John G. Sperling, the activist, union organizer, educator-turned-entrepreneur who created University of Phoenix and ushered in for-profit higher education for working adult students, died on Friday, August 22, 2014, at a hospital in the San Francisco Bay Area. He was 93.

His death was announced Sunday by his son Peter Sperling, now Chairman of the company his father founded in 1973, Apollo Education Group, along with CEO Greg Cappelli.

Ever the self-aware and self-reflective academic, Sperling wrote prodigiously of his sometimes unintentional route to innovation and entrepreneurship, leading to the founding of one of the nation’s largest private universities with more than one million students, alumni, faculty and employees.

To be sure, Sperling’s intensity, tireless work ethic and self-professed “joy in conflict” found fertile ground in the often controversial for-profit higher education industry that he founded. With political antagonists throughout California and the American Southwest, Sperling sparred with newspaper editors, legislators, higher education accrediting bodies, and others he perceived as resistant to change. In his 1989 book *Against All Odds*, Sperling wrote of his efforts to design and operate a university for working adults:

“I was totally unprepared for the level of resistance and the passion of that resistance by professors and university administrators.” He recalls being told by the then vice president for development at the California State University in San Jose (San Jose State): “Educational bureaucracies are dedicated to the status quo, and the only time they innovate is when they have to. The primary spur to innovation is financial necessity. What you need to do is to find a school in financial trouble and convince the people running it that your adult education program will generate a profit beyond the cost of the program.”

Sperling later responded to criticism of his adult-focused model of for-profit higher education: “Why do people say such things about us? Fear! Fear! Fear! They’re scared to death of us.”

In 1972, Sperling founded his first company, the Institute for Professional Development, which helped mostly Jesuit universities, including University of San Francisco, create degree programs for working adults, primarily police officers and firefighters.

Later, after enrolling thousands of students, Sperling faced his first political opposition – and the resulting melee led to his founding University of Phoenix in 1978 in Arizona.
University of Phoenix was among the first institutions to develop distance education online, an effort Sperling drove with now vice chairwoman of Apollo Education Group, Terri Bishop, in 1989. Under Sperling's leadership, the institution pioneered the first electronic textbooks, introducing the world’s publishers to online higher education markets. The University took the educational philosophy known as the andragogical model into the mainstream. It redefined and developed the role of adjunct faculty to encompass working professionals. And in more than 30 states, University of Phoenix introduced the idea of local satellite campuses, deliberately positioned near freeways and major intersections to help adults pursuing their degrees after work.

Born January 9, 1921, in rural Northwest Missouri (Nodaway County), Sperling’s bouts with childhood pneumonia forced him to remain bedridden for months on end. He would later attribute his intense and lifelong restlessness to those unendurable periods of boredom.

Poorly educated and dyslexic, in 1939 Sperling left high school a virtual illiterate to join the Merchant Marine as a “wiper” in a ship’s engine room. During long journeys at sea, one of the ship’s engineers befriended him, teaching Sperling to read using books they would ask to borrow from their shipmates. Sperling was spellbound by classics such as Notes from the Underground and The Great Gatsby.

After serving in the U.S. Army Air Corps, Sperling earned an undergraduate degree from Reed College on the G.I. Bill and went on to attend the University of California at Berkeley, where he was awarded an Ehrman Fellowship to study at King’s College at the University of Cambridge. He earned his doctorate in 18th Century English Mercantile History in 1955.

Starting in 1960, Sperling served for twelve years as a tenured professor of history at San Jose State University. Awarded a federal grant, he explored the best methods to lower the juvenile delinquency rate by engaging a group of teachers and police officers, instructing them to work collectively to tackle specific problems.

His reputation and fortune firmly established after Apollo became a publicly traded company in 1994, Sperling deployed the power of his personality – as well as his significant wealth - to champion the cause of social justice, as well as advancing cutting-edge scientific research. His fierce battles with regulators and accrediting bodies across the United States awakened in him a passion for public policy. He became increasingly respected at the highest political levels, coming to be seen as a pragmatic liberal – a man who respected and admired the raw power of capitalism, while at the same time striving to protect and enhance economic mobility and social justice for all.

Sperling increasingly focused his “implacable opportunism, joy in conflict and…thrill from taking risks” on three activities: seawater agriculture, anti-aging medicine, and opposing the nation’s War on Drugs. Along with fellow billionaires George Soros and Peter Lewis, Sperling attracted attention for his work on drug law reform. Sperling, and his autobiography Rebel With a Cause, published in 2000, were declared by George Soros, a friend and compatriot, to be representative of “A great life and a great read…” Peter Lewis called him “a most remarkable man,” and of his book wrote: “Sperling describes the extraordinary power and potential of focused human intensity.”
His shared political concerns with Soros and Lewis led to an alliance aimed at undermining the so-called War on Drugs, which they decried for its focus on criminalization, as opposed to treatment, and its total dismissal of the possible health benefits of some prohibited drugs. Together, the trio sponsored and passed citizen backed initiatives in 17 states focusing on treatment and education, as opposed to jail-time, for non-violent offenders, while decriminalizing marijuana, especially for medical purposes.

In the fields of science, Sperling’s funding for research in plant genetics contributed to a new understanding of crop nitrogen efficiency and salt tolerance, which hold the promise of reducing toxic fertilizer run-off and bringing millions of acres of farmland back into useful production. His firm commitment to environmental causes compelled him to champion major solar initiatives in the states of California and Arizona as well as to establish a solar research facility in Arizona.

Sperling’s great curiosity and fascination with health matters led him to acquire various biotechnology companies and to found The Kronos Optimal Health Company in Scottsdale, Ariz., to which he attributed his long life and seemingly limitless energy.

Throughout the course of his life, the proudly combative merchant seaman was alternately described as a visionary and a rebel.

Sperling is survived by his long-time companion Joan Hawthorne, his former wife Virginia Sperling, and his son Peter, daughter-in-law Stephanie and two grandchildren, Max and Eve.