American Education

From a cohesive, Aristotelian-sized character forming, liberal arts education, to a vast and diverse university, offering vocational educations with precise specialization, American education has changed over the past century and a half (Nieli 319). Considering more than 2200 years of education in the spirit of the classical tradition, beginning with Socrates and his later-termed “Socratic Method,” and continuing through the first two hundred and fifty years of colonial society, the classical tradition has had an enormous influence on all of recorded history. Modern education, on the other hand, is still a new educational method that is being digested, and repulsed, by some Americans today. Containing many inconsistencies and shortcomings, as any newly implemented system has, since modern education’s onset, questions have arisen as to its positive effects on people, society, and the world at large in comparison to the classical tradition. To eliminate, to such an astronomical degree, classical education in modern universities, which was the primary means of education for all of recorded history, is quite an upheaval in learning practice and how it is viewed. William Bennett, former United States Secretary of Education, said in the late 1960s and 70s, colleges and universities responded to the changing education system “by abandoning course requirements of any kind;” (Nieli 326) this eliminated any remnants of the classical tradition that had been engrained in education for centuries. In investigating modern education, the questions naturally arise of where and how it came to be, and what preceded it. To properly address the situation, one must begin with
America’s original methods of education, the philosophy behind those methods, and then
demonstrate a major shift in thought and practice in our most recent educational era.

American education began in colonial society before the United States was officially
founded. In colonial times, education was dominated by the Christian worldview. Many forms of
Protestantism were the backbone of structure through which colonial society, and its education,
functioned. Some of the earliest universities were founded by Christian men, such as Harvard,
Yale, and Dartmouth by Congregationalists; Princeton by Presbyterians; Columbia, and Penn by
Episcopalian. Even the nondenominational universities that started, one of the most prominent
ones being Stanford, were established with the intention of teaching that human beings have an
immortal soul, a wise and loving God reigns over all creation, and adherence to His statutes is
man’s most noble calling. (Nieli 312-316) The Bible held primary importance in the classroom
as well as other sects of life, prayer and worship services were an integral part of colonial life,
including educational institutions. In fact, most institutions mandated that all students attend
morning and evening prayer services (Marsden 170). This was viewed as positive by faculty,
students, and alumni, because it provided a sense of being of part of something bigger than
oneself, a Yale faculty member commented (Nieli 314). All education was connected to the
religious beliefs of the day, postulating that every knowable subject from the humanities to the
mathematical arts could be integrated into a cohesive whole that revealed attributes of God.
Science was not seen, as it is by many today, as contradictory too religion. Rather, it too was an
avenue by which persons could come to a deeper understanding of God’s creation and thereby an
understanding of Himself and His attributes. (Marsden 85, 91-92) Russel Nieli, professor of
politics at Princeton University, remarks, “Science and religion, the humanities and the
mathematical arts, Christianity and material culture, were all seen as a single unified body of knowledge” (316).

Along with Christianity, colonial peoples drew from sources other than their religious convictions for educational formation. Ancient Greek education was an integral aspect of colonial education. It provided much in accordance with Christian thought and itself strove to similar ends. The Socratics, most famously Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, were and continue to be known for their pursuits of what they claimed to be the highest values in life: Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. The foundational principles that governed education in America incorporated Athens and Jerusalem into what colonials saw as a cohesive unity of knowledge that enabled the seeker to gain an edified understanding of reality, encouraging and enabling him to become virtuous and motivated to work for the common good of his community (D’Souza). Early American leaders recognized the profound accomplishments of Greek thought and acknowledged its ability to permeate cultures for over two thousand years. This made colonials think it only right to continue to spread the Ancient’s knowledge and wisdom about life and reality, providing an opportunity for all who undertook such great works to flourish in ways colonials counted as worthy of pursuing.

Not only were great written works studied, but the ancient curriculum was followed very closely in the form of the trivium and quadrivium. This curriculum firstly established communication skills, the trivium or grammar, logic, and rhetoric, enabling individuals to communicate and articulate their ideas in a clear, precise, an educated manner. Secondly it provided opportunity for initial investigations into further knowledge of reality through the quadrivium: arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music. The colonials followed the ancients’ educational methods to an even further extent than described above with strict adherence to their
languages, Greek and Latin. Teachers of the time saw education as a means by which to expose students to “the best that has been said, thought, written, and otherwise expressed about the human experience” (Nieli 329) with an eventual aim to imitate these masters (Jackson 341). In this spirit, teachers were learned in all fields taught and known as “general” professors; because of this methodology, there were no research professors, everyone was concentrated on the instruction of the young (Nieli 314).

One important element of this classical colonial picture is that they did not see all of these disciplines as distinct subjects, but rather inter-related and, when woven together, providing a consummation of humanly-knowable knowledge that lead to an unparalleled understanding of reality, as known and discovered up to their time. Specialization was not the desirable end of education; rather education was valued for its development of character and pursuit of virtue (Nieli 313-314; Marsden 82). Though many in Colonial times considered pursuing virtue the highest endeavor man could tend to, there was a respectably large number of people who did not hold such a claim.

As the new age of Capitalism thrust itself upon the western world and many European countries seized this new economic machine, the European immigrants in America began seeing themselves as falling by the wayside of the economic twentieth century. Considering the economy is sustained by suitable educated persons employed in applicable jobs, many prominent educational leaders in the States started a movement in American education that they attributed more fitting to the industrial, scientific, and technological advances of the world’s modern-day economies (Nieli 316-318). Frederick Barnard, President of Columbia in the mid-nineteenth century, is recorded saying the American education system was in need of extreme change, implementing various new courses in material sciences and financing cutting-edge research to
stay on pace with the Capitalism of western Europe and the rise of the Industrial Revolution (Rueben 61). Barnard was not a lone ranger regarding his opinions towards education in the years after the Civil War. Presidents from well-known universities scattered throughout the States were of the same mind, including Harvard’s Charles Eliot, Cornell’s Andrew Dickson White, and Michigan’s James Angell (Nieli 317).

With the industrial economy becoming relevant came the seemingly urgent need to adjust education principles and methods to better prepare individuals for careers in the industrial, science, and technologically-based economy that was gaining speed unsustainably fast. The archetype for education in this age was Germany; it was recognized as having the most sophisticated scientific schools and making the latest discoveries that everyone coveted. George Marsden, professor of history at the University of Notre Dame, writes in his book *Soul of the American University*:

> It would be rare to find either a university leader or major scholar [in the latter part of the nineteenth century] who had not spent some years studying in Germany…. Americans stood in awe of the German universities… For Americans, who in university building were behind just about every European country, an appeal to a German precedent could be an intimidating argument (104).

It is easily seen how the push from Barnard, Eliot, et al. was a convincing surge that penetrated deep into even the engrained classical tradition. Barnard argued that professors who were specialized and research-oriented needed to be hired in the universities with minimal attention given to their religious convictions, out of dire need for the best professors to lead the way in scientific discoveries in the new science-driven era. This was in stark contrast to the large
majority of American schools that were staffed by clerics who were general educators, primarily and predominantly focused on establishing moral virtue and high character in the students. (Nieli 313-318; Jackson, “Retooling” 333-343)

One instance of how education practices and methods changed with the up and rising material science phenomena lies in John Dewey’s progressive agenda. Dewey recognized individual differences and social needs as the ideals to which education must adhere (Jackson, “Retooling” 335 and Jackson, “Pedagogues, Periodicals, and Paranoia” (“Pedagogues”) 22-29). Progressive educators used scientifically minded pedagogues to order and administrate the education system. Dewey spoke of his idea for vocational training, under the name of Progressive Education, as that which has as its highest goal the development of effective workers who could control their own fate as industrial workers. His stand was heavily influenced by the changing world economy that was Capitalism. (Jackson, “Pedagogues” 24) Another example, still alive today, is the elective system that Harvard initiated under Charles Eliot; this system “represented the triumph of diversity and educational choice” (Nieli 318) offered to students. It was suited precisely for the American schools’ increasing emphasis on vocational degrees, scientific knowledge, and research. It originally allowed undergraduates free reign in choosing their courses; however, this freedom was constricted as time went on into a major-requirements system, as is present in today’s schools (Nieli 318). These curricular changes, though, were not favored by all American educators.

Many people declared this change in educational practice as homicide on classical education. Paul Shorey, a classics professor at University of Chicago, remarked in a “philosophical debate on traditional and progressive pedagogues with Charles Eliot” (“Pedagogues” 25), his “chief complaint” was the stubborn refusal of progressives to think about
traditionalist pedagogy (“Pedagogues” 26). He went on to say that there are solutions to the progressive-versus-traditionalist stalemate, but any change necessarily begins with sincere attention given to scholars who have “drank deeply from the Tiber” (“Pedagogues” 26). One manifestation of classical education that provides a clear contrast to progressive educational thought lies in the spirit of the Renaissance, and of the Erasmus tradition. People were educated in the fundamentals of Greek and Latin grammar, syntax, and lexicon, and then immersed in exemplary models of these classical languages where the rules learned were on display (Jackson, “Retooling” 341). Though people such as Shorey, Yale’s president Noah Porter and Princeton’s President James McCosh (Marsden, Chs. 7 and 12), were adamantly opposed to the changes in American education, they did not have enough political clout to overcome the immense push for change that Harvard, Columbia, Michigan, et al. advocated (Nieli 318-321). This was largely due to most Americans fearing what might happen to their country if its education system did not adjust to the changes in the economy, which made sense “considering the practical nature of most Americans” (Jackson, “Pedagogues” 25).

As the progressives gained recognition and support throughout America, educational practices shifted their way in a dramatic fashion never seen before in what had always been classical American education. In the 1970s, years after the Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution, and its version of Capitalism hit Europe, demands by professional testing agencies in America were made for “a complete overhaul of the American education system, so that it deemphasized reading, verbal communication, and traditional academic problems and stressed a broader range of mental activities” i.e. vocational education (Ackermann 294; Hutchins 65). Progressive vocational educators were so determined to see their agenda through that they spread articles about their philosophy in magazines that were geared to hit the public face in their
“cosmopolitan (headquartered in New York City), international (Lippmann drafted Wilson’s *Fourteen Points*), and reform-focused (e.g., workers’ rights, feminism, civil rights)” nature (Jackson, “Pedagogues” 23). This clearly added political force to their plan to change American education, an absolutely necessary move considering the influence politics had in major fields, such as education.

As the United States “progressed,” classicists did not give up tradition so easily. In his debate with Eliot, Shorey later made arguably the most insightfully observational statement regarding progressive, material-science based, vocational education to date. In discussing the core problems with modern education he claimed modern sciences’ real competitor was pseudo-science; today’s scientific education claims to adhere to the methods of Newton et al. “with a form of hypocritical sloth” (Jackson, “Pedagogues” 26); he goes on to say that Newton spent years arduously investing the nature of the universe and it was only through these precise, patient, and pain-staking years that his discoveries in science were made. Modern education simply forces students to memorize what Newton discovered without any personal struggle towards an understanding of the universe in any remote way analogous to Newton’s. Conversely, in studying through the classical tradition, students are presented with a principle in life and asked to investigate its truth, guided, not spoon-fed, to the answers, i.e. the Socratic Method. Education is about the journey; the struggle towards understanding, with patience being an assumed and integral aspect of the learning process. Modern education gives the answers to hard questions freely and then asks students to functionally use the answers they have been given in application. Learning, for its sake, is not emphasized; patience is trivial; and true understanding of material is lost to a mere functionality quota. (Jackson, “Pedagogues” 26)
Now, even traditionalists including Shorey acknowledged the good that science had to offer; the German schools were respected (Babbitt 143-144, 165) and the knowledge science had contributed to the world was not deemed trivial. However, traditionalists were not merely fighting for their education system, they wanted others to see that the modern one was not flawless, as some people seemed to think. (Nieli 321; Jackson, “Pedagogues” 26; Jackson, “Retooling” 344) Even though classicists are fighting today and several schools of their tradition are birthing throughout the United States, modern education definitely has the upper hand.

We have seen through a thorough investigation of American education “from whence we have come” (Nieli, pg. 312) and to where we have, and still are, headed. The classical tradition proved deeply rooted in historical context, traveling through time for well over 2000 years, educating mankind. Then, through a series of European-influenced economic and political phases, we find ourselves digesting a drastically different mind frame towards education than that of old. We saw great tension at its birth, and continue to experience reluctance by some to digest it today. No claim has been made and respected that flawlessly asserts the perfection of one education system over all others; yet, in the present hysteria modern education finds itself in, the American scholar T.W. Baldwin’s message from his book Small Latine and Lesse Greeke postulates a question that requires due thought and reflection: Would Shakespeare exist if the Enlightenment had happened 200 years earlier? (460)
Works Cited


Rueben, Julie A. *The Making of the Modern Univeristy: Intellectual Transformation and the