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Franklin's Ivy Leagues and the Junto of Education

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Franklin's Ivy Leagues and the Junto of Education

by Gena Katz

The English language befriends the grand American expression.... It is brawny enough and limber and full enough. On the tough stock of a race who through all change of circumstance was never without the idea of political liberty, which is the animus of all liberty, it has attracted the terms of daintier and gayer and subtler and more elegant tongues. It is the powerful language of resistance... it is the dialect of common sense. It is the speech of the proud and the melancholy races and all who aspire. It is the chosen tongue to express growth faith self-esteem freedom justice equality friendliness amplitude prudence decision and courage. It is the mediums that shall well nigh express the inexpressible.

–Walt Whitman “Preface to the Leaves of Grass” (Norton Anthology 2134)

Freshman year at the University of Pennsylvania I nervously shifted my weight in front of the Benjamin Franklin statue before College Hall while my cohorts swaddled him in a sheath of green saran wrap. It was the middle of the night. It was a silly prank. I had somehow become absorbed into pledging a secret society, one of those renegade groups the University distrusts, perhaps, in this instance, with reason. I am not accustomed to society life, nor am I adept, apparently, at secrecy, but maybe it was the appeal of acceptance, or community or just inertia that brought me there that night, preserving the University's founder in kitchen wrap from the refrigeration of the Philadelphia winter. Maybe it was a sense of belonging, but wherever that place would eventually be at Penn, I couldn't have wished myself farther from College Hall that night. It had looked so different a few months earlier at Commencement, electrified in blue and red. That night it looked hollow. I had started to get the feeling that my college education might be a big empty (though expensive) promise.

Whatever my future at Penn would be, I knew and dreaded the next seven hours of it. By the time I got home to the quad it would be too late for bed. I would slink into the twin closet dorm room I shared with an intimate stranger, carefully, though nosily enough to win a passive aggressive moan or kick of the bed covers. I would have to stay

up the rest of the night and study for my Spanish exam, instead of rising early like I had planned. I had had few enough hours of sleep and far too many cups of coffee to settle with delirium as a suitable substitute for sleep. I did not feel healthy. I did not feel wealthy. And needless to say, I did not feel wise. Was this why I had come to Penn? My eyes climbed the statue to meet Ben's gaze, downcast through those signature bifocals. A plastic turban now nested on his head. I could not help feeling his brow furrowed, a look of disappointment. A light from the direction of College Hall suddenly squinted my pupils. It wasn't anything as convenient as the spirit of Penn's Past, or another fun light show, but a Septa guard's flashlight, swirling like a Siren. She circled each of the suspects with the light like she was practicing chalking out dead bodies at the crime scene on Locust Walk. What was I thinking? And, furthermore:

What *would* Ben think? When I applied to Penn, I did not imagine this scene as the two hundred and seventeenth page in my autobiography. Would Ben then forgive this prank as an "Errata," in my autobiography, as he termed mistakes in his own autobiography? Benjamin Franklin had a sense of humor, didn't he? Ben was a rebel. Ben was even in a secret society. When it came to education though, Franklin felt that learning should not be kept a secret for the few who could afford it. Instead, debate should be freed from the salons and the drawing rooms Europe had locked it away in for too long. Franklin envisioned a liberal arts education that was liberating. Benjamin Franklin's obsession with instituting an English school over Latin was not simply his predilection for the teaching of one language over another, but more the principle. He championed the use of the English language over Latin because it was the language of democracy. Franklin wanted a kind of education that invigorated learning for students. The system, like Franklin's ideas for education promoted individual expression, but at the same time encouraged unity under shared principles.

In 1789 Benjamin Franklin felt that the University had defied these morals. Franklin charged the University with divorcing itself from the ideals set forth with their "[c]onstant disposition to depress the English school in favor of the Latin." In "Observations Relative to the Intentions of The Original Founders of The Academy in

Philadelphia:" Franklin decries the oppression of the University's indirect rule and demands separation in language similar to the Declaration of Independence. We now demand a separation, and without desiring to injure them; but claim an equitable partition of our joint stock, we wish to execute the plan they have so long defeated and afford the public the means of a complete English education" (138). Like the colonists under the British, Franklin wanted out. Is the University, then, justified in clinging to his image as our patriarch, when we have undermined his rules?

Though Franklin's Junto tended to debate more pertinent politics than Greek life at Penn, Ben might understand this aspect of culture. His impulse for community was greater cohesion. I had gotten far enough along in my Spanish flashcards to relate the club name to the word "junta," or fraternity. It was with this Junto that Ben first shared his rebellious ideas of establishing the University in 1793 that, unlike the other instructions at the time, was not a fraternity for the rich.

Like his secret society, the academy was selective. When members wanted to include more people in the Junto, Franklin was opposed.

Our Club, the Junto, was found so useful, and afforded such Satisfaction to the Members, that several were desirous of introducing their Friends which could not well be done without exceeding what we had settled as a convenient Number, Twelve...I was one of those who were against any Addition to our Number. We had from the Beginning made it a Rule to keep our Institution a Secret, which was pretty well observed. The Intention was, to avoid Applications of improper Persons for Admittance, some of whom perhaps we might find it difficult to refuse." (Norton 604-605).

Unlike the similar elitist organizations at the time, membership was not based on societal status. Franklin's club, much as he hoped his university would be, was a forum for members of all classes. "Franklin's small club was composed of enterprising tradesman and artisans, rather than the social elite who had their own fancier gentlemen's club." The group was for the exchange of ideas and intellectual self-betterment, but also "devised schemes for self-improvement, and formed a network for the furtherance of their own

careers... besides being amiable club mates, the Junto members often proved helpful to one another personally and professionally" (Isaacson 55).

Franklin supported education as a form of self-improvement. English was not exclusive to aristocracy. Education was meant as a tool to promote social mobility. In "observations relative to the intentions of the original founders of the Academy in Philadelphia," he associates the teaching of Greek and Latin with the European tradition, and links it to the undemocratic systems that would hoard knowledge and oppress the masses by making it unavailable to them. He explains, "until between three and four hundred years past there were no books in any other language; all the knowledge then constrained in books... being in those languages. It was of course necessary to learn them, as the gates through which men must pass to get at knowledge." Education in these languages was only given to the elite. "The books existing were manuscripts, and these consequently so dear, that only the few wealthy inclined to learning could afford to purchase them." Even if they wanted to, individuals of lower classes could not move up because materials were expensive. "The common people were not even at the pains of learning to read, because, after taking the pains, they would have nothing to read that they could understand without learning the ancient languages, nor then, without the money to purchase manuscripts." Due to the printing press, however, people were able to write and dispense materials in their own language cheaply. "So that learning the ancient for the purpose of acquiring knowledge is become absolutely unnecessary" (Observations 134-35.) Ben Franklin was opposed to frivolity.

Walter Isaacson's specifies in his biography of Franklin, "What made him a bit of a rebel, and later much more of one, was his inbred resistance of establishment authority. Not awed by rank, he was eager to avoid importing to America the rigid class structure of England" (Isaacson 149) He wanted to take education in a distinctly American direction, without the influence of England and the entitlements that aristocracy and religion conferred.

Whoever distinguishes himself there, in either of the three learned Professions, gains Fame, and often Wealth and Power: A poor Man's Son has a Chance, if he

studies hard to rise, either in Law, Church, to gainful Offices or Benefices to an extraordinary Pitch of Grandeur; to have a Voice in Parliament, a Seat among the Peers; as a Statesman or Minister to govern nations, and even to mix his Blood with the Princes. (Proposals 8).

The students who Franklin envisioned attending his university might have well have been the children of the members of his Junto.

In his youth Franklin describes how he became involved in debate, a hobby he "had caught" by reading his father's book about Religious Debates. He notices that only a specific group tends to engage in this dialogue. "I have since obser'd seldom fall into it, except Lawyers, University Men, and Men of all Sorts that have been bred in Edinburgh" (Norton 546). He discusses a debate he and his friend Collins had about "the Propriety of educating the Female Sex in Learning, and their Abilities for Study. He was of the Opinion that it was improper; and that they were naturally unequal to it. I took the contrary Side." Though Franklin concludes with an air of misogyny, excusing that his position was "perhaps a little for Dispute sake" his ideas were progressive. Franklin would take satisfaction in the fact that a little over half the population currently enrolled at Penn is female, if not a little for winning the dispute with Collins (Norton 546).

On the Penn admissions website, they describe "Penn's intellectual mission" as conceived by Benjamin Franklin in 1740. It categorizes Penn's objective under two main Franklin inspired ideas, "The Spirit of Academic Freedom" and "One University: A Revolutionary Idea." Though Penn addresses this as a mission in education, it inconsistently upholds these tenets. The mission aspires, "Penn's four undergraduate schools offer a remarkable amount of educational freedom. Students in one school have opportunities to take advantage of courses and programs in the other schools. You'll have tremendous flexibility to tailor a program that fits your intellectual interests and professional goals."

Making the most of the academic flexibility available to you at Penn goes hand in hand with the somewhat revolutionary idea of seeing Penn as one university, rather than

as 12 separate undergraduate and graduate schools. As a student here, you'll be part of an entire university, not simply a participant in a particular school or program or major.

Students take classes that fall mostly in their majors. Undergraduates enrolled in Wharton and Engineering logistically do not have much leeway to take very many classes in the College, and vice versa. Franklin envisioned that students be tutored in "drawing," and not just the art of signing their name on the dotted line of a major financial merger contract. Likewise, they should be able to be literate in "Arthmetick, accounts and Some Instances of the Principles of Geometry and astronomy" (Proposals 9). If Franklin had it his way students would be required to take courses in other subjects that were useful to their education in life after college. For many, the courses in the College's general requirements, for example, are more bureaucratic formalities in obtaining a diploma.

Franklin would be frustrated by the fact that the facilities at Huntsman Hall are not available to students at the College. That in order to print a paper or log on to the internet at a Wharton or Engineering library, you need a username and password that correspond to that specific school, that there is a different pass code or language for each of these schools.

The accessibility of knowledge at Penn today can nevertheless be too specialized, fragmented and overwhelming. The University of Pennsylvania is a research university, which is incidentally the second bullet point in "Penn's Academic Freedom" section of the mission statement. Although this attracts an incredible amount of talent, invigorating the intellectual community with the fresh dialogue of ideas, it also can detract from the student's ability to learn "everything that is useful and ornamental" about a specific subject. Syllabi are often tailored toward a professor's particular research interest, a corner of knowledge that is too specific for a student trying to fully comprehend the broader concepts of the subject matter. Many of the entry-level courses offered are still very specialized (Proposals 11).

Survey Courses at the University are often very narrow often in regard to the breadth of the subject matter they cover, as well as the type of student they encourage enroll. The ones they do offer are often exclusive to students skilled specifically in that

area. For example, Biology 001 is not an introduction to the principles of Biology, but instead a course intended to weed out serious Premed students from those who just can't cut it. Likewise, Music Theory classes are unapproachable for those without a natural talent for composition. Many of the introductory language courses are only really introductory if you are a native speaker or have taken several years in high school. It seems it's the teachers who decide what they want to teach, often what fits with their research, rather than offering the broad integrated education that the students need.

This is not to say that Penn should "dumb down" these courses or its curriculum at all, but if it was serious about adhering to the founder's practical guide to education, Penn should consider making this general body of knowledge more accessible to the larger student body. Although Franklin considered that the enlightenment students learn at the University should be applicable to their life and occupation, part of that occupation was meant to be complimented by information gained in other fields of study.

The diplomat that he was, Franklin would approve of the Penn Studies Abroad program, with opportunities for students to study at 100 programs in 36 countries. This aspect of cultural immersion at Penn should be included in the curriculum. The notion of crossing into other cultures should be promoted as effectively as it is in the abroad program, perhaps even with a consideration in the general requirement. Ben expressed a preference for the English language, but what he really was in favor of was making education relevant. Immersion programs do just that.

In Franklin's charter for the University he addressed not only student education, but also other daily habits that would contribute to their day-to-day lives. He considered everything, from their diet, physical fitness and living accommodations. Franklin would be satisfied with the facilities at Potruck fitness center, an important measure "to keep [students] in Health, and to strength and render active their Bodies, they be frequently exercised in Running, Leaping, Wrestling, and Swimming" (Proposals 10).

On the other hand, he would not find Penn's living accommodations conducive to the educational environment he imagines. He envisioned students living "together plainly, temperately, and frugally" not stacked in apartment buildings, or overcharged a

few blocks away in subdivided Victorian homes. Franklin specified "The Academy be in or near the Town; for this, among other Reasons, that their Behavior may be better observed" (Proposals 9-10). Franklin imagined students would spend all four years on campus, and that this sense of community would be important in the education of the whole. I, like many Penn students, moved off campus after my freshman year. I have moved, in fact, every single year. I have been awakened in the middle of the night with calls from a disgruntled Russian landlady. And startled awake in the morning to the loud clanking noise of a West Philadelphian man battering an air conditioner with a baseball bat outside my window at 6 a.m. Franklin would be pleased though with the University's security measures. Franklin's students would have "peculiar Habits to distinguish them from other Youth" (Proposals 12).

Penn compensates with the smallest class sizes of all the Ivy League institutions. This would greatly please Franklin who wrote that his hope was for the professors to care for their students: "They look on the Students as in Some Sort their Children, treat them with Familiarity and Affection, and when they have behav'd well, and gone through their Studies, and are to enter the World, zealously unite, and make the Interest that can be made to establish them, whether in Business, Offices, Marriages, or any other thing for the Advantage" (Proposals 7). Franklin would get along fine with professors like Liliane Weisberg who dispenses pearls between insights about Freud or Goethe. He would be delighted with the likes of Gomaa Omar, a professor I had who made a point of internalizing the names of each one of the students in his 150-person lecture class, and it wouldn't surprise me if he knew each of our favorite movies as well. Or a writing professor of mine who called me at home to check up on how I was feeling when I got mono freshman year. Perhaps if I had followed Ben's advice and gotten to bed and woken up early, I never would have fallen ill to begin with. Franklin broke the rules sometimes too. So might then his university.

Franklin's plan for education, just like his outline for moral perfection in his autobiography, is imperfect, because it is overly ambitious and, therefore, bound to fail. It

is the mistakes, the errata in Franklin's autobiography that make a story interesting. And isn't that what education is in a way, building on exchanging stories.

We learn the same things year after year, but in this way we are able to build and gain new insight from what we learned before. Though Franklin was an ambitious man, as much as he was accomplished, he did not expect that students should master all fields of study. I learned about Benjamin Franklin in grade school. I learned about him again in my sixth grade civics class. And now with a more astute analysis, I researched him in college.

I graduated from a private high school in downtown Chicago called "The Latin School," which at one time encouraged serious Latin studies, probably more as an elitist strategy in opposition to Franklin's Enlightenment ideas and preference for English studies. At graduation I received a bracelet with an inscription from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. I headed to Penn with this pledge around my wrist, or what I thought it meant. I would do what I thought Whitman had whimsically suggested: "reexamine all you have been told at school or church or in any book." It seemed easy enough. "Dismiss whatever insults your own soul..." Not too tough. "and your very flesh shall become a poem." Voila! Or so I thought.

When I finally read *Leaves of Grass* in my Early American Literature class this semester, my senior year, I learned that Whitman was saying something more. He was not exclusively promoting independent thinking or questioning authority, but also telling his reader what to think, literally commanding that they read the leaves of his book. And not just once "but every season, of every year" of their lives. Their ideas should be renewed with the seasons, but replaced with his ideas. Was I a lemming then all along, and even worse because I did not realize it?

Whitman, like Franklin, had a plan. He did not want to entirely reject tradition, but use the English language to establish a distinctly American voice. What would happen if we really did read *Leaves of Grass*, and mainly these leaves? We'd be missing out on a lot. If we take Whitman's instructions literally, just as with Franklin, their program would prove entirely impractical. As Franklin realized at the end of his *Autobiography*, "I never

arrived at the Perfection I had been so ambitious in obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was by the Endeavor made a better and happier Man than I otherwise should have been, if I had not attempted it." In Franklin's recommendations for the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania, as in his autobiography, he emphasizes the importance of teaching perfect writing and penmanship. However at the end of his autobiography he realizes. "At those who aim at perfect Writing by imitating the engraved Copies, tho' they never reached the wished excellence of these Copies, their hand is mended by the Endeavor, and it is tolerable while it continues fair and legible" (12). The University's aim to improve upon and reinvent itself with changes in its curriculum or renovations of facilities, while still respecting the infrastructure of tradition is crucial to Franklin's mission.

How can an education be liberal then and still prescribed? Would Benjamin Franklin be more satisfied with a specific course roster like Columbia University has, or maybe the progressive nature of his ideas on education would be better met at Brown where there looser requirements.

Franklin's success was, in part, his ability to continually reinvent himself. To look at the world in different ways, and therefore solve new problems. Benjamin Franklin imagines the students at the University of Pennsylvania "would be well if they would be taught everything that is useful and everything that is instrumental." He recognizes the ambition of this "But Art is long, and their Time short." After acknowledging the shortage of time, he nevertheless repeats his instructions again, that students should learn "everything that most is useful and most ornamental" (Proposals 12). Did Franklin forget his previous mention of the idea just a sentence before that we had little time to spare? Or was he commenting on the procedure and nature of education itself? Education is redundant. Education is redundant. Knowledge is not disposable, but renewable. Franklin understood this, and as much as he wanted to respect the past of classical learning, he realized that taking education into the future meant making it more available. Yet, still like his Junto, in many ways exclusive.

Franklin above all, understood the importance of secrecy. Both in his Junto and in his Autobiography he is strategic about the information he reveals. As difficult as it is at

times to separate the myth from the man, rereading Franklin's Autobiography nevertheless, enables new interpretation if not fresh information about the subject matter. Franklin understood that questioning the past was one of the best ways to ensure its relevance. The very prompt for this essay remarks on the University's adherence to Franklin's principles for the education of Youth in Pennsylvania, in its encouragement to engage though reevaluate tradition. Whether or not Benjamin Franklin had the secret in the end, his voice still guides Penn's Song of Itself.

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