The Learning of Liberty

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Published by University Press of Kansas

Pangle, Lorraine Smith and Thomas L. Pangle.
The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders.

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Higher Education

The history of American higher education begins remarkably early, with the founding of Harvard College in 1636 to train Puritan ministers and civic leaders for the fledgling settlement of Massachusetts Bay. After Harvard, except for the establishment of William and Mary by Anglicans in 1693 and of Yale by Congregationalists in 1701, there were no colleges begun in the colonies until the middle of the eighteenth century. Then, commencing with the College of New Jersey (later Princeton) in 1746, a rapid succession of foundings left the infant country in 1788 with some eighteen degree-granting institutions. All, save the University of Georgia, were created under denominational auspices, though some, notably New Jersey and King's College (later Columbia), were more or less interdenominational in spirit. Even the College of New Jersey had as its chief motive the training of clergymen. But from the outset, as is evident in the Harvard Charter of 1650, the promotion of literature and the education of Christian gentlemen were important secondary goals of American higher education.¹

The proliferation of colleges beginning in midcentury was accompanied by modifications of the traditional course of study, which had integrated theological studies into a largely classical liberal arts program that consisted of grammar, rhetoric, logic, ethics, metaphysics, mathematics, physics, and astronomy, stressing the understanding of ancient texts in the original languages. Most prominent among the leaders of change was John Witherspoon, who devoted a substantial part of his curriculum at Princeton to the Scottish common-sense philosophy of Reid and Hutcheson, to history, and to the writings of political theorists such as Grotius, Pufendorf, Hobbes, Harrington, Locke, Sidney, and Montesquieu. His graduates, as noted earlier, included a distinguished group of early American statesmen, led by James Madison. In nearby Philadelphia, William Smith helped to develop Franklin's academy into the College of Philadelphia (later the University of Pennsylvania). The relation between Smith's educa-
tional vision and that of Franklin remains ambiguous, however. It was Smith who, against Franklin's design, limited the program of the English branch of the academy to English and mathematics and subordinated it to the Latin school, which became the preparatory school for the college. On the other hand, he did bring into the college curriculum many of the practical and scientific subjects whose study Franklin had championed. His capacious, three-year course of study ranged from Plato's *Laws* to the works of Bacon, Newton, Locke, and Hutcheson, and included navigation and architecture. Yet, in another departure from Franklin's principles, Smith made the entire program compulsory, for he continued to subscribe to the traditional ideal of turning out liberally educated gentlemen who could be useful to society in any calling. Indeed, it was the prescribed, compulsory curriculum, weighted heavily in favor of classical works, that remained the rule in postrevolutionary America. Even teachers were often expected to cultivate a gentlemanly well-roundedness rather than expertise in a specialized field, and they typically tutored one class at a time through the entire undergraduate program. This "tutorial" system was supplemented at Harvard by several endowed professorships, most notably one created in 1727 in mathematics and natural philosophy, which brought a higher level of scientific learning to the college. In 1767 Harvard abandoned the practice of assigning each tutor to one class, but at Yale and many other colleges it persisted well into the next century. Even where instructors specialized, students' choices of studies were few, and their opportunities to master the modern sciences and foreign languages were particularly limited. Until late in the nineteenth century, American faculties and libraries were small compared with those of the leading European universities, and the colleges remained too poor and provincial either to attract professors of the first rank from Europe or to prevent large numbers of American youth from traveling abroad for what they and their parents judged a better education. The lure of foreign universities only added to the worries many of the Founders already felt about the civic education of future American statesmen.

**Washington's Project of a National University**

Thus it was that several of the prominent Founders, especially George Washington, set their sights on a nonsectarian national university that might, with the support of the whole country, attain a preeminence that America's regional colleges had been unable to reach. They hoped that a national university would turn out leaders for the nation in every field but especially in politics, by providing a thorough training in American political principles and law. Benjamin Rush seems to have been the first to call for such an institution, in his "Address
to the People of the United States” in the January 1787 inaugural issue of the American Museum—a magazine that counted Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, Franklin, and numerous other illustrious Founders among its subscribers. The federal university Rush proposes would accept as students only those who had earned degrees in colleges of their respective states. Rush sketches a relatively broad curriculum, stressing “everything connected with government,” which embraced not only history and law but agriculture, manufactures, commerce, “and everything connected with defensive and offensive war.” In a somewhat more elaborate “Plan of a Federal University” first published in the Federal Gazette on 29 October 1788, Rush adds modern languages and the most practical elements of mathematics and science. But his departure from the traditional liberal arts university program is radical, even disdainful.

While the business of education in Europe consists in lectures upon the ruins of Palmyra and the antiquities of Herculaneum, or in disputes about Hebrew points, Greek particles, or the accent and quantity of the Roman language, the youth of America will be employed in acquiring those branches of knowledge which increase the conveniences of life, lessen human misery, improve our country, promote population, exalt the human understanding, and establish domestic, social, and political happiness.

Rush tacitly excluded religion (along with the classics) from his course of study, and this depite the fact that in these same years Rush was working energetically to found Dickinson College in Pennsylvania as a Presbyterian denominational school. It was for Dickinson College in the first place that Rush wrote his essay on the mode of education proper in a republic, which we discussed in our first chapter. In a letter to a future trustee of the college in 1783, Rush insists that “religion is necessary to correct the effects of learning. Without religion, I believe, learning does real mischief to the morals and principles of mankind.” He expresses grave doubts about “people who talk loudly of the increase of liberality and sentiment upon religious subjects since the war”: “I suspect that this boasted catholicism arises chiefly from an indifference acquired since the war to religion itself.” These last words help explain Rush’s silence on religion in the proposed federal university: Rush was convinced that interdenominational religion was the death knell of genuine religious fervor. He criticizes the University of Philadelphia, despite its being ostensibly Presbyterian, precisely for its excessively interdenominational spirit: “From its extreme catholicism, I am sorry to say that as no religion prevails, so no religious principles are inculcated.” Since he knew that a federal university could not possibly be denominational, it is understandable that he preferred to leave religion out of the curriculum altogether. The efforts to found Dickinson, and hence inspire other denominations to simi-
lar efforts, are consistent with the promotion of a purely secular national university when we give due emphasis to the fact that Rush had in mind a postgraduate institution: students matriculating at the federal university would already have completed a religiously based course of study at a private denominational college in their state.  

Rush's overall conception thus implied, whether he fully realized it or not, hostility to the establishment of state universities, either interdenominational or purely secular, and nowhere is the tension between Rush's and Jefferson's educational views more palpable. Moreover, Rush's silence on religion in the plan for a federal university only serves to highlight an underlying dilemma, which may be the deepest reason why the dream of a federal university was never realized: religion is crucial to an education that will support rather than undermine "the morals and principles of mankind"; yet to achieve an education that will foster unity in a nation of many denominations, religion must be kept out of the highest, most unifying, and in the long run most authoritative educational institution. National unity was the chief objective Rush had in mind when he outlined his plan for a national university. He argued that without a common education for the country's leading citizens, the union would be only a rope of sand. With characteristic disregard for what is possible in a democracy, Rush thus recommended that after thirty years, all political offices in the United States should be restricted to persons who had learned federal principles at this school.

At the Constitutional Convention held later in the same year that Rush's "Address to the People" appeared, Charles Pinckney, seconded by Madison, introduced a proposal that Congress be given express authority "to establish an University, in which no preferences or distinctions should be allowed on account of religion." The motion failed, although the only objection to it that Madison reports is the one raised by Gouverneur Morris—that this power was already implied in Congress's exclusive jurisdiction over the Federal City. On the other hand, Roger Sherman later declared in Congress that the convention had voted down the proposal because "it was thought sufficient that this power should be exercised by the States in their separate capacity."

Washington took up the idea of a national university during his presidency. In his First Annual Address to Congress, he made an impassioned appeal to the legislature to give its patronage to "the promotion of Science and Literature," but nothing came of his urgings. By 1795 he was more convinced than ever that the United States needed a central university. Finding no help forthcoming from Congress, he wrote to the commissioners for the District of Columbia, offering a substantial bequest, in the form of fifty shares in the navigation of the Potomac River, once the institution was established on a liberal scale "with a fair prospect of success." But the simple fact was that such a university needed government assistance, and Congress was convinced that its constituents did not
wish to be taxed for such a purpose. As David Madsen remarks, when summa-
izing the debates in Congress in 1796: “At this time, scant opposition to the na-
tional university was voiced on purely constitutional grounds. . . . Unquestion-
ably, the most formidable objection to the national university at this time was
that it would require large sums of money.”

Washington argued that in a well-endowed national university, in contrast to
America’s existing colleges, “the arts, Sciences, and Belles lettres, could be
taught in their fullest extent,” so that Americans would have in their own coun-
try “the means of acquiring the liberal knowledge which is necessary to qualify
our citizens for the exigencies of public, as well as private life.” The following
year, in his Eighth Annual Message to Congress, he reminded his audience of
the contribution that a truly eminent university would make to the prosperity
and honor of the United States. He regretted the practice of sending American
youth overseas for their education, not only because it derogated from the re-
spect that both Americans and foreigners felt for the United States, but more
importantly because of its effects on the patriotism of the students who went
abroad. Like many of his contemporaries, Washington was concerned about the
dissipated habits that young Americans were likely to acquire in Europe, but
what he stressed most was the danger to their political principles. In his letter to
the federal commissioners, he warns, “Altho’ there are doubtless many under
these circumstances who escape the danger of contracting principles, unfriendly
to republican government; yet we ought to deprecate the hazard attending ar-
dent and susceptible minds, from being too strongly, and too early prepossessed
in favor of other political systems, before they are capable of appreciating their
own.”

Washington appreciated the power of prejudice—or, more positively, the
power of direct, personal observation and experience in forming human convic-
tions. He expected that simply living in the United States during their formative
years would anchor students’ patriotism, as they felt the benefits and watched
firsthand the workings of good government. In a letter to Jefferson, Washington
explains his choice of the national capital as the location for the institution he
has in mind, underscoring the education in politics and law that can be gotten
more fully and accurately there than anywhere else. Students with political am-
inations will deepen their understanding of both principles and practice if al-
lowed the opportunity to observe Congress and, in the best case, to come to
know some of the national leaders personally. A well-designed curriculum for
the federal university could add immeasurably to this benefit by making the the-
oretical defense of republican government, side by side with its practical exposit-
ion and experience, a central part of the students’ education: “A primary object
of such a National Institution should be, the education of our Youth in the sci-
ence of Government. In a Republic, what species of knowledge can be equally im-
Important? and what duty, more pressing on its Legislature, than to patronize a
plan for communicating it to those, who are to be the future guardians of the
liberties of the Country?"

Moreover, there is one crucial lesson that Washington maintains can only be
well learned at a school that draws students from the entire country. This is a
genuinely national patriotism, without which no amount of knowledge can
make a good American statesman. Such love of country, Washington asserts,
can only arise when sectional jealousies are overcome—jealousies that he identi­
fies as among the worst threats to the young nation. As he observes to Hamil­
ton, daily intercourse and amity between northerners and southerners is the
best antidote for this evil.

That which would render [the university] of the highest importance, in my
opinion, is, that in the Juvenal period of life, when friendships are formed,
and habits established that will stick by one; the youth, or young men from
different parts of the United States would be assembled together, and
would by degrees discover that there was not that cause for those jealousies
and prejudices which one part of the Union had imbibed against another
part: of course, sentiments of more liberality in the general policy of the
Country would result from it. What, but the mixing of people from differ­
ent parts of the United States during the War rubbed off these impressions?
A century in the ordinary intercourse, would not have accomplished what
the Seven years association in Arms did: but that ceasing, prejudices are
beginning to revive again, and never will be eradicated so effectually by any
other means as the intimate intercourse of characters in early life, who, in
all probability, will be at the head of the councils of this country in a more
advanced stage of it.

Friendships of this kind, Washington claims in his Eighth Annual Message, will
further strengthen national unity by promoting “the assimilation of the prin­
ciples, opinions, and manners” of Americans.10

Yet despite his cogent arguments and substantial personal financial commit­
ment, Washington never found allies to carry out his plan, and being deficient
in formal education, he lacked the knowledge as well as the time to do it him­
selves. Although the idea of a national university was repeatedly raised in plans
and messages issued by and under every president up to John Quincy Adams,
nothing was ever done; and with the accumulation of silt and debt, the Potomac
Company went out of business in 1828, its property being acquired by the Ches­
sapeake and Ohio Canal Company. It is a measure of the absence of positive in­
terest on the part of Congress that the precise fate or final worth of the once-
valuable shares bequeathed by Washington for the national university remains
to this day a mystery, and an investigation in 1905 could not even discover a record in the Treasury of the shares' receipt.\textsuperscript{11}

A Military Academy

More fruitful was Washington's campaign for a military academy. As with a national university, he was persuaded that the country needed a military school for precisely the reasons that made it most reluctant to establish one: sectional and state animosities, a stingy short-sightedness regarding education, and a dislike and distrust of military power. As soon as the revolutionary war ended, Washington began urging the creation of an academy to preserve the hard-won lessons of the war. He stressed particularly the need to teach expertise in artillery and engineering, "unless we intend to let the Science become extinct, and to depend entirely upon the Foreigners for their friendly aid, if ever we should again be involved in Hostility."\textsuperscript{11}

Washington pressed the issue with congressmen during his presidency and included it in his Eighth Annual Message: "In proportion, as the observance of pacific maxims, might exempt a Nation from the necessity of practicing the rules of the Military Art, ought to be its care in preserving, and transmitting by proper establishments, the knowledge of that Art." Later he regretted that (perhaps especially in a democracy) "the want of many useful Institutions are not seen until they are felt." If Congress did perceive the potential need for military expertise, it was even more impressed by the havoc that elite officer corps had so often wreaked on civilian governments, and hence it proceeded reluctantly. Nevertheless, in December 1799, just two days before his death, Washington was able to convey to Hamilton his delight that plans were finally under way for beginning serious military instruction at the United States Army garrison at West Point, New York.\textsuperscript{13}

Yet in response to Hamilton's request for his ideas on the best organization and curriculum for the school, Washington had to confess that he had never given it much thought. Hamilton forwarded to President Adams his own elaborate prospectus for an academy that would give specialized instruction in all branches of the military arts, and this plan became the basis for the one that Adams submitted to Congress in 1800. Ironically, the enabling legislation was only passed under Jefferson, who as Washington's secretary of state had denied that the federal government had constitutional power to create a military academy. In keeping with the Jeffersonian outlook, the new school was far smaller and simpler than Hamilton had envisioned and focused less on the training of officers than on military engineering, which Jefferson hoped would contribute to scientific understanding and peacetime prosperity as well as to defense. That
Jefferson had no opposition to military instruction as such, but only to an elite national corps, is indicated by the later provisions for military training in the curriculum for the University of Virginia. Appealing to the example of the ancients, for whom “gymnastics” centering on military exercises “constituted the principal part of the education of their youth,” he called for instruction in arms to be “the frequent exercise of the students, in their hours of recreation.”

But so neglected was West Point in its early years that by 1810 President Madison had to appeal to Congress just to provide habitable buildings for the students. Reiterating Washington’s concern about American suspicion of a military establishment, he urged that “seminaries where the elementary principles of the art of war can be taught without actual war, and without the expense of extensive and standing armies, have the precious advantage of uniting an essential preparation against external danger with a scrupulous regard to internal safety.” Only with the War of 1812 did the country feel its deficiency in military expertise and consequently set West Point on the path to becoming a respected institution of higher education.

Jefferson’s Early Efforts on Behalf of Higher Education

Whereas Washington lent his support mainly to educational projects that would strengthen and unify the nation, Jefferson’s tireless work to improve American schools and colleges was mostly focused on his home state of Virginia. His first attempt to create an eminent modern university in Virginia came in 1779, with the Bill for Amending the Constitution of the College of William and Mary, which completes the system begun by his Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge of the same year. Jefferson argues that the college, supported with public funds and intended solely for the public benefit, can of right be altered by the legislature when it fails to meet the people’s expectations. Indeed, he charges that the legislature has a special duty to improve the college at a time when changes of government and the ongoing war call for “extraordinary abilities both in counsel and field,” so that “those who are to be the future guardians of the rights and liberties of their country may be endowed with science and virtue, to watch and preserve that sacred deposit.” To this end, he proposes streamlining the administration, making the governing board directly answerable to the legislature, and setting the school on a steadier financial footing.

A more responsive administration, Jefferson believed, would facilitate the reorganization and expansion of the curriculum that William and Mary needed to become truly useful to society. The faculty in 1779 consisted of two professors of divinity; two of philosophy, encompassing rhetoric, logic, ethics, physics, and mathematics; one of Latin and Greek; and one missionary to teach English,
arithmetic, and Christianity to the Indians. Later, in the Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson explains that the school of ancient languages "filled the college with children," discouraging more advanced students from enrolling there and rendering the school of philosophy almost useless. He proposes dropping the two chairs of divinity and broadening the rest of the program to fill eight professorships: moral philosophy, natural philosophy and natural history, ancient languages, modern languages, history, mathematics, medicine, and law. In place of the missionary to teach and convert the Indians, Jefferson thought it would be more fitting to send a scholar to study and record their languages and laws, which he believed could reveal much about the structure of language, the origins and migrations of peoples, and the wise ordering of society. This bill, like its companion school bill, was never enacted. The plan had alienated the Anglicans by threatening to weaken their hold on the college, while failing to assuage the jealousies of dissenting sects that still regarded William and Mary as a bastion of Anglicanism.

After he was elected governor of Virginia and appointed as a visitor of the college in 1779, Jefferson was able to effect some of his proposed changes without legislative action. This restructuring left five professorships, including one of natural philosophy and mathematics, one of moral philosophy, and what were apparently the nation's first professorships of modern languages, medicine, and law. But Jefferson was never satisfied with the limited scope of William and Mary. By 1800 financial losses and the removal of the state capital from Williamsburg to Richmond had caused the college to decline, and Jefferson lamented that it was "just well enough endowed to draw out the miserable existence to which a miserable constitution has doomed it." Increasingly, he sought opportunities to establish a completely new university on a more liberal plan.

One intriguing possibility arose in 1794 when the faculty of the University of Geneva, which Jefferson had long considered one of the world's best, found itself opposed by the revolutionary government there and contemplated removing as a body to a new location. Jefferson leapt at the suggestion of a friend of the college, the Geneva historian M. D'Ivernois, that the faculty might be induced to emigrate to America. Jefferson asked his friend Wilson Cary Nicholas to sound the Virginia legislature on the project. While interested, the members concluded that language barriers and expense made the plan unfeasible, especially given Virginia's still relatively sparse population. Regretfully, Jefferson reported this response to D'Ivernois, adding, "I should have seen with peculiar satisfaction the establishment of such a mass of science in my country, and should probably have been tempted to approach myself to it, by procuring a residence in it's neighborhood, at those seasons of the year at least when the operations of agriculture are less active and interesting."
Without holding out to D'Ivernois the hope that another American sponsor might be found, Jefferson wrote the same month to Washington, urging him to use his James and Potomac river shares to bring the Geneva faculty to the United States as the core of a national university. Washington, however, remained cool toward the idea, countering Jefferson's enthusiastic account of the faculty's intellectual brilliance with moral and political arguments that to him were more compelling. Not only were plans and funds for a national university still too uncertain to justify persuading "an entire college to migrate," he replied, but he doubted the benefits to America of "transplanting the Professors in a body," since "they might not be all good characters; nor all sufficiently acquainted with our language." Finally, Washington was concerned with the prejudices and jealousies such a move might excite, turning Americans against an institution whose faculty had been out of favor with the democratic party in its own country and perhaps also precluding "some of the first Professors in other countries from a participation." Jefferson was temporarily frustrated in his desire to secure an assemblage of eminent professors either for Virginia or for a national university, but he continued to look for opportunities along both lines.

During his presidency, Jefferson, like Madison after him, embraced the cause of a national university. Jefferson encouraged both Dupont de Nemours and Joel Barlow to draft plans for a university in Washington; Barlow's was considered by Congress in 1806 but never acted upon. Barlow had first become enthusiastic about the idea of a national university when he read a copy of Washington's last will and testament, which had been sent to him in France in 1800. He wrote to Jefferson and received a warm response, and when he finally returned to America, he drew up a prospectus which was printed and circulated by Samuel Harrison Smith, who also contributed to the writing. Barlow conceives of the national university as part of a broader "national institution" that will have "two distinct objects, which, in other countries have been kept asunder," but which "may and ought to be united." The envisioned "national institution" will be composed of both a university (or, indeed, a university system, since he raises the possibility of numerous campuses throughout the country) and a scientific institute for research, publication, and archival collection, along the lines of the Royal Society of London and the National Institute of France. As James Woodress says, "His plan, in summary, projected an institution very much like a great modern university where basic research, graduate training, and undergraduate teaching go on simultaneously." Barlow suggests that once the institution is in operation, the Patent Office as well as other government departments ought to be affiliated with or subordinated to it, and the military academy moved from West Point to become a division of the larger national institution. He further proposes a press that will publish textbooks to be used throughout the country. This last feature underlines what Barlow calls "the leading principle" of his plan: overcoming
sectional diversity through the "assimilation of civil regulations, political principles, and modes of education," in order to secure throughout the country "good morals and every republican virtue."23

Indeed, so centralized and overwhelming is to be the authority of the institution that it is somewhat surprising to find Jefferson among its enthusiastic supporters. At this point in his career, however, Jefferson as president was very much preoccupied with the need to strengthen national unity and the energy of the national government. He argued for extensive amendment of the Constitution (he remained a strict constructionist) to permit the federal government to involve itself in or take over the leadership of domestic improvements of all kinds, including preeminently higher education. In his Sixth Annual Message, he suggests that, although the public debt will soon be paid off, import duties on luxuries should be continued to finance this and other projects. He maintains that the patriotism of those who would pay the tax

would certainly prefer its continuance and application to the great purposes of the public education, roads, rivers, canals, and such other objects of public improvement as it may be thought proper to add to the constitutional enumeration of federal powers. By these operations new channels of communication will be opened between the States, the lines of separation will disappear, their interests will be identified, and their union cemented by new and indissoluble ties. Education is here placed among the articles of public care, not that it would be proposed to take its ordinary branches out of the hands of private enterprise, which manages so much better all the concerns to which it is equal, but a public institution can alone supply those sciences which, though rarely called for, are yet necessary to complete the circle, all the parts of which contribute to the improvement of the country, and some of them to its preservation.24

The scope of Barlow’s proposal is not its only innovation or remarkable quality. Explicitly appealing to the authority of Francis Bacon, Barlow places the knowledge of science and its technological applications at the heart of the institute’s mission. Like Bacon, moreover, he includes "moral and political philosophy" as perhaps the most important branch of modern science. The institute is to focus its energies especially on the study and improvement of the federal and representative forms of government, as crucial to the future not only of the United States but, in exemplary fashion, of freedom throughout the world.25

Continuing to be faithful to the rich breadth and depth of the original Baconian vision, Barlow insists that the fine arts ought to occupy a major place in the scheme, despite or precisely because they "have been but little cultivated in America." As the author of the Columbiad, an epic poem on the development of America, Barlow rec-
ognizes the need to confront the "opinion, entertained by some persons, that the encouragement of the fine arts savors too much of luxury, and is unfavorable to republican principles." He concedes the historical truth that the fine arts "have usually flourished most under despotic governments," but he counters that there has never before been a government formed on truly republican principles. He insists that far from being at odds with republican virtue, the cultivation of the fine arts promotes it. But his key arguments do not succeed in sustaining this thesis.

The fine arts, both in those who cultivate and those only who admire them, open and expand the mind to great ideas. They inspire liberal feelings, create a harmony of temper, favorable to a sense of justice and a habit of moderation in our social intercourse. By increasing the circle of our pleasures, they moderate the intensity with which pleasures, not dependent on them, would be pursued. In proportion as they multiply our wants, they stimulate our industry, they diversify the objects of our ambition, they furnish new motives for a constant activity of mind and body, highly favorable to the health of both. The encouragement of a taste for elegant luxuries discourages the relish for luxuries that are gross and sensual, debilitating to the body, and demoralising to the mind. The last, it must be acknowledged, are prevailing in our country; they are perhaps the natural growth of domestic affluence and civil liberty.

The last sentence draws our attention to the overwhelming difficulty: while eloquently marshaling moral arguments in favor of the cultivation of the fine arts, Barlow utterly fails to show how such cultivation, and indeed the moral virtues it produces, are in harmony rather than in tension with democracy. The difficulty increases as Barlow goes on to observe that taste in the fine arts is "peculiarly desirable in those parts of our country, at the southward and westward, where the earth yields her rich productions with little labor, and leaves to the cultivator considerable vacancies of time and superfluities of wealth." Do not the fine arts, cultivated for the sake of the aristocratic virtues Barlow celebrates, require at the least a life of true leisure, historically dependent on slaves or a lower, laboring class? Do they not require as well an inclination "to great ideas," a certain contempt for physical comfort and gratification, and a disdain for or ambition beyond commercial and productive activity—all of which are alien to the deepest spirit of modern democracy? These troubling and far-reaching questions are vividly exposed but never addressed in Barlow's discussion.

The University of Virginia

Jefferson seems to have first conceived the idea for a new state university around 1800, when he wrote to Joseph Priestley of his wish to establish in the central,
upper country of Virginia "an University on a plan so broad & liberal & modern, as to be worth patronizing with the public support, and be a temptation to the youth of other states to come and drink of the cup of knowledge & fraternize with us." Periodically over the next twenty-six years, and continually for the last decade of his life, Jefferson worked to realize this dream.

His efforts began to take definite form in 1814 when he was elected a trustee of the as-yet-unopened Albemarle Academy in Charlottesville, which he helped to transform into a more ambitious project under the name of Central College. While promoting Central College, he was also seeking legislative passage of his bills to create a school system and a state university. When in 1818 the school bill failed but provisions for a university were approved, Jefferson and his friends moved quickly to have Central College's grounds and endowment adopted as the basis for the new university. Securing a site in Jefferson's own neighborhood was of no small importance to him, since it allowed him to oversee every stage of the planning and construction. He was named rector in 1819 (at age seventy-five), though he shared responsibility with his colleagues on the board of visitors, all of them distinguished men. The others deferred to Jefferson, reasoning with James Madison that "as the scheme was originally Mr. Jefferson's and the chief responsibility for its success or failure would fall on him, it was but fair to let him execute it in his own way."  

Jefferson's meticulous involvement ranged from drawing up the curriculum and student regulations, to selecting the professors, to designing the buildings, ordering the bricks, and demonstrating for a stonemason how to chisel an Ionic capital. So pervasive was his influence that Emerson would later describe the University of Virginia as but "the lengthened shadow of one man." Jefferson himself chose a more affectionate term in the epitaph that he wrote for his own tombstone, commemorating his three most cherished achievements.

Here was buried Thomas Jefferson,
Author of the Declaration of American Independence,
Of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom,
and Father of the University of Virginia.

As the inscription shows, liberty was forever uppermost in Jefferson's mind—liberty from tyrants and superstition, liberty to rule one's life according to a free conscience and an unshackled mind—and so it was as he planned the University of Virginia. The school would foster the individual's liberty to study and think by offering high-level instruction in as many fields as possible, especially in the rapidly advancing modern sciences. It would support political liberty by offering sound political and legal instruction to future leaders. Finally, it would tie these public and private functions together by focusing on the knowledge in
every field that was evidently most useful for the business of life and the prosperity of society.  

The character and structure of the university followed directly from these purposes. It was to be a state school answerable to the legislature, but with extensive freedom for professors to specialize and for students to study what they wished. In the 1818 Rockfish Gap report, the basic plan according to which the University of Virginia was framed, Jefferson specified that the university "should, in all things, and at all times, be subject to the control of the Legislature." The University of Virginia was not to be the first chartered state university (that honor had gone to the University of Georgia in 1785), yet it quickly became the most successful and influential. The state universities that preceded it in Georgia, North Carolina, and elsewhere tended to fall under the power of sectarian groups within the state legislatures and to differ very little at first from traditional church-sponsored colleges. The University of Virginia was, by contrast, strictly nonsectarian. In the Rockfish Gap report Jefferson explained the absence of a professor of divinity as a necessary consequence of Virginia's dedication to religious freedom, although he included within the purview of the professor of ethics the proofs for the existence of God and the "moral obligations . . . in which all sects agree." In response to charges that the university was hostile to religion, Jefferson would later invite all the denominations to establish their own seminaries "on the confines of the University." There, he suggested, the students might enjoy the university's library and all its other resources—and there, as he wrote privately to Thomas Cooper, "by bringing the sects together, and mixing them with the mass of other students, we shall soften their aspersities, liberalize and neutralize their prejudices, and make the general religion a religion of peace, reason, and morality." None of the churches, however, chose to take up this offer.

Jefferson's aim was to found a university "where every branch of science, useful at this day, may be taught in its highest degree." Funds did not permit him to create a school as expansive as Harvard, with its twenty professors. As he told his colleague Joseph Cabell, however, he was confident that scholars of greater distinction could be acquired and that as the university took root, its faculty would increasingly be able to specialize in their chosen fields. "You know we have all, from the beginning, considered the high qualifications of our professors as the only means by which we could give to our institution splendor and pre-eminence over all its sister seminaries." To this end, he proposed "to draw from Europe the first characters in science" by generous salaries, "which would not need to be repeated after the first generation have prepared fit successors, and given reputation to the institution." Equally essential to assembling a prominent faculty, Jefferson thought, would be the "distinguished scale" and beauty of the university's buildings "and the promise of future eminence which these
would hold up, to induce them to commit their reputation to its future fortunes." Although Jefferson was to meet with many frustrations in his efforts to attract scholars of the first rank to the University of Virginia, the school was able to open its doors in 1825 with a respectable faculty of seven.  

One of Jefferson's setbacks in his search for professors is particularly revealing, since it shows a tension between his dual goals of public responsiveness and academic excellence or freedom. Jefferson was truly concerned with protecting academic freedom. He promised prospective faculty members that their tenure was "in fact for life," dismissal being possible only on a two-thirds vote of the liberal-minded and distinguished board of visitors. Academic freedom was also to be safeguarded by the equality among the faculty; instead of a potentially authoritarian presidency, Jefferson instituted an annually rotating chairmanship. But although the board did not dismiss any professors during Jefferson's lifetime, it was a board answerable to the state government and not the faculty. When the opening of the university was delayed for lack of funds, the visitors were forced to terminate the contract they had made with Dr. Thomas Cooper to teach science and law. It was public opposition to Cooper's religious heterodoxy, however, that prevented Jefferson from reappointing him in 1824 and that for a time damaged the cause of the university among the Virginia public. Jefferson himself clearly believed that a man's freethinking in no way disqualified him as a teacher.

Jefferson hoped that by assembling a group of fine scholars, he would enable the university "to draw to it the youth of every State, but especially of the south and west." To assure that students received the full benefit of their teachers' wisdom, he stipulated that professors should "follow no other calling," and that their salaries "should be a certain but moderate subsistence," supplemented by "liberal tuition fees, as an excitement to assiduity." He proposed to focus the university's resources on the most useful branches of knowledge, although, like Bacon, he construed utility broadly to include whatever promised to contribute to material well-being, good government, and even the contemplative and artistic pleasures of a cultivated life. Finally, he recommended allowing students a free hand in choosing the courses they thought they would profit most from.

As a devotee of modern science and philosophy, Jefferson was impressed by what he called "the wonderful advances in the sciences and arts" which had been made even within his own lifetime. In his 1800 letter to Priestley, he wrote of the irrelevance of "some branches of science, formerly esteemed," for "an institution meant chiefly for use," and he mentioned "oriental learning" as an example, although he did include the classics in subsequent plans for the university. Other disciplines, especially the natural sciences, he wanted taught more fully than they were in contemporary American colleges. But it was not enough to add more practical studies to the prescribed curriculum or to substitute them
for some of the traditional subjects. William Smith’s modernized program at the College of Philadelphia had been criticized, not without cause, for being so crowded and diverse that all of the courses risked becoming superficial. To do justice to any field of knowledge, Jefferson was convinced, one must make choices, and those choices were best left to the student himself, in consultation with parents and advisers.

I am not fully informed of the practices at Harvard, but there is one from which we shall certainly vary, although it has been copied, I believe, by nearly every college and academy in the United States. That is, the holding the students all to one prescribed course of reading, and disallowing exclusive application to those branches only which are to qualify them for the particular vocations to which they are destined. We shall, on the contrary, allow them uncontrolled choice in the lectures they shall choose to attend, and require elementary qualifications only, and sufficient age."

Jefferson thus proposed applying the customary college entrance requirements of Latin and Greek only to those who elected to study in the school of ancient languages. The board of visitors confirmed in their 1824 regulations Jefferson’s principle of leaving students free to attend the schools of their preference, although the students were expected to follow a more or less prescribed program in each of the schools they entered. Nevertheless, while the visitors welcomed at the university all who wished to study there, offering diplomas only to the most outstanding, they did bow to tradition in defining the requirements for these diplomas.

But no diploma shall be given to any one who has not passed such an examination in the Latin language as shall have proved him able to read the highest classics in that language with ease, thorough understanding and just quantity; and if he be also a proficient in the Greek, let that, too, be stated in his diploma. The intention being that the reputation of the University shall not be committed but to those who, to an eminence in some one or more of the sciences taught in it, add a proficiency in these languages which constitute the basis of good education, and are indispensable to fill up the character of a “well-educated man.”

"The Academical Village"

As soon as Jefferson’s friends had secured for the university a site in his neighborhood at Charlottesville, Jefferson threw himself into the construction of the
campus. He had long been persuaded that the usual plan of American colleges, consisting of one large building for all purposes, was “equally unfriendly to health, to study, to manners, morals, and order.” He created instead an open quadrangle, surrounded by pavilions for the professors to live and teach in, which were connected by student rooms opening onto covered walkways. Study for Jefferson was at heart a solitary affair, or at most a matter for a few friends to engage in together, with the elder offering the younger friendly guidance. While assembling scholars into what he expected would become a large institution, he wanted to maintain the close, informal teacher-student ties that had been important in his own youth and that he judged most conducive both to learning and to morals. To encourage this, he proposed an arrangement whereby each professor would have a part in choosing the students who would live near his quarters, whom he would then oversee and sit with at the head of their table.  

Jefferson’s unique design for the University of Virginia campus was the culmination of a lifetime of study in and original contributions to the field of architecture. Jefferson was, as he confessed to Madison, “an enthusiast on the subject of the arts,” but he justified the enthusiasm by adding that “it’s object is to improve the taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, to reconcile to them the respect of the world and procure them it’s praise.” Architecture was the art most suited to form the taste of a young republic, Jefferson thought, because it was both public and solidly useful, and because simple buildings of noble proportions could be built as inexpensively as ugly ones. While he himself loved painting and especially sculpture, he argued that their cost rendered it “useless therefore and preposterous for us to endeavor to make ourselves connoisseurs in those arts. They are worth seeing but not studying.”

Even as a young student Jefferson was collecting architecture books, and at twenty-four he began designing his home at Monticello, using the sixteenth-century Venetian master Andrea Palladio as his guide. On his European travels, architecture was second only to agriculture as an object of his attention. When a new state capitol was to be erected in Richmond, Jefferson seized the opportunity to form American taste by providing a design for it based on the Maison Carré at Nîmes, an austere Roman temple that he thought perhaps “the most beautiful and precious morsel of architecture left us by antiquity.” He also helped arrange for Jean-Antoine Houdon to create a sculpture of George Washington, life-size and in modern dress, to stand in the capitol where the Roman god had stood in the Maison Carré. With this novel adaptation of ancient temple forms for American public buildings, the classical revival in American architecture was begun.

Jefferson was also intimately involved in planning Washington, D.C. For the Capitol he urged “the adoption of some one of the models of antiquity, which have the approbation of thousands of years,” and for the president’s house, he
hoped that the finest modern structures might serve as examples. To educate the aesthetic judgment of the people and determine the style of the new city, he suggested distributing free engravings from his own plates of some of the most beautiful private buildings in Europe. As in the case of the University of Virginia campus, imposing buildings were to be more than ornaments: they were to overcome the country's provincialism and the low expectations that both Americans and foreigners tended to have for things American. A chaste, graceful style of architecture would lend dignity to the country's republican aspirations, conferring a sense of history and authority on the new nation's untried experiment in self-government. In the enabling legislation that created the University of Virginia, fine arts was the one category the legislature dropped from the list of subjects recommended in the Rockfish Gap report. Jefferson thereupon saved civil architecture by quietly including it along with navigation and military architecture in the school of mathematics. In fact, he designed the campus with the architecture students especially in mind. Although the whole was to stand with Monticello and the Virginia statehouse as a model for his countrymen, each pavilion was to provide for students a model of a different architectural order. "And these buildings being arranged around three sides of a square," Jefferson explained, "the lecturer, in a circuit, attended by his school, could explain to them successively these samples of the several orders." The University of Virginia campus, with the stately rotunda housing the library as its focal point, has attracted wide admiration, and in 1976 the American Institute of Architecture chose it as the finest architectural achievement in the United States since the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Student Discipline

One reason for Jefferson's unusual campus design was his desire for closer oversight of the students, both to promote learning and to prevent the insubordination and riots that were endemic among the mostly sixteen- to twenty-year-old youths who attended early American colleges. As Jefferson looked forward to the university's opening, he wrote, "The rock which I most dread is the discipline of the institution," and he consulted the regulations of other colleges and sought advice from George Ticknor at Harvard on how best to govern students. When it came to discipline, Jefferson was somewhat divided himself. On the one hand, he wanted students to have the freedom and responsibility of adults. He believed that if the faculty dispensed with petty rules and humiliating punishments, if they allowed students themselves to handle minor offenses through a board of censors, if they expected mature judgment in matters of conduct as in
choices of studies, the majority of students would prove themselves serious scholars and the rest would be influenced by their example. To the extent that he acknowledged a need for professors to govern students, he hoped that honor might be their main appeal.

It may be well questioned whether fear after a certain age, is a motive to which we should have ordinary recourse. The human character is susceptible of other incitements to correct conduct, more worthy of employ, and of better effect. Pride of character, laudable ambition, and moral dispositions are innate correctives of the indiscretions of that lively age; and when strengthened by habitual appeal and exercise, have a happier effect on future character than the degrading motive of fear. Hardening them to disgrace, to corporal punishments, and servile humiliations cannot be the best process for producing erect character. The affectionate deportment between father and son, offers in truth the best example for that of tutor and pupil.41

On the other hand, and in keeping with the idea of fatherly guidance, Jefferson wanted to shelter the students somewhat from the rigors of legal adulthood. In laying plans for Central College, he had advocated giving the school's proctor the powers of a justice of the peace on the college grounds, with authority to punish minor infractions of the law at his own discretion by such means as confining a student to his room. Jefferson explained that this authority would allow him to keep order and at the same time "shield the young and unguarded student from the disgrace of the common prison, except where the case was an aggravated one." This provision was unpopular and was not adopted at the University of Virginia, but the board of visitors did make another careful concession to the immaturity of students. In university inquiries into student misconduct, unlike in cases handled by the civil authorities, the faculty would not compel students to give evidence on oath. Jefferson supported this provision out of consideration for the common belief of schoolboys that it was dishonorable for them to bear witness against one another, even though he called such compunctions unfounded; he preferred to overcome sincere scruples by reason and not by force.42

In the event, the regulations adopted by the visitors in 1824 fell short of the principles Jefferson had enunciated. Whether he suffered a loss of confidence or was prevailed upon by his colleagues to change his mind, Jefferson approved a body of rules that was in many ways typical of the time. The university, for example, required parents to be notified of all their sons' absences from class, forbade students to hold or to attend "festive entertainments" except with the permission of their professors, and threatened for minor infractions such
punishments as “a seat of degradation” in the schoolroom, “removal to a lower class,” and “imposition of a task.” Perhaps in response to these regulations—perhaps simply because, as Honeywell says, the bulk of students were not serious-minded scholars but the “undisciplined heirs to slave plantations”—disorder erupted on the night of 1 October 1825. Fourteen masked and intoxicated students rioted on the lawn, insulting and throwing brickbats at the professors who tried to quell the disturbance. The board of student censors, which might have helped identify the perpetrators, was not functioning. To the contrary, a majority of the other students signed a petition supporting the rioters. Finally, on 4 October, the visitors called the entire student body before them in the Rotunda. On the board sat two former presidents of the United States, Jefferson and Madison, and a number of Virginia’s leading statesmen and jurists. Jefferson, aged and ill, attempted to address the students but was overcome with emotion. A colleague, Chapman Johnson, thereupon appealed so powerfully to the consciences of the offenders that all fourteen came forward to give themselves up. One of the ringleaders turned out to be a great-nephew of Jefferson himself. The board expelled him and two others, turning one over to the civil authorities, suspended eleven more, and allowed their supporters to retract their petition.43

Shortly after this incident, the rules were changed. The visitors gave the faculty more power, tightening the restrictions on student conduct in some respects but also dropping some of the more humiliating punishments. Most notably, they determined that prompt recourse to the law was the best means of keeping order for the future. In a letter to his granddaughter, Jefferson sums up his revised views on the place of fear and legal coercion in a college. He expresses satisfaction that the board’s vigorous exercise of authority and its referral of one student’s case to a grand jury has “struck a terror” into the minority of students who are inclined to make trouble.

A perfect subordination has succeeded, entire respect toward the professors, and industry, order, and quiet the most exemplary has prevailed ever since. . . . We have no further fear of anything of the kind from the present set, but as at the next term their numbers will be more than doubled by the accession of an additional band, as unbroken as these were, we mean to be prepared and to ask of the legislature a power to call in the civil authorities in the first instant of disorder, and to quell it on the spot by imprisonment and the same legal coercions provided against disorder generally committed by other citizens, from whom, at their age, they have no right to distinction.44

Although he was forced to retreat from his vision of the university as an affectionate family, Jefferson’s final position was more consistent with his desire to
treat students as responsible adults, capable of making use of the learning available to them and answerable, as all citizens, if they overstep the law. Jefferson's hope that students might exercise self-government by taking a share in enforcing the rules on campus was not immediately realized, but some years after his death an honor system was established at the University of Virginia, which proved successful and was imitated elsewhere.

The University Curriculum

In the Rockfish Gap report, Jefferson proposed that the university begin with ten professors. Their fields were to be: (1) ancient languages (Latin, Greek, Hebrew); (2) modern languages (French, Spanish, Italian, German, Anglo-Saxon); (3) pure mathematics (algebra, calculus, geometry of straight lines and curved, including "projectiles, a leading branch of the military art," military and naval architecture); (4) "physico-mathematics" (physics, astronomy, geography); (5) "physics, or natural philosophy" (chemistry, including "the theory of agriculture" and mineralogy); (6) botany and zoology; (7) anatomy and medicine; (8) government, political economy, the law of nature and nations, and history, "being interwoven with Politics and Law"; (9) civil law; (10) "ideology" or philosophy of mind, grammar, ethics, rhetoric, belles-lettres, and the fine arts.

As heavily loaded as some of these professorships were, Jefferson managed to preserve almost the entire curriculum when in 1824 the shortage of funds forced him to reorganize the subjects to fit eight schools, each to be staffed at the outset by a single teacher. Natural philosophy, botany, and zoology were combined into one school, and government and law into another, with history divided between the schools of ancient and modern languages. The fine arts were dropped, and the professor who would originally have taught them had his program further lightened by the removal of rhetoric and belles-lettres to the school of ancient languages. Jefferson's curriculum thus provided for both a college and two professional schools utilizing only eight professors. Taken as a whole it was a massively ambitious project, designed more for the future than for the constraints of the present.  

The Natural Sciences

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the curriculum was its emphasis on the natural sciences. Both as originally planned and as finally enacted, mathematics and science composed fully half of the university offerings. In a letter which Jefferson asked to have circulated among the faculty, he sketched the program that
he thought would best suit the majority of students. Since he believed that languages and mathematics provided superior intellectual training for boys in grammar school, he hoped most students would matriculate with a good foundation in these subjects. Classics could be continued and given a “last polish” in the first year of university. Mathematics could also be studied then and the following year, at which time students might begin to focus increasingly on physics, chemistry, and the rest of natural history.

Even in advice that he offered to young men preparing independently for the bar, Jefferson recommended beginning with mathematics, astronomy, geography, and natural philosophy, in order to strengthen the powers of their minds. His letters to young friends and relations enrolled at university often stress these same subjects as the most valuable courses they can take. Thus he counsels his future son-in-law, Thomas Mann Randolph, to attend lectures at Edinburgh in astronomy, physics, natural history, anatomy, botany, and chemistry, but not to waste time attending a professor of history, for “it is to be acquired from books” in the hours of relaxation from more demanding studies. He likewise advises a grandson at South Carolina College to study all the science that he can but to omit Blair’s Rhetoric, Watts’s Logic, Kames’s Elements of Criticism, Paley’s Moral Philosophy, Butler’s Analogy of Religion, etc., “which you can read in your closet after leaving College as well as at it.” To furnish students with the kind of scientific learning that cannot be easily obtained from books, he advises the creation of a botanical garden, stocked with trees of “distinguished usefulness,” an observatory or at least a model of the solar system, a chemical laboratory, and a dispensary for the medical school.

Chemistry was the one science that Jefferson considered most useful, especially for its applications to agriculture. In a revealing letter to John Emmett, the overburdened, discouraged young professor of chemistry, mineralogy, geology, rural economy, botany, and zoology, Jefferson urges him not to worry about turning out accomplished scientists but simply to start students on their way in each of the sciences and above all in chemistry, so that they might be prepared to attain eminence on their own. At other times, however, he suggests that the real goal is not to produce scientists at all but rather solid husbandmen.

In every college and university a professorship of Agriculture, & the class of its students, might be honored as the first. Young men, closing their academic education with this as the crown of all other sciences, fascinated with its solid charms, & at a time when they are to choose an occupation . . . would return to the farms of their fathers . . . & replenish and invigorate a calling, now languishing under contempt & oppression.
Of all the departments of the university, the school of law, government, and political economy was the one Jefferson planned for most carefully and the one that he found hardest to staff with a suitable professor. In the Rockfish Gap report, he set down as the first aim of the university “to form the statesmen, legislators, and judges, on whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend.” Since the courses in government and law were, like all those at the university, wholly voluntary, they would provide mainly a professional training for the few rather than a civic education for the students at large. Yet Jefferson did not assume that students would arrive at the university with a firm grounding in the liberal principles of the American regime, as is evidenced by the basic texts he expected them to study. Hence it was all the more essential for Jefferson that the professor be both a United States citizen and a learned lawyer who held strictly to the spirit and letter of the Constitution. Because the university’s salaries could not compete with lawyers’ fees, and because so many lawyers were Federalists or, as Jefferson thought, advocates of “consolidation,” someone meeting Jefferson’s criteria was doubly hard to find. When his first choice, Francis Walker Gilmer, was forced by ill health to resign, Jefferson decided to ensure the teaching of correct principles in the government courses by dictating the books to be used.

In most public seminaries, textbooks are prescribed to each of the several schools ... and this is generally done by authority of the trustees. I should not propose this generally in our University, because, I believe none of us are so much at the heights of science in the several branches as to undertake this; and therefore that it will be better left to the professors, until occasion of interference shall be given. But there is one branch in which we are the best judges, in which heresies may be taught, of so interesting a character to our own State, and to the United States, as to make it a duty in us to lay down the principles which shall be taught. It is that of government. Mr. Gilmer being withdrawn, we know not who his successor may be. He may be a Richmond lawyer, or one of that school of quondam federalism, now consolidation. It is our duty to guard against the dissemination of such principles among our youth, and the diffusion of that poison, by a previous prescription of the texts to be followed in their discourses.

The visitors believed that the selection of the law professor required special care, both because they were certain that they understood the true principles to be taught and because they saw grave threats to these truths from the errors or selfishness of political partisanship.
Jefferson accordingly drew up a list of prescribed books for the course in government and sent it to Madison for his suggestions. While Madison proposed adding Washington's Farewell Address as one of the selections, he was wary of mandating texts at all and hoped that the board could find a politically sound professor who could be trusted to choose his own books. He and his colleagues nevertheless approved Jefferson's recommendations, in a report that underscores their responsibilities as a public university.

*It is the duty of this Board to the Government under which it lives and especially to that of which this University is the immediate creation, to pay especial attention to the principles of government which shall be inculcated therein, and to provide that none shall be inculcated which are incompatible with those on which the constitutions of this State and of the United States were genuinely based, in the common opinion.*

The report then lists as appropriate texts Locke's *Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent and End of Civil Government*, Sidney's *Discourses on Government*, the *Declaration of Independence*, the *Federalist Papers*, the 1799 Virginia Resolutions on the Alien and Sedition Acts, and Washington's Farewell Address. For studying the law, Jefferson thought students should begin with Coke on Littleton.

*You will recollect that before the Revolution, Coke on Littleton was the universal elementary book of law students, and a sounder Whig never wrote, nor of profounder learning in the orthodox doctrines of the British constitution, or in what were called English liberties. You remember also that our lawyers were all Whigs. But when his black-letter text, and uncouth but cunning learning got out of fashion, and the honeyed Mansfieldism of Blackstone became the students' hornbook, from that moment, that profession (the nursery of our Congress) began to slide into toryism, and nearly all the young brood of lawyers now are of that hue. They suppose themselves, indeed, to be Whigs, because they no longer know what Whigism or republicanism means. It is in our seminary that that vestal flame is to be kept alive; it is thence it is to spread anew over our own and the sister States. If we are true and vigilant in our trust, within a dozen or twenty years a majority of our own legislature will be from one school, and many disciples will have carried its doctrines home with them to their several States, and will have leavened thus the whole mass.*

How could such prescriptions of books be justified in one who was such a champion of the freedom of the mind? Jefferson's conservatism in politics after
the Revolution is especially remarkable given his confidence that free inquiry would bring advancement in other fields, such as science. Indeed, as we have seen, he elsewhere indicated that he expected and welcomed ongoing progress in politics also, even periodic revolutions. After Shays's Rebellion in Massachusetts, which filled so many of his countrymen with gloomy forebodings, Jefferson wrote from Paris that "the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure." Jefferson valued such rebellions more for restoring lost liberty—or warning the rulers that the people were willing to fight to restore it—than for introducing new truths. But he also argued often that "the earth belongs to the living," that they and they alone must choose what government is right for them. On this theme, he wrote to Samuel Kercheval in 1816:

Some men look at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence, and deem them like the ark of the covenant, too sacred to be touched. They ascribe to the men of the preceding age a wisdom more than human, and suppose what they did to be beyond amendment. I knew that age well; I belonged to it, and labored with it. It deserved well of its country. It was very like the present, but without the experience of the present; and forty years of experience in government is worth a century of book-reading; and this they would say themselves, were they to rise from the dead. I am certainly not an advocate for frequent and untried changes in laws and constitutions. I think moderate imperfections had better be borne with; because, when once known, we accommodate ourselves to them, and find practical means of correcting their ill effects. But I know also, that laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times. . . . Let us, as our sister States have done, avail ourselves of our reason and experience, to correct the crude essays of our first and unexperienced, although wise, virtuous, and well-meaning councils. And lastly, let us provide in our Constitution for its revision at stated periods. . . . Each generation is as independent of the one preceding, as that was of all which had gone before. It has then, like them, a right to choose for itself the form of government it believes most promotive of its own happiness.82

But how radical were these advances that Jefferson anticipated in political understanding? In the letter to Kercheval he seems to be speaking more of the prudent application of principles than of basic principles themselves. Moreover, if he believed that experience would make future generations politically wiser, he
also feared that the passage of time would inevitably make them more corrupt. Paradoxically, then, while he defends his call for a new Virginia constitution on the grounds that each generation has a right to decide for itself, he later explains it to Kercheval as his wish to avail future generations of the virtue of the present (which is bound not to last), "to put into a chaste and secure form, the government to be handed down to them." The same tension or qualification appears in Jefferson's 1779 Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom. He concludes the bill with an explicit concession that "this assembly ... have no power to restrain the acts of succeeding Assemblies," yet he declares nevertheless that any revocation or abridgement of the rights therein established "will be an infringement of natural right." Despite his sometimes ardent statements about progress, Jefferson was confident that his generation had already grasped most or all of the fundamental truths about human rights and just government.  

At the university, Jefferson was prepared to require the teaching of these truths because he saw the university not as an end in itself but as a teaching institution designed to serve the country's needs. His statement that the visitors should allow most professors to choose their own texts "until occasion of interference shall be given" shows that Jefferson did not consider academic freedom in any field to be an intrinsic right of professors or of universities, but only a prudent rule to be followed as much as possible. Although he wanted the professors, once hired, to be reasonably secure from dismissal because of unpopular opinions, he still expected them to teach what the community decided it was best for the youth to learn. And Jefferson shared the common-sense understanding of his countrymen that America's freedom is only safe if the mass of citizens agree on fundamental principles, committing themselves to respect one another's basic rights and to submit to the rule of the majority, remaining loyal even in opposition. Jefferson saw that an undiscriminating openness to the critics of liberal democracy could easily lead to a rejection of those very principles of natural rights that justify intellectual freedom in the first place. Jefferson was confident that republican principles could withstand the harshest scrutiny when submitted to a reasoned and sober inquiry, but he was well aware that forces other than reason all too often sway the minds of youths, and that most people keep in adulthood whatever principles they have imbibed when young. Hence his advice to a young nephew on what histories to study: "Omit Clarendon as too seducing for a young republican. By and by read him."  

Whereas Jefferson thought of the other professors mainly as teachers but also as scholars who might advance knowledge by freely questioning all the received opinions in their fields, the task of the professor of law and government was at once more serious and less exciting: to prepare young men for positions of leadership and trust, by teaching faithfully the principles of the Revolution. But just as Jefferson himself felt more enthusiasm for the burgeoning sciences than for
law, could one not expect many of the most talented and ambitious youths to gravitate away from government to fields such as science and business, which still promised to reward bold innovation with riches and prestige?

Aside from his attempts to bring dignity to American public life with fine buildings and to invigorate local politics through the wards, Jefferson gave insufficient thought to the problem of drawing good people into public service. We have already seen his own views on the "splendid torments" of government. What is troubling is that his own policies did little to make political life less of a torment while they drained it of much of its splendor. Jefferson was from his youth a vigorous proponent of the idea that leaders were but servants of the people, to be summarily dismissed when they proved unfaithful. He worked hard to remove from government the vestiges of traditional monarchy or aristocracy, and with them went much of the honor that would have attracted high-minded, ambitious youths into government. His principles tended to end government's character as a club for gentlemen, opening it to talent from all classes and so bringing in men of little culture and uncouth manners. He advocated an extensive franchise, so that no one could corrupt the electorate with money, but that policy exposed leaders to the attacks and vicissitudes of the masses. Finally, he fought for the freedom of the press, which subjected leaders to the even more violent attacks of the newspapers. While these measures were essential to liberty as Jefferson understood it, he suggested no special honors to replace those that had formerly been accorded to statesmen.

Jefferson wanted citizens to serve their country out of love for the nation and a desire to make themselves useful. These were surely the passions that motivated Jefferson himself to continue in the nation's service for so long despite his distaste for public life: he found deep satisfaction in guiding the country successfully through troubled times, in laying a firm foundation for an infant polity, in doing what perhaps no one else was capable of. But was it not infinitely easier to acquire a satisfying sense of achievement when the slate had been swept clean, when the nation was casting about for a constitution and the states for new codes of law? Jefferson was encouraged in his labors on the country's behalf by the thought that history would judge him fairly even if his contemporaries did not and by the confidence that he would indeed be remembered as one of the greatest founders of a great nation. But what aspiring statesman could ever again hope for so much?

A decade after Jefferson's death, Abraham Lincoln was to wonder whether the passing of that Founding generation of heroes did not leave the most ambitious spirits with nothing to do but destroy an edifice that they could not improve upon. Although Lincoln suggested that men of intense political ambition would always arise, this expectation by no means implies a confidence that the most patriotic or principled Americans would continue to go into government.
Indeed, he was troubled by what he saw as a general decline in dedication to the Constitution and laws. A reverence for the Founding principles, Lincoln said, had hitherto been kept burning by the living history of the revolutionary patriots' struggle. As the voices of those patriots one by one fell silent, however, liberty could only be upheld if stirring memories were replaced with "other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason." Sober reason itself dictates an appeal to passions supportive of reasonable institutions, as is seen by Lincoln's subsequent appeal to the hearts of his hearers.

Let us have, above all, a reverence for the constitution and laws: and, that we improved to the last; that we remained free to the last; that we revered his name to the last; that, during his long sleep, we permitted no hostile foot to pass over or desecrate his resting place: shall be that which to learn the last trump shall awaken our WASHINGTON.

One cannot help a comparison with Jefferson's breezy assertion that "the earth belongs to the living." To say the least, it is not clear that Jefferson's education furnishes the materials for Lincoln's "pillars" of reasoned reverence.

Part of the problem with Jefferson's curriculum was that he was concerned to teach not only the principles that had united the Constitution's Framers but the specific interpretation of the Constitution that defined his Republican party—and southern Republicans especially—over against the Federalists. This partisan concern led him to design a course of study that was too narrow and defensive to give the best grounding in political science. Whereas in 1800 Jefferson had hoped to draw students from the whole country, by 1820 the controversy over Missouri's admission to the union had riveted his attention on the sectional struggle. Thereafter, though he never ceased to abhor slavery, Jefferson saw the university as primarily a school for southern students and hence a bulwark of the South in its assertion of states' rights. In 1821 he wrote that the university was intended for students "who desire the highest degree of instruction for which they now go to Harvard, Princeton, New York, and Philadelphia. These seminaries are no longer proper for Southern or Western students. The signs of the times admonish us to call them home. If knowledge is power we should look to its advancement at home where our resource of power will be wanting." Jefferson accordingly included in the reading list the 1799 Virginia Resolutions, without giving a fair hearing to the writings of great and intellectually rich political opponents such as his fellow Virginian John Marshall.

The same failure to examine both sides of a controversy appears in Jefferson's exclusion from the program of any premodern or even pre-Lockean political theory. To appreciate fully the strength of the principles their country is built on, students must examine not only the philosophers who articulated those
principles but the opponents against whose teachings they argued. In order for leaders to know the deepest limitations of their regime, so as to be able to moderate its most dangerous vices or compensate for its weaknesses, they must acquire a perspective outside it. Such a perspective is best gained through a sympathetic if critical study of alien, competing regimes or ways of life, especially those of the ancients. Basic questions about the nature of man, of freedom, and of just government were open and alive in Jefferson's day; he thought them through for himself and hence had a deep appreciation for his country's fundamental principles. But his proposed curriculum transmits to posterity the answers without the questions; it runs the risk of turning burning issues into dead dogma and leaving students with beliefs that are mere opinions. Jefferson was right to put civic education first in the school of government; he was right that a professor of government ought first and last to make the case for his own country's principles. But by making civic education too partisan and curtailing the liberal education that comes with studying fundamental alternatives, he left his students rooted in thin soil. There is indeed a tension between civic education and liberal education, but there is also a mutual dependence: civic and liberal education need each other if scholars are to possess the moral seriousness without which philosophy becomes an academic game, and if civic leaders are to be inspired with a patriotism that is reasoned and moderate.58

This fundamental deficiency of Jefferson's conception of higher education in politics and law is illuminated by a contrast with the conception outlined by James Wilson in his 1790 lecture course inaugurating the nation's first law school, at the College of Philadelphia. Wilson shared with Jefferson a deep uneasiness at the prospect of American judges, lawyers, and civic leaders being educated through the study of texts and legal precedents that were mainly English and hence unrepresentative. Like Jefferson, Wilson deplored in particular the virtual monopoly over legal education exercised by William Blackstone's Commentaries. Wilson felt, as strongly as did Jefferson, that a new, distinctly American, and thoroughly republican legal curriculum had to be designed. He was convinced that at the core of the curriculum there had to be Lockean political philosophy—especially those revolutionary, republican, and individualistic elements of Locke that had been questioned or rejected by Blackstone and Hume. Despite the burden of his duties as an associate justice of the Supreme Court, Wilson accepted with enthusiasm the challenge of initiating a formal law school lectureship, convinced that it was through the law school and its lectures that Americans might self-consciously strike out to forge a new, homegrown outlook in legal theory and education. But he saw this great effort as anchored in a dialogue or debate with the greatest pre- or anti-Lockean theorists.

After summarizing his basic disagreement with Blackstone and quoting and rebutting a crucial passage from the Commentaries in which Blackstone criticizes
and rejects Locke's doctrine of the right to revolution, Wilson draws back to consider the place Blackstone ought to occupy in the education of young American law students.

As author of the Commentaries, he possessed uncommon merit. His manner is clear and methodical; his sentiments—I speak of them generally—are judicious and solid; his language is elegant and pure. In publick law, however, he should be consulted with a cautious prudence. But, even in publick law, his principles, when they are not proper objects of imitation, will furnish excellent materials of contrast. On every account, therefore, he should be read and studied. He deserves to be much admired; but he ought not to be implicitly followed.

Wilson then applies these educational reflections to the history of political theory generally. This admonition, he says, "should not be confined to William Blackstone: it ought to be extended to all political writers." "The cause of liberty," Wilson explains, and the cause of "the rights of men" require that "in a subject essential to that cause and to those rights, error should be exposed, in order to be avoided." Illustrating and continuing this pedagogy, Wilson turns to a critical examination of Grotius's theory of sovereignty in its opposition to Lockean theory; and in his second lecture, Wilson extends his critical engagement to arguments with Aristotle, Hobbes, Pufendorf, Barbeyrac, and even the great Locke, insofar as Lockean writings (unintentionally, Wilson believes) "facilitated the progress, and have given strength to the effects of scepticism" in religion.59

One may take issue with Wilson's interpretations of and arguments against the classic texts in political philosophy. One may accuse him of having too blithe a confidence in the superiority of Lockean political theory and of moving too superficially and in too harmonizing a spirit through the complex quarrels that divide and animate the history of political philosophy. But it is impossible to deny that his lectures breathe, and in all likelihood conveyed to students, a zest for intellectual debate and a consequent joy in learning and reading that surpass anything comparable to be found in the educational reflections of Jefferson. Rare among the Founders, Wilson proved in action that he knew what it means to deliver before students a memorable, erudite, controversial, and hence thought-provoking lecture on the theoretical principles of the American Constitution.

Languages, History, and Philosophy

Jefferson did of course make some provision for a classical liberal education in the schools of ancient and modern languages and moral philosophy. It was this
portion of the university, however, that Edward Everett found most inadequate in his unsigned critique of the Rockfish Gap report, published in 1820. As actually established, the school of ancient languages included advanced Latin and Greek, Hebrew, rhetoric, belles-lettres, and ancient history and geography. Jefferson ensured that Greek and Latin would be studied on a high level by setting minimal qualifications for this school and by specifying that the university was the place where students’ “classical learning might be critically completed, by a study of the authors of highest degree.” He expected this completion to require the first year for most of the students who chose it. They would then, with a gentlemanly grounding in classical literature and history, proceed to more practical studies that would fit them for an active life.60

Everett’s objection to this plan is that it will allow neither professor nor students sufficient time for a proper classical program. Even in its original form in the Rockfish Gap report, where the school of ancient languages is assigned simply the Greek, Latin, and Hebrew languages, Everett argues that the duties are too extensive for any one man to discharge with distinction. He compares the university’s provisions for the classics unfavorably with “the most ill-provided” grammar schools, suggesting that in its rush to teach everything, the university will sacrifice thorough instruction in the highest classical authors. He goes on to compare the American universities with those on the European continent, which, he explains,

are properly speaking professional schools; places to which young men who have carried their classical studies to a high degree of perfection, at gymnasia or high schools, resort for the study of their profession, of law, physic or divinity. It is here too, that they prepare themselves for another profession, scarcely known with us, viz. the Classical. All who look forward to places of instruction at the universities or the academies, who propose to get their living as professors or school-masters, together with the students of theology, to which class in fact the other for the most part belongs, these all make philology in its widest sense a great and constant study.61

The school of modern languages included French, Spanish, Italian, German, Anglo-Saxon, and modern history and geography. Of these languages, Jefferson in the Rockfish Gap report describes French as the most valuable, both as “the language of general intercourse among nations, and as a depository of human science.” Spanish he recommends for its importance in communicating with the other countries in the hemisphere and for reading early histories of America. He praises the many superior works written in Italian for their subject matter and especially for their fine style and composition, and German books for their erudition and scientific value. Anglo-Saxon was a favorite pastime for Jefferson. In
1798 he wrote an essay on it with a view to facilitating its instruction. He believed, as he put it in the Rockfish Gap report, that a few weeks' study of this language would give students a deeper knowledge of English and a "full understanding of our ancient common law." This comment prompted the following response from Everett:

We were a little grieved, if we may say so without disrespect toward the distinguished name at the head of this report, to hear of "the few weeks of attention, which would alone be requisite for the attainment of the Anglo-Saxon."... We know not which most to wonder at, the good nature with which discreet people suffer pretenders to confound learning a language, with learning something of it; or the hardihood with which the experience of the world is still set at gross and open defiance, and itinerant sages are imagined to have a magic key, to unlock that chain, by which the gods have bound labour and acquisition together.

While Jefferson himself mastered many languages, he may here again have overestimated his students’ capacity for mature, serious application. Literature and especially modern literature received short shrift in the early University of Virginia curriculum, as in the reading lists that Jefferson drew up for young relations and friends. Summing up Jefferson's attitude toward English literature and education in English, Philip Bruce has observed:

It is remarkable how slightly he depended for recreation on the variety and beauty of the literature of his own language. He seems to have been indebted to it only for the clarity and precision of his flexible style. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he had no familiar knowledge of Shakespeare.... The profound impression which he made on the character of the University of Virginia is revealed in no particular more plainly than in the history of its school of languages. His interest in the ancient tongues caused him to employ the ablest scholars for those professorships who could be procured from Europe; but the nearest approach to an English chair was a barren school of Anglo-Saxon.

Partly based on a principle of economy but partly reflecting Jefferson’s low opinion of most literature, he provided in the final plan that the language of each country should be taught mainly through reading its history in the original sources. For Jefferson agreed with Locke that history, in contrast to poetry, was a subject that "a Gentleman should not barely touch at, but constantly dwell upon, and never have done with." Jefferson himself loved historical readings, and all the more as he grew old. As he mused to Nathaniel Macon in 1819: "I
feel a much greater interest in knowing what has passed two or three thousand years ago, than in what is now passing. I read nothing, therefore, but the heroes of Troy, of the wars of Lacedaemon and Athens, of Pompey and Caesar, and of Augustus too, the Bonepart and parricide of that day. . . . I slumber without fear, and review in my dreams the visions of antiquity.” To Anne Randolph Bankhead in 1808 he wrote: “Tacitus I consider as the first writer in the world without a single exception. His book is a compound of history and morality of which we have no other example.” Jefferson made it clear, however, that he regarded history as a subject that could as easily be studied independently as with a professor.64

The school of moral philosophy was to comprise “mental science generally,” including ideology (by which Jefferson meant the science of ideas), grammar, logic, and ethics. Jefferson’s estimation of ancient philosophy was unorthodox and mixed. He identified himself as an Epicurean and accorded the highest praise to the writings of Epicurus, his ancient disciple Lucretius, and his modern disciple Gassendi. Although he showed respect for Socrates as presented by Xenophon, he looked with considerable skepticism on the Stoics, dismissed Aristotle’s Politics as irrelevant to modern conditions, and regarded Plato as worse than useless. As he put it in a letter responding sympathetically to John Adams’s expression of disgust with Plato:

Fashion and authority apart, and bringing Plato to the test of reason, take from him his sophisms, futilities, and incomprehensibilities, and what remains? In truth, he is one of the race of genuine Sophists, who has escaped the oblivion of his brethren, first by the elegance of his diction, but chiefly by the adoption and incorporation of his whimsies into the body of artificial Christianity. His foggy mind, is forever presenting the semblances of objects which, half seen thro’ a mist, can be defined neither in form or dimension. Yet this which should have consigned him to early oblivion really procured him immortality of fame and reverence.

Later he observed to William Short: “I consider the genuine (not imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us. Epictetus, indeed, has given us what was good of the Stoics, all beyond, of their dogmas, being hypocrisy and grimace.” To law students he recommended the study of Seneca and “the Stoic Cicero’s” De Officiis, but little else in ancient philosophy.65

Jefferson had considerable respect for modern moral philosophy, especially its Epicurean aspects, but his own study of ethics had persuaded him that it would be superfluous for a student to attend lectures in this subject, since nature has provided man with a moral sense sufficient to guide him. In a similar spirit, he
wrote to Dr. Thomas Cooper regarding his grandson, "It would be lost time for him to attend professors of ethics, metaphysics, logic. The first of these may be as well acquired in the closet as from living lecture; and supposing the two last to mean the science of the mind, the simple reading of Locke, [Destutt de] Tracy, and [Dugald] Stewart will give him as much in that branch as is real science."

This remark helps explain Jefferson's original willingness to put mental and moral philosophy together with grammar, rhetoric, belles-lettres, and the fine arts in the hands of one professor, combining subjects that, as Everett points out, usually comprise at least four great departments of themselves.66

Jefferson's belief that history and philosophy did not really need to be studied in the classroom is more an indication of his own immense capacity for independent learning than a sign of disregard for these subjects: his library had numerous volumes of philosophy and especially history, including all the Greek and Latin classics that were available in printed editions in his day. Some of his judgments, notably on the high merit of Xenophon's portrait of Socrates, were far superior to the judgments of the greatest German classical scholars of his time, such as B. G. Niebuhr—scholars to whom Everett tended to look with uncritical admiration. Jefferson's keen grasp of politics prevented his reading of the classical historians from ever becoming so naively enthusiastic as that of such modern commentators as Hannah Arendt or J. G. A. Pocock. Nevertheless, particularly in the case of the philosophers, if not also the historians, one gets the impression that Jefferson too easily mined the ancient writers for his own uses, a bit like the medieval Romans mined the ancient monuments for marble; he seems rarely to confront an ancient work as a whole that commands respect, as a worthy and instructive opponent. Jefferson perhaps rightly felt more kinship with Pericles and Cicero than with the politicians who swarmed the United States capital, yet he also declared that the ancient historians had little to teach us about government. For all his love of classical learning, Jefferson in the end recommended it mainly as an ornament; he never made the case that there was anything compelling in Greek and Latin books that could not be gotten from another source. As a result, he damned the study of classics by faint praise, and to the extent that he was influential, he contributed to making liberal education in the United States less open to the challenge of the classics and hence less truly liberating.67

The Influence of the University of Virginia

In improving the level of teaching and learning in southern schools and colleges, the University of Virginia had a considerable impact. When the university opened, its students tended to be poorly prepared because of the uneven
quality of grammar schools in the region. As Jefferson had hoped, many of the university's graduates went on to found new schools and colleges, and University of Virginia graduates were particularly prominent in the establishment of the University of Texas. But in other respects, the university did not have the influence that its rapid rise to prominence would have led one to expect.68

Although the most successful state university, Virginia was founded in an era that witnessed the resurgence of religiosity and a renewed interest in sectarian rather than state-sponsored colleges. In the words of the leading historian of this aspect of American higher education:

Although the secular patterns of eighteenth century European thought received a considerable welcome in certain circles in American life during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary eras, and were reflected in the establishment of a few collegiate institutions during the latter part of the eighteenth century, the forces of orthodox religion, after a temporary setback during the Revolution, regained their ascendancy over the cultural life of this country at the turn of the century through a complex of circumstances. . . .

It still remained to be seen, however, whether the American people were to choose to establish state universities, and thus give their main support to the centralized forms of state education so strongly advocated during the revolutionary era, or to prefer in the next half-century to provide for themselves small denominational colleges, widely scattered over the country, and closely fashioned after local and particular desires and aspirations. . . . The reasons that led the people of this land to choose, in the main, at that time the latter alternative can be understood only in the light of the religious developments that took place during the early decades of the nineteenth century. . . .

The "denominational era" of our history was ushered in with a series of revivals that spread from the settled communities of the East to the pioneer settlements on the frontier. There took place a veritable "Second Awakening" throughout the land. In the early decades of the century, the older colleges in the east became the centers of a deep and fervid religious life, and the newer colleges on the frontier exhibited signs of true evangelical zeal.69

The turning point was the landmark Dartmouth College case, decided by the Supreme Court in 1819. "Until the time of the Dartmouth decision," Donald Tewksbury writes, "the future of denominational colleges, and private colleges in general, was in the balance." The contest was a largely partisan one, between the Federalist and Congregational defenders of the original college charter on the one hand, and the Republicans who asserted the people's right to transform
Dartmouth into a state university on the other. Here, as in the case of William and Mary, Jefferson defended the government’s right to alter corporations chartered and partially endowed by it for public purposes. The claim of the college to the sanctity of its charter was championed by Dartmouth alumnus Daniel Webster and upheld in a celebrated opinion written by Chief Justice John Marshall. Chancellor Kent later argued that this case was crucial in protecting the autonomy of American charitable, religious, educational, and commercial institutions. The immediate effect in education was to bolster the movement toward church-sponsored colleges, thus delaying the creation of other great state universities until after the Civil War.70

It thus was Benjamin Rush’s, rather than Jefferson’s, vision of state higher education that predominated. Rush, it will be recalled, had argued strongly for denominational colleges. He had done so because he was convinced, contrary to Jefferson, that denominational Protestant religion was the moral backbone of the country and that the various sects should be entrenched and strengthened through their shared, decentralized control over higher education. As he explains in his “Hints for Establishing a College at Carlisle in Cumberland County, Pennsylvania”:

Every religious society should endeavor to preserve a representation of itself in government. The Presbyterians suffered greatly under the old government from the want of this representation. At present they hold an undue share in the power of Pennsylvania. . . . To secure a moderate and just share in the power of the state it becomes them to retire a little from offices and to invite other societies to partake of them with them. To prevent the effect of these combinations against them reducing them to their ancient state of oppression and insignificance it becomes them above all things to entrench themselves in schools of learning. These are the true Nurseries of power and influence. They improve talents and virtue and these by begetting wealth form the ingredients that constitute power in all countries.

But if American colleges were overwhelmingly denominational, they were not for that reason narrowly or intolerantly sectarian. One must bear in mind what Frederick Rudolph calls “the paradox that while most colleges of the period were founded by denominations, they were also forbidden either by charter or public opinion to indulge in religious tests for faculty or students.”71

Jefferson’s curricular ideas, like his organizational theories, were of limited influence, at least in the next two generations. The elective curriculum at the University of Virginia attracted considerable attention. George Ticknor of Harvard and Francis Wayland of Brown both visited to see it in operation. Ticknor had been, with Edward Everett, one of the first American students to attend a Ger-
man university for advanced studies. Soon after returning to take up a new chair of modern languages at Harvard, he proposed a major restructuring of the college. He called for opening courses to nondegree students who wanted to gain specialized knowledge, organizing the college into departments, classing the students in each subject by proficiency and not by year, and allowing some choices of study for degree students. His proposals were briefly implemented in 1823 but never fairly tried. Only in his own department of modern languages were they continued, much to the satisfaction of teacher and students alike.

But it was neither Virginia nor Harvard that was to set the curricular tone for American higher education in the early nineteenth century. Princeton and above all Yale were producing an abundant stream of graduates who set out to found new colleges in the South and West, and these men, more pious and more traditional than their colleagues from Cambridge and Charlottesville, were firmly committed to the classical, prescribed curriculum. They found a credo in the 1828 Yale report, a document written by Yale president Jeremiah Day, classics professor James Kingsley, and a committee of the Yale Corporation, in response to a rising tide of questioning of the old collegiate ways. With its cogent arguments, this paper effectively settled the issue in favor of the classical curriculum until after the Civil War.

"The two great points to be gained in intellectual culture," President Day argues, "are the discipline and the furniture of the mind; expanding its powers, and storing it with knowledge. The former of these is, perhaps, the more important of the two." The report then defends Yale's comprehensive, prescribed curriculum in general and the classical portion of that program in particular, mainly for their capacity to train the mind. A narrow education can produce skilled specialists, but a combination of such subjects as mathematics, science, ancient and modern literature, logic, and mental philosophy is needed to produce a balanced intellect that can approach any problem with discrimination and judgment. In response to the question of Jefferson and others—"Why should a student waste his time upon studies which have no immediate connection with his future profession?"—Day observes that "every thing throws light on every thing." The man who is both eminent in his profession and generally knowledgeable "has an elevation and dignity of character, which gives him a commanding influence in society, and a widely extended sphere of usefulness." Precisely in a self-governing republic, citizens need a breadth of understanding and a capacity to speak persuasively. Precisely in a practical, active, enterprising nation, it is "highly important, that this bustle and energy should be directed by sound intelligence, the result of deep thought and early discipline."

The Yale report continues with Professor Kingsley's argument that, far from being irrelevant to modern life, a study of the classics "forms the most effectual discipline of the mental faculties. ... not only the memory, judgment, and rea-
sioning powers, but the taste and fancy are occupied and improved.” He speaks of the power of Greek and Roman writers to give a taste for what is “elevated, chaste, and simple.” Finally, the report states that classical literature is valuable for providing models of patriotism and noble action, wise precepts, “the knowledge of a most extraordinary and unexampled people,” and deeper understanding of human nature. One argument that is not made in the Yale report is that ancient texts offer an alternative vision of human excellence that needs to be confronted by Americans, including in particular a rare glimpse of the truly philosophic life.74

Clearly the Yale faculty revered the classics, and their preference for the classically based curriculum rested on considered reasons. What is less clear is that the teachers succeeded in conveying these reasons to students. According to Julian Sturtevant, a Yale graduate from that period, instruction was conducted mainly by tutors in daily recitations whose chief effect was to demonstrate whether students knew their lessons. “The tutors were good drill-masters, but they often lacked culture and the true literary spirit.” He recounts that Professor Kingsley, who occasionally instructed their class, once “astonished us by closing a series of readings of Tacitus’ Agricola, by saying, ‘Young gentlemen, you have been reading one of the noblest productions of the human mind without knowing it.’ We might justly have retorted to these severe and perhaps deserved rebukes, ‘Whose fault is it?’” The educational system at Yale, bolstered by the Yale Report, prevailed almost universally for the next generation. But by relying so heavily on drill rather than discussion, by stressing in their report the intellectual training of students more than the ideas they would encounter in the classics, Kingsley and his colleagues left themselves open to the criticism that subjects such as the natural sciences could develop the intellect equally well, while providing more useful knowledge.

It was President Charles Eliot of Harvard who took up this argument and led the transformation of America’s best colleges into world-class universities. Eliot, who was inaugurated in 1869 and held office for forty momentous years, gradually abolished the prescribed curriculum and gave students complete freedom to choose among a rapidly expanding number of specialized courses, taught by a faculty that was increasingly involved in original research. Recitations were dropped in favor of laboratories, lectures, and discussions, and the library was expanded and made more accessible. Like Jefferson, Eliot wanted the students’ education to proceed as much as possible on the basis of their own internal direction rather than external compulsion. The growth of the sciences and social sciences in the nineteenth century had increased the pressure for an elective system. America’s commitment to utilitarian education was manifested in the Morrill Act of 1862, which established land-grant colleges to teach practical sciences,
and this trend ensured that the Harvard elective system promulgated by Eliot would be widely copied.

Eliot did go further than Jefferson in two crucial respects, however, which Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison has judged unfortunate. Instead of allowing students to choose the schools in which to study, leaving it to the professors to devise a coherent program within each subject, as Jefferson had, Eliot let them elect any combination of individual courses they wished, subject to a few prerequisites. More significant in the long run was the fact that Eliot dropped not only Latin and Greek requirements for undergraduates but Latin as an entrance requirement for science students and—over the strenuous protest of other university presidents—Greek as an entrance requirement for all students. The classical education that Jefferson himself had cherished and that, through the rigorous gymnasium or high school, provided a foundation for the German universities Eliot admired ceased to be the rule for educated Americans. But if he destroyed the old gentleman's education, Eliot did set a standard among American universities for teaching all of the sciences in the highest degree, thus bringing finally to fruition one of Jefferson's greatest aspirations.