

What's a University For?: Reflections on Carolina's History

by

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Thank you, Bob. It's a great honor to have been invited to deliver this lecture, and a privilege to share this evening with you.

When Bob Anthony and John Sanders called several weeks ago and asked if I'd speak tonight, they suggested that I should share with some reflections on Carolina's history. That seemed simple enough. But what would I say? How in the space of twenty or so minutes could I capture the essence of this place? There are so many stories to tell, and no easy way to knit them all together.

The truth, of course, is that there is no essence to capture and convey. The stories cannot be distilled into a simple, uplifting tale. This institution's legacy is something quite different. Its history has been contentious and contested. It has been centered on some of the most fundamental questions we can ask in the academy: What should a university be? What counts as knowledge? What is to be taught? And how should the university understand its relationship to the larger society beyond?

We, of course, struggle with those questions today, although we tend to think of them as somehow peculiar to our own time. They are, in fact, our inheritance. And they are by their very nature irresolvable. They have challenged this institution since its founding. They have shaped its identity, and they are what make Carolina today a stimulating and rewarding place to do one's intellectual work. That's the history that I want to share with you this evening.

We should begin, I think, by recognizing that this University was born in a time of revolution and reaction. As the nation's first public university, it was established to serve a radical experiment in politics and government – the founding of a republic, a society of citizens rather than subjects – and, accordingly, it embraced a radical experiment in curriculum.

The beginnings of a university

When the first students arrived here in 1795, they encountered a course of study shaped by the philosophy of French and English freethinkers, and by an Enlightenment faith in the power of human reason to know the world, and to reform

and perfect it. That curriculum was the handiwork of William Richardson Davie – a former officer in the Continental Army, author of the University's charter, a deist and a Freemason. Under Davie's plan, science and modern languages stood on an equal footing with the classics of ancient Greece and Rome, and students were free to pursue their choice of two diplomas. One was the traditional Latin diploma, for young men who wished to master an ancient tongue; the other was in English, for those who concentrated on science, modern literature and politics, and who read the classics only in translation. Bemused by those offerings, one critic quipped that in here in a rural backwater, "the age of reason" had surely dawned.

This University was a child of new freedoms, both political and intellectual. But Chapel Hill's experiment with an Enlightenment curriculum survived for less than a decade. By the opening years of the nineteenth century, that experiment had been swallowed up in the tide of reaction that was sweeping across Europe and America in the wake of the French Revolution.

The troubles here broke to the surface in 1799, when students rose up in open rebellion. A sparse archival record makes details hard to come by, but the revolt seems to have started with the expulsion of an especially popular young man for disobedience to college rules. Other students rallied to his defense, and in the week of rioting that followed, they horsewhipped the president of the University, "waylaid and stoned" one of the professors, and harassed the others with threats of similar harm.

Samuel McCorkle, a Presbyterian minister and one of William Davie's harshest critics among the University's trustees, blamed the unrest on what he described as Chapel Hill's "Jacobine system of education." With its emphasis on the contemporary world and elective studies, he argues, the University's Enlightenment curriculum cultivated an excess of liberty together with disrespect for tradition and all forms of established authority. (Here were the culture wars of the eighteenth century, not so different in their most basic terms from the culture wars of our time.) McCorkle warned that unless abandoned, Davie's plan of college studies would soon perpetuate in America the same forces of infidelity, freethinking, and moral decay that had corrupted France's revolution and unleashed the Reign of Terror.

Shaken by McCorkle's warning, and fearful of anarchy, the University's trustees beat a hasty retreat to the classics. By 1804, they had abolished the English diploma together with Davie's system of elective and had restored Greek and Latin as the twin pillars of instruction.

At first glance, Chapel Hill's return to the classical fold seems to have placed it well within the mainstream of American higher education. The student riot of 1799 was one of many such upheavals that rocked campuses across the nation as sons of the American Revolution tested the limits of a democratic society. From Harvard and Yale to Princeton and Chapel Hill, college leaders responded with a common antidote. They administered heavy doses of classical learning and evangelical piety –

one to discipline the mind, the other to tame the passions. But first glances can be deceptive. While events at Chapel Hill fit into broad, national patterns of college development, it's also true that, before the Civil War, a very particular form of classical instruction claimed pride of place at southern colleges, this University first among them.

The antebellum University

Leaders of the antebellum University had no doubt about their mission: it was to make young men into masters, in all of the varied meanings of that word. Sons of a slaveholding elite ventured to Chapel Hill from every corner of the South. By the 1850s, nearly forty percent of the student body came from out-of-state, and with an enrollment approaching 500, this college ranked second only to Yale in size. As defenders of human inequality in an age of natural rights, the University's patrons felt uneasy with the ideas of perfection and reform that were spreading throughout much of the western world. Parents sought for their sons an education that affirmed the fixity of human relations and installed a habit of command. Young men came to Chapel Hill to confirm their place in society, not to discover a prescription for remaking their world.

That purpose was reflected in the routines of the classroom. Faculty at the antebellum University viewed knowledge as a body of established truths, rather than as methods of inquiry and investigation. The course of study was fixed, and recitation – that is, memory work – was the favored method of instruction. By the time of graduation, college men had stored away the poetry of Horace, the orations of Cicero and Demosthese, and the epic tales of Homer and Virgil. They had learned to seek knowledge in authoritative texts before their own interrogation of the world. And most important of all, in society in which power was exercised primarily by means of the spoken word – in the pulpit, at the bar, in the legislative hall – graduates of the University had acquired the ability, as one alumnus put it, to "speak and act as a man."

This pattern of learning served the University well during the years before the Civil War. By the late 1850s, Carolina could claim among its alumni a President and Vice-President of the United States, twenty governors, eight United States Senators, forty-one members of the House of Representatives, and innumerable judges and state legislators. But the Civil War and emancipation changed everything. They destroyed an economy built on human bondage: they steered the South in new directions.

Postwar transitions

During the 1870s and 80s this state, more than any other section of the South, was remade by the growth of new towns, the establishment of cotton mills and tobacco factories, and the construction of thousands of miles of railroad that snaked across

the countryside, connecting even the smallest communities to the outside world of commerce. In the words of one young man who was a student at the time, a "new North Carolina" was taking shape – one consumed, he said by the "fever and frenzy of accumulation." He was of course, observing the birth of our world.

In the late nineteenth century, the University remade itself in the image of that economic revolution. The change began in 1875, when the trustees scuttled the antebellum curriculum and reorganized the institution along the lines of what we recognize today as the modern research university. They divided the University into six degree-granting colleges, each made up of departments that offered a variety of electives in history, politics, modern languages, the sciences, commerce, and engineering.

It's worth attending to the reformers' language, because once we got beyond the hyperbole, we can begin to recognize a dramatically new vision of education and society. The University, they insisted, would serve no longer as a mere storehouse of knowledge; it would operate instated as "a great metropolis of thought," and by "gathering, creating, and distributing knowledge "would become" a potent force in the world's progress," a dynamo of change. The reformers envisioned a University that would take the lead in fashioning a New South, and in reintegrating the region into the life of the nation.

This new conception of the University's mission sent ripples through every aspect of campus life, altering in particular the composition of the faculty. The faculty grew rapidly from a handful of ministers who had served as academic jacks-of-all-trades to include men who were trained as specialists and were certified by a degree borrowed from German universities and new to America, the Doctorate of Philosophy.

The first of Carolina's new faculty – the first to hold the Ph.D. – was a chemist named Francis Venable, who came here in 1881 with degrees from the Universities of Berlin and Goettingen. Carolina, in turn, conferred its first Ph.D. on one of Venable's students in 1883. Those dates are significant, because they suggest just how rapidly change came to this institution. Carolina awarded its first doctorate just seven years after the founding of Johns Hopkins, nineteenth-century America's first true research university. Here the cataclysm of war compressed into a single decade processes of transformation that on most American campuses unfolded at a far slower and less dramatic pace.

This is an important point, and I want to be certain to underscore it – context is everything. The University reinvented itself under the most inauspicious circumstances. North Carolina was one of the poorest states in the nation; it labored under the burden of defeat; and like the South at large, it was hobbled by the legacies of slavery, most particularly, a rigid and unforgiving system of racial segregation.

In that context, the embrace of the research ideal was accompanied by something akin to missionary zeal. The knowledge that research produced came to be valued not only for its own sake, but also as a tool of redemption and reform. By the early twentieth century, Carolina was led by educators who sought to broaden the mission of the public university, which traditionally had been simply to educate the young. And they did so, by encouraging faculty to conduct creative research and to use that research to advance the public good.

Several figures stand out:

- Edward Kidder Graham and Harry Woodburn Chase, the eighth and ninth presidents of the University, who insisted that Carolina engage the South's great ills – racism, poverty, illiteracy, sickness, and disease - and that it provide what they called a "program of guidance" for citizens who were unlikely ever to visit its classrooms.
- Howard Odum, who arrived in the mid 1920s with not one but two Ph.D.s and established both the School of Social Work and the Institute for Research in Social Science. Odum's most important contribution was to bring to Chapel Hill a group of free-thinking young graduate students, intellectual iconoclasts who produced scholarship on topics that were taboo, if not downright dangerous: lynching, debt peonage, unions, and child labor.
- Frank Porter Graham, president of the University from 1930 to 1949, who allied himself with all manner of causes, crafted a declaration of workers' rights, and, as a member of Harry Truman's Commission on Civil Rights, called publicly for the dismantling of Jim Crow. Graham served briefly in the U.S. Senate, but was returned from Washington in a bitter election in 1950. It was the campaign in which a young radio reporter named Jesse Helms first cut his political teeth.
- Albert Coates – and at his side, but never in the background, Gladys Coates – who took seriously Edward Kidder Graham's suggestion that the boundaries of the University with coterminous with the boundaries of the state. They struggled for many years in the middle of the last century to establish the Institute of Government – now the School of Government – and to promote standards of public administration that would bring new opportunities and better lives to communities across North Carolina. They did this work at considerable personal risk. Indeed, at one point they mortgaged their home

to raise the funds necessary to keep the fledgling institute alive. That sort of self-sacrifice and commitment to an idea is, I think, difficult to imagine, even for those of us who are ardent proponents of public service and civic engagement.

- And last, but certainly not least, Paul Green, who reminds us that the humanities, with their concern for meaning and moral purpose, are vital to the University's service mission. In 1927, Green won the Pulitzer Prize for his play "In Abraham's Bosom." The play tells the story of two men, Abraham and Lonnie McCranie – half brother, one black the other white – a latter-day Cain and Able, both destroyed by the white South's brutal preoccupations of color. To this day, that play has never been performed below the Mason-Dixon line.

It is, of course, easy to romanticize this story of scholarly engagement. We should remember that for all its openness, Carolina remained during the time all-white and predominantly male, and that in subsequent decades it would adjust with uneven willingness to the changes brought by the civil rights and women's movements.

There was, for instance, no place on the faculty for one of Howard Odum's most gifted students, a woman historian named Guion Johnson, whose research on the early South anticipated by decades the new social history of the 1960s and 70s. As Paul Green once noted, Carolina could at times resemble a lighthouse whose beacon illuminated the territory all around, but whose base remained shrouded in darkness. Even so, there was something distinctive here – a willingness to engage in open self-reflection and social criticism that, as one detractor grudgingly acknowledged, won Chapel Hill its reputation as a "sanctuary of freedom' [and] a Mecca of learning and creativity."

The irony here is that Carolina acquired its stature as an institution of the first rank by focusing on its own back yard. That story has been played out in virtually every corner of the campus.

The Medical School is today ranked twelfth in the nation for NIH funding – its roots go back to the 1940s and a Good Health campaign inspired by the fact that during WWII North Carolina had more young men rejected for military service than any other state.

The School of Public Health recently tied with Harvard for the number-two spot in the nation and is known around the globe for its work in health education and disease prevention – it was founded in the 1930s out of concern for North Carolina's appallingly high infant mortality rate and generally poor conditions of child welfare.

Last year Carolina ranked seventeenth in the nation in federal science and engineering funding; it is the only university without an engineering school to crack the top twenty. That achievement owes much to the priorities articulated nearly half a century ago, when farsighted leaders established the Research Triangle Park, realizing then that the state's future would depend on new technologies, not the traditional triad of tobacco, textiles, and furniture.

A cosmopolitan institution

Today Carolina is a cosmopolitan institution. It draws its faculty from points far and wide, and those faculty and their students participate in research communities whose boundaries reach far beyond any particular region or place. Carolina is at the same time a distinctively local – one might even say parochial – institution. Fully eighty-two percent of its undergraduates come from in-state, a far larger percentage than at any of its peers. Some might see a troubling contradiction in those observations. But what I see is a reminder that the great challenge of our time, and one of the great pleasures of teaching here, is that the local and the global are so inextricably intertwined.

The evidence is all around us. In the prosperity of this place, with its ties to global communities of research and finance, set against the desperation of small towns – places like Kannapolis, whose very name means “city of looms” – where textile and other manufacturing jobs have disappeared, never to return, now permanently relocated to other parts of the globe.

We see it in North Carolina's changing demography. This state, in relative terms, has the fastest growing Hispanic population in the nation. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the South was a meeting ground for European, African, and indigenous cultures. Today it is once again a crossroads in the world migration of peoples. We educate students who will make their lives and careers in the far corners of the globe.

We also educate students who will return to places like West Jefferson, Burgaw, and Hertford – who will take up positions of leadership and struggle to create jobs and economic opportunity, to build thriving communities, and to find happiness in places whose fortunes are shaped as much by capital markets in Hong Kong and London as by policies made in Raleigh. Whether or not they prevail will depend in no small measure on our success in equipping them with the wisdom and the judgment to comprehend and take command of a world in which new technologies and global markets are at once bringing us closer together and dividing us more deeply than ever before.

These are the circumstances, historical and contemporary, that we must consider as we ponder our answer to that enduring question: What should a university be? As faculty and students, our first obligation is to enlarge our scholarship and to pursue

our art. But, let me suggest that, as we go about that work, we should also attend to what William Richardson Davie and his generation called "public virtue" – that is, the practice of engaging our talents with the needs and concerns of the communities in which we find ourselves.

We are the inheritors – the stewards – of a grand idea. In 1789, this place was a backwater, a tiny wooded encampment on the margins of the Atlantic world. Even so, its founders held to the values of an enlightened age. They dreamed of a republic – a new social order governed by its citizens and committed in principle, if not always in practice, to human equality. They believed above all in education's power to improve the human condition. And so they embarked on a radical experiment – the founding of a public university.

Today, that phrase has perhaps become too familiar; it rolls a bit too easily off of our tongues. Most of us utter those words most of the time with little thought of their deepest, most profound meanings. My point this evening is to encourage us to hear those words anew, to recapture for our own tumultuous age an appreciation of their power and possibility. That is the challenge and the promise of Carolina's history, and it is our charge and responsibility as stewards of this nation's first public university.

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