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Educating Citizens: Have We Kept the Founders' Ideals for Higher Education?

By HANS ZEIGER

Engraved above the colonnade of the Angell Building at the University of Michigan are the words of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787: "Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged" (*Northwest Ordinance*). The irony of this inscription is that religion and traditional morality are not highly regarded at the University of Michigan. The University of Michigan was one of the major outposts in the campus wars of the 1960s, the legacy of which is a campus culture of multiculturalism, sexual obsession, and political correctness. Not even knowledge is prevalent in the postmodern university, if by knowledge we mean an integration of the disciplines into a coherent reality. Instead, we witness a fragmented world of deconstruction and trivial pursuits where the black perspective, the gay perspective, or the female perspective takes the place of a single reality. Each perspective is weighted by a political agenda (typically to the left), and professors, many of them having come of age with the protests of the 1960s, unload politics into the classroom.¹ Though higher education is more politicized than ever, it is doing little to prepare students for responsible engagement in politics. Since there is no shared philosophy about "religion, morality, and knowledge," we may ask whether "good government" is still possible.

Indeed, in a republic, civic duty begins with education. "In the United States, the sum of men's education is directed toward politics," Alexis de Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America* (292). Such a statement would have thrilled many of the founders, who hoped that educational institutions, especially at the university level, would be aimed toward the cultivation of republican civic duty. In their rhetoric about higher education, the founders were careful to shape the discussion around the political demands of the new republic. This article will demonstrate that the founders cared deeply about higher education as the means to prepare the rising generation of American leaders. We may analyze today's university in light of the founders' ideal.

Institutional education in the early agrarian republic was not widespread, and college education was rare. Before the revolution, the colonies could boast but nine colleges, all of them small and some unstable (Rudolph, *Essays on Education* xvii). In the colonial setting, higher education was directed mainly toward the training of ministers and Christian gentlemen (Pangle, 146).

¹ Some readings on this topic include Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), Martin Anderson's *Impostors in the Temple: A Blueprint for Improving Higher Education in America* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1996), Alan Charles Kors and Harvey A. Silverglate's *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses*, and Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990). Challenging many of these arguments is John K. Wilson's *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

With the revolution came a shift of political and vocational ambitions in higher education. A fresh spirit of American national identity and democracy gave rise to new colleges and to enthusiastic boosters of civic purpose in the mission of American higher education (Rudolph, *The American College* 34). Between 1782 and 1802, nineteen colleges that exist to this day were chartered in the states (35-36). Symbolic of the departure from Old World traditions, King's College changed its name to Columbia College in 1784 (43). According to Frederick Rudolph, there obtained in early America "a widely held belief that the colleges were now serving a new responsibility to a new nation: the preparation of young men for responsible citizenship in a republic that must prove itself, the preparation for lives of usefulness of young men who also intended to prove themselves." (*The American College* 43)

Not only did the colleges take interest in the founding of the republic, the founders were highly interested in the colleges. Awareness of the political possibilities in young America spurred on a discussion among the founders about the prospects for republican education. George Washington, James Madison, Noah Webster, and other founders were interested in the idea of a university. Several of the founders—Thomas Jefferson, John Witherspoon, Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Franklin—were directly involved in the founding or leadership of a college or academy. Less remembered intellectuals—Robert Coram, Simeon Doggett, Samuel Knox, Samuel Harrison Smith—contributed to a public discussion of educational theory.

Education was important to the founders because it was closely linked to republican self-government and duty. A recent historian, Eugene Miller, writes that "innovations in the forms and structure of government could not be made durable without attention also to the proper education of the citizenry" (71). In the founders' estimation, learning and liberty were inseparable. Benjamin Rush posited that "a free government can only exist in an equal diffusion of literature," and Thomas Jefferson considered that the surest prevention of tyranny was "to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large" (qtd. in Miller, 73-74). Both the head and the heart were involved in the founding view of educational purpose. Noah Webster declared, "Education, in a great measure, forms the moral characters of men, and morals are the basis of government." Some founders went further than others in their expectations of civic education. "Let our pupil be taught that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property," Rush wrote in "Thoughts upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic" (14). Drawing on the examples of ancient Greece and Rome, Rush believed that rigidly disciplined and diligently instructed children could be fitted for dutiful citizenship.²

It was proper for government to promote education, since education was the means of promoting good government and happiness, a sentiment affirmed by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. In his 1797 "Remarks on Education" for the American Philosophical Society, the newspaper editor Samuel Harrison Smith listed three categories of benefits resulting from republican education. First, "The citizen, enlightened, will be a free man in its truest sense" (qtd. in Rudolph, *Essays On Education* 220). As a self-governing and virtuous individual, the citizen would know both his rights and his responsibilities. Second, the educated citizen would contribute to the political welfare of the country by his participation in its institutions and deliberations on the development of its political philosophy. In turn, finally, the nation would be an example to the world and "the most powerful nation on earth, if that example exhibit dignity, humility, and intelligence" (222-223).

² None of this was to exclude traditional liberal education. Against the opinion of thinkers from Cato to Rousseau that liberal education and democracy are fundamentally in opposition, the founders believed that "liberal education is fully compatible with republican civic education," according to Miller (Miller, 71, 82). Though liberal and civic education were not interchangeable, literary and scientific instruction rooted in the classics cultivated good intellectual habits, preparing the mind for "republican duties and virtues," while civic education went further to instruct youth in patriotic duty and moral virtue (Miller, 83-84).

Though education was not included in the Constitution, it was certainly a priority for the founders; where they differed was on the degree of government involvement in education. Since childhood education remained firmly a matter of local and private concern, discussions among the founders about state and federal educational establishment centered on higher education.

For many early state leaders, higher education was a priority. The North Carolina Constitution of 1776 decreed that “all useful learning shall be duly encouraged and promoted in one or more universities” (qtd. in Rudolph, *The American College* 36). Opening its doors less than two decades later, the University of North Carolina departed from the traditional liberal arts curriculum with courses in chemistry, agriculture, mechanic arts, belles lettres, and modern languages (41-42). Three other states—Georgia, Tennessee, and Vermont—established state universities by 1800 (36). In addition to founding the Presbyterian-affiliated Dickinson College, Benjamin Rush drafted his Pennsylvania “Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools” to include a single state university, which would draw young scholars from four colleges to the state capitol to study “law, physic, divinity, the law of nature and nations, economy, etc.” (Rudolph, *Essays on Education* 4). Temporarily, the state of Pennsylvania managed the University of Pennsylvania, while New York and New Hampshire respectively held temporary management of Columbia and Dartmouth (Rudolph, *The American College* 36).

Thomas Jefferson spent much of his life building a state university in his home of Virginia. Jefferson began his campaign to improve higher education as a professional visitor of his alma mater, the College of William and Mary. In 1779, Jefferson initiated administrative reforms at the college, hoping to enable academic change in conformity to the increasing demands of the growing nation (Pangle, 153). In this he failed. As early as 1800, Jefferson wrote to Joseph Priestly with his plans for the University of Virginia, which would be a community of full-time professors and students highly focused on the natural sciences (Hofstadter & Smith, 175-176). It was another eighteen years before Jefferson organized a committee on education at a tavern in Rockfish Gap. The committee devised a plan, which, with some modification, has become the comprehensive educational system Americans know to this day: local elementary schools for all children, secondary academies for vocational instruction, and a state university for the intellectual aristocracy. The university would be secular. Its program of study would include ancient and modern languages, mathematics, physico-mathematics, physics, botany and zoology, anatomy and medicine, government and political economy and history, municipal law, and Ideology (rhetoric, ethics, belles lettres, fine arts) (Slosson, 86-88).

For a minority of the founders, concern for civic higher education became the basis for suggesting a national public university. Benjamin Rush first proposed the idea in the January 1787 inaugural issue of *American Museum* magazine. The university would be something like a graduate school, following upon the completion of state-based colleges, emphasizing “everything connected with government” and “everything connected with defensive and offensive war” (qtd. in Pangle, 148). In radical distinction from the classically-based European colleges, “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” (148). Fearing that bland ecumenical religion was harmful to genuine devotion, Rush thought it best to exclude religion from the national university altogether (148-149).

Later that year, the Constitutional Convention took up the idea of the university after Charles Pinckney proposed it. It was not adopted, in part because the federal city already had authority to establish such an institution, in part because of a conviction that universities were to be state institutions, not federal (Pangle 149). James Madison, who seconded Pinckney’s resolution, continued to advocate a national university for years, writing as president in 1810 that such an institution would promote patriotism, intellectual enlightenment, republican

manners and sentiments, mutual understanding, and “social harmony.” Most importantly, “it would contribute not less to strengthen the foundations than to adorn the structure of our free and happy system of government” (Hofstadter & Smith, 177).

President Washington was the most avid promoter of a national university. Increasingly, Washington feared that foreign influences and radical ideas would find their way into American politics by the tendency of upper class youth to study at European colleges. America’s republican integrity depended on a national institution dedicated to the teaching of “the arts, Science and Belles lettres” that would avoid the perils of foreign education. Further, a national university would promote national union “by assembling the youth from the different parts of this rising republic, contributing from their intercourse, and interchange of information, to the removal of prejudices which might perhaps, sometimes arise, from local circumstances” (Allen, 605-606).

In his First Annual Message to Congress in 1790, Washington explained that knowledge is the foundation of “public happiness,” especially in a republic. Education helped to secure “a free constitution” by teaching the principles of public confidence, rights and duties, the distinctions between just and oppressive authority, between liberty and license (Allen, 469). Washington asked Congress to investigate the place of education in the federal government. Without Congressional action by 1795, Washington offered his plan for a national university to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, promising fifty shares of navigation on the Potomac River if they could establish a university in the federal city (605-606).

At the end of his second administration, Washington made one last challenge to Congress to act on a national university plan. The preparation of the nation’s future leaders ought to be a priority, he indicated in his Eighth Annual Message. A national university would result in “the assimilation of the principles, opinions, and manners, of our countrymen, by the common education of a portion of our youth from every quarter.” By educating young men in “the science of *government*” regardless of their regional backgrounds, the “prospect of permanent union” would be real (Allen, 505). The nation’s rising statesmen would form deep friendships and learn the same ideas of political science from the world’s best teachers. As Washington wrote to Alexander Hamilton, young leaders in a community of learning “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” (649). Not only liberty, but union also, was tied to the establishment of proper institutions of learning. In his Last Will and Testament, Washington endowed the fifty shares of Potomac navigation toward the establishment of the national university (670). The national university never came about.

Though discussion of a national university continued for decades, federal involvement in higher education was negligible until the passages of the G.I. Bill of 1944, the National Defense Education Act of 1958, and the Higher Education Act of 1965. In the early republic, the successes in government-sponsored universities were felt in the states. State university systems endure to the present.

This brings us back to the starting point of this article. The sad condition of many academic departments at most universities is that they have ceased to give allegiance to the “Great Tradition” of Western civilization that the American founders believed essential. Though higher education is more public than ever before, the actual underpinnings of the public good—what Walter Lippmann called “the public philosophy”—have become privatized to the smaller corners of the universities (*The Public Philosophy*). If one wishes to have an education in “religion, morality, and knowledge” these days, he must go off to a small liberal arts college or a traditional religious school.

Allan Bloom confronted these problems eloquently twenty years ago, in *The Closing of the American Mind*. Since America is not an aristocratic society, he wrote, “[t]he greatest of thoughts” are not and have never belonged exclusively to a narrow group of people in the upper

ranks of American society. Rather, “The greatest of thoughts were in our political principles but were never embodied, hence not living, in a class of men. Their home in America was the universities, and the violation of that home was the crime of the sixties” (Bloom, 321). The principles of liberalism, whether defined as the sort of education one must have to be free, or as ideas about liberty on which the nation was founded (the two, after all, are related), have had no greater opposition in the United States than what Dinesh D’Souza has called “illiberal education” (*Illiberal Education*).

The founding fathers believed deeply in the possibility of forming citizens, and they promoted a civic and moral education that would sustain American self-government. Religion, morality, and knowledge—comprising the public philosophy—are no less essential to public happiness and good government today than they were in 1787. Even if illiberal education has triumphed over liberal education, those of us who seek the public good may yet see to it that good education “shall forever be encouraged.”

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