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The Yale Report of 1828: A New Reading and New Implications

Michael S. Pak

Of the classic documents addressing issues in higher education, few have provoked as much commentary as the Yale Report of 1828—and perhaps fewer still have been subject to such undeserved infamy.¹ Ostensibly, the Report originated as an institutional memorandum. It was produced in response to the suggestion made at the annual meeting of the Yale Corporation in 1827 that the College might consider dropping the study of “the dead languages” from its curriculum. But its authors—President Jeremiah Day, Professors Benjamin Silliman, Sr., and James L. Kingsley—were clearly participating as well in an ongoing public debate. The 1820s were a decade of lively campus discussions on the subject of curricular reform. The stakes were high. The study of Latin and Greek traditionally constituted the core and bulk of college education. Wasn’t it time for change?

The debate was set in motion in 1819, when Thomas Jefferson’s University of Virginia was founded, with a much-publicized experimental curriculum that included a non-classical track. The debate then really took off in 1825, when George Ticknor, a professor at Harvard but a protégé of Jefferson, argued in a published report that the classical languages, if to be studied at all by undergraduates in the

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¹The Report’s full title and references are as follows: Committee of the Corporation and the Academical Faculty, *Reports on the Course of Instruction in Yale College* (New Haven, CT, 1828). It was subsequently published as, “Original Papers in Relation to a Course of Liberal Education.” *The American Journal of Science and Arts* 15 (January 1829): 297–351. In this article I refer to the page numbers from the original 1828 Report.

future, should be made into electives. Against such experiments and proposals, the authors of the Yale Report took it upon themselves to write a definitive defense of the classical curriculum. They responded to Ticknor's report point by point, taking pains to register their profound disagreement. Eventually, they published their own report in *American Journal of Science and Arts*, then a popular periodical with a wide readership.²

So produced and put in circulation, the Yale Report went on to have a curious afterlife—one that its authors probably could not have imagined. By the mid-twentieth century, it had come to be recognized as a major classic of its genre and had become a subject of extensive discussion among historians and other educators. In *American Higher Education: A Documentary History*, Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith went so far as to call the Report “the most influential document in American higher education in the first half of the nineteenth century.”³ Yet the Report's fame was not of an enviable kind. For its fame did not rest on any constructive achievement or contribution it was believed to have made. Rather, it had become famous because many had come to believe that it epitomized everything that had been wrong with antebellum colleges or, worse still, that it had contributed in no small way to their retarded development. The Yale Report's defense of the status quo indeed seemed to dovetail with what had by this time become the consensual view of the antebellum college among historians: that it had been a conservative, dogmatic, and sectarian institution, concerned more with discipline than instruction and hostile to the very idea of curricular innovation. Scholars went on to make a great deal of the pedagogic philosophy seemingly undergirding the Report. In the Report, the Yale authors made multiple allusions to the educational principles of the so-called “faculty psychology” of the Scots Common Sense School. An operative term in this school of pedagogic thought was

²George Ticknor, *Remarks on Changes Lately Proposed or Adopted, in Harvard University* (Boston, 1825). The Yale authors quote and dispute Ticknor in Yale Report, 42–49. On the general background of the Report, see Melvin I. Urofsky, “Reform and Response: The Yale Report of 1828.” *History of Education Quarterly* 5 (March 1965): 53–67. For a general account of the University of Virginia's curricular experiment, see Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study since 1636* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), 81–83. For Ticknor's reform efforts at Harvard, see David D. Tyack, *George Ticknor and the Boston Brahmins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 85–128, and Richard Storr, *The Beginnings of Graduate Education in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 15–24.

³Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith, eds., *American Higher Education: A Documentary History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 275. Some of the earlier discussions of the Report were in R. Freeman Butts, *The College Charts Its Course: Historical Conceptions and Current Proposals* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939), 118–125, and George P. Schmidt, *The Liberal Arts College: A Chapter in American Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1957), 55–58.

“discipline.” The fact that the Yale authors were keen on invoking the authority of such a school seemed to confirm that the academic mainstream of the antebellum period, presumably represented by them, was indeed reactionary and doctrinaire, all too eager to align itself with pedagogic scholasticism. “Traditionalism as an educational goal,” claimed Hofstadter, summed up the main thrust of the Report.⁴

In time the Yale Report became all but a mandatory historical reference for those discussing curricular issues, past or present. In the controversy following the publication of Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* in 1987, for example, the authors of the Report were brought back to the scene as proverbial villains. In defending the modern college curriculum against Bloom’s critique, Lawrence W. Levine used the strategy of contrasting it to the curriculum of the distant past. He made a point of discussing the Yale Report at length, saying it stood for the old, close-minded approach to college education. In contrast to such a regrettable past approach, Levine maintained, the modern curriculum showed much evidence of “the opening of the American mind.”⁵

What more, then, can be said about the Yale Report today? A great deal, in fact. The document, it turns out, requires a thorough new reading. Since the late 1960s historians of higher education have been trying to overturn the traditional view of the antebellum college. They have challenged practically all major clichés regarding antebellum colleges and, in many instances, successfully discredited them. On the curricular policies of antebellum colleges in particular, scholars like Stanley Guralnick have suggested that if colleges did anything wrong, it was not in experimenting too little but in trying too much.⁶ Yet few know

⁴Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 279. The precepts of the faculty psychology are invoked in the Yale Report, 7–15, 30–41, and *passim*. See also Urofsky, “Reform and Response,” 58–61.

⁵Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), esp. 37–53. See also David L. Kirp’s more recent discussion of the Yale Report in *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 256–59.

⁶David B. Potts, *Baptist Colleges in the Development of American Society, 1812–1861* (PhD Dissertation: Harvard University, 1967; New York: Garland Publishing, 1988) was among the studies that inaugurated this revisionist movement. Other landmark studies within this movement have been Stanley M. Guralnick, *Science and the Ante-bellum American College* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1975) and Colin B. Burke, *American Collegiate Populations: A Test of the Traditional View* (New York: New York University Press, 1982). A synthesis of the revisionist views of the antebellum college is attempted in Roger Geiger, ed., *The American College in the Nineteenth Century* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000). The book includes articles from *History of Higher Education Annual* (recently re-titled *Perspectives on the History of Higher Education*), a periodical edited by Geiger, which has been a major vehicle for propagating the

about the new claims and findings, outside the narrow circle of specialists. This becomes all too evident in some of the recent readings of the Yale Report attempted by scholars who are not specialists in the history of the antebellum college. As for the more up-to-date readings of the Report offered by the specialists, they have been desultory and fragmentary, usually included as an afterthought or footnote to some other related theme. There has yet to be a comprehensive new reading of the Report.⁷

This article attempts such a new reading. An exegesis of the Report here serves as an occasion to reflect on not only the historical reality surrounding the antebellum college, but also the historiographical debates it has inspired over the years. For as the recent wave of revisionism nears the end of its cycle, it has become increasingly necessary to assess its achievements and shortcomings. Roger L. Geiger has written:

... the revisionist project has remained incomplete even where it was most focused ... This incompleteness arises in part from the strong partisan flavor of the most committed revisionist writings. The élan that launched and sustained the movement deprecated past scholarship to such an extent that it became difficult to incorporate the more persuasive evidence

revisionist views. For a bibliographical overview of recent scholarship in the field, see also D.G. Hart, "Christianity and the University in America: A Bibliographical Essay," in George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield, ed., *The Secularization of the Academy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 303–309.

⁷In 1977 David B. Potts observed, "Anachronistic readings of the Report are now yielding to interpretations that find it a thoughtful, realistic, and effective approach to pre-Civil War collegiate education." Potts, "College Enthusiasm! as Public Response, 1800–1860." *Harvard Educational Review* 47 (February 1977): 39. As examples of the emerging new assessment of the Report, Potts cited his own, "American Colleges in the Nineteenth Century: From Localism to Denominationalism." *History of Education Quarterly* 11 (Winter 1971): 353–366; Douglas Sloan, "Harmony, Chaos, and Consensus: The American College Curriculum." *Teachers College Record* 73 (UAT December 1971): 242–247; Guralnick, *Science and the Ante-bellum American College*, 28–33; and Ralph Henry Gabriel, *Religion and Learning at Yale: The Church of Christ in the College and University, 1757–1957* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1958), 98–108, which Potts characterized as an instance of "an earlier sympathetic reading." In 1981, however, he remarked that many scholars, though sympathetic to the Report, still had not understood its true message and implications, citing Frederick Rudolph as a prime example. (Potts, "Curriculum and Enrollment: Some Thoughts on Assessing the Popularity of Antebellum Colleges." *History of Higher Education Annual* 1 (UAT 1981): 88–109, reprinted as "Curriculum and Enrollment: Assessing the Popularity of Antebellum Colleges," in Geiger, ed., *The American College in the Nineteenth Century*, 37–45. Potts discusses both Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Knopf, 1962), chapters 3–11, and *idem*, *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study since 1636* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), 66–72). Independent of the revisionist movement, there is also a reading that has attempted to treat the Report as a "neorepublican manifesto." See Jack C. Lane, "The Yale Report of 1828 and Liberal Education: A Neorepublican Manifesto," *History of Education Quarterly* 23 (Fall 1987): 325–338.

supporting the traditional view. Hence revisionists are comparatively silent on the unattractive features of the classical curriculum and the recitations by which it was taught, on the precarious and constrictive finances of the colleges, on student misbehavior, and on other inherent shortcomings—i.e. where colleges failed to attain their own expectations—that traditionalists may have overemphasized but did not wholly invent.⁸

In the following new reading of the Yale Report, an attempt has been made both to incorporate the recent revisionist scholarship on the antebellum college and to suggest ways of going beyond it. Among other things, the article addresses how the new findings may be reconciled with those elements of traditional scholarship which may well be worth preserving. Both revisionists and traditionalists have been half-right and half-wrong on several things. Antebellum colleges were indeed more innovative and progressive than the traditional view allowed, but not so in some important respects, despite the revisionist claims. On some matters, neither revisionists nor traditionalists have been quite right, especially when it comes to understanding the true message of the Yale Report. On one matter in particular, both have been dead wrong.

For it turns out to have been a major error to suppose that the Yale authors along with others became defenders of the classical curriculum because they were under the influence of “the faculty psychology,” an allegedly reactionary pedagogic philosophy. That supposition can only be attributed to an inadequate understanding of the faculty psychology. Whatever else it might have advocated, the faculty psychology did not recommend the study of Latin and Greek for college students. Moreover, as the most respected educational orthodoxy of its day, it was embraced by *both* sides in the curricular debate—a fact that has eluded previous commentators on the Report.

Beyond exploring what antebellum colleges did with or to their curriculum, this article seeks to show why colleges felt compelled to do what they did. It contends that previous readings largely missed what the authors of the Report regarded as the main reason for retaining the classical requirements—namely, that the clientele of colleges demanded preserving such requirements, and that because of the intensifying competition among colleges, even an elite institution like Yale had to be careful to accommodate client demand. In all, what permeates the Report is neither suffocating traditionalism nor buoyant progressivism, but relentless realism. The contention of its authors was that any policy decision, even regarding the curricular content, must respect the bottom line in college management: the survival and welfare of the institution. To affix a new label, the Yale Report might be

⁸Geiger, *American College in the Nineteenth Century*, 8.

characterized as a “realist manifesto.” Consequently, perhaps the greatest gain to be made from a new reading of the Report is a renewed sense of its relevance. For the issues it addressed do not belong simply to the past; in essence, they are the same issues American colleges and universities have been contending with since its initial publication.

The Emergence of a Competitive System of Higher Education

In a previously quoted passage, Geiger attributes revisionist shortcomings to one main cause: partisan bias. Partisan bias has been by no means exclusive to revisionists, however. Their predecessors have been just as guilty, if not more so. Traditional scholarship on the antebellum college was in fact saturated with what historians today call “Whig bias.” According to Sir Herbert Butterfield, who coined the term, “Whig history” tends to denigrate the past so as to glorify the achievements of the present. So traditionalists exaggerated the shortcomings of the antebellum college—so as in part to highlight the achievements of the modern research university.⁹

The brunt of the revisionist attack was directed against the paradigmatic work of Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger published in 1955. As the terminal synthesis of an interpretative tradition dating back to the Progressive historians of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, their survey history of American higher education provided a bleak portrait or caricature of the antebellum college. Against such a looming target, revisionists hurled one ferocious monograph after another. By Hofstadter and Metzger’s characterization, the antebellum period (1800–60) was an era of “Great Retrogression.” It represented the dark ages of American higher education falling between the glories of the Enlightenment—when far-reaching views on education were propounded by the Founding Fathers—and a renaissance represented by the emergence of the research university following the Civil War. The main objective of revisionists has been to repudiate such a characterization of the period.

Revisionists have been successful in this quest. In fact, their groundwork makes it possible for contemporary historians to do much more than repudiate the traditional view. Historians of higher education can now attempt an altogether different characterization of the period. The antebellum era can now be seen, not as a time in which

⁹James Axtell, “The Death of the Liberal Arts College,” *History of Education Quarterly* 11 (UAT Winter 1971): 339–352, itemized and discussed the failings of what the author called “*bad Whig history*.”

the development of American higher education stalled or took a step backward, but as its formative period—a period in which a uniquely American system of higher education began to spread its roots throughout the United States. What makes the Yale Report truly important is that it is among the earliest documents to discuss the implications of operating colleges in such a system. To understand the Report's true message, it therefore helps first to see it against the backdrop of the system's emergence.

When the Republic was first created, statesmen such as Thomas Jefferson advised that higher education in the United States be made into a government monopoly, or at least placed under centralized government control to ensure equal access and uniform quality. However by the 1820s, it was clear that such plans had failed to become reality. If anything, government control deteriorated throughout the antebellum period. Both the federal government and respective state governments were losing their licensing power over colleges, and in many states, charters were extensively being granted to any individual or group intent upon starting a college or university.

Loosening regulation was an aspect of the ongoing decentralization of American society, which impressed foreign observers like Alexis de Tocqueville, the celebrated author of *Democracy in America*. Under way in America was a legal revolution whereby corporate charters, denied to all but the privileged few in Europe, were beginning to be handed out almost as a matter of routine—a revolution with profound consequences for business and the economy, as well as for higher education. In the United States, political and legal barriers to founding colleges and universities were fast becoming a non-issue, though they remained a daunting obstacle in Britain and Continental Europe. Case in point, in England, only one new institution, the University of London, was granted a charter besides Oxford and Cambridge before 1850, and this occurred only after a prolonged and acrimonious parliamentary debate.¹⁰

The authors of the Yale Report duly make note of the emergence of a unique, decentralized system of higher education under way in the United States. “Our institution,” they observed,

is not modeled exactly after the pattern of *European* universities. Difference of circumstances has rendered a different arrangement expedient. It has been the policy of monarchical governments, to concentrate the advantages of a

¹⁰On the emergence of a unique system of higher education in the United States, seen in contrast to developments in major European countries, see Michael S. Pak, “Academia Americana: The Transformation of a Prestige System” (PhD Dissertation: Harvard University, 2000), 13–45.

superior education in a few privileged places ... But in this country, our republican habits and feelings will never allow a monopoly of literature in any one place.¹¹

Such developments indeed provided a sharp contrast to those taking place elsewhere in the Atlantic world. In France and the German principalities, government control over higher education tightened in this period. In Great Britain, the national churches—Anglican in England and Presbyterian in Scotland—retained their control over higher education. In particular, Oxford and Cambridge were shielded from competitive pressure to such a degree that the word “monopoly” was often applied to them.¹²

In the United States, diminishing government regulation left the door wide open for an almost bewildering number of new colleges. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, twenty colleges operated within the United States. Within a decade their number doubled. By the end of the 1820s, the number exceeded one hundred, and by mid-century, two hundred.¹³ The effects of such rapid growth, as well as its contributing causes, have been fertile grounds for scholarly debate. What factors fueled the growth? Was this growth reasonable? Was its main cause a rising demand for college education? The traditional view regarded the growth as unequivocally unreasonable, unhealthy, and unwarranted. According to Hofstadter and Metzger, the most important driving force for the multiplication of colleges was denominational competition or sectarian jealousy. They claimed that the number of colleges greatly exceeded demand throughout the antebellum period and that, with their enrollment dangerously low, colleges constantly found themselves pushed to the verge of extinction. To corroborate their claim, Hofstadter and Metzger drew upon the research of Donald Tewksbury. Of the colleges founded in America before the Civil War, Tewksbury discovered that only 20 percent were still in operation at the time of his publication. Tewksbury thus put the “mortality rate” of antebellum colleges at 80 percent.¹⁴

Revisionists responded with new research. Colin Burke managed to show that the alleged “mortality rate” of antebellum colleges had been much exaggerated, owing to Tewksbury’s flawed methodology. Burke has also shown that the collegiate population in the United States

¹¹Yale Report, 20. See also 50–51.

¹²Pak, “Academia Americana,” 13–29.

¹³Burke, *American Collegiate Populations*, 18.

¹⁴Hofstadter and Metzger, *Development of Academic Freedom*, 209–274. The “mortality rate” of colleges is discussed on 211–12. See also Donald G. Tewksbury, *The Founding of American Colleges and Universities before the Civil War* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1932).

continued to grow throughout the antebellum period. Pressing his argument further, Burke claimed that the rapid growth of colleges in the antebellum period was in fact reasonable, since it corresponded to, and was driven by, an increasing demand for higher education.¹⁵

Measurable statistics for this period have always been difficult to obtain and this partly explains these diametrically opposed views. No official organ existed to collect figures on how many colleges operated in the antebellum period or how many students attended them. Consequently, the numbers have traditionally been pieced together by historians from scattered records, including those relating to institutions that no longer exist. Burke deserves every credit for making available the most reliable set of statistics on the antebellum college to date.

Still, no interpretation is above modification. True, antebellum colleges were not as inept as previously thought, but do Burke's findings amount to proving that they were actually well off? While it is difficult to challenge Burke's statistics, some of his inferences clearly remain debatable. Some computations were neglected, most notably, the average enrollment per college throughout the antebellum period. The average enrollment remained low, despite the growing collegiate population, and colleges remained under enormous competitive pressure. Burke and other revisionists failed to consider the psychological impact of such pressure in their respective studies, and this turns out to be a major oversight. For the competitive pressure colleges were under explains a great deal about their curricular policy.

Colleges Feeling the Pressure

Burke documents that between 1800 and 1850, when the number of colleges grew tenfold, the number of students attending them grew tenfold as well—from around 1,000 to just below 10,000, and from 0.52 percent of the relevant age group to roughly 1 percent.¹⁶ But this figure is deceptive. Using Burke's own numbers, one can calculate that the average enrollment per college stood at around 50 even at mid-century, with roughly 10,000 students attending about 200 colleges—just as it did at the century's start, when 1,000 students were split among twenty institutions. The average enrollment thus did not change much throughout the period, as a tenfold increase in demand was offset by a

¹⁵Burke discredits Tewksbury's research in *American Collegiate Populations*, 11–52. A tabulation of the total collegiate enrollment for the period is on page 54.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 54.

tenfold increase in supply. Fifty students per college were certainly better than none and probably enough to keep colleges open, but it was a pitiful number.

As Burke concedes, contemporaries often expressed concern over enrollment. The per-college enrollment figure just calculated explains why. Though the collegiate population continued to grow in the antebellum period, new colleges appeared just as rapidly. This trend in turn underscores the fact that there were other forces driving the multiplication of colleges, besides the growth of the collegiate population. Weakening government regulation was one important negative force. Also important were positive propelling forces such as local boosterism and denominational competition. Research by David B. Potts illustrates the impact local boosterism had on the establishment of colleges. According to Potts, local elites often sought to start a college in their town or region as a way of boosting its economy, quality of life, and reputation. Still, as important as local initiatives were to college growth, denominations were just as important. Denominations possessed recognized expertise in fundraising and other aspects of college management, and local elites usually relied on them as partners in the founding and running of colleges. As denominations competed against one another—an affiliated college could become, among other things, a base for future denominational operations within a region—they often became the *agents provocateurs* inciting the local elite to think about starting a college. More than 80 percent of colleges in operation during the antebellum period continued to maintain one form of denominational affiliation or another.¹⁷

All forces combined, the supply of institutions offering college education was thus prone to run ahead of the existing demand for college education. In short, Hofstadter and Metzger were not wrong in this

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 53–54. On local boosterism, see Potts, “‘College Enthusiasm!’ as Public Response, 1800–1860,” 28–42. For a recent treatment of the relationship between antebellum colleges and Christianity, see Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 17–60, and Marsden and Longfield, eds., *The Secularization of the Academy*. On the nature of cooperation between the locals and the denominations, see Potts, “American Colleges in the 19th Century: From Localism to Denominationalism.” On the Baptists in particular, see Potts, *Baptist Colleges*. Still useful on the Presbyterians is C. Harve Geiger, *The Program of Higher Education of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America: An Historical Analysis of Its Growth in the United States* (Cedar Rapids, IA: Laurance Press, 1940). On the Methodists, see Sylvanus Milne Duvall, *The Methodist Episcopal Church and Education up to 1869* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1928). The figures on the percentage of denominationally affiliated colleges are tabulated in Burke, *American Collegiate Population*, 22.

regard. But they, too, like most revisionists, neglected to consider the effects of rising competition on colleges.

In an unregulated, decentralized system of higher education as developed in the United States, the potential for competition has always existed. As the number of colleges grew, competitive pressure also grew. In the aforementioned calculations on the average enrollment per college, regional variations or variations among institutions within a region were not taken into account. Even in New England, where the enrollment statistics were better than, say, in the Southwest, the pressure was nonetheless felt. Not even the oldest of American colleges were spared. As Josiah Quincy, President of Harvard from 1829 to 1845, complained in a letter to a colleague, Harvard had to watch its every move or it “would find every time-serving rival growing fat and sassy on its spoils.”¹⁸

In the writings of contemporaries, one often encounters similar worries. In hindsight, survival may not have been such an exigent issue for most institutions. Colleges in this period seldom operated as free-standing institutions. Very often they existed as a branch within a multi-unit institution, which might also include academies, “scientific schools,” and other professional schools. Such “diversification” enhanced their chances of survival, as did the commitment and support of the local community and denominations. They were not dependent solely on the patronage of the collegiate population. Still, contemporaries were inclined to interpret even minor fluctuations and temporary downturns in the most dramatic, even apocalyptic terms. In his 1829 inaugural address, Harvard President Josiah Quincy decried the proliferation of colleges as a sign of “an age almost lawless from its love of liberty.”¹⁹ Observing the declining enrollment at Brown, President Francis Wayland speculated in horror that “its causes are permanent.”²⁰ In the Southwest, Philip Lindsley, President of Cumberland College in East Tennessee, similarly voiced his concerns about the growing competition:

When this college was revived and reorganized at the close of 1824, there were no similar institutions, in actual operation, within two hundred miles of Nashville. There were none in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Middle or West Tennessee—and none in Kentucky, nearer than

¹⁸Quincy quoted in Robert A. McCaughey, *Josiah Quincy 1772–1864: The Last Federalist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 169–170.

¹⁹Quincy, “Address of Josiah Quincy upon His Inauguration as President of Harvard University, June 2nd, 1829,” Josiah Quincy Papers, Harvard University Archives, 41.

²⁰[Francis Wayland], *Report to the Corporation of Brown University on Changes in the System of Collegiate Education, Read March 28, 1850* (Providence, 1850), 43.

Lexington. There are now some thirty or more within that distance and nine within fifty miles of our city. These all claim to be our superiors; and to be equal at least to old Harvard and Yale.²¹

Remarks like these illustrate how conscious colleges were of competition. It is not difficult to imagine how unnerving it had to have been for college administrators to hear about new colleges being founded year after year, when their own college enrollment barely remained constant and sometimes declined. It did not help that the American Education Society, arguably the most influential educational philanthropic organization of the period, used its vast network to collect information regarding colleges and reported on their respective performance in its widely circulated journal. In 1838, the Society's Secretary, William Cogswell, noted, "Our movements are regarded with a jealous eye by these institutions and justly too; for what we publish has a tendency to help or to injure them."²² Nor did it help that colleges had to worry about agricultural and mechanical institutes, some of which, according to Brown President Francis Wayland, were beginning to offer a liberal arts curriculum. "If the *prestige* of colleges should be thus destroyed, and it be found that as good an education as they furnish, can be obtained in any of those other schools," Wayland warned, "the number of their students will be seriously diminished."²³

Yale's own case speaks volumes. Throughout the antebellum period, Yale remained among the best-attended and most prestigious colleges in the United States.²⁴ Yet as the authors of the Report of 1828 make clear, they operated under the assumption that the College had to

²¹Philip Lindsley, "Speech about Colleges, at Nashville, Commencement Day, October 4, 1848," *The Works of Philip Lindsley, D.D., Later President of the University of Nashville* (Philadelphia, 1859), I, 518.

²²Cogswell to William Hunting, 7 November 1838, American Education Society Letters, II, 73, Congregational Library, Boston. For a fuller discussion of the Society's activities and impact, see Natalie Naylor, "Raising a Learned Ministry: The American Education Society, 1815–1860" (PhD Dissertation: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1971).

²³Wayland's quote is from *Report to the Corporation of Brown University*, 60. On academies, see Nancy Beadie and Kim Tolley, eds., *Chartered Schools: Two Hundred Years of Independent Academies in the United States, 1727–1925* (New York: Routledge Palmer, 2002). On the competition academies faced in turn, see in the above collection Christine Ogren, "Betrothed to the State?: Nineteenth-Century Academies Confront the Rise of the State Normal Schools," 284–303.

²⁴George W. Pierson, the statistician and historian of Yale, observes: "Once the enrollment began to be printed under President Timothy Dwight, they recorded a rise-fall-rise to 305 by the year 1811, some decline in the War of 1812, recovery in the 1820s, and a total college enrollment of 413 in the year 1835–36. Yale was then (and for a long generation remained) the largest college in the country, yet it took almost twenty years for growth to resume, so that a figure of more than 500 students was not reached until the eve of the Civil War." Pierson, *A Yale Book of Numbers: Historical Statistics of the College and University, 1701–1976* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1983), 5.

be very careful. The passage already cited was one among many in which the authors reflected upon the emergence of a competitive system of higher education. In another passage they referred to the “unexampled multiplication” of colleges. Another passage shows that, while they accepted competition as an unavoidable reality, their feelings toward it were at best ambivalent. “We anticipate,” authors of the Yale Report wrote, “no disastrous results from the multiplication of colleges, if they can only be adequately endowed. We are not without apprehension, however, that a feeble and stunted growth of our national literature, will be the consequence of the very scanty supply of means to most of our public seminaries.” “The competition of colleges,” they speculated, “may advance the interests of literature: if it is a competition for *excellence*, rather than for numbers.” They also feared the eventuality where “the rivalry becomes a mere scramble for numbers, a dexterous arrangement of measures in beating up for recruits.” They were certain of at least one thing: no college in the United States, not even Yale, was in a position “to presume upon its influence, nor to set itself up in any manner as a dictator.”²⁵

Hedging the Bet: The Genesis of a Dual Curricular Strategy

The curricular policy of antebellum colleges must be viewed against developments taking place in the background. Designing a curriculum requires selecting from a vast and ever-expanding knowledge base a small sample that can fit into limited instructional time. It is seldom easy and the nineteenth century was no exception. Further compounding the difficulty of antebellum colleges was the decentralized institutional structure of American higher education itself. In centralized educational systems, such as those in France and the German provinces, government ministries pooled expert opinion and decided on a single national curriculum.²⁶ Or in a system like the English, in which competitive pressure was minimal, Oxbridge colleges were notorious for holding out before conceding to make changes. In the American system, colleges had no centralized authorities to provide guidelines and were at the same time exposed to pressure coming from all directions, from clientele, from competition, from the expanding knowledge base. Curricular reform became for them a complicated game they had to play.²⁷

²⁵Yale Report, 28, 21, 27, 42.

²⁶This was true of the curriculum for the French *lycée* and the German *Gymnasium*, which for all purposes were the equivalents of the American undergraduate college in this period. University degree programs in France and Germany were likewise controlled by the government, which administered national exams for those seeking to graduate.

²⁷Pak, “Academia Americana,” 13–29.

One noticeable aspect of the antebellum college curriculum, as revisionists have shown, was the incessant surface change. Contrary to Hofstadter and Metzger's assertions, a great deal did change throughout the period. In fact, there has never been a time when the curriculum at American colleges consisted solely of the classical languages and literature. Even in the colonial period, mathematics and the natural sciences (taught as "natural philosophy") were studied alongside ancient languages, and during the antebellum period, new subjects and materials continued to be added to the curriculum. As Guralnick has documented:

Where the whole of mathematics and science instruction within the American college curriculum of 1800, for instance, had been contained in two books (and those of doubtful quality), that of 1825 was taught from no less than four, and that of 1850 from a minimum of ten. Where scientific subjects had commonly engaged one professor per school in 1800, by 1830 there were usually two, and by 1860 four, with occasional instances of scientists making up over half of an individual college's faculty.²⁸

Such a move on the part of American colleges is hardly surprising. As institutions anxiously competing to attract students, they could not afford to appear outdated. As such, they constantly and assiduously tinkered with their curriculum. George Pierson's characterization of Yale as an institution "struggling desperately" to keep up with new developments applies to antebellum colleges in general. Pierson demonstrates that "as more and more intellectual disciplines flooded in from Europe in the nineteenth century one finds our forefathers struggling desperately to introduce them into the curriculum."²⁹ Visiting England in 1840, Brown President Francis Wayland was surprised to note in contrast how little the curriculum at Oxbridge colleges had changed over the years. "At American colleges," he observed, "science after science was added to the course, as fast as the pressure from without seemed to require it." "At Cambridge, almost the whole of this time is devoted to the study of the mathematics. At Oxford, it has been almost as exclusively devoted to the study of the Greek and Latin classics."³⁰

Yet if Hofstadter and Metzger erred in seeing no changes at all, revisionists have committed an opposite error. For if constant tinkering

²⁸Guralnick, *Science and the Ante-bellum American College*, ix. Guralnick's conclusions are based on a study of the curriculum at Amherst, Bowdoin, Brown, Columbia, Dartmouth, Dickinson, Harvard, Middlebury, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Princeton, Rochester, Transylvania, Union, University of Vermont, Virginia, Wesleyan, Williams, and Yale.

²⁹Pierson, *A Yale Book of Numbers*, 20.

³⁰[Francis Wayland], *Report to the Corporation of Brown University*, 14, 8.

was one salient aspect of the antebellum curricular strategy, there was a whole another facet to this strategy, tending to the opposite. Beneath the surface changes, the fundamental framework and core component of the traditional curriculum did not change. Despite the addition of new subjects, courses, and materials, the structural core and basic template of the antebellum curriculum remained the same: Latin and Greek and other required subjects supplemented by a set of electives.

The revisionist view that antebellum colleges were overanxious innovators requires a major qualification. In their eagerness to discredit their predecessors, revisionists have failed to note that two contradictory tendencies were simultaneously at work at antebellum colleges. For as much as colleges felt compelled to introduce new elements to the curriculum, they were unwilling to discard the old. Put more precise, antebellum colleges were anxious innovators on one level, but not so on a more fundamental level. They kept making changes within the framework of an inherited curricular paradigm but fell short of embracing a new paradigm, such as the elective system. Even the method of instruction remained essentially the same. While for some subjects lectures gradually began to be used, much learning continued to be imparted through recitations—that is, having students take turns reciting textbook passages in the classroom, so as to commit them to rote memory. And this remained the chosen method of instruction, whether the subject was Latin or physics.³¹

Such a dual strategy—anxious and incessant surface innovation on the one hand and equally anxious efforts to maintain a hold on the traditional curriculum on the other—becomes understandable when one looks more closely at the pressure colleges were under. Both contemporary testimonies and recent scholarship suggest that the clientele of antebellum colleges was demanding and fickle. America in the antebellum period was a developing country experiencing a “take-off.” As is not uncommon in such a society, the opinions of the public seemed conflicted on the right balance between tradition and progress. The clientele of colleges was known to swing from one contradictory extreme to another. On the one hand, it might demand that colleges include new subjects and materials in the curriculum. Such

³¹A good feel for what the classroom instruction at antebellum colleges was like is conveyed by the recollection of Andrew Dickson White, who was a prize-winning student at Yale in the early 1850s. In the following passage he speaks of instruction in science: “The textbook was simply repeated by rote. Not one student in fifty took the least interest in it; and the man who could give the words of the text most glibly secured the best marks.” See Andrew White, *Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White* (New York: The Century Co., 1905), Vol. 1, 27; Yale Report, 10–11, defends the efficacy of recitations as an instructional method. See also Geiger and Julie Ann Bubolz, “College As It Was in the Mid-Nineteenth Century” in Geiger, ed., *The American College in the Nineteenth Century*, 81.

a demand was often little more than a reflex or knee-jerk reaction to what was perceived to be the new trend. What the clientele wanted was not necessarily a more rigorous curriculum or new opportunities for study, but reassurance that their college was not falling behind the times. As Guralnick documented, “The student opinion that had so often demanded new courses became equally insistent upon not studying them.”³² On the other hand, the clientele also demanded some semblance of a classical education. President of Harvard Josiah Quincy quickly learned that it was indeed necessary to retain the classical requirements in order to accommodate the expectations of parents who “permitted their sons to pass through studies, the value of which they did not appreciate, from a desire to obtain for them what was called a ‘liberal education,’ and because the prescribed process was necessary to attain that distinction.”³³ Given competitive pressure, and given such conflicting client demand, antebellum colleges were likely to settle on the safest strategy. By retaining the classical curriculum and supplementing it with new subjects, courses, and materials, colleges could accommodate the demand of their clientele for both tradition and innovation. By making gradual changes rather than radical ones, they could avoid exposing themselves to unnecessary risk.

In the Yale Report, the dual curricular strategy, as well as the rationale behind it, was fully articulated. To begin with, the Report emphasized the necessity of keeping the curriculum up to date with the addition of new subjects, courses, and materials. In case anyone doubted their commitment to innovation, the authors of the Report began with a reminder:

Nothing is more common, than to hear those who revisit the college, after a few years of absence, express their surprise at the changes which have been made since they were graduated. Not only the course of studies, and the modes of instruction, have been greatly varied; but whole sciences have, for the first time, been introduced; chemistry, mineralogy, geology, political economy, &c.

The authors return to this point towards the end of the Report, enumerating all the changes made to the curriculum since the colonial period.³⁴

They proceeded to discuss the other half of the dual strategy at greater length. They explained why, despite all the new changes, Yale or any other American college still could not discard the classical

³²Guralnick, *Science and the Ante-bellum American College*, xi.

³³Josiah Quincy, *Remarks on the Nature and Probable Effects of Introducing the Voluntary System in the Studies of Latin and Greek* (Cambridge, MA: J. Owen, 1841), 12.

³⁴Yale Report, 5–6. On the curricular changes since the colonial period, see 42–49.

requirements. With surprising candor the Yale authors pointed out the bottom line in the debate: “with respect to all proposals of this kind, the inquiry should be, is there such a demand on the part of the public for these changes as to make it imperative on the college to adopt them?” If such a demand existed, the college should of course try to accommodate it. “But that the great body of supporters of this college, those to whom it is to look for countenance and patronage, are to be numbered in the ranks of these innovators, no reason appears for believing.”³⁵ As they further spelled out:

If it should pursue a course very different from that which the present state of literature demands; if it should confer its honors according to a rule which is not sanctioned by literary men, the faculty see nothing to expect for favoring such innovations, but that they will be considered visionaries in education, ignorant of its true design and objects, and unfit for their places. The ultimate consequences, it is not difficult to predict. The college would be distrusted by the public, and its reputation would be irrecoverably lost.³⁶

It was to accommodate the needs and wishes of their clientele that colleges had been adding new courses to the curriculum. It was for the same reason, the Yale authors reminded, that the colleges could not, at the same time, abandon the classical requirements.

In fact, the Yale Report may well have been among the earliest documents to broach the view that education may not be the primary function of an American college. To be sure, its authors stopped short of an explicit assertion made by Christopher Jencks and David Riesman in the twentieth century that “many would argue that education is not a college’s primary function. The crucial *raison d’être* of the American college, the *sine qua non* of its survival and current importance, may not be education but certification.”³⁷ Still, the premise of the Report was that college education represented a social and cultural capital—a major investment—for those who pursued it and that the success of a college depended to a great degree on its ability to accept such a reality and act accordingly. “[T]he degree from this college,” read a passage in the Report, “has to maintain its present value in the view of the public.”³⁸

The Yale authors displayed a keen insight into the clientele of colleges. They devoted a considerable amount of space to discussing the advantages classical education offered to those entering ministry, the law, and medicine. The ability to make classical allusions, they observed,

³⁵Ibid., 42–43.

³⁶Ibid., 42.

³⁷Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 61.

³⁸Yale Report, 25.

continued to command considerable respect in American society. A classical education helped lawyers, for example, attain respectability and sport an aura of competence. “High respectability,” the authors yielded, “without its aid may indeed be attained, as it has been, by lawyers of extraordinary mental endowments, but such, it is presumed, will generally be found to lament their inability to command the rich illustrations and embellishments, which the scholar copiously draws from classic learning.”³⁹ Classical education, in short, provided the trappings of gentility and intellectual accomplishment, which were highly desirable assets for those entering the professions.

The egalitarian myths of Jacksonian America notwithstanding, historians have shown this to be an era when Americans were becoming increasingly status-conscious. The clientele of colleges appeared to have more than its share of status aspirations. In 1829, Philip Lindsley observed this when he commented:

Democratic and republican as we are, our citizens are strangely partial to great names ... Our people, at first, oppose all distinctions whatever as odious and aristocratical; and then, presently, seek with avidity such as remain accessible. At first, they denounce colleges; and then choose to have a college in every district or county, or for every sect and party—and to boast of a college education, and to sport with high sounding literary titles; as if these imparted sense or wisdom or knowledge.⁴⁰

As is not uncommon in an emerging middle-class society, education was increasingly prized in antebellum America as a determinant of status. As Burke documented, college graduates represented an overwhelming majority of those who entered professions like medicine, the law, and ministry—a fact which suggests that the correlation between the college diploma and social and occupational status was already becoming proverbial. Classical education—or pretenses thereto—could not fail to have a special appeal for such a group, given its traditional associations with culture and breeding.⁴¹

³⁹Quote from Yale Report, 54. More on the value of classical education as a preparation for the professions, see 36–41, 54–56, and *passim*.

⁴⁰Philip Lindsley, “Baccalaureate Address, at Cumberland College, 1829,” *The Works of Philip Lindsley, D.D.*, I, 162–63.

⁴¹Burke, *American Collegiate Populations*, 55, 137–211. The best general account of the “status revolution” in the Jacksonian era remains Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics*, rev. ed. (Howewood, IL: The Dorsey Press, 1978). In addition, Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992) is a landmark study in cultural history, which documents the intensifying quest for “gentility” reflected in the lifestyles of Americans of virtually all social classes in this period.

The Antebellum Curricular Debate and the Faculty Psychology

We can now better understand what the debate between the Yale authors and their opponents was really about. To begin with, the debate did not arise, as Hofstadter and Metzger suggested, because colleges had been opposed to change. To the contrary, the debate arose in part because too many new things had been added to the curriculum or at least some educators were beginning to think so. Albeit by the same token, antebellum colleges were not in favor of any type of change per se. As articulated in the Yale Report, the whole point of the dual strategy was to introduce changes without exceeding reasonable limits. It was almost inevitable that American academics of the antebellum period would debate where such limits might lie.

Those who instigated the debate were of the opinion that there was an impending curricular crisis. The dual strategy had one major drawback. In simplest terms, it entailed adding more and more requirements on top of the existing ones. The obvious result was a continuously expanding curriculum. By the 1820s, some thought that the curriculum had already become all but unmanageable. That was precisely Ticknor's point. He deduced that "the branches of knowledge professed at Cambridge, [Massachusetts,] which were originally few and humble, are now grown to be so numerous and important, and may be so easily extended."⁴² The complaint that students were spread too thin and encouraged to be superficial remained a recurring trope among antebellum advocates of reform. By 1842, Francis Wayland estimated that, since Independence, "the amount which the college is required to teach, is doubled, if not trebled, but the time in which all this is to be done, remains to a day just as it was before."⁴³ In his famed report to the board of Brown University in 1850, Wayland itemized the requirements for a bachelor's degree at a typical New England college:

Latin, Greek, Mathematics, comprehending Geometry and Algebra, Plane and Spherical Trigonometry, and Analytical Geometry, Ancient and Modern History, Natural History, Chemistry, Rhetoric, French, Psychology, Ethics, Physics, Logic, Botany, Political Economy, the Evidences of Religion, Constitution of the United States, Mineralogy, Geology, and German or Spanish or an equivalent, together with essays to be written in several of these departments, and instruction in Elocution.⁴⁴

⁴²Ticknor, *Remarks*, 38.

⁴³Francis Wayland, *Thoughts on the Present Collegiate System in the United States* (Boston, 1842), 80.

⁴⁴Wayland, *Report*, 14.

What the participants in the antebellum curricular debate argued about, as early as the 1820s, was what should be the next step. Clearly colleges could not go on indefinitely as they had. They had been trying to have it both ways, keeping the classical requirements on the one hand while continuously adding new elements to the curriculum on the other. But how long could this continue? Given that the curriculum was already bloated and would become progressively more so, wasn't it time for them to adopt an altogether new curricular format? Under an elective system, for instance, students would be given the freedom to choose their own courses or at least a concentration. Presumably, they could thereby fashion a more manageable course of study than they could under the traditional system. As the Yale authors themselves characterized it (with their own italicized emphases), the debate was between those advocating, like themselves, "*gradual* changes, as heretofore" and those saying "that our colleges must be *newly modeled*" — "whether the whole system is not rather to be broken up, and a better one substituted in its stead."⁴⁵

The elective system made much more sense but there was a catch: it would require scrapping the classical requirements. As demonstrated, antebellum colleges did not feel confident enough to take such a step — at least not yet. In principle and sentiment, someone like Josiah Quincy might have agreed with the advocates of reform. In 1841, he observed, "The arts and sciences have so multiplied that it is impossible to study everything. There must be a selection."⁴⁶ Yet for the survival of Harvard College, Quincy opted for retaining the classical requirements, knowing how important it was to satisfy the parents who wanted "what was called 'liberal education'" for their sons. It was an administrative decision he had to make, not a pedagogic one.

It was on behalf of those who had to make a similar administrative decision that the authors of the Yale Report spoke. Their response to Ticknor and others advocating the elective system was that such a drastic step was imprudent and impractical. As previously seen, they went so far as to characterize their opponents in the debate as "visionaries in education, ignorant of its true design and objects, and unfit for their places." The ultimate deciding factor, they insisted, was whether there was "a demand on the part of the public for these changes." Beyond purely pedagogic concerns, they suggested, realpolitik must prevail even in decisions regarding the curriculum.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Yale Report, 6.

⁴⁶Josiah Quincy, *Remarks on the Nature and Probable Effects of Introducing the Voluntary System*, 7.

⁴⁷Yale Report, 42.

Of course, the Yale authors did not defend the classical requirements solely on practical grounds. They defended them on pedagogic grounds as well, especially in discussing the benefits of classical education in terms of the faculty psychology. Both traditional and revisionist historians, especially Melvin Urofsky, the author of an influential 1965 publication on the Report, have been misled by this. In fact, because of their inadequate understanding of the faculty psychology, they completely misconstrued the subtext of the Yale authors.

The faculty psychology was an epistemological doctrine that emerged from the debate within Western philosophy on what the mind was and how it functioned. As elaborated by the Scots Common Sense School of the eighteenth century (e.g., Thomas Reid, William Hamilton, and Dugald Stewart), it asserted that the human mind comprised distinct component faculties such as memory, reasoning, and judgment, and that a human child was endowed with such faculties at birth, rather than being born with a mind which was *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. In antebellum America, the faculty psychology of the Scots philosophers became the most widely taught philosophical doctrine; it became the mainstay in the “moral philosophy” course (alternately called “intellectual philosophy”) required of seniors at most colleges. Contemporary college-educated readers would have had no difficulty identifying where passages like the following in the Yale Report might have been drawn from:

The two great points to be gained in intellectual culture, are the *discipline* and the *furniture* of the mind; expanding its powers, and storing it with knowledge. The former of these is, perhaps, the more important of the two. A commanding object, therefore, in a collegiate course, should be, to call into daily and vigorous exercise the faculties of the student. Those branches of study should be prescribed, and those modes of instruction adopted, which are best calculated to teach the art of fixing the attention, directing the train of thought, analyzing a subject proposed for investigation; following, with accurate discrimination, the course of argument; balancing nicely the evidence presented to the judgment; awakening, elevating, and controlling the imagination; arranging, with skill, the treasures which memory gathers; rousing and guiding the powers of genius.⁴⁸

⁴⁸Yale Report, 7. The content of this paragraph is also drawn from Merle Curti, “Psychological Theories of American Thought” in Philip P. Wiener, ed., *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973), 16–30; [Thomas H. Leahey], “Faculty Psychology” in Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 261. The faculty psychology and its historical significance are discussed in Douglas Sloan, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1971) and Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America 1720–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 58–74. Fuller explorations of the faculty psychology as a

Previous commentators on the Report, such as Urofsky, have tended to focus on these passages, often to the exclusion of others in this 56-page-long document. This focus in turn led them to believe that its authors insisted on retaining the classical requirements mainly because of pedagogical considerations. Urofsky asserted, "Time and again, when conservatives rallied to the defense of the classics, the ultimate appeal would be that of all things, they best disciplined the mind."⁴⁹

Yet it is a mistake to assume that the invocation of the faculty psychology was in itself indicative of a conservative or reactionary mindset. Just about everyone was a devotee of the faculty psychology in this period, regardless of whether they were defenders of the classical curriculum or not. The faculty psychology was a content-neutral educational philosophy; it said nothing whatsoever to the effect that a classical education was superior or preferable to other curriculums. Essentially what it said was that education should encourage a balanced development of the inborn mental faculties of students. Conceivably, there could be a myriad of other subjects, besides Latin and Greek, which could encourage exercising and developing faculties like memory, reasoning, and judgment.

So it was that some of the best-known devotees of the faculty psychology also happened to be outspoken critics of the classical requirements. Francis Wayland, a well-known advocate of the elective system, did not merely subscribe to the faculty psychology. He was arguably its most authoritative expositor and one of its most dedicated propagators in antebellum America. His books on the faculty psychology, *Elements of Moral Science* and *The Elements of Intellectual Philosophy*, became popular textbooks used by college seniors, eventually replacing Stewart's classic *Outlines of Moral Philosophy*. "What we learn is of importance," he wrote, "but this importance is secondary to that of so cultivating and disciplining our faculties that we are ever afterwards able to use them."⁵⁰ He advocated the elective system precisely because he believed that it would allow for a more focused program of study, and

philosophical doctrine are found in Patricia A. Easton, ed., *The Logic and the Workings of the Mind: The Logic of Ideas and Faculty Psychology in Early Modern Philosophy* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1997).

⁴⁹Urofsky, "Reform and Response," 61.

⁵⁰The elective system Wayland proposed is outlined in his *Report to the Corporation of Brown University*, 51–56. The earliest copies of Wayland's textbooks I have been able to locate are *Elements of Moral Science* (New York: Cooke and Co., 1835) and *The Elements of Intellectual Philosophy* (New York: J.C. Derby, 1854), though the latter is a second edition. Both of these went through numerous editions. On the popularity of Wayland's textbooks, see Curti, "Psychological Theories of American Thought," 22. The quote is from the 1854 edition of *Elements of Intellectual Philosophy*, 122.

hence a better training for the mind, than would a curriculum diluted with too many requirements. As Wayland propagated, “he who has thus mastered a single science has gained far better mental discipline than by cursory attention to several. He who has learned one thing thoroughly knows how other things also are to be learned.”⁵¹

In fact, the critics of the classical requirements had a surprising source of support—Scots thinkers and educators, from whom the faculty psychology originated. At the time when the authors of the Yale Report were defending the classical requirements, the Scots were arguing that the study of the “dead languages” was next to useless. By the 1820s, the classical requirements had long since disappeared at Scottish universities. As George Elder Davie has shown, the Scots considered the emphasis on the classical languages an *English* inanity, and cherished their own non-classical university curriculum as a high point of their cultural and intellectual independence. In 1826, Scot thinkers and educators were pressed to take their views to a public forum, as a Royal Commission was appointed that year to examine the possibility of reforming Scottish universities after the English model.⁵²

Circumstantial evidence suggests that the Yale authors might have included a discussion of the faculty psychology mainly as a defensive rhetorical strategy. The Scottish views on the classical curriculum had been publicized in American educational circles before the publication of the Yale Report. In 1826–27, the *American Journal of Education* reprinted a series of excerpts from a book by George Jardine, a professor at the University of Glasgow, on the philosophy and practices of the Scots university education. In these excerpts, Jardine asserted that “no time is less profitably spent than that which is passed in acquiring a mere smattering of the ancient languages.”⁵³ Ticknor also referred to Jardine in his report.⁵⁴

The situation could have been potentially embarrassing for American colleges. For years they had deferred to Scots thinkers as the fountain of wisdom on education. But now it was readily apparent that they despised the classical curriculum, a curriculum American colleges could not afford to abandon. By citing Jardine on the uselessness of the classical languages, Ticknor had momentarily got an upper hand in the debate; he had the defenders of the classical

⁵¹Ibid., 265.

⁵²George Elder Davie, *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and Her Universities in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1961), especially xi–xx, 3–102.

⁵³[George Jardine], “On the Systems of Education Established in Universities, and on the Means of Improving Them.” *American Journal of Education* 1 (1826): 585.

⁵⁴Ticknor, *Remarks*, 7.

requirements cornered. By including discussion of the faculty psychology in the Report, the Yale authors may have been trying to steer themselves out of a difficult situation. They offered an interpretation of the faculty psychology which was all their own, and which was particularly suited to the needs of American colleges. The subtext of the Report may well have been that the educational precepts of the faculty psychology could be satisfied *just as well* by studying Latin and Greek grammar and literature, despite what the Scots or anyone else had to say about them.

Both traditionalists and revisionists thus have been wide of the mark in their readings of the Yale Report. The antebellum college reflected in the Report was neither a smug nor a boldly forward-looking institution. Rather, it appeared to be an institution extremely nervous about survival and hence anxious to preserve its reputation and image. As the authors of the Report conceded, one of their main objectives in writing was to exonerate colleges from the charges and “misrepresentations” of the critics like Ticknor, who had the audacity to call their curricular policy “miserable farces.” They felt they had no choice but to reply, since “in the present instance, silence might be interpreted as an admission.”⁵⁵

Revising Revisionism

It is a tribute to Roger Geiger’s impartiality and leadership that, even as an expositor of the revisionist views, he addressed their limitations and called for a more balanced assessment of antebellum colleges. *The American College in the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1999 under his editorship, is the most comprehensive synthesis thus far of revisionist scholarship and will serve as a starting point for future studies in the field. The book illustrates to what extent the revision of revisionism remains an ongoing project. Geiger’s characterization of the Yale Report, for instance, is a telling case of revisionist hypercorrection. “The Yale Report,” he writes, “has been almost universally misinterpreted as a conservative document, seeking to turn the clock back or to perpetuate something like the colonial course of study. In fact the classical curriculum had to be reinvented in the nineteenth century, and Yale was proud to be in the forefront of this endeavor.”⁵⁶ The authors of the Yale Report were certainly not “seeking to turn the clock back.” Still, to suggest that the Report was a purely progressive

⁵⁵Yale Report, 46.

⁵⁶Geiger, *American College in the Nineteenth Century*, 4.

document ignores the context in which it emerged and misrepresents its message.

To speak of the classical curriculum as having been “reinvented” is surely to exaggerate. Geiger for his part relied on Caroline Winterer’s article, in which she claimed that there was a “humanist revolution” at American colleges in the period 1820–60. Winterer has done the field a great service by reminding historians that colleges continued to update not only the scientific and mathematical content of their curriculum, but its classical content as well. In keeping, for example, with the so-called “Greek Revival” in America in the mid-nineteenth century, colleges began to offer more Greek.⁵⁷ Whether there was a “humanist revolution,” beyond the inclusion of more classical authors in the curriculum, is unclear and would require a full-scale study to corroborate. What remains to be seen is whether the addition of new materials was indeed accompanied, as Winterer suggests, by the introduction of new pedagogic methods. Those trained in philology at German universities certainly talked about introducing them, but talking about and successfully implementing these considerations are entirely different. The antebellum period is replete with episodes of German-trained scholars and scientists proposing ambitious reforms at American colleges but becoming frustrated in their attempts to make the reforms long lasting. Ticknor himself was trained in Germany; his failure to instigate lasting reforms set the pattern for the period.⁵⁸

All major reform efforts at Harvard after Ticknor, for example, followed a similar pattern throughout the antebellum period. During the early phase of Josiah Quincy’s presidency, Harvard made an effort to revamp the classical component of its curriculum. This effort culminated in the establishment of an advanced seminar in classical philology (“Classical Seminary”) under the directorship of Charles Beck, a philologist born and trained in Germany. The seminar opened with six seniors in the spring semester of 1832 but did not reopen in the fall. When the novelty wore off, students who sought instructions in classical philology apparently proved to be in short supply. The “Seminary” was never revived thereafter. Quincy’s statement of 1841 quoted above—that the clientele of the College seems to insist on retaining a semblance of classical education but essentially as a genteel

⁵⁷Caroline Winterer, “The Humanist Revolution in America, 1820–1860: Classical Antiquity in the Colleges.” *History of Higher Education Annual* 18 (1998): 111–130. One of the best discussions of “the Greek Revival” is found in Gary Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 41–62.

⁵⁸For Ticknor’s failed reforms at Harvard, see Tyack, *George Ticknor*, 85–128, and Storr, *The Beginnings of Graduate Education*, 15–24. For a general discussion of the failed reform efforts of German-trained American scholars and scientists at American colleges, see Pak, “Academia Americana,” 78–127.

ornament and not much more—comes from the latter phase of his presidency, when he had learned his lesson and abandoned most of his earlier curricular experiments.⁵⁹

Including more Greek—as well as Latin—authors in their program of study was entirely in keeping with the dual curricular strategy of colleges, which stipulated making concessions to contemporary tastes. But also in keeping with this strategy, colleges avoided or recoiled from experiments that seemed too radical. As Geiger concedes, they retained recitation as their principal pedagogic method.⁶⁰ As for the authors of the Yale Report, they made a point of distancing themselves from any notion of reinventing the curriculum or introducing revolutionary changes. If anyone aspired to start a “humanist revolution” inspired by German philology, the authors of the Yale Report not only wanted no part in it, but felt obliged to discourage someone from trying. As they deduced:

The Universities on the continent of Europe, especially in Germany, have of late gained the notice and respect of men of information in this country ... But we doubt whether they are models to be copied in every feature, by our American colleges. We hope at least, that this college may be spared the mortification of a ludicrous attempt to imitate them, while it is unprovided with the resources necessary to execute the purpose.⁶¹

For better or worse, the curricular policy articulated in the Yale Report—i.e. “*gradual* changes, as heretofore”—was to remain canonical at American colleges well into the post–Civil War period. As one curricular experiment after another failed, that policy was reaffirmed time and again as the most, if not only, viable compromise between tradition and innovation.⁶² What the Yale authors outlined in 1828 was indeed to remain the mainstream management philosophy among American colleges for a long time to come.

⁵⁹On Charles Beck and Cornelius Felton and their ill-fated experiment at Harvard, see McCaughey, *Josiah Quincy*, 173–74. With regard to the quality of teaching, it is interesting to note that in 1829 Quincy conducted a study on how much time instructors at Harvard spent with each student for recitations in Latin and Greek and found a “*general want of thoroughness of instruction* in those branches, which has, in a greater or less degree, characterized all the literary institutions of our country.” There was “indifference,” he concluded, even among instructors themselves. From Harvard University, *Annual Report, 1828–29* (Cambridge, 1830), 11, 7. Quincy’s low opinion regarding the quality of classical instruction at American colleges did not change near the time of his retirement in the 1840s. See Quincy, *Remarks* (Cambridge, MA, 1841).

⁶⁰Geiger, *The American College in the Nineteenth Century*, 8, 81.

⁶¹Yale Report, 21.

⁶²On the failure of Virginia’s reforms, see Rudolph, *Curriculum*, 81–83.

Conclusion

As Geiger noted, the main impetus behind recent revisionism has been the desire to discredit traditional scholarship. In essence, what traditionalists like Hofstadter and Metzger claimed was that denominational control had pernicious effects on antebellum colleges, making them dogmatic and unresponsive to client demand. In the traditionalist view, this in turn became the undoing of colleges, with harrowing encounters with enrollment fluctuations and an 80-percent mortality rate.⁶³ The revisionist strategy has been to turn the argument of traditionalists on its head, by denying the existence of the symptoms they had attributed to denominational control. It was thus denied that antebellum colleges had enrollment problems, and denied that there was a conservative side to their curricular policy. In short, revisionist scholarship has been, to a considerable extent, reactive.⁶⁴

In the foregoing new reading of the Yale Report, an attempt has been made to pinpoint some of the excesses and blind spots in revisionist scholarship while also highlighting its achievements. In the last analysis, this reading points to new ways in which we might think about the trends that affected antebellum colleges and the possible correlations thereof. To begin with, one can now acknowledge the more conservative aspects of their curricular policy without conceding too much to the traditional view. For as it turns out, their decision to retain the classical requirements and other aspects of the traditional curriculum was not due to denominational control or the influence of dogma, but to competitive pressure and client demand. It was precisely because they were responsive to their clientele—because they were operationally savvy, one might almost say—that colleges adopted a dual curricular policy, as a compromise between tradition and innovation. Modulations of this policy can now be studied in greater depth.

Similarly, the faculty psychology and its influence can and should be further studied, since its dismissal as a doctrinaire and reactionary pedagogic philosophy no longer seems justified. Wayland's popular texts on the faculty psychology had numerous elements of self-help manuals in them. They offer, among other things, advice on exercise and diet, tips

⁶³This argument in turn derived from their more general view that evangelical religion has been hostile to the intellect throughout American history—a view which Hofstadter would further elaborate in his subsequent book, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1963).

⁶⁴In a response to revisionists, Metzger wrote, "What would have happened if there had been no Richard Hofstadter? The revisionists would have had to invent him and to a certain extent they have." Walter P. Metzger, "American Collegiate Population: A Test of the Traditional View." *The Journal of Higher Education* 55, 3 (May-June 1984): 422. See also Laurence Veysey's skeptical treatment of revisionists in Veysey, "The History of Education." *Reviews in American History* 10, 4 (December 1982): 289.

on how to improve memory, reasoning, and even the imagination. How such books might have influenced the college graduates of this period remains an intriguing historical question.

Perhaps most important of all, a new reading of the Yale Report compels us to recognize fundamental continuities in the development of American higher education from the early nineteenth century to our day. For in some respects the Report turns out to be a surprisingly modern document. American colleges and universities still operate much the same way as they did in the days of the Yale Report. They still use the dual strategy of anxiously making surface adjustments from year to year, semester to semester, while putting off deep structural reforms. As Derek Bok has observed, “faculties will resist new initiatives that are so large or so visible that failure could diminish the prestige of the institution or impair its ability to attract able students and talented professors. This inhibition seriously affects the likelihood of major reforms.”⁶⁵ It is as though the Yale Report’s recommendation that colleges cautiously inch forward—by making such modifications as sufficient to cope with the pressure of the moment but avoiding big risky moves—has remained the fundamental premise in college and university management in America since.

Revisionists have been indeed right to insist that the antebellum period was not an era of “Great Retrogression.” Moving on, we may now regard it as a formative period in which a uniquely American system of higher education came to its own.

⁶⁵Derek Bok, *Higher Learning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 185–86.