

Liberal Arts Illuminated  
Introduction of Rebecca Chopp  
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When I first joined the professoriate at a venerable liberal-arts college, having spent my own undergraduate years in a very profession-oriented music school, I was surprised that many of my new colleagues found conversations about preparation for a world of work unseemly at best and anathema at worst. Fortunately, most of us have come to grips with the fact that students don't and never did come to our institutions with dreams of future unemployment,

That now anachronistic anti-vocational spirit I encountered in the 1980s was often referred to as a centuries-old tradition, but it was really a twentieth-century fabrication. To differentiate themselves from their rapidly growing public counterparts, many with a focus on job training, some liberal-arts college faculty members embraced a convert's zeal and the rhetoric to go with it. As we of course know, the early American liberal arts colleges couldn't have been more vocational. They were founded to train clergy. Vocation from the Latin *vocare*, to be called, was doubly true for these early-American students, and of course we know that liberal arts colleges have excelled at preparing students for successful careers throughout their histories.

William Smith was named Provost of the College of Philadelphia (forebear of the University of Pennsylvania) in 1755. He introduced the first systematic course of study and degree program in the colonies. At this time, as the Enlightenment hit our shores and as its spirit fueled the fires of future democracy, many of our colleges were preparing more students for thoughtful citizen leadership than for lives in the pulpit. It is fitting that Smith would serve as the inaugural President of the first college founded in the new United States. It is even more fitting that this institution, Washington College, would be established under the aegis of its namesake.

George Washington's belief in the critical role education would play in our national development continued throughout his career of public service. The draft of his first inaugural address embraces the foundation of liberal education:

*Whenever the opportunity shall be furnished to you as public or as private men, I trust you will not fail to use your best endeavors to improve the education and manners of a people; to accelerate the progress of arts & sciences; to patronize works of genius; to confer rewards for invention of utility; and to cherish institutions favourable to humanity. — G. Washington, Draft of the First Inaugural Address, c. January 1789*

Washington was not alone in his patronage of the intellectual future of the republic. The five authors of the *Declaration of Independence* were public intellectuals of the

highest order. Robert Livingston was a distinguished man of letters who amassed a personal library of over 4000 volumes. John Adams was a founder of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences with John Hancock and James Bowdoin. Roger Sherman was a member of the Yale University faculty and served as the University's treasurer. Benjamin Franklin provided the leadership to create the University of Pennsylvania, and of all his accomplishments, Thomas Jefferson took his greatest pride in having established the University of Virginia.

Other Virginia patriots provided important educational leadership. James Madison and James Monroe were charter members of the Board of Visitors of the University of Virginia, and Madison succeeded Jefferson as Rector of the University. Patrick Henry helped to establish the charter of Hampden-Sydney College in January of 1776, making it the last college founded in the colonies. On 5 December of that same year, Phi Beta Kappa was founded at the College of William and Mary.

Like Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin was a man of immense intellectual breadth. He founded the College of Philadelphia in 1749, the same year he published a fascinating outline of the goals and content of the educational experience he hoped its students would receive. The footnotes, which are more extensive than the body of the text, provide evaluations of his proposed content for this curriculum. The pamphlet concludes with the following summary of the goals of such an education:

*The Idea of what is true Merit, should also be often presented to Youth, explain'd and impress'd on their Minds, as consisting in an Inclination join'd with an Ability to serve Mankind, one's Country, Friends and Family; which Ability is (with the Blessing of God) to be acquir'd or greatly increas'd by true Learning; and should indeed be the great Aim and End of all Learning. — B. Franklin: Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania (p.30), 1749.*

Franklin was a co-founder of the American Philosophical Society with botanist, John Bartram. Early members included George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Marshall, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Rush, and the lesser-known Michael Hillegas who edited the *Declaration of Independence* and served as our nation's first Treasurer.

Ours is a nation born of intellectual idealism. The visionary leaders who conceived this republic were deep thinkers who embodied the best citizenship that is at the heart of liberal learning. They were avid scientists, political theorists, natural historians, and moral philosophers. Theirs was, however, an idealism deeply rooted in practical wisdom. Among the many articles in the first volume of the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* published in 1771 were an essay on grape cultivation and wine making, designs for an automated bilge pump, and the Society's observations of the Transit of Venus in 1769. John Adams using a rooftop telescope was one of many contributors to that project.

The same spirit of scientific thinking and a flourishing of the enlightenment provided the spark that created our new republic and led to the rise of liberal arts colleges throughout the fledgling nation. These institutions, many under denominational sponsorship, focused on the development of the whole student and the higher purposes of education. They lived their missions and prepared the next generation of leaders. They have continued to evolve and to produce a disproportionately high percentage of leaders in science, letters, business, and government. Liberal arts colleges represent only 3% of American college students, yet according to the *Huffington Post*, “a third of all Fortune 500 CEOs have liberal arts degrees,” but the value of what we do is questioned in the media daily.

One of the greatest ironies of our time is the celebration of anti-intellectualism as a form of self-proclaimed patriotism. Nothing could be further from the truth; America’s greatest hope for the future is to embrace the intellectual ideals of its founders, and the best stewardship of these ideals remains our active and meaningful engagement in the liberal arts.

Rebecca Chopp has been in the forefront of advocacy and stewardship for the liberal arts in higher education. As former president of Colgate University, Swarthmore College, and now as Chancellor of the University of Denver, Dr. Chopp has been a leader in national conversations about the changing nature of knowledge, fostering meaningful student experiences on campus and in our communities, and the ways in which the liberal arts can help us and our students adapt to and lead in an ever more rapidly changing world. The dreams of the Founding Fathers continue. Please join me in welcoming Rebecca Chopp.