

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

PROBING EDUCATION

Series Summary and Conclusions (Part One) *Amazing Ancient Universities and some of their Superstars*

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Editor's note: This Jefferson Publications series examines ancient universities that thrive today – how they have shaped the world and influenced education methods, citizenship, the meaning of government, and cultural life. Today's article is the first of two parts summarizing the series offering conclusions.

21st in a Series

FEZ – Here we have some surprising results – the oldest Western university is Muslim. It's in Morocco, is still going strong, and it was founded by a woman, **Fatima al-Fihri**. Fez taught many subjects of importance then and now. It had some remarkable early alumni from very different backgrounds: Maimonides (1135/1138–1204), Jewish philosopher; Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), Sufi philosopher; Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), historian and philosopher; Leo Africanus (1494–1554), author; and Nicolas Clénard (1495-1542), a professor at the Christian university of Leuven in Belgium. There was religious diversity and women too.

The main point is the educational methodology that was developed early on in Western history from the Greeks through the early Muslim universities and in Christian foundations as well – it was, and we hope can remain where it is in place, polymathic. It taught a lot of subjects that all students studied and some of these universities tried to relate them to each other. Religion cannot be understood without law; medicine cannot be practiced without history. Include

vice versa and put all major subjects under the same criterion. We need doctors, scientists, and engineers who know some philosophy and psychology and can relate them together, and vice versa.

There is also the notion of teaching the “whole” student, not just portions of his or her intellect. Psychological, philosophical, historical, legal, and other dimensions of life need to be factored in to help develop a complete social person who has a strong self-understanding and sense of citizenship.

These are obvious points we can make right for renewal. It may help current problems between men and women and the difficulties of interreligious dialogues to realize that long ago we had the start of some sense of equality between men and women. Founding a mosque and a college were generally accomplished by men – in Fez we had two sisters.

Educationally, we are introduced to a way to bring young students into a broad relationship with learning. The early universities were not trade schools preparing students for jobs. With some exceptions of clergy, doctors, and lawyers, students were given a broad education. And as we have seen, Al-Ghazali insisted on general education as well as specific Qur’anic education for the clergy. If they paid attention in college (and I suspect they did by working together in small groups rather than huge lecture halls), most students would have emerged with a wide knowledge of their religious traditions, the law, history, literature, and philosophy.

Ibn Khaldūn – How do we teach history to our students both in school and college? Ibn Khaldūn paralleled Toynbee’s philosophy of history in that history was about the whys and purposes of civilizations, not just a collection of facts with no meaning. That is hugely important for our educators.

We see in Ibn Khaldun a remarkable product of medieval Islamic education from Fez and elsewhere. He was skilled in many subjects and was able to use his education to help understand Islam and participate in politics as well.

Can we apply this to college education today? Indeed, we can, and we need to do this. We should not neglect vocational training, but alongside that can and should be a lot of space and time for general knowledge so our students have a better understanding of the world they live in and will help them be better citizens for the future. It isn’t hard to show how badly we are doing it at present. **BOLOGNA had a remarkable structure.** Students controlled most of their life and study, as was the case in early Oxford after revolting against the faculty of Paris. Cambridge University was founded after student revolts in Oxford. Once in a while, students are in the moral forefront of a college or nation. That is a good tension to deal with.

Bologna had two early remarkable woman, Bettisia Gozzadini (13th century) **and Laura Bassi** (18th century) – a lawyer and a physicist. Bassi's appointment at age 65 to the chief of experimental physics with her famous husband as her assistant was unique in university life as far as I know. Italy was not known for feminist breakthroughs, but here was a great one. And it was in Europe's oldest university, and so often the older the university is the more conservative. Not so with Bologna.

Dante – We can learn much from the great man. Dante's education was "classical" in that he studied Greek and Roman history, their stories, their myths, along with their philosophies combined with a deep interest in the Bible and theology. His personal teachers were of the highest order. He wanted to merge faith and reason. He used Muslim thinkers, a rarity in the West today. He learned and entered politics from observation and participation. He was an activist. He applied his learning to his own life and to the religion and politics of the city and nation. He was a pioneer in the partial separation of church and state but realized that both were necessary, and both were from God. He identified with Virgil and used Florence, from where he was unjustly expelled, and forced to search, as Aeneas had done, for a better city, in his case the heavenly city. He used the love of Beatrice to guide him during her life and after her death. Love itself provides not only questions but answers to life's deepest problems.

PARIS – The University of Paris at its beginnings had the faculty of Arts as the lowest in rank, but also the largest as students had to graduate from there to be admitted to one of the higher faculties. This made some guarantee that their education was broad, and specialization was later in their academic career.

Simone Veil – Here we have a Holocaust survivor who was given due recognition by France and the rest of the world. The University of Paris can be proud of its product, and so much of what she stood for, given her terrible experiences, were for the good of the world. She used her education and experience to the benefit of humanity.

Thomas Aquinas – Like previous authors in these articles, Thomas had the insight to integrate academic disciplines and was fluent and creative not only in theology but also law, war, social ethics, economics, and Islam. Many of his original and derived ideas are in use today.

I also gathered over time that most of our great Western thinkers and our best institutions have been willing to take on outside ideas from cultures other than their own. That has caused real progress, and it mainly came through our great universities.

Today most of us have accepted that the Greeks were our founding fathers in philosophy and Rome was our legal foundation. Roman law was taught in Oxford for first year students to give them the basis of English law. But there is a lot of reluctance to learn from the Muslim world. The excuse is that they had their day in the Middle Ages and haven't progressed since then. That is baloney. I think there is a prejudice that started long before 9/11 that has relegated them to the intellectual and social and religious background – people to be converted, not listened to.

The same can be said about much of current politics. There are many who are against allowing new social or political thought. The debate over Critical Race Theory is a good example. Though there are countless definitions of the phrase, it mainly means looking at American history to see how slavery and Jim Crow have affected our national lives. In American history, healthcare, medical, legal, and law enforcement professions were complicit and culpable for the maintenance of slavery and other racist systems, to name a few. But some states and college boards have banned the word “systemic” (definition: some individual phenomenon – an illness, a social problem – that affects every part of an entire system) which helps us understand who we have been and who we are. They hate the word “woke.” Nobody can agree on that definition, but it is along the lines of being alert to racial prejudice, economic injustice, and gender rights.

The French students in the 1968 protests (and the streets were dangerous when I was there) had a major voice in educational reforms. May 1968 ushered in both the women's movement and the sexual revolution in France. Workers got higher salaries, better working conditions and stronger unions in response to their protest demands. The students' demands were diffuse – more philosophical than political. Free speech was also a crucial point for the students, and we are still fighting this battle in our universities today.

Sometimes, not always, students get it right.

OXFORD – Roger Bacon held orthodox and unorthodox views and was able to use his education at the Universities of Oxford and Paris to apply to many different and various fields of study and action. His interests and output were prodigious. But he was open to both old and new knowledge and set the stage for the remarkable rise of science in the world and can help us now in politics and philosophy to take account of other religions and cultures e.g., Islam, and not just one's own. That is something that needs to be stressed, especially in our day. The Oxford undergraduate course Politics, Philosophy, and Economics (or Psychology) is a modern example of integrative learning, and that model is spreading, thankfully.

Isaiah Berlin was a great talker. We need to think up ways to get people talking again, not on X (formerly Twitter). And regarding the continual

judgment of professors and their departments by the weight (not brilliance) of publications, we are losing our soul to build up the body (a contemporary heresy). Like Jesus and Socrates, Berlin did not publish much, but like them he thought a lot and talked a great deal and had an enormous influence on our times. And, oh yes, exuberance helps as well.

Berlin stressed cultures as unified and wholly separate entities, webs in which each belief is bound together with every other belief. This is always important for teaching – to find how one idea affects another. This refers to intersectionality, which studies the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group.

Two Concepts of Liberty gives us an old Hebrew truism – freedom from and freedom for: we are freed from oppression (Egypt) and then freed for service to God and humanity (Wilderness experience of growing up as a nation). Berlin, as a Jew, didn't realize the parallel to his ancient though secularized belief, but to me it seems obvious. This brings up the question of what a university is for. Is it just for transmission of knowledge and methods of finding out, job training etc., or does it have a moral purpose, not only looking at oppression in the past, but also looking for ways forward for a society? I think all three are on the cards.

Finally, Berlin's work on value pluralism is crucial to today's world. So many want a closed society in which a person or institution or one big idea, such as religion, dominates the nation. There is no room left for dissent. This is the worst of the old Puritan tradition, though it has been sometimes fostered by Catholicism as well. Sinclair Lewis (Yale) and Margaret Atwood (Harvard) have shown how this can happen in America in the most dystopian form in their highly relevant novels. We should strive toward what Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin called the Open Society in which people are not persecuted for their beliefs, even though they might be at odds with the majority. And we need to state, with Berlin, that all ideas and ways of living are not necessarily compatible. We must learn to live with this. This would help us in these dark days when some parties in Congress and some states are pushing us into what will turn out to be a closed society. Heaven and Isaiah Berlin, help us!

SALAMANCA – Universities are not just for students. They have a responsibility to work for the government and with industry on worthy projects benefiting the people. "The school's mathematicians studied the calendar reform, commissioned by Pope Gregory XIII, and proposed the solution that was later implemented." Today one sees that everywhere. To take two Pennsylvania examples. Carnegie Mellon (author is an alumnus) and the University of Pittsburgh cooperate on mathematical modelling of disease; they are involved in helping search for new industries; they are world leaders in robotics and helped remake the city and area after the devastating loss of steel

and manufacturing. Today it is one of the best cities to live in and is pioneering all sorts of changes in business and science. Erie, Pennsylvania (author's hometown): undergraduate students at Penn State Behrend and Gannon University work together for technology startups. They build and prototype new technologies, earn new patents, and get paid. They also saw community leadership and global engagement being provided by civic institutions and a community convenor, the Jefferson Educational Society. They participated in a panel discussion as part of the think tank's Global Summit speaker series.^[1]

We looked at one of its many students who became world famous against all odds as a woman in a man's world. **Ángela Abós Ballarín** was a superstar indeed with many useful scientific and political accomplishments. She did not hide in her lab. But it was not an easy road. She was indicted by the Superior Court of Justice of Aragon following allegations of workplace harassment, later to be reversed. But what a trauma some teachers must go through and keep their cool and continue to produce. It happens all the time. In America, it happened to large numbers during the Joseph McCarthy era when he and his Senate committee accused many innocent teachers of communist sympathies. Often, they lost their careers too. That was a terrible time, and we need to remind ourselves of all the teachers of all institutions – schools, colleges, universities – in past ages who knew something was wrong with the local or national government or even the church and said so, often to the loss of their jobs.

Teaching and politics are a calling no matter at what level. Most are not in it for the money but for curiosity, love of learning, helping students, love of the country, using new knowledge for the benefit of others, and the wonders and the joy of research and action in a complex and strange world.

Cervantes – It is important to see those individual stories, whether in literature or transcribed from life itself, always need to be set in context so that the readers are aware of it. We cannot fully understand writers or politicians or anyone without knowing their context. *Don Quixote* certainly fits this bill. We must be aware of the collapse of the Spanish Empire as well as the fissures in society caused by class and economics. Universities and schools must point this out for discussion on how external events can affect personalities. The worship of manliness is worth looking at as well.

Secondly, great literature can make us more aware of who we are when people like Don Quixote and Hamlet, to name just two, can be a mirror to us, even though, as St. Paul says, we see in a mirror darkly.

HARVARD – **John Adams** believed education was crucial so that people could govern themselves and not be dependent on the great families and the very few universities that supplied the ruling class. Consequential to this was the

belief in “equality” that he and Jefferson pursued, perhaps viewed differently, but pressed with equal vigor.

Adams stated that the purpose of America is not simply to sustain itself in freedom and wealth, but it is also to be for the world, spreading emancipation to all so that the slaves of the world in whatever form they found themselves could be freed. He said God wanted America to be good and righteous and prosperous but also to be a servant to the world. This echoes Winthrop’s and Washington’s sense of mission. Harvard Divinity School and the Kennedy School of Government still stress these values.

Adams was willing to put the country before self and believed all those Harvard chapel talks and Braintree Unitarian sermons that stressed this. He could live with wars if they benefited the United States. It was a brand of asceticism that he fostered with some gusto. But along with this he concluded that America needed to be wary of those who did not put nation in front of self, and he was always on his guard against those who took advantage of their positions. For this the government must set up controls to spurn the selfish interests of humankind and here he fundamentally disagreed with Jefferson but agreed with Madison realizing that factions could tear America apart unless checks and balances were in operation. This was good Calvinist stuff from his Puritan forebearers and early Harvard. One can still find this philosophy in the select New England prep schools. It might even make him into a heretic today, with most Americans lusting for unregulated freedom to do whatever they like, whenever they like, and to hell with the rest.

Adams appreciated the Vedic scriptures. I’m not sure where this came from, probably not Harvard at the time. Harvard’s William James with his *Varieties of Religious Experience* was much later with its openness to the science of religion, not simply affirmations of it. Adams started the way for a better interfaith ecumenism and essentially made room for William James. This helps diplomacy both within and outside the nation. Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, and Lincoln followed on. So too in their own but less obvious ways did Theodore Roosevelt Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, and others. Let us hope that current and future administrations realize this connection between interfaith theology, the American mission, and its wars.

Lastly, and crucial for our own day, was Adams’ recognition of the need for America to have a purpose that is linked with an overall plan for the world. For Adams, America was to be the foremost defender of the rights of people everywhere, not just her own. For now, this will involve sensitivity toward other nations and using favorable trade deals, alliances, and treaties to help sort things out. Force is sometimes needed. It is a calling fraught with dangers, but necessary. A broad education is key to this goal.

Benazir Bhutto – She was a willing martyr for the cause of freedom and democracy as were others in her family. “I couldn't retreat from the party and the platform that I had given so much of my life to.” That may sound old fashioned in these days of grabbing for oneself, but it is the ancient universities that still fostered that virtue. We could use it again!

WILLIAM & MARY – “The entire history of liberal reform in the United States can be written as a process of discovery, within **Jefferson's** words of a mandate for ending slavery, providing the rights of citizenship to Black people, women, and transgender people and protesting a full range of individual freedoms. ... One can trace Jefferson in the demand for women's rights at Seneca Falls, Lincoln's condemnation of slavery in the Gettysburg Address, and Martin Luther King's “I have a Dream” speech. What has come to be called the American Dream, then, is the Jeffersonian dream writ large, a utopian vision of the ideal society that can never be fully achieved but the goal that each generation aspires to approximate and more closely approach.”^[2] Jefferson credited his W & M teachers with the beginnings of his knowledge.

We have a women's group from W & M that shows a Congressional spectrum of belief and action from left to far right. Sports are deemphasized at W & M deliberately. The football coach wasn't too happy with their losses. “We have too many Marys and not enough Williams” he was overheard to say.

ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE – I love it that St. John's (Maryland) produces people like **Ahmet Ertegun**, and originally from a foreign country as well. He stressed Jazz, Blues, Bluegrass, and Rock 'n' Roll which are truly American creations. They are our original art forms. This should be celebrated far and wide in schools, colleges, and universities. It ought to be studied, not just danced to. Penn State Behrend has a jazz elective that is taught in context of the nation's history and culture. Many social issues can be understood through its lyrics and musical styles.

I prefer the educational method at St John's where many things are examined, and connections are made between the subjects. This is what I have been arguing in this series of articles. But a lot of students reject this program because they don't think it prepares them for the workplace compared with having a “major” under their belt. If I were hiring for business, I would prefer a Johnny, but I realize this is a minority position in today's world.

Ben Sasse – “Education properly understood isn't exclusively or even primarily about transmitting information. Education is about learning how to humbly and meaningfully engage with new ideas.” That is a big point. And may I add *ad nauseum* – education ain't only about jobs.

But what do we do about social and “woke” issues and the university? He says: “How will we champion pluralism, curiosity, viewpoint diversity, open debate, and intellectual rigor for our students and faculty, such that our graduates will be prepared to live and work with people of many points of view?” This agrees with most of our quoted examples of what it means to be a competent teacher, student, and graduate.

There is a tried and true way to get at America’s and the world’s problems – **democracy**. We read good newspapers and books, we watch non-ranting TV, we inform, we argue, we persuade, we want our colleges and schools to address these issues, we select representatives, we **VOTE**. Colleges and universities, churches, book clubs, social gatherings, and others must fight it out. And we must try to listen to the other side and be compassionate. We need to find out why people hold such disparate views. Why are some so nutty and some so progressive?

Addendum: Einstein on Education: “Firmly establish certain moral and social principles and standards, and conduct the character education of youth along these lines: develop important intellectual capacities, such as logical thinking, judgment, memory, art appreciation, creative ability, as well as physical fitness; transmit general knowledge and information [on mega issues], as well as skill in routine functions such as reading, writing, arithmetic, and languages; impart special knowledge and skill in preparation for a profession.”[3]

For me, his order is significant. Most universities put it the other way around and job training comes first. Some even ignore the rest and sacrifice traditional education to professional training. If that is what students want, they must be challenged, not coddled. The future is at stake.

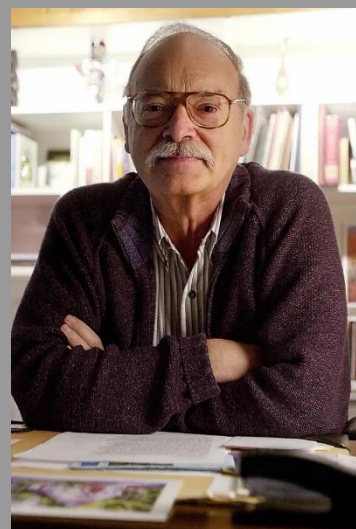
[1] John Austin, *WHAT MIDWEST INDUSTRIAL COMMUNITIES CAN TEACH ABOUT MANAGING ECONOMIC CHANGE* [Posted on Jan 20, 2023, Our Towns, online](#)

[2] Joseph J. Ellis, *The Cause – the American Revolution and its Discontents, 1773-1783*, WW Norton, 2021, p 89

[3] NY Times, 11 November 1939. “mega issues” addition by author.

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