

How Christian Values Shaped America's Higher Education System

American higher education rests upon the foundation of biblical Christianity. From their beginnings, American colleges emphasized scriptural literacy, Christian moral principles, salvation through Jesus Christ and a biblical worldview. Though these initial commitments may have shifted over time, the foundations are rock-solid.

Puritans established Harvard College in 1636, shortly after arriving in Massachusetts Bay. Harvard's mission statement, given in 1642, was clearly evangelical: "Everyone shall consider as the main end of his life and studies, to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life. John 17:3." Harvard's motto, written in 1650, likewise emphasized its core Christian commitment: "In Christi Gloriam" ("For the glory of Christ"). And for many decades, conservative Puritan ministers served as Harvard's presidents.

Almost all Ivy League institutions had similar beginnings. They were established by conservative Connecticut Congregationalists (Yale), pro-Awakening New Jersey Presbyterians (Princeton), devout Rhode Island Baptists (Brown) and mission-minded New Hampshire evangelicals (Dartmouth). These schools shared common commitments to the authority of the Word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ and the need for a Christian influence in society.

These early schools promoted a broad sense of calling and service. Many were designed to train faithful clergy. Massachusetts Puritans established Harvard, for instance, "dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust." But

Christian colleges also prepared students for careers in business, law, medicine and education.

American colleges also encouraged independence and patriotism. During the American Revolution, British leaders complained that colleges were “seedbeds of sedition.” Longtime Princeton President John Witherspoon was a member of Congress, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and an advocate for American freedom. He was also a dedicated churchman and evangelist. His 1776 “Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men,” the most famous sermon of the Revolutionary generation, included a passionate call for salvation before weighing any political considerations.

Early colleges were anchored in the American evangelical tradition. Great American evangelist and theologian Jonathan Edwards enthusiastically supported the pro-revival College of New Jersey (Princeton) and, at the end of his life, served as its president. Edwards’ grandson Timothy Dwight served as president of Yale College and, in 1802, was the catalyst for a remarkable campus awakening. The Yale Revival was a key component of the Second Great Awakening that transformed American society in the early 19th century. New Christian colleges popped up across the American frontier, founded by denominations born or invigorated by the awakening.

Even public institutions had a vigorous Christian influence. The Rev. William McGuffey served as professor of moral philosophy at the University of Virginia. Best known for his “McGuffey’s Readers,” used to educate untold millions of American schoolchildren, he also taught essential elements of Christian morality and doctrine to students at the college founded by Thomas Jefferson.

Americans held a common conviction that true education rested, somehow, upon a biblical foundation and Christian principles. The great American universities, which grew to prominence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, shared traditional

mainline Protestant standards. James Duke's great endowment of 1924 included a clear mission statement: "The aims of Duke University are to assert a faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion set forth in the teachings and character of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." One hundred years ago, American universities still formally affirmed their Christian character.

Then things changed. Prior to the 20th century, Christian values had a natural and expected place in American higher education. Over the next century, colleges and universities abandoned or muted the spiritual and religious messages of their founders. Increasingly committed to liberalism, secularism, humanism and statism, cultural elites grew hostile to biblical Christianity. Some modernists now argue that faith-based institutions are antithetical to the spirit of American education.

In the midst of this cultural deterioration, the institution where I teach, Liberty University, has remained refreshingly unique. Its Christian mission is clear. Its fundamental standards are unaltered. Its purpose—to train champions for Christ—remains constant. But the doctrinal fidelity and Christian focus that make Liberty exceptional today were once commonplace in early American colleges. I am proud to teach at a school like Liberty University that resolutely stands on the biblical principles and Christian commitments that made our nation great. {eoa}

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