

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## PROBING EDUCATION

### University of Salamanca and Ángela Abós Ballarín

By Rev. Charles Brock  
May 2023

*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 features the University of Salamanca and Ángela Abós Ballarín.*

#### 10th in a Series

**The University of Salamanca** is a Spanish higher education institution in the autonomous community of Castile and León. It was founded in 1218 by King Alfonso IX. It is the oldest university in the Hispanic world and one of the oldest in the world in continuous operation. It has over 30,000 students from 50 different nationalities.

Prior to the foundation of the university, Salamanca was home to a cathedral school, known to have been in existence by 1130. The university was founded as a studium generale by the Leonese King Alfonso IX in 1218 as the *scholas Salamanticae*, with the actual creation of the university (or the transformation of the existing school into the university) occurring between August 1218 and the following winter. A further royal charter from King Alfonso X, dated May 8, 1254, established rules for the organization and financial endowment of the university, and referred to it for the first time by that name. A papal bull of Alexander IV in 1255 confirmed the Royal Charter of Alfonso X and granted universal recognition to the university's degrees.

In the reign of King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile, the Spanish government was revamped. Contemporary with the Spanish Inquisition, the expulsion of the Jews and Muslims, and the conquest of Granada, there was a certain professionalization of the apparatus of the state. This involved the massive employment of “letrados,” i.e., bureaucrats and lawyers, who were “licenciados” (university graduates), particularly, of Salamanca, and the newly founded University of Alcalá. These men staffed the various councils of state, including, eventually, the Consejo de Indias and Casa de Contratacion, the two highest bodies in metropolitan Spain for the government of the Spanish Empire in the New World.

While Columbus was lobbying the King and Queen for a contract to seek out a western route to the Indies, he made his case to a council of geographers at the University of Salamanca. While the geographers were skeptical of Columbus and his voyage calculations, the University of Salamanca always defended the theory of unknown territories to the west, and supported Columbus’ voyage, believing that new territories may be discovered. In the next century, the morality and laws of colonization in the Indies were debated by the School of Salamanca and the Bartolomé de las Casas was a leading critic. Also studied was science, geography, and cartography of the Americas, and as well as the study of general subjects of economics, philosophy, and theology.

Like Oxford and Cambridge, Salamanca had a number of colleges. These were founded as charitable institutions to enable poor scholars to attend the university. By the 18th century they had become closed corporations controlled by the families of their founders and dominated the university between them. Most were destroyed by Napoleon’s troops. In the 19th century, the Spanish government dissolved the university’s faculties of canon law and theology. They were later reestablished in the 1940s as part of the Pontifical University of Salamanca.

The faculty renovated the theology department, laid the foundation for modern-day law, international law, modern economic science and actively participated in the Council of Trent. The school’s mathematicians studied the calendar reform, commissioned by Pope Gregory XIII and proposed the solution that was later implemented. By 1580, 6,500 new students had arrived at Salamanca each year, and among the graduates were state officials of the Spanish monarchy administration. It was also during this period when the first female university students were probably admitted, Beatriz Galindo and Luisa de Medrano, the latter probably being the first woman ever to give classes at a university.

In popular belief, the university was associated with sorcery. A certain cave in Salamanca was considered the site of a school of black magic. In Spanish, Salamanca may mean “cave,” “an evil iguana,” and “hand trick” and the *salamanquesa* (*Tarentola mauritanica*, the Spanish name is also derived

from “salamander”) is a reptile with magical attributes in Spanish tradition. In Romanian folklore, the devil runs a school of black magic named Scholomance. The name is derived from “Salamanca” and the wise king “Solomon” with his 400 wives and 400 concubines.

Salamanca draws undergraduate and graduate students from across Spain and the world but nowadays not to study sorcery; it is the top-ranked university in Spain based on the number of students coming from other regions. It is also known for its Spanish courses for non-native speakers, which attract more than two thousand foreign students each year.

Today, the University of Salamanca is an important center for the study of humanities and is particularly noted for its language studies, as well as in laws and economics. Scientific research is carried out in the university and research centers associated with it, such as at the Centro de Investigación del Cáncer [Cancer Research Centre], Instituto de Neurociencias de Castilla y León or INCyL [Institute of Neuroscience of Castile and León], Centro de Láseres Pulsados Ultracortos Ultraintensos [Ultrashort Ultraintense Pulse Lasers Centre]. It is one of only two Hispanophone universities in the world that have a MoU with the United Nations to train language professionals for the organization. In conjunction with the University of Cambridge, the University of Salamanca co-founded the Association of Language Testers in Europe in 1989.

In 2018, the institution celebrated its eighth centennial. *Wikipedia*

**Ángela Abós Ballarín** (October 1, 1934 to July 16, 2022) was a Spanish writer and politician from Aragon. A member of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, Ballarín served in the Cortes of Aragon from 1991 until 1999.

Ballarín was born in the town of Benasque in Aragon. Her family owned a grocery store and an inn in the town. Ballarín graduated from the University of Salamanca in 1956 with a degree in Romance philology. From 1962 to 1983, Ballarín was a professor at the Institute of Language and Literature in Jaca, Aragon.

Ballarín became involved with politics in 1976, when she was one of the founders of the Socialist Party of Aragon, a short-lived minor party that was founded in her house. In 1982, Ballarín became a member of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE).

In 1983, Ballarín was appointed the provincial director of the Huesca Ministry of Education, a position she would hold until 1986. From 1987 until 1989, Ballarín was a deputy director in the Aragon Ministry of Education and Culture.

From 1991 until 1994, Ballarín served as a member of the Jaca City Council. In the 1991 Aragonese regional election, Ballarín was elected to the Cortes of

Aragon; she was later re-elected in the 1995 Aragonese regional election. During her tenure in the Cortes, Ballarín was the only female member of the body. In 1994, she was appointed Regional Minister of Education and Culture, serving in this role until 1995. That year, following the retirement of José Marco as the president of Aragon, Marco nominated Ballarín to be his successor. Though Marco gave a well-received speech in the Cortes to support her, Ballarín was ultimately defeated in the leadership contest by Santiago Lanzuela.

From 1995 until 1999, Ballarín was the PSOE spokesman for the Education Commission. In 1999, Ballarín was appointed to the Social Council of the University of Zaragoza. She held this role until 2006, when she was appointed Regional Minister of Science, Technology and University by Marcelino Iglesias, the president of Aragon. Ballarín would serve as minister until 2007, when she became president of the Economic and Social Council of Aragon.

In 2007, Ballarín was indicted by the Superior Court of Justice of Aragon following allegations of workplace harassment. The complainant was a secretary at the Social Council of the University of Zaragoza who was unlawfully fired in 1995 and was legally reinstated to her position in 2005. However, the secretary alleged that after she was reinstated, Ballarín used her position to marginalize and attempt to force out the secretary. A judge dismissed the charges against Ballarín after determining that she likely had no sway over the secretary's marginalization.

Ballarín was one of the founders of the Aragonese Association of Writers, and she received several awards for her writing. In 1995, Ballarín was awarded the Centenary Medal by the International Olympic Committee, and she served as a member of UNESCO-Aragon. In 2006, Ballarín received the Golden Sabine Award, and in 2020, the Aragonese Association of Writers awarded her the Magnet Award.

The president of the Government of Aragon, Marcelino Iglesias, appointed Angela Abós, current president of the Social Council of the University of Zaragoza, as the new minister of Science, Technology and University. Angela Abós was born in Benasque in 1934. Militant of the PSOE, she was the only woman deputy in the Constituent Cortes of Aragon. She held the position of provincial director of the Ministry of Education in Huesca (1983-1986) and deputy director-general-head of the Technical Inspection Service of the MEC (1987-1989).[1]

Ballarín had seven children. Following her death in 2022, Javier Lambán, the president of Aragon, described Ballarín as “educated, humanist and generous” and a “feminist without fuss,” while Regional Minister of Culture Pilar Alegría stated that she was “a progressive and feminist woman who paved the

way for many others. [She was a] defender of education as a fundamental pillar of the State.” *Wikipedia*

**What are the takeaways from Salamanca and one of its stars?** As stated earlier: “While the geographers were skeptical of Columbus and his voyage calculations, the University of Salamanca always defended the theory of unknown territories to the west, and supported Columbus' voyage, believing that new territories may be discovered. In the next century, the morality and laws of colonization in the Indies were debated by the School of Salamanca, along with the development of the study of science, geography and cartography of the Americas, and as well as the study of general subjects of economics, philosophy, and theology.”

It is important for universities to be willing to take chances intellectually and to some extent morally. This happened in 1492 when Columbus sailed the ocean blue. Whatever one thinks of the conquest of the Americas these days (and there is a lot to atone for), discovery was in the cards and the university supported that endeavor.

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 an American example, Pittsburgh is one example among many. Carnegie Mellon and the University of Pittsburgh cooperate on mathematical modelling of disease; they are involved in helping search new industries; they are world leaders in robotics and helped remake the city and area after the devastating loss of steel manufacturing. So, today it is one of the best cities to live in and is pioneering all sorts of changes in business and science.

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 away 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, among others, of communist sympathies. 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.

She was willing to enter local as well as national government. Today in America we often disparage the local and we can learn from her and others. As Jamelle Bouie wrote recently in the New York Times: “Americans have turned to national news and national news outlets to close the gap, but these larger institutions can’t replace what has been lost. By virtue of proximity, I can respond more easily when a local official is accused of wrongdoing. The same isn’t true of a member of Congress, especially if they aren’t my own. The information we get from national outlets is valuable, but it can also leave us feeling hopeless and impotent. And it can contribute to ‘political hobbyism,’ a tendency to treat politics not as a cause for action and an essential part of citizenship, but as a game where the only goal – the only objective – is to somehow embarrass and humiliate our enemies.

“There has always been an element of entertainment in politics – it’s part of living in a mass democracy – but the total devolution of politics into entertainment may have something to do with the absence of institutions that link our political awareness to something more local, something more concrete, than national political conflict.”[2]

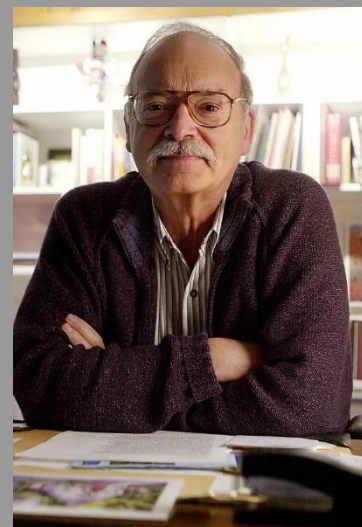
Teaching and politics are a calling no matter at what level. Most are not in it for the money but for curiosity, love of learning, helping students, love of the country, using new knowledge for the benefit of others, and the wonders of research and action in a complex and strange world. We can leave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

[1] ZARAGOZA, June 8, 1989 (EUROPA PRESS)

[2]Jamelle Bouie, *Disinformation Is Not the Real Problem With Democracy*, New York Times, March 11, 2023

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rev. Charles Brock**, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa., and he is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and serves as Secretary of the Jefferson Educational Society’s Board of Trustees.



[Subscribe to JES Publications Mailing List!](#)

[Support JES | Donate](#)

## In Case You Missed It

[The Wider World | Is Corruption Like Pornography? Do We Know It When We See It?](#) written by President of DC Analytics **Diane Chido**

[Truth in Love | The Making of Cookie-Cutter Citizens](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris J. Baker**

[Probing Education | University of Oxford and Roger Bacon](#) written by Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education **Rev. Charles Brock**

[Be Well | Go Ahead, Request These Lab Tests](#) written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

[Book Notes #146 | 'Americans & Their Games' \(Part II\)](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

[Sad News Follows Me to California: Gordon Lightfoot](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

Jefferson Educational Society | [jeserie.org](http://jeserie.org)

