

STUDENTS THEN AND NOW: THE CONCEPT OF THE ALMA MATER

Honors Day Address
May 10, 1994

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Universities, along with cathedrals and Parliaments are products of the Middle Ages. Although instruction on a high level did exist in almost all ancient civilizations, the institutions we know as universities came into being in the 12th and 13th centuries. That is the time when organized education with which we are so familiar, emerged. It is during these centuries that we see the division of knowledge into academic disciplines, we see the development of examinations, commencements and degrees. At first the medieval university had few physical features or manifestations: It had no laboratories, no classroom buildings, no museums, not even libraries. It did, however, have two ingredients of fundamental importance, namely students and teachers.

Although there are great differences between medieval and modern universities, the institutions of higher education in the twentieth century are direct lineal descendants of the great schools of Bologna, Padua, Paris, Oxford, Heidelberg, Vienna, and so forth. The university traditions of our own time were created in the Middle Ages. These traditions bind us together, whether we teach or study at old or new institutions.

How did universities come into existence? The earliest institutions of higher education, i.e. Bologna in Italy and Paris in France, had no founder, no fixed date of beginning. They just grew. It was the international reputation of great teachers, which brought hundreds of intellectually curious young people to Bologna and Paris respectively. Thus, for the first time in history, a student-class or student-body was born.

As more and more students congregated at Bologna, many of them from places far beyond the Alps, they felt a natural need to protect themselves, especially against the townspeople, who were prone to charge outrageous prices for food, drink and lodging. The students, in response, formed an association, a guild, an "universitas", following the example of the labor organizations emerging in Italy at that time. Thus, the word "UNIVERSITY" originally meant a corporation, a guild, a union and only later does the meaning become limited to an association of students or scholars.

At Bologna the students formed the universitas, primarily as a means of protection against the townspeople. United in this fashion, the students could force the citizens of Bologna to be more reasonable in the rates they charged for rooms and other necessities. The young scholars had one great power, namely, the threat of secession. If the townspeople did not show due respect for their needs, the "university" could simply pick itself up and leave to another city which was more receptive to their wishes and demands. Remember: no buildings, no library, no labs, no stadiums, thus, the threat of secession was real and, in fact, was used several times.

The great University of Padua, where the famous Galileo taught, was one of the many universities which came about as a result of students leaving for a more accommodating environment. Cambridge was founded by students who for a time left Oxford. The townspeople of Bologna soon realized that it was better to rent a room for a more reasonable rate than to have the scholars pick up and leave. Thus, the university, i.e. the corporation of students, secured the power to fix the price of lodgings, of books, of food and drink, through negotiations with city representatives.

Having been able to emerge victorious against the townspeople, the triumphant students now turned against their other enemies, or tormentors, the professors. Since the teachers lived exclusively from the fees paid by students (no state subsidy) the threat of a collective boycott by the students made the faculty willing to listen to the demands of the students. Professors were put under bond and had to live up to the regulations imposed upon them by their pupils, thus, guaranteeing that they got their money's worth. The statutes drawn up by the university, i.e. students, clearly illustrate this point. The teacher had to have an audience of at least 5 people to be able to lecture. Woe unto the prof who could not draw enough students! -- Such a person soon had to leave the profession. The instructor had to begin the lectures on time and finish it on time. He was to cover the material in the book systematically and not skip chapters, nor was the teacher to ramble on concerning unimportant and irrelevant matters. If he decided to marry during the academic year, he needed his student's permission, and could have a honeymoon of one day.

The Bologna type of university, in which the main power was held by the students, became a model for other Italian institutions of higher learning. Some of the Spanish, Latin-American and Southern French universities were likewise patterned after this famous proto-type. To this day, in Italy and in some S. American countries, the power and influence of the student-body in the administration of universities is far greater than in our tradition. Students have an active voice in the appointment of faculty, deans and the rector. Student strikes, for better educational conditions, are not unknown.

The other great proto-type university was Paris, which also rose to prominence in the 12th century. This institution was a direct outgrowth of the Cathedral School attached to Notre Dame. It is uncertain when the Cathedral School actually became a University. This transformation occurred well before 1200, the date when the first official royal charter was issued to the teachers or masters and the students. In that year, a riot had occurred in which a few students were killed by irate townspeople. In response, the king issued a formal charter of privileges, which recognized the exemption of students from lay jurisdiction, thus, creating a special status of student, before the courts. Following another bloody riot, which began in a

tavern, the Pope issued a decree in 1231, in which he recognized the masters and students as a legal corporation, with the right to regulate their own life, unaffected by outside forces (king, bishop, etc....). To prevent further bloodshed, the papal decree does prohibit the students from carrying arms, but this admonition, although often repeated throughout the Middle Ages, was regularly ignored.

The corporation, or guild, or universitas in Paris, differs from Bologna in one major respect: Paris was a university of masters, i.e. professors and not of students. The fame of the university and of its teachers spread throughout Europe. To study in Paris, to receive a degree from there, was the dream of countless students for centuries after its foundation. The University of Paris became the model of universities subsequently founded in Northern and Central Europe and in North America. Oxford was influenced by Paris and Cambridge by Oxford. The German universities, beginning with Heidelberg and those in Central Europe, were all patterned in imitation of Paris. By the year 1500, there were about 80 universities in different parts of the European Continent.

The history of the Medieval and Renaissance university is filled with conflict. Consensus building was not fashionable. There were frequent disputes between "Town and Gown", i.e. between the city and the university, which often degenerated into pitched battles, resulting in bloodshed and even death. There were innumerable cases of brawls in taverns, attacks by angry townspeople upon scholars, who had seduced their wives or abducted their daughters. It seems that disgruntled students also turned upon their teachers. The University of Leipzig, in 1438, issued regulations which provided increasing penalties for the student who picks up a missile, such as a stone, to throw at a professor. The fine rises if he threw the stone, went up further depending whether he missed the teacher or accomplished his purpose, and if the professor bled or not.

Public authorities and preachers denounced the students for their lawlessness, immorality and impiety. There were repeated prohibitions against university members frequenting houses of ill-repute and warnings about associating with immoral women. Some students at Paris had to be admonished for playing dice on the altar of the Cathedral of Notre Dame.

The reason I am relating these incidents is obviously not to encourage you to emulate the behavior of these students. What I would like to show is that excessive youthful exuberance, and in some cases criminal behavior, did accompany the development of higher education. Remember, the university is, to a large degree, a reflection of the society from which it springs.

The Medieval and Renaissance university traditions, with most of their positive as well as negative aspects, did eventually reach the shores of the New World and became part of American academic life. One of the extraordinary events in the history of education was the speed with which the colonists in Massachusetts recognized the need for a center of advanced learning as soon as the survival of their settlement around Boston seemed assured. Only six years passed since the establishment of the Bay Colony in the Boston region, when, in 1636, the local legislature voted to appropriate L 400 (about 1/4 of that year's tax revenue) to establish a college. Two years later, John Harvard, a Cambridge University graduate, died of consumption and left half his fortune, along with his library of some 400 volumes, to the newly founded college. The grateful institution promptly adopted his name as its own. The New Town area near Boston, where the college was located, was nostalgically called Cambridge. And so, the first American institution of higher education, consciously patterned after the Medieval colleges of England, came into existence in the New World.

Before the end of the century, the College of William and Mary was established in 1693, followed by Yale in 1701, the College of New Jersey, now called Princeton, in 1746. The Philadelphia Academy, founded in 1749, opened as a college in 1754 and grew into the University of Pennsylvania. King's College in New York, now Columbia University, was chartered in 1754, Brown, a decade later and Rutgers, originally known as Queens College in New Jersey, was established in 1766. The last college to be founded in colonial times was Dartmouth, in 1769. From the Revolutionary War to the end of the century, a great flurry of activity took place and a large number of new foundations were added to the original nine. By 1800, a total of 29 institutions of higher learning had been established. Of these, 26 have survived to our own day.

Harvard did not have an auspicious beginning. Its first President, Nathaniel Eaton, a Trinity College/Cambridge man, was tyrannical, avaricious and cruel. A student reported that Eaton was better fitted to have been an officer of the Inquisition, or the master of a house of corrections, than an instructor of Christian youth. Eaton's wife, who was in charge of feeding the students, served them meatless meals, sour bread and dry pudding. She seems to have been instrumental in bringing to our shores the tradition of poor quality college food, which has caused much distress among generations of students. (YSU is, of course, and exception to this often heard sentiment!)

Generally, the colonial colleges emulated the Medieval English collegiate system of academic and social organization. The college hall, the chapel and the library, if there was one, were the centers of all activity. What seems striking to us, is the small size of the first colonial colleges. We usually find a President, who also teaches, a few masters or tutors, a steward, a

cook, a butler, a few servants and 20 to 60 students. The physical aspects of these colleges are often rather grim and depressing. The college hall was generally cold, drafty and inhospitable.

Now, a few words about the condition of the professors. The number of teachers were at first very few and they were almost invariably clergymen. The President of the college, along with a few professors, taught all the subjects. It was not uncommon for a professor to also serve as pastor of a neighboring church, to supplement his meager income. Although, pious and generally learned men, most colonial professors lacked depth of scholarship. Some professors were accused of moral laxity. The learned teachers at William and Mary were often observed playing cards in public houses at night and were frequently seen drunk in the street.

To be a professor or President, could be a dangerous occupation. One of the most outrageous incidents occurred at the University of North Carolina, in 1799. According to an undergraduate account, "our President has got horse-whipped from a boy, which he and the teachers had expelled unjustly". Not only was the poor President beaten, but two of the professors were stoned and the others threatened with injury. As a result, most of the faculty resigned.

At William and Mary, the masters were also intimidated. When the faculty expelled two students for dueling, a group of unidentified undergraduates, "...broke the windows of every professor...together with those of the Church chapel...and committed every act of impropriety they could think of."

Students who attended the colleges during the Colonial and early National Period, were subject to a most rigorous regimen of rules, regulating every aspect of college life. Here is a sampling of the prohibitions contained in the Yale regulations from 1745:

Students should avoid profanity, swearing, cursing, etc..

They should not fight, strike or quarrel.

They must avoid drunkenness, uncleanness, lascivious words or actions.

They should not wear women's apparel (No alternate life style, yet.), should refrain from idleness, lying, etc...

Students are prohibited from playing cards, dice, games of chance, nor should they bring rum, wine, brandy or other strong liquor to their chambers.

They are to refrain from damaging college property, or jump out of windows.

Every person is to abstain from signing or loud talking.

There is the usual prohibition against bringing strangers into the college, rules against having or firing pistols.

No student should call the President or the teachers hypocrites, or carnal nor should they assault, bruise or strike them, under penalty of expulsion.

It is worth noting that by 1817, the Yale prohibitions covered 40 printed pages. A Princeton student likened college discipline to that of a prison. Subjected to a galling regimen of restrictions and repression, forced to endure hardships and discomfort, as well as an often irrelevant curriculum, it is not surprising that the students rioted.

In the late 18th and early years of the 19th century there were at least 13 major confrontations at the hardest hit schools, not counting the numerous attempted bombings, arson, drinking sprees, vandalism or simple town-gown fights.

Yale had a minor riot in 1786, Harvard a more serious situation in December of 1788, when students were disorderly in chapel, followed by a "food fight" in the course of which tea cups, saucers and a knife were also thrown. A few months later, at about 3 AM, a group of students insulted the President and threatened to burn his house.

In 1800 at Princeton, following morning prayers, students fired pistols, smashed doors with bats, rolled barrels of stones along the halls. Next year, at William and Mary, the students went to the church, broke and destroyed all windows, cut down the pulpit, tore out the pages of the Bible and "gave them to the wind".

And finally, mention must be made of the "Rotten Cabbage Rebellion" of 1807, at Harvard. For some time, there had been latent discontent among the students concerning the general state of the college and conditions at commons, or the dining hall. When a dinner of ill-prepared fish and maggot-infested cabbage was served on March 30, the students went into action. They attacked the kitchen, forced the commons to shut down. The confrontation continued through the following year, until most of the unhappy students had either been expelled or had graduated.

From the meatless, stale food of Mrs. Eaton in the 1630's, to the maggot-infested cabbage in 1807, we see little culinary improvement at Harvard.

Our quick glance at 600 years of higher education, leads us to several conclusions which are relevant even in our times.

1. The university is still an association or corporation of students and teachers, who together seek wisdom. The relationship between professors and their students was, as we have

seen, not always harmonious. Yet, what we must never forget is that there is no university without these two ingredients. You can have a university without elaborate student centers, swimming pools, gymnasiums, and athletic teams, but you cannot have a university without students and professors. Everything else is secondary.

2. The lasting fame of an institution of higher learning is ultimately based on the excellence of its students and the reputation of the faculty. That is why the universities we spoke about tonight have survived and have flourished through the centuries. An institution devoid of curious and intellectually alert students or scholarly and dedicated teachers, is not much more than a glorified high school. We here at YSU are blessed by having both of these ingredients. We are gathered here tonight to recognize and to celebrate this excellence!
3. Students in Medieval Paris, Renaissance Oxford or Colonial Harvard were not much different from you. Some, like you, excelled in their studies! The majority were adequate, while others barely passed their courses. There was always a minority of outright troublemakers, which has received a lot of attention.

There is, however, one sentiment which seems to run through the history of higher education in the past 800 years: Students have always had a special love for the institution that expanded their minds, nurtured and protected them and prepared them for a productive future. Students from earliest times have called the university ALMA MATER, which in Latin means "Sweet Mother". This is obviously a term of affection and endearment--no other institution in Western society can boast of this kind of loyalty.

There was a unique bond between the university and its students, just as there is a special love that binds us to our mothers. Our mothers also nurtured and protected us, guided our moral and intellectual development and when we were ready, she sent us out into the world to make our way in life. The bond between mother and child, university and students, is a bond that lasts a lifetime.

When the time comes and you leave this, your own ALMA MATER, I hope that you will reflect upon the many positive influences which have shaped your intellectual growth and emotional development and can proudly say that YSU was indeed a "Sweet Mother" to you!