

Association of Graduate Liberal Studies Teaching Award

Graduate Liberal Studies and the Medieval University

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this evening:
In 1984 the summer Olympics were held in Los Angeles. Most of the events occurred at the Los Angeles Coliseum. A few blocks to the east of the Coliseum is the campus of the University of Southern California. It seems that USC hosted the AGLSP that year, and there I attended my first conference—with an eye for the sessions I had been told would help with starting a new GLS program. Subsequently, I began a new program in the Fall of 1985, and from then until now I have been a stout supporter of Graduate Liberal Studies.

Sometime over the years I developed a hypothesis concerning the nature of the GLS programs; I cannot prove my hypothesis and it is likely not original with me, but I have related it to my students over the years and I relate it to you this evening:

More likely than not the GLS program on your respective campuses is the most similar on campus to the academic nature of a medieval university.

Although I am trained as an historian of Victorian Britain, I have long had an interest in medieval universities. They are one of the great legacies of the middle ages. Mind you, the Greeks and Romans did not have them. Oh, I know, outside Athens Plato and his peripatetic scholars wandered through the groves of Academe—but it was



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not a university. I have been impressed by some of the most famous of the ancients: Salerno, Bologna, Coimbra, Salamanca, Paris—and have meandered through some of them with interest. With my British background, however, I have been most interested in the ancient English Universities.

At the end of the twelfth century several dissident theology faculty from Paris came across the channel to found a new institution, not in a major city as was customary on the Continent but, rather, in the countryside. Less chance of town-gown conflicts, they reasoned. Where there was a ford for animals to cross the Cherwell river, Oxford was established. A few years later, where there was a bridge over the Cam river, Cambridge was founded. My remarks will involve Oxford more so, as I have more associations there.

An early decision was made to establish residential colleges rather than subject colleges. These were often endowed by wealthy donors who provided their names (e.g., Oxford's oldest college, Merton, was endowed by Walter de Merton). Students lived in college quadrangles in rooms, dining halls, and chapels, often times side by side with faculty. One's college became a center of student life. At Rice we adopted the Oxbridge residential college system many years ago. Today all incoming students are assigned to one of the several colleges where they eat, sleep, and play for their four years. They take great pride in their college; and, upon graduation they often attach their college insignia to their academic regalia. And... if, for example, I am in public wearing a Rice t-shirt and a Rice grad comes up to me, the first question is never "When did you graduate?" Instead, it is "What College?"

What did students learn? Why, of course, they learned the Seven Liberal Arts. I'll wager some vestiges of the seven liberal arts are taught even today in our programs. First they had to master the Trivium—that is, Grammar, Rhetoric, and Logic. Regardless of the formal term, this meant a serious dose of Greek and Latin writers. These writers were the basis of university learning for centuries to come—a classical education. I have seen, for example, the degree requirements for Harvard University, as late as 1800, and there was still a four-year requirement for Greek and Latin writers.

Next, on to the Quadrivium. Here students learned music, mathematics, geometry, and astronomy (although this latter topic would seem to our eyes more akin to astrology). After these seven,

the students might specialize in a particular topic as they prepared to stand for a degree (or sit on a stool, if at Cambridge).

What about categories of students? Here we come a little closer to my hypothesis. Most students were categorized as “fellows.” They were there at university with hopes of obtaining a degree. But, there were others known as “commoners.” These individuals came with no real objective of ever graduating but instead wished to “be at college” and enjoy the good times. Commoners often lived in college amongst the fellows, and later, perhaps, even became fellows and eventually graduated.

But...

there was another, smaller, category whose description might immediately capture your attention. This was the category called “Mature Commoner.” These were persons who already possessed at least a Bachelor’s degree (and sometimes several others) who wished to come to university, often in mid-career, to enjoy university life and study across a broader range than they had as undergraduates. Sometimes they came back, years later, to their old residential college to study; sometimes they selected another college, and, sometimes they matriculated to an altogether different university than they attended as undergraduates. To me, these Mature Commoners sound remarkably like some of my own Liberal Studies students of today.

I have thus far been speaking in generalities. Allow me a few specific examples of Mature Commoners:

Cardinal Henry Beaufort (who once had the pleasure of interrogating Joan of Arc while she was in prison in 1430) received most of his early formal theological training at Charlemagne’s palace school in Aachen. In 1388–1389, however, he studied as a Mature Commoner at Peterhouse College, Cambridge, and in 1390–1393 at Queen’s College Oxford. He didn’t play favorites.

In 1438, Peter Beverley became a Mature Commoner at Pembroke College, Cambridge. At the time he matriculated he already possessed a Bachelor’s in Theology, a Masters of Arts, and a Doctorate in Theology. His stay at Pembroke was unrelated to any particular course of study; rather, it was a convenient interlude between different periods of his career.

We all have had students like Beverley. We have had students already with advanced academic degrees as well as professional degrees in fields such as law and medicine. While they are with us

they tend not to specialize in a particular field; rather, they spend a convenient interlude in mid-career enjoying our varied course offerings. One difference from the medieval is that we offer a degree at the end.

These two examples are not outliers. At University College, Oxford, for example, between the years 1385 and 1495 there were 187 Mature Commoners enrolled. That is not a paltry number for a single Oxford college. One can only speculate on the total of Mature Commoners throughout all Oxford colleges—plus all those at Cambridge. Thusly we have the Mature Commoner and the Graduate Liberal Studies Student.

Allow me now to augment the discussion of my topic by raising the spectre of Charles Homer Haskins. C. H. Haskins from Harvard was the Dean of Medieval Historians for the first part of the twentieth century—and widely admired even today. He took his PhD at Johns Hopkins, the first American university to offer the PhD degree. (Some years ago Hopkins hosted this AGLSP conference and I was then assured that this assertion is true.) He was a significant enough figure to be part of the American delegation at the Versailles Conference in 1919. Well... perhaps it was significant for him that there had been a fellow history PhD student with him at Hopkins named Woodrow Wilson. Regardless, after Haskins returned, in 1922, he was invited by Brown University to present a series of lectures on medieval universities. He presented three lectures which were published together in 1923 under the title *The Rise of Universities*. I believe this work is still in print today. I find it entirely apropos to provide the last couple of Haskins' sentences as they relate to my hypothesis.

But money and clothing, rooms, teachers, and books, good cheer and good fellowship, have been subjects of interest at all times and all places. The Middle Ages are very far away, farther from us in some respects than is classical antiquity, and it is very hard to realize that men and women, then and now, are after all much the same human beings. In his relations to life and learning the medieval student resembled his modern successor far more than is often supposed. And for him as for us, intellectual achievement meant membership in that great

city of letters not made with hands, rather “the
ancient and universal company of scholars.”

And here we are, each from our separate program, each with our
individual students, our individual faculties, all still seeking entry
into “that ancient and universal company of scholars.”