

# 9

## Epilogue: In Historical Retrospect

### DIALOGUES WITH THE PAST

As one reflects on the long and colorful history of higher education, the temptation runs strong to conclude by drawing parallels between past and present, between what once was yesterday and what is today. The impulse is to try to link events separated from one another in time, to draw out broadly defined thematic connections, to locate basic continuities and patterns in the flow of things. Admittedly problematic, the enterprise is hazardous if carried too far. Straining after precedents, for example, readily lends itself to distortion, as does didacticism of any sort in historical inquiry. The danger of succumbing to cheap historicism of the worst kind is quite real. Respecting the historical autonomy of past events, treating their unique, contingent identity on their own terms, so to speak, is an obligation that must always be borne in mind.

It has been rightly said, however, that in education there is only a single perdurable set of questions, a finite number of truly basic or fundamental issues: the educational institution's role in society, and whether its contribution is to serve society or to challenge it; the possibility of objectivity and impartiality in knowledge; the appropriate balance between curricular

commonality or integration and diversification and specialization; issues of inclusion and exclusion; and so on. Depending on the time and place in question, the ways in which both philosophical and practical policy issues have been framed and responded to admit almost endless permutations and variations in detail. Yet in some deep underlying sense, the queries themselves and the divergent responses they have provoked are perennial. Similarly, it may be the case that the range of possibilities open for the conduct of higher education is finite, in which case one would expect to discover that certain features of the academic enterprise are recurrent over time. It may be instructive for illustrative purposes therefore to touch if only briefly on the more obvious thematic and topical continuities, to note just some of the more interesting specific similarities and contrasts that seem to surface from the historical record of higher learning.

### DISINTERESTED LEARNING

Contemplating the spectacle of careerism and narrow professionalism common among so many of today's collegians, some purists are apt to wax nostalgic, invoking some idyllic past when motivations were more exalted and students gathered in admiration at the feet of their professors to drink of the fountain of knowledge. Was there ever any such time or place? Was it ever the case that students, animated by an intrinsic love of learning and largely indifferent to considerations of utility and practical application, pursued learning solely or even primarily for the edification of their minds and souls?

Evidence is mixed. Anecdotal material abounds attesting to the influence of inspired teachers of liberalizing persuasions. On the one hand, there are countless stories of students within whom a genuine love of learning was kindled, of those who, reflecting back upon their college days, were persuaded they had been spiritually enlarged, intellectually stimulated, and otherwise enriched in innumerable ways having little to do directly with utilitarian considerations. On the other, bearing in mind the decidedly mixed motives drawing students to higher learning, it is difficult to imagine a time when large numbers of students sought instruction in a completely disinterested spirit. Youths of fifth-century B.C. Athens flocked to study under the sophists, but according to Plato's testimony they were impelled mainly by a desire for preference and advantage, by a felt need to acquire skills useful in the marketplace. The appeal of scribal and rhetorical schools throughout antiquity was clearly one of practicality; and those who patronized them seem to have been prompted at least as much by pecuniary interests as by absorption in intellect.

Similarly, though it has often been idealized as a disembodied community of inquiry, the fact remains that the medieval *universitas* was, more than

anything else, at root a professional training facility. Its primary mission was to train clerics, physicians, specialists in civil or canon law, and (sometimes almost by default) teachers for the lower schools. Although it is true that the university provided a safe haven for pure scholarship and unfettered inquiry available nowhere else perhaps except within the confines of the monastic cloister, though the substance of the arts curriculum could be abstract in the extreme and often bore little immediate or obvious connection to the practical exigencies of life, and while the university jealously guarded its intellectual autonomy against attempts at encroachment by civil or ecclesiastical officials, it existed first and foremost to prepare young men for specific careers.

Again in modern times, in the case of the American antebellum college, for all its classical antiquarianism it is important to remember that its practical function more than anything else was to prepare clergymen for their pastoral duties (not to mention other professionals, such as physicians and lawyers, and so forth). Mastery of its curriculum could and did lead to employment. The rise of the comprehensive state land-grant institution and subsequently the emergence of the modern university in the United States, to cite other instances, were predicated on the assumption that an integral connection between learning and social life ought to be maintained, that there should be a linkage between instruction and application. The astounding growth in student enrollments universities enjoyed from the late 1860s onward, for instance, can hardly be accounted for by some vast popular swelling of interest in learning as a self-contained end.

It is also historically true, of course, that higher learning has been construed as a matter of personal adornment and refinement, disconnected in any meaningful way from occupations or careers. There is little difficulty, for example, in seeing the tendency at work among the sons of the privileged classes who sought to acquire from the rhetors of late Hellenistic times certain social graces and a superficial patina of learning. Patrons of learning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who aspired to become "courtiers" after the fashion sketched out by Castiglione or later by Elyot may have been inspired by neither academic nor careerist motives. Judging from accounts of the desultory manner in which they pursued their studies, their intellectual aspirations and interests must have been modest at best. Much the same situation held true in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Benjamin Franklin's criticism of Harvard as a finishing school for the idle rich, complaints throughout the antebellum period about students who were considered not serious enough about their studies, criticisms of American collegians between the 1890s and the late 1920s as coddled adolescents mainly interested in having a "good time" during their stay on campus—all do serious violence to the stereotype of budding intellectuals

inhabiting the groves of academe for the sole purpose of advancing their learning. Perhaps the safest thing to say is that students in all times have pursued higher learning for a great variety of reasons, that their motives have been mixed, not pure, and that upon occasion, when they have been fortunate, they have carried away from the experience far more than they knew or imagined.

### **FACULTY POWER AND GOVERNANCE**

Proponents of faculty power within colleges and universities are prone to bolstering their case by appeals to the past. There was a time, it is sometimes alleged, when faculty were in control, when the legitimate prerogatives of the professorate to exercise control over learning and scholarship were respected and abided by. Since that time, runs the argument, the record has been one of a more or less steady erosion of faculty power and a corresponding usurpation of authority by administrators and external authorities. If true, it is difficult to know precisely when any such state of affairs actually prevailed. Once again, the scholars' guilds of the Middle Ages tend to be most frequently invoked as illustrations of a time when teaching masters allegedly controlled their own fate and collective destiny, when all decisions rested in the hands of elected representatives of the faculty, and various assorted administrative functionaries existed solely to do their bidding.

Leaving aside for the moment significant differences between modern institutions of higher learning and medieval universities or the immediate successors, it simply was never the case that faculties enjoyed unchallenged authority or responsibility even within the institution. Except possibly for an exceedingly brief period in the late 1200s and early 1300s, and then only partially and in isolated instances, it would be difficult to identify circumstances when it could be said of faculty that they actually managed the institution's operational affairs. Furthermore, the struggle of the universities for autonomy vis-à-vis outside forces was just that—a constant struggle for control against the depredations of popes, secular monarchs, and local civic authorities, not to mention in the case of the southern Italian *studia*, an internal jockeying for power between masters' guilds or faculties and the dominant students' nations, usually with the faculty competing at a distinct disadvantage. The impact of local municipal authorities or papal factotums or court-appointed representatives of the crown upon *studia* in medieval times, for example, more nearly approximate that of state regents or boards (in the case of publicly assisted higher education); the various and sundry efforts of state legislatures to intrude upon and to define the conditions under which teaching and learning are conducted; or even in a limited sense the impact of external accrediting agencies upon academe.

---

Governance of the American colonial and antebellum college typically was a matter of one-man rule, usually paternalistic, sometimes autocratic. The president was in charge, and he, in turn, was overseen closely by an external board of trustees or governors. Faculty tutors served at the president's pleasure and could be dismissed at will. The situation was little changed by the end of the nineteenth century when universities came into their own. Just as faculty were closely monitored and supervised in private liberal-arts colleges and sectarian schools, those who taught in turn-of-the-century universities enjoyed few immunities and privileges. Few of the strong presidents of that era—Charles W. Eliot, Nicholas Murray Butler, Davis Starr Jordan, William Harper Rainey, and so on—brooked much opposition or tolerated significant faculty dissent.

The birth of the American Association of University Professors in 1915 was prompted precisely by a need to defend academic freedom, to bolster tenure and procedural safeguards against arbitrary dismissal of errant faculty who had incurred the displeasure of the rich or powerful, including both administrators on the inside and the external patrons to which they were sometimes beholden. It is undoubtedly true that today's administrative bureaucracies often wield power in ways faculty are apt to regard as antithetical to scholarship, teaching, and learning, doing so, moreover, at the expense of faculty influence over curricula or all-important resource allocations. Nevertheless, historical precedent affords scanty support for the argument that professors were actually once in charge and *inter alia* should now "reclaim" their rightful role in the governance of colleges and universities. The case for faculty governance, in other words, is poorly served by appeals to history, except perhaps in the negative sense of affording vivid illustrations of times when faculty lacked even whatever modest and circumscribed influence and power they enjoy today.

## ACADEMIC AUTONOMY AND FREEDOM

The image or model of the college or university as a kind of secular monastery is nevertheless an enduring aspect of academic mythology. The traditional picture, sometimes drawn with great conviction, is of a sheltered enclave in which scholar-monks pursue their academic mission, preserving the accumulated wisdom and technologies of the culture, transmitting it to successive generations of students, and pushing ever outward the boundaries of ignorance and darkness. Because academe is a protected place, reason and unfettered inquiry reign supreme, sheltered by cloister walls against the intrusive influence of worldly concerns for influence, privilege, wealth, or power. As a representation of academe, the picture lends itself readily enough to caricature and

---

ridicule, even if it encapsulates certain partial or incomplete truths. But apart from whatever other defects might be found, where the theme of sequestered free learning is least persuasive is when it is invoked in connection with academic freedom.

In colonial times, for example, anything much resembling academic freedom in its modern sense was either nonexistent or severely limited in its scope. Despite the practical necessity of practicing toleration where religious pluralism demanded it, the ideal of theological rectitude, of doctrinal soundness as the chief criterion of fitness to teach in a college was adhered to whenever and wherever possible. Harvard's first president, it is worth recalling, was dismissed from his post for having accepted the Baptist view of infant baptism. Indicative of popular thinking even toward the end of the colonial period was the rather remarkable observation of President Clapp of Yale who proclaimed, "Though every man has a right to examine and judge for himself according to truth, yet no man has a right to judge wrong." While it is true that suppression of religious heresy proved well-nigh impossible in the colonies, it should never be supposed that it was for want of trying or because toleration was looked upon as anything but a regrettable practical necessity.

In the early national period, advocates of religious freedom were ultimately successful in eliminating legal penalties for professions of unorthodox religious belief. Acceptance of a limited range of heterodoxy was easier, of course, if one was a Trinitarian Protestant Christian—the abolition of legal discrimination against Jews, Roman Catholics, Unitarians, Deists, and atheists took somewhat longer. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, it might be added, few colleges or universities provided congenial work places for academics imprudent enough to espouse openly certain religious, social, or political views conspicuously at variance with prevailing local norms. It is worth recalling too that before the Civil War, many easterners were reportedly most reluctant to extend support and assistance to the newer frontier institutions of higher learning being established, because they were widely perceived as hotbeds of social and economic radicalism.

Slavery probably was the single most divisive issue in early-nineteenth-century American society. Academics in the South who opposed slavery were often driven from their posts, among them the president of Mississippi College and a faculty member at Centre College who publicly dared to question the moral propriety of keeping one's fellow human beings in bondage. At the University of North Carolina, a certain Professor Hedrick was dismissed in this connection for his avowed support for a subversive organization—the Republican party. At one point even Northern colleges moved to suppress any criticism of the institution of slavery. Miami University, Kenyon College, and

Lane Theological Seminary were only three of a larger number of schools where student antislavery societies were outlawed as subversive. At Lane and at Harvard, professors who were opposed to slavery lost their jobs for their views. When Harvard's distinguished alumnus Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered an abolitionist speech, he was pelted by students with rotten eggs for his trouble. On the other hand, it could work both ways, as a president of Franklin College discovered when he was forced out because of his pro-slavery views. During the Civil War, at Bowdoin and Dartmouth, presidents were dismissed for defending slavery and states' rights of secession. If to debates over slavery are added the many controversies surrounding the doctrine of evolution, and the difficulties into which professors fell for presuming to question Biblical literalism (at the Baptist Seminary in Louisville, at Vanderbilt in Tennessee, and at the Presbyterian Seminary in South Carolina, among several other places), any suggestion that academic freedom was well entrenched in nineteenth-century America begins to look like a very dubious proposition.

As has been noted, at the opening of the twentieth century there were more than a few cases where professors found themselves in trouble for having expressed what, judged by the standards of the day, were judged to be radical economic or social views. The fate of the economist at Chicago who dared to criticize the practices of the Pullman Company, whose founder was one of Chicago's leading citizens, affords an instructive case in point. Had John Dewey examined the situation a bit closer, it is doubtful whether he would have registered the opinion he did in 1902 that there was little danger to academic freedom in America. There were simply too many bona fide instances of professors who faced the threat of loss of employment when they became too outspoken in their opinions.

Again during World War I and immediately thereafter, it would be difficult to claim that professors had many opportunities to exercise the traditional prerogatives of *Lehrfreiheit* without suffering adverse consequences. In 1915, for example, Scott Nearing, a socialist professor of economics, lost his position for publicly opposing the use of child labor in coal mines. With an influential coal mine owner on the board of trustees of the institution where Nearing had been employed, the school's president did not long hesitate before demanding the offending professor's resignation.

The tendency of academics to sanitize their views or to refrain from speaking openly was amply warranted, considering the wave of nativist repression that engulfed the nation during the war. Nor could the AAUP always be relied upon to intervene on a professor's behalf. Once again a historic tendency to redraw the boundaries of acceptable professional behavior during a period of national crisis so as to reflect the prevailing political consensus reasserted itself.

The distinguished psychologist James McKeen Cattell, for example, was imprudent enough to petition Congress for the passage of a law exempting unwilling wartime draftees from being forced to fight in Europe if they objected to doing so. He lost his job at Columbia as a direct result. No one intervened.

Columbia's president, Nicholas Murray Butler, undoubtedly spoke for most of his academic colleagues when he emphasized the importance of being circumspect to the graduating class of 1917: "What had been tolerated before becomes intolerable now," he declared. "What had been folly was now treason. . . . There is and will be no place in Columbia University . . . for . . . any among us who are not with whole heart and mind and strength committed to fight with us to make the world safe for democracy."

After the war, in the midst of one of the nation's periodic communist and anarchist scares, as Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer led a national campaign to suppress dissent and to brand all unorthodox opinion as radical and disloyal, loyalty oaths were freely imposed within many of the nation's colleges and universities. The same broad trends continued into the twenties and thirties, at least to the extent that whenever any academic strayed too far beyond the boundaries of acceptable dissent, punishment was sure to follow. The sad history of what happened in higher education between 1940 and the mid-fifties when McCarthyism held sway offers yet another cautionary tale about the fragility of academic freedom in American life. Although it is true there were many instances where there was resistance, in the main, when academe was pressured to cleanse itself of suspected dissidents, colleges and universities readily acceded.

Classical forms of academic freedom, the type of civil liberty which relates to the specific work of the professor—freedom to teach, to conduct research, to publish without interference; and freedom for college teachers to exercise the same civil and political rights as other citizens without endangering their academic status—these dominated the history of academic liberty in America up until the late sixties and early seventies. Until then, except in a very limited sense, the correlative freedom of *Lernfreiheit*, students' freedom to learn, received very little attention. This latter form of academic liberty came to the fore in the midst of discussions as to whether the exercise of student freedom posed a direct threat to teachers' freedom. When campus radicals and other dissidents held administrators hostage in their offices in order to enforce their demands, called strikes to prevent classes from being held, forced major curricular changes, closed campuses, or demanded new programs, the question posed was not simply one of the legitimacy of whatever students wanted, but how those demands encroached upon teaching freedom. At the risk of considerable oversimplification, it was during the height of the period

of campus riots that appreciation was registered for the reciprocal interdependence of the two types of academic liberty. Heretofore, it had been easy enough to discern in theory and practice how teachers' freedoms might intrude upon students' freedom to learn. Now the tables were turned: it became painfully obvious that unbridled demands for student freedom encroached upon teaching freedom as well.

Less often discussed has been yet another type of academic freedom: that having to do with the corporate autonomy of the institution itself, a prerogative more nearly reflective of the original medieval construction of academic freedom. Historically, the greatest threats to the academic freedom of institutions of higher learning have come from the encroachments of church or state. Arguably, in recent decades the greater threat now derives from the economic rather than the political influence of government and industry. As *The Control of the Campus*, a report issued in 1982 by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, summarized the issue, "The connection between higher education and major corporations . . . imperils colleges and universities in much the same way as the church and the state have threatened university integrity in the past. And preoccupation on the part of the academy with the priorities of business and industry may mean that . . . larger social mandates . . . will be compromised."

Contemporary institutions of higher learning depend on three main sources for funding: private gifts, research grants and contracts, and tuition payments—in other words, they depend upon outside benefactors, upon business or government, and upon the market. Dependence, as has often been argued, spells vulnerability to influence. Those upon whom colleges and universities depend for money exert influence on how the institution discharges its mission, what programs are offered, and what policies are pursued. Inevitably, colleges attempt to do whatever it is they do in ways that will ensure continued support from those upon whom they depend. Hence, the question has become one of determining whether, and in what ways, institutions of higher education can protect themselves from corrupting external influences while preserving for themselves the autonomy needed for the pursuit of learning. By the same token, the question is also one of balance between institutional independence and responsiveness to social need.

### **CURRICULAR CONSERVATISM**

Complaints heard nowadays that colleges and universities are not responsive enough to social, change, that general learning should be more diverse in its content, that colleges and universities have been exceedingly slow about opening up the curricular canon (if any such thing exists) to reflect more fully the

interests and cultural contributions of minorities heretofore consigned to "invisibility" or marginality, are not without precedent. Collegiate courses of instruction have always exhibited a certain inertia, evolving at first through a process of accommodation at the periphery and only later at the core, and then almost always only as a result of strong pressure imposed from without. So far as one can ascertain, it has always been so, differing from case to case only in the degree to which accommodation took place and the rapidity with which it occurred.

The Romans were much opposed to the introduction of Hellenistic learning in the second century B.C., and went so far as to pass official proscriptions against its being taught in schools, though to little avail. Juvenal and Tacitus both railed against the apparent stagnation and deterioration of what was taught in oratorical or rhetorical schools, again without much effect. The tendency of schools to preserve and transmit knowledge no longer rooted in the social conditions that once made it vital and important is seen also in the predominance of rhetorical education in the very late Hellenistic period, long after republican government was only a memory and opportunities to apply what was learned were severely circumscribed.

The liberal arts—*artes liberales*—in their original sense, it should be observed, originally did not designate fixed fields of study so much as they referred to activities or techniques; each was conceived of, strictly speaking, as a way of *doing* something, as in the "art" of engaging in rhetorical, logical, grammatical, or literary analysis. Subsequently, as Greco-Roman learning, the *enkylios paideia* or "recurrent" general culture, passed into the medieval world, curricula were structured around what became a standardized enumeration of its primary elements: the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric), and music, geometry, arithmetic, and astronomy, or, alternatively, philosophy (the *quadrivium*). Together they became formalized and fixed—some might say, ossified—as the basis of all instruction preparatory for professional training in the medieval university. For centuries thereafter, liberal learning was defined rigidly within the confines of the seven liberal-arts. The tendency of academic institutions to resist change, to adapt only slowly to pressures for the substitution or inclusion of new learning, is shown, for example, in the willingness of the medieval scholars' guilds to accept Aristotelian logic, but not Platonic metaphysics and other elements of learning imported from Moorish and Saracenic sources; by the initial rejection by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century universities of almost the entire corpus of Renaissance literary humanism; and the slowness or reluctance with which institutions of higher learning in the eighteenth century incorporated new scientific knowledge and discoveries.

Much of the history of collegiate curricula in America over the past century and a half revolves around the struggle to legitimate new fields of scholarly inquiry and academic instruction, a struggle marked by broad opposition to the incorporation of new professional specialties at the expense of older ones, and by a recurrent desire to preserve certain subjects or content bodies as timeless and immutable (the Yale Report of 1828, the Great Books program at the University of Chicago in the early 1930s, the spirited attack upon and defense of Western Civilization courses in the 1980s). Sometimes new learning has had to seek a place outside the academic cloister when, for whatever reasons, it was denied a place in the universities—legal training at the Inns of Court in sixteenth-century London, or literary classicism in the fifteenth-century Italian academies, the work of scientific investigation in separate clubs, societies, and academies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Today, for all their inclusivity, there are many applied technologies and practical arts not taught in colleges and universities that are offered instead in community colleges, and perhaps appropriately so. The point here is not what should be taught as part of accredited higher learning, but, rather, the historical question of how, when, and under what circumstances courses of study have evolved and devolved, have come into existence or disappeared. Overall, it seems safe to say, curricular revision has been a fitful and uneven process, invariably controversial, always a collision point for competing social interests and needs.

Likewise, the tension between commonality and diversity has been perennial. Certainly, rough parallels can be found between efforts to introduce and popularize the elective system in the early twentieth century and efforts to devise more flexible curricula emphasizing student choice in the early 1970s, over a half century later. Contrariwise, the basic form of the rationale for preserving common learning in the eighties and nineties of the twentieth century differs insignificantly from expressions of support for efforts in previous decades to accomplish the same aim. Illustrative examples might include the inauguration of general survey courses at Columbia University in the post-World War I period, the program advanced by the Harvard Redbook in the mid-1940s, or, to cite the case of Harvard once again, the inauguration of a curricular “core” in the late 1970s.

Curricular inclusivity in the special sense of representation of minority interest poses a somewhat different issue. To some extent, perhaps, the problem is historically new. Few precedents suggest themselves for any deliberate and self-conscious effort on the part of an academic community to broaden courses of study so as to treat more fully the interests, concerns, accomplishments, and contributions of the disempowered, of culturally marginal peoples.

Depending upon the interpretive scheme within which the phenomenon is analyzed, a case could be made for the argument that the contemporary American effort to draw in elements from the periphery of power and cultural influence and to install them within a curricular "mainstream" has a special uniqueness about it. Which is cause and which effect—a broadening and diversification of the curriculum and the ascendancy of those whose interests historically have not been well represented—remains an interesting open question.

### EDUCATIONAL AIMS AND IDEALS

Plato and Aristotle were among the first to pose the question as to whether education should primarily serve the individual or the state, whether it should be directed to the advantage of the individual or made to serve larger social ends. Phrased in the abstract as a purely philosophical issue, discussions over the aims and purposes of education might have seemed remote or fruitless. Nevertheless, all things considered, it is difficult to make sense of institutional policies and practices overtime in the history of higher education without reference to the provisional answers to those queries that were accepted (if only implicitly) at some particular time and place. The Socratic ideal balanced the claims of personal development and civic rectitude, learning intended both for the perfection of self and effective participation in the life of a city-state. The Platonic perspective, in contrast, held that schooling was of such overweening importance to the welfare of the just state that it should be a public function. Cicero's *De oratore* made plain the author's conviction that oratorical learning had as its goal the production of wise statesmen. Early medieval erudition was directed to otherworldly ends, most particularly to the salvation of one's soul. Renaissance humanism enshrined secular aesthetic enrichment and expanded consciousness as a paramount goal, even as some theorists believed that from the ranks of liberally educated men would come the prudent counselors and executives of the Italian city-state.

Drawing closer to modern times, it is worth remembering how serious were the calls of Benjamin Rush and many others for a new type of education better adapted to fostering allegiance to republican ideals; and it was a goal to which many early antebellum colleges fervently pledged themselves in their founding charters. Spirited defenses of the classical curriculum competed in the nineteenth century with heartfelt appeals for more practical trade training and professional learning, symbolizing the tension between intellectualist and utilitarian aims in higher learning. From the late 1800s onward, it would be almost impossible to trace out or explain permutations in collegiate curricula without reference to the growth of scientific knowledge, the impact of the

emergence of the new social-science disciplines, and the recurrent struggle between those who felt colleges and universities should be repositories of liberal culture or custodians of civic virtue and those who urged that institutions of higher learning be converted into training facilities for business and industry.

### INCLUSIVITY AND ELITISM

The extent to which higher education has been an elitist phenomenon, the exclusive preserve of the rich and privileged, is historically problematic. In their formative period at least, universities seem to have attracted students from all social classes and walks of life, rich and poor alike. In many ways, students then were as heterogeneous a group as today's college students, and oftentimes were even less well prepared for their studies than their modern counterparts. Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, at any rate, universities appear to have afforded many less-advantaged persons a route upward in terms of social mobility and class status. As has often been observed, the liberal arts supplied the avenue over which the sons of Europe's poor made their way into high positions in church and state. Included on the rosters of those enrolled, for example, are the names of many students whose fathers were tradesmen, merchants, and yeoman farmers.

Exclusivity sometimes correlated with geography: fragmentary records suggest that lower-class students represented a smaller percentage of enrollments in the Italian *studia* of the early Renaissance than in the Spanish universities, for example; that lower- and middle-class students were more numerous in early nineteenth-century French and German institutions of advanced learning than at Oxford and Cambridge in the same period, and so on. Again, so far as it is possible to ascertain and correlate student enrollments with socioeconomic class, degrees of inclusion or exclusion seem to have fluctuated over time, with the general trend from the late seventeenth century onward being toward exclusion. In England especially, from the early nineteenth century on into the twentieth, the commitment of the dons at Oxford and Cambridge was to social exclusivity and privilege.

In America, trends were mixed. Not nearly enough is known to permit firm judgments, but it has been suggested that the early colonial and antebellum colleges included significant percentages of enrollments drawn from working-class families and farmers. The picture grows more complicated with the advent of the so-called booster colleges and comprehensive land-grant institutions, most of which attracted an ever-increasing percentage of lower-class and middle-class students. Clearer by far in the American context has been the experience of women and minorities. Women's colleges did not make their

appearance until the first third of the nineteenth century; and coeducation was not well established until the last third of the nineteenth century. African Americans enjoyed little access to higher education throughout the 1800s, and then usually their opportunities were restricted to predominantly black colleges. Not until past the midpoint of the twentieth century were blacks admitted in large numbers to predominantly white colleges and universities. Relative to their numbers as percentages of age-relevant and total populations, Hispanics fared poorly, as did Native Americans. Similarly, breaking barriers to access by religious minorities was a slow and sometimes painful process.

The second half of the twentieth century brought a major influx of women and ethnic minority students into academe, but they were distributed rather unevenly in terms of the types of institutions attended. Assuming present trends continue, as the white percentage of the population decreases relative to blacks and other minorities, non-white enrollments are predicted to climb significantly in the early twenty-first century. Nowadays much controversy attends the question of what price must be paid for the sake of greater inclusion, but few will dispute on historical grounds the apparent and not-so-simple truth that the trend in American higher education in recent decades has been away from exclusionary practices and norms of all kinds.

### KNOWLEDGE AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

If there is anything unambiguous about the history of higher education, it is that different types of knowledge have enjoyed varying degrees of status, prestige, and authority, and their hierarchical rankings have changed enormously over time as a function of a diverse array of social factors. In classical antiquity two quite dissimilar conceptions of education competed for acceptance: commitment to *logos* or *ratio*, "reason," and correlatively to the arts of reasoning, which framed the philosophic tradition; and a commitment to *oratio*, having to do with the arts of speech and language, which defined the oratorical or rhetorical tradition. Beginning in Greece in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., debate opened as to which should take precedence in the education of the free citizen. Rather clearly, between the two, the Romans ultimately showed a distinct preference for the latter perspective, a view of education emphasizing public expression, political and legal discourse, and literature pertaining to the noble civic virtues upon which an orderly society was based. Over and against a stress on logic, mathematics, and philosophy characteristic of Plato, Aristotle, and their spiritual successors, Hellenistic learning was thus organized around the practical arts of grammar, dialectic, and public rhetoric.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the ancient rhetorical tradition or model for education first came under serious challenge by medieval scholastics,

at which point speculative philosophy, logic, and theology began to supersede grammar and rhetoric as leading elements within the curriculum. With the Renaissance humanist recovery of the Ciceronian educational ideal in the late 1400s and early 1500s, rhetorical and literary studies were revived and strengthened once again. To them were added Christian ethics and the social courtesies or conventions of etiquette traditionally associated with medieval knighthood. By the sixteenth century, that combination of literary training, religious piety, and courtly etiquette had given rise to an archetypical conception of the ideally-educated person as a "Christian gentleman." It was a construction of higher learning that with some modifications won ready acceptance in the first colonial colleges of America. Henceforth, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, rhetoric, grammar, and theology were to dominate courses of study aimed at producing good citizens within a theocratic commonwealth.

The nineteenth century brought the first stirrings of protest against a curriculum defined almost exclusively by antique learning and religious piety. On one side were proponents of scientific learning and the experimental sciences. On the other appeared advocates of applied technical arts. Defenders of the rhetorical and textual arts were not easily cast aside, however; and a strong humanistic program of studies emphasizing literary and rhetorical training continued to characterize the offerings of denominational or sectarian schools and most liberal-arts colleges. However, in the universities that came to dominate the landscape of American higher education (beginning with the founding of Cornell in 1868, Johns Hopkins in 1876, Clark University in 1889, Stanford in 1891, and Chicago in 1892), the orientation was altogether different. Dedicated to specialized research and advanced professional studies, as has been shown, universities installed experimental science as a new knowledge paradigm.

Little acumen is needed to discern the results ensuing in the twentieth century. Reflective of a profound historical shift in thinking within the broader cultural milieu, the so-called "hard" experimental physical and biological sciences and their allied technologies together with mathematics now occupy places of preeminence at the top of the status hierarchy. Somewhat lower are the social-science disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, together with the separate applications or "applied" subdisciplines they in turn have spawned, all of which vie for status and prestige with a range of commercial and business-related subjects (accounting, finance, administration, and so forth). Near the bottom stand the humanities (language, literature, philosophy). Ironically perhaps, today's knowledge pyramid almost perfectly inverts the disciplinary status hierarchy of centuries past.

What is at once, paradoxically, quite old and new in controversies over collegiate curricula is the basic intellectual frame of reference within which contemporary debate is increasingly conducted. Today the venerable positivist belief in the possibility of total objectivity, impartiality, and neutrality in knowledge has come in for hard times at the hands of so-called critical theorists and sociologists of knowledge, just as it did in the days of the sophists, the philosophical Cynics and Skeptics, and others of their ilk two and a half millennia ago. As Jürgen Habermas and many others have labored to show, the ideal of scientific or philosophical objectivity in its purest forms may be largely illusory if, as is alleged, knowledge is always about power, and "truth" is in some indeterminate sense a function of interests. If the status and interests of knowers are bound up inextricably with the nature of knowledge itself, and if knowledge structures are social or cultural artifacts masquerading as immutable features of reality, any notion of the academy as a neutral field where competing truths contend on an equal basis falls into question.

From a critical-theory perspective, knowledge is socially conditioned; it is the product of communities whose regulative principles and constitutions inevitably include some and exclude others; and its reifications and codifications of information function oftentimes as obstacles to the emergence and acceptance of new knowledge-forms.

On this account it would seem to follow that any curriculum is not simply a sampling of independent and autonomous information available to society in a given historical moment, but, in a deeper sense, is an organic outgrowth of that society and the forms of consciousness it permits or allows. As society changes, so too must the curriculum—but not necessarily for reasons traditionally adduced. Rather, as John Fiske would have it, writing in *Reading the Popular* (1989), "Knowledge is never neutral, it never exists in an empiricist, objective relationship to the real. Knowledge is power, and the circulation of knowledge is part of the social distribution of power." The same point is given expression in Michael Apple's *Official Knowledge, Democratic Education in a Conservative Age* (1993): "It is naive to think of the . . . curriculum as neutral knowledge. Rather, what counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations and struggles among identifiable class, race, gender, and religious groups."

Whatever the merits of the argument, it does seem to offer a challenging perspective for further historical inquiry. On its reading, the history of curricular change over time within colleges and universities bears close ties with a broader array of societal forces and relations than conventional interpretations have typically comprehended. Whether a critical-theory perspective can supply a more cogent accounting of how institutional change and curricular reform occur in higher education awaits further investigation.

## ACADEMIC CONVENTIONS, RITES AND RITUALS

Each year countless thousands of college students don caps and gowns at commencement and join in the sort of stately processions that characteristically mark such occasions. Pomp and circumstance lend a proper air of solemnity to the proceedings. Yet probably no more than a few of the participants have the remotest inkling of the historical derivations and origins of the pageantry in which they are engaged. Modern usage is not old: most customs trace back no more than a hundred years or so. What they do represent, however, is an outgrowth of a self-conscious nineteenth-century effort to recapture something of the spirit of Oxford and Cambridge, and behind them, the symbolism and traditions of the original universities of the Middle Ages. The master's *pileum* or *biretta* has been incarnated anew as a mortarboard; today's processional leader unknowingly imitates the ceremonial place and role of the *bedellus* of ancient times; and the long black gowns in which faculty and students now attire themselves, though quite different in style, are presumably intended to invoke associations with those worn centuries ago by medieval academics. Less well understood is the modern system under which each discipline or academic specialization is assigned its own distinctive striping: dark blue for philosophy, a light-blue color for professional education, and so on; or the different designs of academic hoods, each bearing the colors of the institution from which its wearer once graduated or is graduating. Those upon whom the bachelor's degree is conferred in all likelihood have little appreciation for how medieval nomenclature has been preserved in the identification of academic degrees, any more than do holders of the master's degree, or those to whom the Ph.D., or doctorate of philosophy (*philosophia*, "love of wisdom," comprehensive learning in general) is awarded.

Beyond the level of liturgy and ceremony stand also institutional usages and the "structural" conventions of academe which have proven so remarkably durable over time. The oral defense of a dissertation, for example, must be seen as standing in a direct line of descent from the obligatory "oration" of the colonial college, and still further back, from the medieval university disputation, or *conventus*. It is not too far-fetched to trace the lineage back even further, to the formal declamations of the rhetors' schools or even to the oral interrogations of the Mesopotamian tablet-house. Rituals of judgment, of assessment and evaluation of learning, have been a permanent feature of collegiate life in all times and places, and have been met with much the same degree of trepidation and apprehension felt by any of today's collegians contemplating final examinations. Dishonesty and cheating on tests are nothing new either: efforts to keep assessment and evaluation efforts honest by all

parties involved extend back many centuries and probably always have enjoyed about the same degree of mixed success.

Fraternity and sorority initiation rites of the twentieth century loosely recapitulate the hazing to which the *bejaunus*, or "yellow-billed" fledgling scholar newly arrived at fifteenth-century Heidelberg, was subjected, or the system under which underclassmen were obliged to exhibit deference to upperclassmen in nineteenth-century British and American colleges. Contemporary student complaints over the high price of textbooks also bear an uncanny identity with officials' criticisms of the *stationarri*, or book copyists, heard in thirteenth-century Bologna.

Laments over today's unruly students partying in "Greektown" or in neighborhood bars on a Saturday night differ but little from complaints levied by Libanius of Antioch about the chaos and disorder attending gatherings of students after hours in his own time, or the popular outrage felt by townsfolk witnessing bands of drunken collegians roving along Straw Street in medieval Paris or crowding the taverns and ale-houses of Oxford and Cambridge. Instances of student intimidation of faculty and administrators during the campus unrest of the 1960s, to cite another parallel, invite rough comparison with the exactions of student courts before which Bolognese teaching masters in the early fourteenth century were hailed. Once again, one need only recall the riots and student food fights that broke out periodically at scores of ante-bellum colleges in order to be reminded that student misconduct and unrest have always been a more or less permanent if episodic feature of collegiate life.

The academic as an object of mingled respect and ridicule also has a long history behind it. Ironic use of the title "professor," at once signifying condescension and feigned or exaggerated deference, for example, has many historical analogues, nicely illustrated in the fun Lucian poked at the absurd pretensions of the self-important rhetors of his day, or by popular nineteenth-century images of the old-time academic as slightly dotty, absent-minded, delightfully eccentric, or woefully impractical. Criticism of scholars for their obscurantism and the unintelligibility of their writings echo down through the ages, as do attacks upon the ivory tower as a citadel of irrelevance and impracticality. Here one thinks, for example of a Hellenistic writer's dismissal of the Alexandrian *Mouseion* as a "bird cage" for scholars, or Luther's dismissal of universities as "nests of gloomy ignorance."

Perhaps, then, it is also true in higher education as it is in almost all things that, as the French have it, *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*—the more things change, the more they remain the same.