to a fellow graduate student. After collecting his Ph.D. in economic history in 1955, he took his first real academic job, as an instructor at Ohio State University. It was a big moment, and he should have been elated.

He was not. Although he loved the scholarly give-and-take, he found the atmosphere of faculty life stultifying, the compensation meager, and the survey courses he taught tedious. He describes university gatherings as dismal and his colleagues as pompous. You can taste his disgust in his account of parties at which “the hostess almost invariably served either a tuna or a macaroni casserole and cheap red wine.”

He toyed with the idea of leaving academe altogether, but a friend persuaded him to take a one-year appointment at San Jose State University. He ended up sticking around for a dozen. The new gig meant steady employment at a more reasonable salary, but he remained restless, dissatisfied.

He fell into union organizing and led a monthlong strike that culminated with a sit-in at the president’s office. It failed, but if nothing else, the experience taught him to deal with withering criticism, an aptitude that would come in handy later on. “The lesson was simple,” he writes. “Ignore your detractors and those who say that what you are doing is wrong, against regulations, or illegal.”

What would become the University of Phoenix grew out of a federally financed project to help juvenile delinquents. Before that Mr. Sperling had been tapped to direct a remedial program for incoming freshmen; dealing with difficult students had become his forte. He decided that the best way to lower delinquency rates was to train the teachers and police officers who interacted with the teenagers.

The adults loved the classes, and most of them enrolled in his humanities course the following semester. They invited their friends, too. But those teachers and police officers wanted more than a few courses: The officers wanted bachelor’s degrees, and the teachers wanted master’s. Mr. Sperling thought a degree program aimed specifically at working adults was a guaranteed winner, so he drew up a plan and pitched it to officials at San Jose State.

They shot it down. He found a more receptive audience at the University of San Francisco and took a year’s leave from San Jose State, a leave from which he still has not returned.

With two former students as co-founders, Sperling worked out of his house and used \$26,000 in savings as seed money for the fledgling program, which was originally called the Institute for Community Research and Development. By the second year, revenues were just under \$3-million. Locked inside the middle-aged professor, it turns out, was a CEO waiting to burst forth.

IN THE mid-70s, Mr. Sperling’s company was entirely different from what the University of Phoenix would become. Instead of competing with nonprofit institutions, it formed partnerships, acting as a subcontractor to teach working adults. Mr. Sperling traveled the country drumming up business and often running into skepticism and even scorn from those in traditional higher education. He saw his mission as bringing higher education to underserved communities. But naysayers said his company was lowering the standards of its accredited partners. Why would a college bring in outsiders to teach? And why cater specifically to working adults?

Not that the venture was a failure. Some colleges did sign on, but the ar-

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rangements ultimately proved problematic. Mr. Sperling remembers sitting in his office in San Jose—a proper office building rather than his living room—thinking that if he didn’t come up with a new plan there would no longer be a company to run. The money was coming in, but he sensed trouble ahead.

That’s when the University of Phoenix was born, at least in his mind. Problems with California regulators, whom Mr. Sperling believed were determined to shut his company down, prompted a move to Arizona. In those first few years, Phoenix was dismissed as a diploma mill and struggled to gain accreditation.

As profitable and ubiquitous as Phoenix is now, it is hard to imagine the company as a small, vulnerable upstart. But that’s

what it was, even after it was accredited. Other institutions in Arizona were hoping for its demise, and reports in the local news media about the California interlopers were almost uniformly negative. There was an FBI investigation into allegations that Mr. Sperling had bribed officials at the University of San Francisco to get them to support a contract with his pre-Phoenix company. The probe went nowhere but was a genuine distraction.

Meanwhile, Mr. Sperling, now twice divorced, struggled in his personal life. At 57, he was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Following surgery, he discovered that smoking marijuana helped him manage his pain better than prescription drugs. He has been an advocate of legalization ever since.

There were internal company struggles, too. One of them involved Mr. Sperling and another founder, Peter Ellis. Mr. Ellis had been one of Mr. Sperling’s students at San Jose State and considered him a father figure. In his autobiography, Mr. Sperling portrays his former student as a hard worker but an inadequate leader who wasn’t up to the challenge of building a university. The two men tangled over a host of issues, and Mr. Ellis, after some deft maneuvering by Mr. Sperling, was pushed out with a payment of \$125,000, a tiny amount considering that he had an ownership stake in the company. They haven’t spoken to each other since.

Nearly three decades later, Mr. Ellis, who now runs a company called Community Crime Prevention Associates, says he was ready to leave. In his view, the University of Phoenix had strayed from its original mission and become too focused on the bottom line. And Mr. Ellis, a self-described do-gooder, thought the university was no longer interested in doing good.

That said, he has watched in awe as the company he helped start has grown exponentially. As for his former professor, he sees Mr. Sperling as an ambitious businessman who hates to lose. “He’s a brilliant guy, but he loves power,” says Mr. Ellis.

Others also point to Mr. Sperling’s fierce drive, his confidence in his own abilities, his desire to be in charge. Suzanne W. Helburn, a longtime collaborator on some of Mr. Sperling’s writing projects, has had her disagreements with him over the years, but the two have remained friends. She describes him as cocky, ambitious, and very sure of his own judgment. “He’s an archetype en-

trepreneur,” she says. “He loves starting things. He’s totally enthusiastic about the new thing.”

With that ambition, though, is a gentler side. Ms. Helburn remembers that, back when he was a professor, he would buy broken-down jalopies and fix them up for carless friends. (Along with being able to sew and box, Mr. Sperling is also mechanically inclined.) That kind of generosity, both to friends and to causes, is typical, she says. Asked to sum him up, she says: “weird but wonderful.”

Another friend quotes something Mr. Sperling once said about himself: “I’m an egotist. I’m more interested in what I’m doing than in what anyone else on the planet is doing.”

Many colleagues and friends note his seeming indefatigability, dubbing him “the Energizer Bunny.” Among them is Jorge Klor de Alva, one of his closest friends. The two got to know each other at San Jose State, and, many years later, Mr. Sperling persuaded him to leave his professorship at Berkeley to come to work for Phoenix as the university’s president. Mr. Klor de Alva liked the university’s focus on teaching, an emphasis he found lacking at his own institution.

“One trait that I think has led to his success is his capacity to be alone,” says Mr. Klor de Alva, who is now senior vice president for academic excellence at Apollo Group Inc., Phoenix’s parent company. “He is his own counsel. Some people might look at it as selfish, but I don’t think that’s true.”

Mr. Sperling is also ruthlessly practical, as illustrated by his wardrobe. His closet full of identical blue, button-down shirts and khaki slacks eliminates sartorial dilly-dally. Recently, when Mr. Sperling was having back problems, he made his own brace out of plywood and elastic. It actually helped.

Mr. Klor de Alva mentions, as do several others, his friend’s remarkable recall. “He has a depressingly good memory,” he says. “I have no idea where the hell he puts it all.” That memory, says Mr. Klor de Alva, allows him to “connect dots” that others miss.

In person, Mr. Sperling lives up to his reputation. He latches onto small facts and brings them up later in conversation. He gets new names and obscure places right. He is usually listening, even when it seems he is not. He is a voracious consumer of information. Ask him about something happening in the news and he already will have read the article in *The*

*New York Times* or heard the story on National Public Radio. He devours magazines and newspapers, tearing out items that catch his eye. He reads a lot online, too, and forwards articles to friends and colleagues.

Both Mr. Sperling and Mr. Klor de Alva split their time between Phoenix and San Francisco. When Mr. Klor de Alva is in Phoenix he stays at Mr. Sperling’s house. After nearly 40 years of friendship, the two have an easy, effortless rapport. That may be because neither man backs down from an argument. They can both be, to put it mildly, blunt. “If you’re thin-skinned, he’s not your right interlocutor,” says Mr. Klor de Alva.

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*“I speak as little as possible because when I talk I don’t learn.”*

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Not long ago, Mr. Sperling emerged from a meeting with top managers at Apollo. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes were narrow, intense. Heated words had been exchanged during the closed-door session, though over what he wouldn’t reveal. Mr. Sperling was clearly enlivened by the dispute.

Despite his fondness for conflict, he doesn’t demand the floor in meetings. “I speak as little as possible because when I talk I don’t learn,” he explains. He tends to sit back quietly, waiting for the right moment to interject. When he has a point to make, he will spring to life, leaning over the table, raising his voice, wagging his finger. It’s as if he has been waiting for the action to begin.

Eric Rey remembers giving a presentation in front of Mr. Sperling and several others. Mr. Rey is president and chief executive of Arcadia Biosciences, one of Mr. Sperling’s roughly dozen companies, which develops environmentally responsible agricultural technologies. He wasn’t sure how closely Mr. Sperling had been listening until he asked a particularly tough question, one that caught Mr. Rey off-guard. “He had really processed and thought about what was said,” says Mr. Rey. “That was my main impression.”

Sometimes it is Mr. Sperling who’s being asked the tough questions. One of the people likely to challenge him is Terri Bishop, who started at the University of

Phoenix as a part-time clerk in the early 1980s before becoming head of its online division. She is now director and executive vice president for external affairs at Apollo, which means that, among her other duties, she is often the public voice of the company. In meetings, Ms. Bishop is perfectly willing to interrupt, contradict, or roll her eyes at some of Mr. Sperling’s more interesting statements.

During a meeting with this reporter, Mr. Sperling began to speak, unprompted, about some of the university’s lobbying activities. Ms. Bishop wondered aloud whether it was such a terrific idea to go into detail with a scribe in the room. “I’m not going to censor myself!” Mr. Sperling shouted. “I’m just saying!” she shouted right back, shaking her head. Mr. Sperling, while pretending to ignore her advice, did indeed veer off onto another topic.

A few minutes later, the two were discussing the menu for that evening’s dinner party and whether it would be warm enough to eat outside.

They have had innumerable arguments over the years, but Ms. Bishop can “count on one hand” the number of times she has felt genuinely angry at him. She left Phoenix for a year, not because of an argument, but because she got an offer from another company. When that job didn’t work out, Mr. Sperling welcomed her back. Like Mr. Klor de Alva, Ms. Bishop is more than a colleague. She is involved in seemingly every aspect of Mr. Sperling’s life, knows his whereabouts at all times, and largely controls his schedule. Those who want an audience with him must come through her. She is also the person who, when Mr. Sperling dies, will administer his foundation.

Mr. Sperling speaks glowingly of Ms. Bishop. “She’s brilliant,” he says. “Isn’t she great?” What he likes about her, he says, is “brains.” That is Mr. Sperling’s most frequent compliment. Those who, in his estimation, are lacking brains do not meet with his favor. He says of both Mr. Klor de Alva and Ms. Bishop: “They don’t bore me.”

High praise from a man who is easily bored.

IT TOOK brains to create Phoenix, but it also took ambition. From the start, Mr. Sperling labored to make the company grow. Once he had several contracts with universities, he itched to set up his own institution. Once Phoenix was off

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the ground, he wanted it to expand tenfold. In a 1984 memo, he wrote that the company—valued at \$14-million at the time—needed to be worth \$100-million. He acknowledged that that would be a “hell of a task.” He had no interest in running a small business. He was out to build a behemoth.

His restlessness played a role as well. He is always striving, even now. He admits that he’s not sure what it means to be content.

It is tempting to assume that Mr. Sperling’s drive and intelligence led necessarily to his success. But the University of Phoenix was also an idea whose time had come, and Mr. Sperling had both the entrepreneurial spirit and the academic credentials to pull it off. He wasn’t overly impressed by traditional higher education; he had been there. He wasn’t overly impressed by the world of business; in fact, he dismisses most businessmen as intellectual lightweights. Thanks to the juvenile-delinquency program, he had customers begging him to offer a service. He didn’t merely see the need, the need saw him.

When the company went public, in 1994, it made John Sperling a rich man. In the years since, he has become a very rich man. In 2006, *Forbes* estimated his personal wealth at \$1.3-billion, ranking him 297th among the nation’s 400 richest people and making him perhaps the wealthiest educator in history.

Despite his wealth, Mr. Sperling’s lifestyle has remained relatively modest. His Phoenix home is well-appointed but not over-the-top. The paintings and sculptures reflect his magpie taste: a set of Warhol prints featuring a big rig in the entryway, a blue-tiled horse that caught his eye outside a store. Carved into his living-room ceiling is Apollo’s distinctive logo. The bookshelves are filled with art books—Magritte, Miro, Picasso. Classical music plays gently in the background.

He doesn’t have a driver (“too much trouble”), and he isn’t followed by a phalanx of attendants. He doesn’t take fancy vacations. He does regularly fly between Phoenix and San Francisco on a private jet, which is a definite luxury and not an environmentally friendly one. But, other than trips between his two homes, he doesn’t travel much at all. During breakfast at a hotel, he raises an eyebrow at the \$9.99 buffet. “For fruit?” he says, suspiciously. He orders coffee instead, half-decaf.

When asked if the *Forbes* estimate of his

worth is in the ballpark, Mr. Sperling replies, in no uncertain terms, that he doesn’t care. His son confirms this assessment, using the exact same language. Mr. Klor de Alva puts it this way: “It took him a long time to appreciate that he had a lot of money.”

At times he appears slightly embarrassed by his own wealth and status. When someone refers to him, teasingly, as “the pooh-bah,” he winces noticeably. He reacts with equal displeasure when others call him “Big John” or joke about his bank account. “I’m a normal person,” he says. “I just have a lot of money.”

He is not shy, however, about spending that money on the causes that matter to him. About a decade ago, he developed an interest in the science of radical life extension. For a newly affluent man of advanced years it was an understandable fascination.

Among those he enlisted to help him

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was Christopher Heward, a biologist involved in aging research. Together they started the Kronos Longevity Research Institute, whose original purpose was to treat well-to-do patients interested in not dying. That business had trouble attracting enough clients, and now the institute is focused mostly on research (though there is talk of reviving its original mission). The only real patient is John Sperling. Mr. Heward, who was diagnosed with esophageal cancer last fall, died earlier this year, but Mr. Sperling continues to follow the regimen he laid out.

At the institute, he undergoes regular testing of a range of bodily functions. His hydrocortisone level, creatinine level, white-blood-cell count—the list includes some 200 markers—are carefully measured and tracked to make sure nothing is amiss. The amount of testing has made Mr. Sperling, Mr. Heward said in an interview before his death, the world’s most studied human being. No other person has had more data collected on his or her physical condition, he said. And the institute’s staff is ever-vigilant about downturns in his health. “When we see

something heading south, we jump on it,” Mr. Heward said.

Mr. Sperling is careful about what he eats, exercises several times a week, and takes vitamins and supplements. But he is not, Mr. Heward insisted, obsessed with postponing death or convinced that these efforts will lead to a longer life. “I just do what they tell me,” Mr. Sperling says.

A related interest is cloning. In 1997, while having breakfast with a friend, Mr. Sperling was waxing lyrical about his aging dog, Missy, a border collie-Siberian husky mix. He wondered if it would be possible to clone her. That conversation led to his giving millions to researchers at Texas A&M University at College Station for the so-called Missyproject.

It worked, producing several clones of the now-departed Missy. Mr. Sperling owns one, which he says is “almost a copy,” with differences in coloring and behavior but with the personality that drew him to the dog in the first place. He calls her Missy 2.

While the cloning was a triumph, the attempt to spin off a pet-cloning business—“Genetic Savings & Clone”—was not. The company folded and re-emerged as the more generically named BioArts International.

Recently Mr. Sperling poured millions into a ballot initiative in California that would have forced the state to move toward renewable energy sources in the near future. It encountered vociferous opposition from utility companies and even from some environmental activists, who considered it too aggressive. Mr. Sperling is often accused of trying to move too quickly, a criticism he doesn’t mind.

The take-no-prisoners approach characterized his argument in a book he co-wrote in 2004, *The Great Divide: Retro vs. Metro America*. To oversimplify a data-laden treatise, Mr. Sperling and his four co-authors, three of whom are economists, called on progressives (“Metros”) to stop trying to win over conservatives (“Retros”), and instead ditch them and push forward a left-leaning agenda.

*The Great Divide* attracted lots of attention thanks to a quirky, expensive advertising campaign bankrolled by Mr. Sperling. The book was essentially self-published, which probably harmed its credibility but also allowed Mr. Sperling to have control over its distribution and promotion (it was available, for instance, as a free download).

These days, Mr. Sperling is not talking about radical life extension or presidential

politics as much. His preferred topic of discussion is solar energy. He has started a company called Southwest Solar Technologies Inc., which is developing a solar-powered system that uses heated air and turbines to generate electricity. In addition, a solar research center is in the planning stages.

In a meeting with his researchers last fall, Mr. Sperling was animated and engaged, seeming to revel in even the more technical details. He asked questions like “What’s the carbon footprint?” and—characteristically—“How long will it take?”

The former socialist runs his enterprises like a capitalist. While he is willing to whip out his checkbook, he wants the projects to be self-sustaining and ultimately profitable. He doesn’t seem interested in padding his already substantial fortune, but he sees profitability as a sign that an idea actually works. “We believe in the Jesuit concept of doing well by doing good,” he says.

Mr. Sperling has remained single since his second divorce, in the late 60s. In his book, he is frank about his relationships with women, including some who were married at the time and others who were colleagues. He admits that he finds it impossible to subordinate his wishes to those of someone else. He likes what he likes. That said, he has had an on-again, off-again relationship with Joan Hawthorne, a writer, for the past 40 years.

Peter Sperling, Mr. Sperling’s son from his second marriage, sees a connection between his father’s entrepreneurial tenacity and his personal life. “He writes his own rules for whatever game he tries to play, and that extends to women,” he says. “He isn’t willing to compromise.”

Peter and his father had a falling-out a number of years ago that led to a prolonged estrangement. It was, according to Peter, a family spat over priorities, with each side feeling slighted and put-upon.

What brought them back together was the dissatisfaction they both felt with how the company was being run under its then-CEO, Todd Nelson. Mr. Sperling had stepped back from the daily operation of the company, concentrating on his environmental causes and his writing. But Peter, who is on the university’s Board of Directors, and others urged him to return and, in effect, boot out the current leadership. In early 2006 Mr. Nelson stepped down. At the time, as is routine in the corporate world, the reasons for his departure were not made

public. Mr. Nelson called the decision amicable, but few believed that, and the change in leadership sent the company’s stock price tumbling.

Mr. Klor de Alva was among those who thought Phoenix had gone off-course. “There was a breakdown in the culture that John had built up,” he says.

One of the things in need of repair, in Mr. Sperling’s opinion, was the corporate style of governance. He wanted to make sure that employees could bypass the chain of command and go straight to the top if they had a complaint. It’s probably no coincidence that it was around this time that the university was accused of paying recruiters on the basis of how many students they could get to enroll—in violation of federal rules. The charge resulted in a nearly \$10-million fine from the U.S. Department of Education. A billion-dollar whistle-blower lawsuit against the university filed by two former admissions recruiters is set to go to trial next March.

Mr. Nelson turned down multiple requests for interviews. The CEO position is now shared by Charles B. Edelstein and Gregory E. Cappelli, both of whom were previously with the financial-services company Credit Suisse. Mr. Sperling is executive chairman of the board.

The details of the shake-up are not known, except to company insiders. Even members of the university’s board at the time don’t know the full story. It is certainly not unheard of for the founder of a company to have a hard time letting go of the top spot, but that doesn’t seem to be the case here. Mr. Sperling was enjoying his quasi retirement and talks now about wishing he had more time to write. But he believed that his company was in real danger and that he was the one who could save it. His belief in his own abilities is undiminished.

**S**O HOW is the company doing since his return? In January, Apollo stock had risen to \$90 a share but has since dropped to around \$60. That fluctuation, though, says more about Wall Street’s fickle opinion of for-profit institutions, according to a stock analyst, Jeffrey R. Silber, of BMO Capital Markets. When the economy took a nose dive, for-profit colleges—assumed to thrive during hard times—saw a corresponding boost. Now that the economy appears to be recovering, or at least not rapidly worsening, Phoenix and others have fallen out of favor.

Phoenix was once viewed as a can’t-

miss company. “People worshiped at the altar of Apollo,” says Mr. Silber. But that time has passed. Now smaller for-profit colleges are seen as having a better chance for explosive growth, while Phoenix is already so large that it’s a challenge for the company just to maintain its size. “They’ve been a victim of their own success,” says Mr. Silber.

Criticism is nothing new for Phoenix, or for Mr. Sperling, who long ago learned to wave it off. But there is a sense among those who run Phoenix that the university has never gotten its due, from the news media, from Wall Street, and particularly from the rest of higher education.

“For a long time Phoenix was viewed as the bogeyman that has devalued American higher education,” says Arthur Levine, president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and a former president of Teachers College at Columbia University. “It’s a ridiculous notion.” Ridiculous or not, that notion created an us-against-the-world ethos that hasn’t gone away, despite the company’s success.

Mr. Sperling is not, he will agree, especially inward-looking. Ask, for instance, how a professor with no business background managed to pioneer the for-profit education industry, and he’ll shrug: “I made it up as I went along.”

“I don’t think about the past much,” he says, as he fiddles with a Swiss Army knife. That may be true, but he certainly has no trouble remembering it, usually in precise detail. His autobiography is heavy on specifics and light on reflection.

It was reported a few years ago that Mr. Sperling would leave his personal fortune to longevity research. That is no longer the case (assuming it ever really was). He says his money will support the causes that he is interested in now, most of them environmental. “Anything that keeps America at the forefront of scientific research,” he says.

As for what others think of him, or how his obituary will read, Mr. Sperling professes not to care.

“They say I move too quickly from one thing to another. They say I’m eccentric. I don’t feel eccentric,” he says. “I’m indifferent to my reputation. I’ve never lost one minute of sleep over it.”

One small clue about who John Sperling is can be found in how he answers his cellphone—not with a sober “Hello” but with a playful “Fill me in! What be happening?” He’s eager to know what’s going on and, more important, what will happen next.