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Lessons from the First Universities

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Commemorative anniversaries, whatever the year, lead to reflections on institutional origins. And while Bridgewater's university status is of recent vintage, we nonetheless share deep connections with the first universities, a new type of institution that began cropping up in parts of Europe at the end of the twelfth century. By considering the broad strokes of their origins, their structure, and their pedagogical practices, we might better appreciate those fundamental institutional constants still with us today as well as some of the great changes that have occurred in the intervening centuries.

The common terminology between the first universities and their current iterations offers a good starting point. Terms such as lecture and lesson (which come from the same root), study, examination, matriculate, discipline, liberal arts, faculty, scholar, license, bachelor, master, doctor, professor (these last three titles were interchangeable), dean, chancellor, rector, proctor, regent, bursar, college, and university, were all used with some consistency in the medieval university, though a few of these terms have changed their meanings significantly.

Bridgewater can trace its origins precisely to 1840, but the same sort of precision is lacking for the earliest universities at Bologna, Paris, and Oxford. None of these original universities was established with a formal charter: in this respect, they differ from the institutions that came later, including all those in North America. Instead, the first universities grew and developed organically over the course of the twelfth century, from the coalescence of an initially disjointed collection of scholars. The first "official" sources that inform us about university affairs stem from crises involving teachers and students struggling for legal autonomy. In Paris, a royal privilege in the year 1200 resulted from one of many town-gown struggles, in which a tavern brawl led to the death of several students. The French king responded by recognizing special privileges for the masters and students at Paris, including clerical legal status. In 1231, a few decades later, after another struggle led to a teacher strike, the pope offered the university his own protection. And at Oxford, when students were subjected to the harsh justice of the townspeople, the masters packed up and relocated to Cambridge, giving rise to a new university there in 1209.

Thus, in the early thirteenth century, royal and ecclesiastical authorities were beginning to recognize scholars as a distinct legal body, as a corporation (in medieval terms, a guild). The fact that all industry, from that of wealthy merchants to simple artisans, was also organized into guilds shows the decidedly urban nature of the first universities. The bucolic ideal of the American liberal arts campus lay in the distant future; the first universities developed in places of dense population and brisk exchange.

Our term for an institution of higher learning did not originally connote education: *universitas* (lit. the totality) was merely the standard terminology for guilds, whether it was the "totality of merchants" (*universitas mercatorum*) or the "totality of masters and scholars" (*universitas magistrorum et scholarium*). The nature of the scholastic guilds was not uniform throughout Europe: the two oldest universities – Bologna and Paris – adopted different structures. At Bologna, which emerged from the city's many law schools in the twelfth century, the group that eventually incorporated into a guild was the students, who, in contrast to the professors, were not Bolognese. These students organized for legal protection and fair treatment from the town and their teachers (whom they often subjected to rigorous demands for punctuality and efficiency). At Paris, the professors (i.e. the masters) were the ones to incorporate; for better or worse, most subsequent universities would adopt this structure.

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By the thirteenth century, these new institutions of learning were referring to themselves as *studia generalia* — places of general study. They were "general" in the sense that they accepted students from all over Europe, at least those parts where Latin was the intellectual language. (Plenty of "national" divisions awaited students upon their arrival.) The universities offered instruction in the liberal arts (reckoned at seven in the medieval curriculum, the most important subject being, without question, logic) as well as in at least one of the higher faculties of law, medicine, and theology.

Urban guilds were controlled by their full members. Guild masters set the prices and standards for products, the wages for laborers in the industry, and, most importantly, controlled entry into their ranks. A typical craft guild was a three-tiered structure, with adolescent apprentices offering their labor in exchange for learning a trade, older day laborers earning a wage and, at the top, shop-owning masters.

At the university, the craft in question was not knowledge itself but specifically its conveyance; therefore, university degrees signifying various levels of entry into the guild all related to the practice, to the occupation, of teaching. The young student entered as a pure apprentice with low status; only after several years of successful study and passing an exam did he become a "bachelor" (*baccalaureus*), which entitled him to undertake some minor teaching responsibilities. After a few more years, he could be considered for the teaching license (*licentia docendi*) and, if successful, was then eligible to "incept;" that is, to join the ranks of the masters and

begin to deliver standard lectures in the curriculum (this inception explains why we still refer to the attainment of a university degree as a beginning or "commencement"). All students seeking to study in one of the higher faculties needed to demonstrate mastery of the liberal arts. A similar set of degrees awaited them in law, medicine, and theology.

Azzo of Bologna, **Summa codicis** *(Bodleian Library, Oxford, UK). Canon. Misc. 416, fol. 1r (ca. 1300).*

To understand the larger significance of university education in the Middle Ages, we need to realize that many young men studied at these institutions without pursuing a degree. Reliable data are scarce for the thirteenth century, but later records indicate that less than half of the students actually reached the rank of bachelor, and many

fewer went through the steps to become masters. That must have been because the degrees, while considered a source of social prestige, were only of use to those who stayed within the university. For example, the relatively large number of students who became masters in the faculty of arts did so only in order to enter a higher faculty.

Unlike today, there were no positions, either in the church or in the developing royal bureaucracies, that required a university degree. These employers were more interested in skills than credentials. Several years of study at a university – degree or no degree – brought with them the expectation of competence in Latin and training in the principles of dialectic. The majority of participants in the medieval university were temporary members of the community; they neither sought nor received full membership into the guild. To have studied for a time at a place such as Paris was often enough to further one's career.

Then, as now, advanced study in law or medicine opened doors to high positions, and especially in the case of law, there was a direct link between university training and royal administration. It is perhaps for this reason that the lifelong university masters, typically those in the faculty of theology, often derided the other higher faculties as the "lucrative sciences" — corruptions of an idealized pursuit of truth.

What did this university education look like at a practical level and what measures were in place to train teachers? Lectures (*lectiones*: readings) formed

the core of the university experience and were based on the reading of authoritative texts. In the thirteenth-century faculty of arts, the syllabus was dominated by Aristotle, known simply as "the philosopher," whose corpus had been expanding greatly since the twelfth century thanks to an influx of new translations, some from the original Greek and some via Arabic. The ordinary lecture, in which a master read from a book in the standard curriculum, was not a simple verbatim reading. These dense texts needed to be expounded on and explained, and individual masters developed various techniques for doing so. In cases where masters isolated specific questions arising from a text, they were free to draw from other authorities and the rules of reason to arrive at conclusions. In these *quaestiones*, masters employed the essential scholastic method of putting forth a proposition and then supporting and challenging it with a list of authorities *pro* and *contra*. This classroom method led to the second fundamental practice in the universities, the disputation.
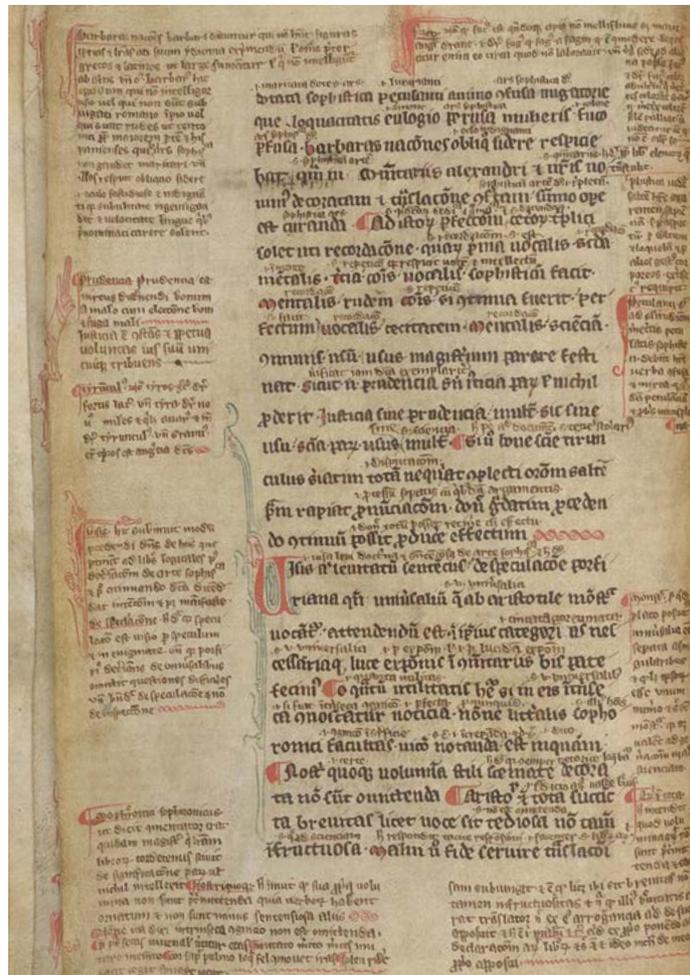
In essence, what was being taught in every discipline was the application of the principles of logic either to determine true statements from false

ones, or to reconcile seeming contradictions through subtler definitions. Formal disputations at regular intervals throughout the year were a staple of the medieval university. Here, students engaged in active structured debate,

Pseudo-Boethius, De disciplina scholarium *(with glosses) (British Library, London). Burney 306, fol. 3v (thirteenth century).*

with one taking on the role of "objector" (to the proposition at hand) and another, as "respondent/defender." The master intervened when necessary, but

his more important role was to issue the *determinatio* — his own answer, either affirming or rejecting all or parts of the proposition. At certain points in the year, universities held special public disputations called *de quolibet* (lit. about whatever). In these academic free-for-alls, any member of the audience was permitted to engage the presiding master by putting forth propositions or arguments.

Since lectures and disputations formed the core of the academic experience, the performance of these skills marked the transition into the higher levels of guild membership. To become a *baccalareus*, the pupil "determined" (resolved a disputation) in a special procedure for that purpose. The final ceremony that created a master, the inception, included a disputation and an inaugural lecture as its main components (along with a large banquet at the newly minted master's expense!). In this structure, there was no disconnect between research and teaching. The wealth of writings produced in the university setting were products of teaching, whether commentaries on authoritative texts, written *quaestiones*, or extensive compilations known as *summae*. Nor were medieval universities bereft of writings on educational theory. To single out only one of the most influential, the thirteenth-century treatise, *On the training of scholars* (*De disciplina scholarium*), survives in well over a hundred manuscripts. Despite its pseudonymous authorship by the sixth-century philosopher Boethius, it comes directly from a university milieu

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and emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between learning and teaching. Its first chapters treat the beginnings of one's studies, but the last focus on the preparation and duties of a master. One cannot know how to act as an authority figure in the classroom without first learning obedience in the same forum. The manual even offers advice for scholars of different temperament – what we might call learning styles – all couched in terms of humoral theory.

At its height in the late thirteenth century, the medieval university was considered the third pillar of authority alongside the church and the state. Popes, emperors, and kings all saw the benefits of universities as sources of knowledge and authority (not to mention skilled administrators). They hoped that by protecting the privileges of universities, these institutions would incline themselves favorably towards their protectors.

This elevated status of the university did not last. Already in the fourteenth century, the voice of critique expands beyond monastic circles claiming the vanity of all worldly knowledge. No better example can be found than the Italian Petrarch (†1374), who dismissed the inane logical exercises of scholastics seeking to determine the corporeal qualities of angels and the like. Renaissance humanists used the scholasticism of the university as a scapegoat for what was wrong with the intellectual life of their time. Their disdain for the intellectual development of the preceding centuries is what created
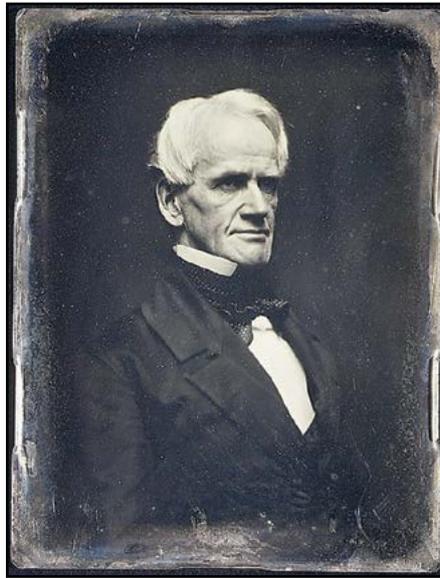
Horace Mann, circa 1850. Daguerreotype by Southworth & Hawes (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

the notion of a "middle age" between classical culture and its rebirth in the first place.

This view of the medieval university had resonance for a long time. It was carried to America, and held by an individual intimately tied to the origins of the Bridgewater Normal School. When in 1840 Horace Mann delivered a speech on *An Historical View of Education: Showing its Dignity and its Degradation*, his purpose was to rail against the educational practices of past societies. Throughout the speech, it becomes evident why he has failed to find any worthy theory of education in history: he viewed education not as an individual experience, but in relation to a population as a whole, the "common mass of mind" as he put it,

whose education was deemed essential to the survival and functioning of the new democracy.

In contrast, medieval universities were not public in any real sense, beyond the principle that no worthy student should be refused an education on the basis of poverty. But neither the very poor nor the very wealthy comprised the university-educated in the Middle Ages. The majority of students were city dwellers in search of education for social mobility. Of course, we cannot forget that "student" here means male student, and the education of women – for which the normal school movement was fundamental – exposes perhaps the greatest contrast between the first universities and our own.

Before we dismiss the first universities as so far removed from higher education in the twenty-first century that they defy useful comparison, we might consider what has remained constant over the past eight centuries. The autonomy of the masters was central to the power of the first universities and remains an important part of our unionized faculty today. And as for teaching, how many of us would claim to employ some mixture of "lecture" (the direct conveying of authoritative information from teacher to student) and "discussion" (the fostering of questions and debate among the students) in our classrooms? This has been, essentially, the format of university education since its beginning.

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