

WILLIAM G. DURDEN

Reclaiming the Distinctiveness of American Higher Education

PERSPECTIVES

We have provided our students with a shopping mall of choices without an overarching purpose

IN THE FACE of rising global competition and the heightened call for accountability issued by the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education, educators across the country are being called upon—once again—to demonstrate the validity of a liberal education. We are asked repeatedly if our approach to undergraduate education will prepare stu-

dents to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, if it is capable of adapting to rapidly changing times. As we seek to respond to these concerns and evaluate the effectiveness of our own institutions, I suggest that we look for guidance to those enlightened revolutionaries who established not only our democracy, but also an American approach to liberal education that was distinctive for its emphasis on pragmatism delivered through an integrated, comprehensive student experience.

Our founding fathers instinctively understood that a nation whose success depended upon engaged and informed citizens demanded an education far different from the isolated, “monkish,” ivory-tower model that was prevalent throughout eighteenth-century Europe and upon which America’s colonial, theologically oriented colleges and universities had been modeled. They advocated, instead, an education that easily traversed the boundaries between the classroom and the community, an education in which the lessons of the academy could be applied immediately to a society seeking to define its own parameters. It was a revolutionary education for a revolutionary time.

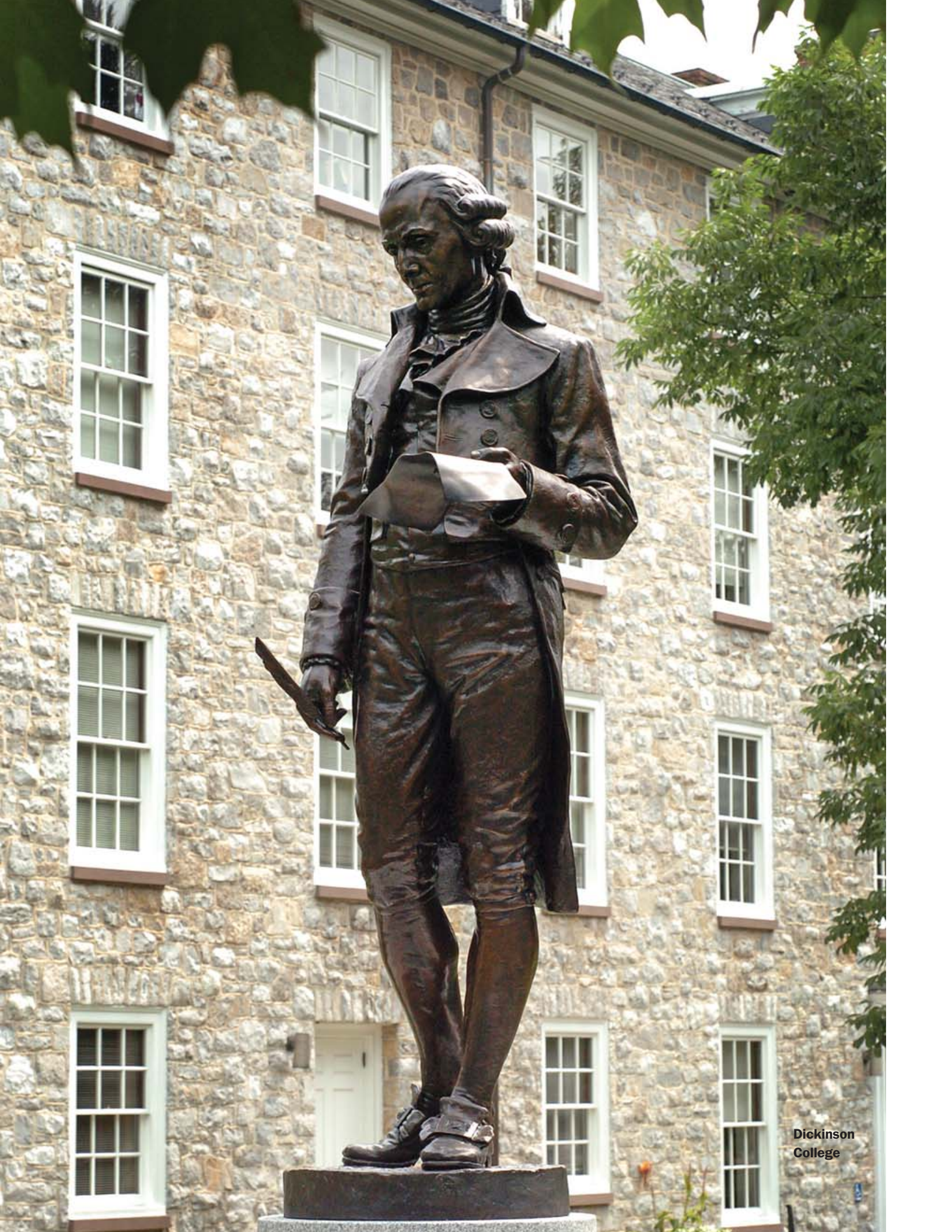
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Benjamin Rush

One of the most passionate and eloquent advocates of a distinctive American education was Dr. Benjamin Rush, who founded Dickinson College. Rush’s fundamental precepts, debated regularly with Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, John Dickinson, and others, offer us important directives as we explore ways to define the relevance and value of liberal education in our own rapidly changing, revolutionary era.

For Rush, an American liberal arts education was to be, above all, useful—useful to oneself, but also to society. This education was to accomplish nothing less than preparation of those citizens and leaders who would shape the economy, government, and social structures of the young democracy. Rush adamantly believed that students must be engaged with their society in order to prepare them to lead in it. Rush had no tolerance for “the college high on the hill,” physically and symbolically removed from the people. For this reason, he strategically located Dickinson College a short two-block walk from the county courthouse, fully expecting students to make the trek on a regular basis to observe government in action. Through the creation of debating societies—an early incarnation of extracurricular student groups—Rush sought to give students the opportunity to discuss the most pressing issues of the day, an opportunity that connected them to rather than isolated them from emerging national developments. Rush even went so far as to recommend that students live not on campus, but with families in the town, where they could be mentored daily in community values and citizenship.

Rush’s conception of an American liberal arts education did not draw arbitrary boundaries among students’ classroom experiences,



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their extracurricular and recreational activities, and their living arrangements. It was an educational approach designed to encourage character development and one that valued public service as a form of patriotism.

We have, I am afraid, lost this vision of an integrated and distinctively American approach to liberal education. We have compartmentalized its parts. There has been a rupture between the student life and academic sides of our enterprise and a focused emphasis on the “useful” and the comprehensive has dulled with time.

While Rush’s idea of having all students live with families in the community is unrealistic in the twenty-first century, is the fundamental premise behind this idea outdated? Shouldn’t we still be striving to provide daily mentoring to our students in community values and citizenship? Isn’t it our responsibility to develop the twenty-first-century contexts that accomplish this most basic and most important of goals? And should not the current “accountability movement” in higher education extend beyond the measurement of disciplinary academic ability to that of citizenship? Shouldn’t we be seeking evidence of informed voting in public elections, community volunteerism, monetary contributions to nonprofit organizations, standing for public office?

Decoupling academic and student life

I would argue that higher education has derailed on both the academic and student life sides. Of course, the academic side would like to claim that it has held steadfast to its mission, and faculty all too frequently place blame on student life for failing to make these important connections. This line of thinking, however, ignores the fact that student life divisions are a relatively recent creation in American higher education and that faculty should also, as they have in the past, shoulder the responsibility of providing a comprehensive educational experience for our students.

And what about student life? This division has burgeoned at most institutions over the past two decades, but in too many instances, we have allowed it to mushroom without clear purpose or direction. Instead, we have reacted

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helter-skelter in our rush to meet rising student demands and challenges. We are “over-offering” and thus introducing a hyper-consumerism into the academic setting. We have built twenty-four-hour student unions and fitness centers that resemble cruise ships. In our haste to demonstrate that we understand that engaged stu-

dents are healthy, energetic students, we have scrambled to provide them with opportunities to engage in, well, everything—to include every conceivable aspect of their own selves and their unfettered desires.

We have not, however, organized this plethora of activities into a cohesive or progressive series of meaningful, educative experiences. Instead, we have provided our students with a shopping mall of choices without an overarching purpose. In the process, we have created a lot of busy, busy students, many of whom are intent on adding activity upon activity to their undergraduate resumes. We have, in short, succeeded in giving students the opportunity to be busy—but simply being busy is not the same as being meaningfully engaged with society and understanding the connection between the activities in which one is engaged and the larger educational mission of the institution.

In general, we have not fulfilled our educative responsibility to open students’ minds, to encourage serious inquiry, and to develop an understanding of what it means to be a part of a wider, diverse community that is not always cast ultimately in a student’s own image. By simply enabling our students’ selfish desires, we have denied them the genuine sociability and connectivity necessary for continuous learning. Instead, we have fallen prey to the students’ own definition of success as we assist them in their quest for personal advancement at the expense of communal progress. The whole notion of a “useful” education, in other words, has become focused on a personal usefulness as each student asks him or herself, “How can I get ahead?”

The type of “usefulness” that builds good citizens through service to society has all too frequently fallen by the wayside. While there is a notable rise in community service or volunteerism among college students today, this often



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occurs because such activity is now viewed as a necessary component for “credentialing” personal aspirations. Of course, there are notable exceptions to these negative trends among both individual students and college or university programs. Yet, in general, it is this decoupling of the academic from student life and our enabling behavior in higher education that has resulted in today’s undergraduates experiencing what former Harvard dean Harry Lewis (2006) describes provocatively in his recent book, *Excellence Without a Soul*, as “the hollowness of undergraduate education,” the total abdication of colleges’ “moral authority to shape the souls of students,” and the absence of any definitive statements about what it means to be an educated person.

American undergraduate education for the twenty-first century

It is time to reclaim and revitalize for the twenty-first century the distinctiveness that characterized American higher education during the earliest days of our democracy. At the dawn of a century that promises to be breathtaking in both its challenges and opportunities, we must ensure that our students are

prepared and willing to take on the responsibility of global citizenship and to shake free of their obsessive focus on themselves. We must ensure that they know how the United States “works” and what it values (in all that complexity) and are prepared to engage and listen carefully to opinions expressed by the rest of the world. We must be willing to admit that we have lost the connection between theory and practice that will most readily make this global understanding possible, and we must seek to redefine this connection in a twenty-first-century context.

To do so, we must return to a conception of undergraduate education that is comprehensive and does not compartmentalize students’ experiences into artificial components that separate the curricular from the extracurricular. We must return to the notion of a “useful” education that encompasses and intertwines personal and public usefulness, demonstrating to our students that personal success and understanding are most complete when they contribute to the public good—not when they simply fulfill individual notions of anticipated accomplishment. This will require us to rethink totally our approach to undergraduate

education. Dr. Rush was on to this notion very early. In a 1773 letter to his countrymen on patriotism, he stated that “the social spirit is the true selfish spirit, and men always promote their own interest most in proportion as they promote that of their neighbors and their country” (1951, 84).

As a starting point, we must conceive of and treat student life and the academic program as coequal partners in a shared endeavor that begins as a student prepares for the transition to college and continues as an organized and sustained priority until commencement. The residential experience continues to be *the* characteristic that distinguishes American undergraduate education from that found in other countries, and it should remain a centrally defining feature. The challenge is to incorporate it into the entire educational experience rather than treating it as an ancillary, less serious partner. Failure to do so places the historic advantage of an American higher education at risk and lends increasing advantage to the many for-profit institutions that offer a new—and far less costly—business model for higher education that eschews athletics, residential life, and student life for the bottom line.

We must find ways to encourage faculty to think differently about how they reach and relate to students, ways that will require them to think beyond the classroom experience. The answer is not, as some have suggested, merely to coax faculty into living in residence halls, a concept that presumes that physical juxtaposition will establish a cohesive educational experience. Rather, we need to think creatively about how to bridge the artificial chasm between academic and student life. We need to focus on ways to engage students in a seamless experience that moves easily and naturally in and out of the classroom—an experience that involves faculty in both arenas.

We all have been touched and inspired by a professor whose passion for his or her discipline is absolutely contagious. We need to enhance and expand the ways in which our faculty can model behavior that shows students what it is like to be an engaged scholar who is connected to the wider world with a sense of wonder, bliss, and obligation. Equally

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important, we need to give our students glimpses of faculty interactions in their own communities. They must see the “whole” professor—an individual who lives beyond his or her discipline with curiosity and a commitment to better

the world. We need, in other words, to illustrate to our students through example—through proactive mentorship—that a liberal education is a lifelong habit of the mind.

Similarly, we must demand for our institutions student life professionals who push beyond attention to the affective and endlessly affirming desires of our students. We must ask them to act as far stronger role models by advancing discourse about issues that matter beyond the highly circumscribed topic of the self and how it “feels at a particular moment.” We must ask them to encourage students’ engagement in an expansive interpretation of the life of the mind and to advance a more realistic commentary—a constructive honesty—about students’ performance and aspiration that tempers their unfettered, often ungrounded self-assessment. We must ask them to do so with a candor not found in education—collegiate or precollegiate—for decades. We need, in the final analysis, to push beyond the ivory-tower mentality that our founding fathers so ardently rejected for American higher education but that, nevertheless, has seeped steadily back into the mindset of most of our country’s colleges and universities.

In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that all sectors of American life, *except* liberal arts higher education, revolted against the practices of royalist, privileged England. “Learning for learning’s sake,” instead of the objective of an ultimately useful study, still dominates American liberal education all too often. It is now time to complete the revolution.

Introducing a more comprehensive and generous approach to undergraduate education will require nothing short of a major cultural shift for many institutions. Developing the synergy between the academic program and student life will require that long-established habits be replaced with creative thinking and a willingness for change—a most formidable challenge in a profession notorious for maintaining stability and status quo in its basic organization and intent.



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Perhaps most important will be the need to reassess the purposes for which we reward our faculty—an exercise that will ask us to reexamine the most fundamental aspects of our mission. We must encourage our faculty to connect to the world beyond our campus boundaries through activities such as service learning and applied research. We must find or reallocate resources to help faculty establish networks with the broader community. We must challenge faculty to broaden the definition and scope of substantive scholarship in a liberal arts setting, and we must support them as they explore new pedagogies and introduce new methods of research in and out of the classroom.

We must recognize that these activities can and should be the foundation for legitimate, serious scholarship and service for faculty and that they are integral to advancing a distinctively engaging residential life for students. And we must give these activities appropriate weight and merit when evaluating faculty performance. In the final analysis, we will only be successful if we create a solid scholarly foundation of new knowledge, pedagogy, and residential life out of this renewed synthesis that will define American higher education for the twenty-first century.

To the casual observer, all of this talk about citizenship and engagement with community may seem superfluous and unnecessary. Look in virtually any college catalogue or on any Web site and you will find platitudes and promises touting the institution's commitment to these ideals. While I suppose the fact that such pronouncements exist is a step in the right direction, many of us know that the real work has yet to be done. To quote Thomas Jefferson, "it is in our lives and not from our words, that [our value] must be read. . . . By the same test, the world must judge me." There you have it. By the same test, so must the world judge us in higher education. This is true accountability—devotion to and deliverance upon the original post-Revolutionary intention adapted to our own rapidly changing times. □

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