



THE FIRST CENTURY OF THE AMERICAN COLLEGE, 1636–1740

HARVARD COLLEGE

HIGHER EDUCATION IN BRITISH NORTH AMERICA was conceived on October 28, 1636, when the Great and General Court of Massachusetts Bay “agreed to give 400£ towards a scholale or colledge.” Despite the ambiguity of this wording, there is no doubt that the Puritan leaders intended to provide education comparable to that of Oxford and Cambridge, with which they were familiar. Provision had already been made for a preparatory grammar or Latin school in Boston; the new founding was intended for “instructing youth of riper years and literature after they came from grammar schools.” This relatively generous appropriation triggered a train of events that led to the erection of Harvard College and its first commencement 6 years later, in 1642.¹ However, the path was far from easy.

Further steps were taken late in 1637 when the Court directed that the college be located at Newtown and added “that Newetowne shall henceforward be called Cambridge.”² It confided the responsibility for the college to a “committee” of six magistrates and six ministers—who soon became the Board of Overseers. Newtown had grown rapidly in the early 1630s and even functioned briefly as the capital. But its first settlers found the area too cramped and left in 1636 for Connecticut.

The college was intended to uphold orthodox Puritanism, as interpreted by the General Court, the governors of the colony, and this consideration seems to have played a role in placing it in Newtown. Religious controversy was present from the start. The Colony had been shaken that same year by what was deemed heretical teachings by Anne Hutchinson. In increasingly popular

¹ The following draws upon Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Founding of Harvard College* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935) and *Harvard College in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936). Quotes, *Founding of Harvard*, 168, 449. These works are summarized in *Three Centuries of Harvard* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936).

² Morison, *Founding of Harvard*, 188.

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discussion groups she had advocated a more severe, antinomian version of Calvinism, which meant stricter criteria for determining who belonged to the elect and hence qualified for full church membership. This approach threatened the governance of both churches and the General Court. Reverend Thomas Shepard of Newtown played a prominent role in opposing Hutchinson's views when she was tried and ultimately banished. The fact that Shepard was named to the overseeing committee and that the college was placed next to his dwelling would seem to be linked with his role in this controversy. Producing ministers with the proper interpretation of Puritanism was understood to be the mission of the new college.

Finding qualified leaders for the college was a challenge throughout the seventeenth century. The ministers of existing congregations were committed by covenant to remain with their congregations, making newcomers the most likely candidates at first. In the summer of 1637 Nathaniel Eaton arrived with some attractive credentials. He was just 27 years old, and his older brother had helped to organize the Massachusetts Bay Company. Although he had dropped out of Trinity College, Cambridge, he subsequently studied at the Dutch University of Franeker with William Ames, the Puritan's most revered theologian. Considered a "rare scholar" for having written a tract on observation of the Sabbath, Eaton was named master and charged with launching the college. He seems to have begun instructing about ten first-year students in the summer of 1638. The little that is known of this initial effort is all bad. Eaton routinely whipped his charges, and his wife failed to provide them with adequate beef and beer. The overseers were apparently blind to these practices, but when he savagely beat an assistant, the whole fiasco came to light. Eaton was tried and dismissed but still managed to abscond with some college funds. The college closed after just 1 year of operation, and students returned to their homes.

Before this tumult, John Harvard had taken an interest in the inchoate college. A graduate of Emmanuel College, Harvard probably crossed over on the same ship as Eaton and undoubtedly visited the new college. When he succumbed to consumption shortly after the college opened, he bequeathed it half of his estate and his entire library. Six months later, a grateful General Court ordered "that the colledge agreed upon formerly to bee built at Cambridg shall be called Harvard Colledge."³ But the college still awaited a teacher.

Its needs were met when Henry Dunster arrived in August 1640. A Bachelor and Master (1634) of Magdalene College, Cambridge, who had preached and taught in England, Dunster consented to become the first president of Harvard College just 3 weeks after disembarking—"a meer stranger in the Country," in

3 Ibid., 221.

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his words.⁴ Reassembling the students almost immediately, he was responsible not only for shepherding them through to the commencement of 1642 but for organizing enduring forms of teaching, living, and governance.

Dunster originally established a 3-year course of study for the AB degree, loosely modeled on those of the Oxford and Cambridge colleges. The major components were philosophy (logic, ethics, and politics), the classical languages and literature, and other subjects suitable for a gentleman's education in the arts. Latin and Greek had quite different roles. Latin was the language of instruction and communication, so that students had to be able to read, write, and speak it as a condition for admission. Beginning students needed only a basic grounding in Greek grammar since this proficiency was developed in all 3 years. Students began by emphasizing logic in order to develop a facility for the disputations that were central to the arts course. Each class devoted one day per week to rhetoric, which prepared students for the flourishes of oratory known as declamations. Saturdays were devoted to divinity. The original Dunster course included Oriental languages (Hebrew and a smattering of Chaldean and Syriac), his specialty, as well as single terms that addressed history, botany, physics, astronomy, and geometry. After a decade, Dunster felt compelled to extend the course to 4 years, like the AB course in England. The fact that the additional year was appended to the beginning of the course and was used for honing skills in Latin and Greek, suggests weak student preparation.

Several aspects of the original Harvard course are notable. First, it was meant to convey a liberal education in the arts for the first degree. Despite the intense piety of the Puritans, the arts were considered essential to the culture of an educated gentleman. Future clergymen were expected to earn a second degree, the master of arts, by reading divinity for 3 years, whether in the college or elsewhere. But the paucity of resources in seventeenth-century Massachusetts made it difficult for most students to complete their education. Second, the course provided a largely literary education. Scientific subjects were only touched upon, in a manner that did not yet reflect the intellectual advances of the seventeenth century. Mathematics was confined to arithmetic and geometry in the last year. The corpus of knowledge transmitted at Harvard College was considered fixed, and inquiry after new knowledge was beyond imagining. Third, in spite of the static conception of knowledge, the pedagogy demanded what today would be called active learning. Students studied their texts, kept notebooks to organize this knowledge, and copied key concepts or phrases for future use in declamations or disputations. These latter two exercises occupied significant parts of the week for all classes, and performance in these exercises largely determined a

⁴ *Ibid.*, 448.

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student's standing. Finally, the graduation protocols provided both accountability and a capstone experience as the commencers publicly "demonstrated their proficiency in the tongues and the arts" with declamations and disputations that addressed previously publicized "*theses* and *quaestiones*."⁵

Harvard's first commencement in 1642 consecrated the initial success of Dunster's efforts. In an impressive ceremony, the governor, magistrates, ministers and other educated citizens endured a full day of Greek and (mostly) Latin presentations. Nine students who had begun their studies under Nathaniel Eaton were awarded the first degree of bachelor of arts. It is often noted that the college had no authority to award degrees, since it lacked a royal charter. However, Harvard degrees had the backing of the colony, which created the college as one component of its self-sufficient existence. Given the universal nature of the arts course and President Dunster's qualifications as a master, Harvard degrees were soon recognized elsewhere as well.⁶

The commencement also marked the public debut of the college building. This structure allowed the students, who had been "dispersed in the town and miserably distracted," to be united in the "collegiate way of living."⁷ The graduates of Cambridge and Oxford who organized the college viewed this arrangement as essential for a college of arts: teachers and scholars living together under a common discipline and sharing in meals, chambers, prayers, and recreation—a kind of total immersion in a setting devoted to learning. The building itself soon came to be known as the Old College. A four-story wooden open quadrangle, shaped like an *E*, it was so poorly designed and constructed that it required constant repairs and lasted fewer than 40 years.⁸ The first floor contained a large hall where the entire college assembled for prayers, meals, and college exercises, as well as rooms for storing, preparing, and serving food. The library was on the second floor. Student chambers were scattered throughout, mostly on the upper stories. Students lived three or four to a chamber, which also contained individual cubicles as studies.

In 1650 Dunster was able to solidify the governance of the college by obtaining a charter of incorporation from the General Court. The eminent Overseers could seldom be gathered for college business, so the Charter of 1650 established

5 "Theses are propositions on the several liberal Arts and other subjects studied in the undergraduate course, which any member of the graduating class, if challenged, was supposed to be able to defend, in Latin, by the recognized rules of syllogistic disputation . . . The quaestiones were defended or opposed by candidates for the Master's degree, at Masters' Commencement on the afternoon of Commencement Day": *Harvard College*, 580.

6 Morison, *Founding of Harvard*, 257–62.

7 *Ibid.*, 448.

8 Bainbridge Bunting, *Harvard: An Architectural History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 5–12.

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a corporation, consisting of the president, treasurer, and five fellows, to be responsible for the affairs of the college and particularly its finances. The Overseers remained as a second, dominant external board, with responsibility to approve the actions of the Corporation. Dunster no doubt envisioned active teaching fellows filling out the Corporation. However, because the college could support only two such positions in the seventeenth century, outside ministers were enlisted. Whether the fellows should be instructors or external representatives would be a future bone of contention. The Charter of 1650 has endured as the basis for governing Harvard, the oldest continuous corporation in the Western Hemisphere.

Dunster resigned the presidency in 1654 under circumstances that exposed the realities of college governance perhaps better than the charter. He was first disturbed by the General Court's assertion of authority over the college. When Dunster had complained of insufficient funds, the court ordered a review of all income and expenditures. The resulting report found no wrongdoing on Dunster's part, but the court nevertheless affirmed the Overseers' authority over the corporation in financial matters. Dunster doubtless had assumed that his charter accorded greater powers to the president and corporation, and he complained of this slight in his letter of resignation. However, it was a theological matter that made his position untenable. Dunster had become convinced that there was no scriptural justification for infant baptism. The notion that baptism should signify adult religious commitment was a heresy associated with Anabaptists, who were outlawed in the Colony and banished to Rhode Island. Dunster could have retained the presidency had he kept his beliefs to himself, but he would not suppress what he held (with Biblical justification) to be truth. The court finally reacted by announcing that no one should teach in school or college who "manifested themselves unsound in the faith."⁹ Given the Reformation melding of state, church, and college, Dunster had to go. But the problem of the state determining what was sound or unsound in the faith was not so easily dismissed—as subsequent developments would show.

When Dunster withdrew in 1654 he left a flourishing, if impecunious, college of about fifty students. Harvard degrees were recognized in England, and its students hailed from New England and beyond. In just 15 years Dunster had created the fully functioning arts college that the Puritan founders had envisioned. Yet it had already assumed distinctive American features. The collegiate way of living was sparser in Cambridge, Massachusetts, but in some ways more intense. Students thrown together with their classmates for 4 years developed lasting bonds,

⁹ *Harvard College*, 302–14; Jurgen Herbst, *From Crisis to Crisis: American College Government, 1636–1819* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 10–18.

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so that the class became a stronger source of identity in America than in England. Tutors turned over rapidly given their meager stipends, so that the president dominated teaching in the American college. And, while Oxbridge colleges enjoyed endowments and a significant degree of autonomy, Harvard emanated from a self-defined community that expected to both support and control the institution.

Dunster was replaced by the learned but elderly Charles Chauncy (1654–1672), who provided solid if uninspired leadership until his death at age 80. The difficulties facing Chauncy and Harvard were not of his making. The outbreak of the English Civil War in 1640 had brought the dissenters to power. With an end to persecution, Puritans were no longer driven to emigrate to the Bay Colony. The absence of newcomers and new money brought the economy near to collapse. The dearth of new settlements also shrunk the need for new ministers. Instead, Puritan rule in England during the 1650s under the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell generated a huge demand for Puritan ministers there. A reverse migration took place that chiefly attracted the young and the educated. Reverend Richard Mather of Dorchester, for example, saw three of his four Harvard-educated sons take parishes in England and only the youngest, Increase, return to Massachusetts after the Restoration.¹⁰ As the constituency of Harvard evolved from first-generation immigrants to indigenous families, educational aspirations waned. College enrollments fell by half during Chauncy's tenure; graduates fell to five or six per year (and none in 1672), and fewer bachelors completed the master's degree. These relative doldrums persisted until the 1680s. By then a pattern for seventeenth-century Harvard was set.

Roughly 300 students attended Harvard under Dunster and Chauncy (1640–1672), and almost 200 of them graduated. In the next 35 years the college enrolled about 360 students, most of them after 1690, when class size grew to around 15.¹¹ Dunster's students were distinctive in being the sons of English exiles, if not exiles themselves. Sons of ministers or magistrates were a majority, and the rest came from gentry families. These classes contained a number of older students, as well as students from England and other colonies. Under Chauncy, however, Harvard quickly became a New England institution. The ministerial connection, unsurprisingly, was central to both recruitment and careers. Almost one-quarter of Harvard students were sons of Harvard-trained ministers. But, overall only about two-thirds of students came from gentry or college-educated fathers. Included in this group were a few fellow-commoners, as at Oxbridge, who paid double tui-

¹⁰ Michael G. Hall, *The Last Puritan: The Life of Increase Mather* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), 41–48.

¹¹ Morison, *Harvard College*, 70–80, 448–52.

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tion and dined with the fellows and resident bachelors, a practice that continued into the early eighteenth century. Still, it seems remarkable that one-third of students came from the common people of New England. One reason for this may have been the availability of schooling. Samuel Eliot Morison found the largest numbers of students hailing from, respectively, Boston, Cambridge, Ipswich, and Roxbury—towns that maintained grammar schools in the same order of size. Other students would typically have been prepared individually by local ministers and even then would face the costs of tuition and living expenses at Harvard. Total costs for 4 years at Harvard in the seventeenth century approximated 2 years' income for a common laborer—not too different from the price of a residential public university education in 2010.¹²

A professed mission of Harvard College was to educate a learned Puritan ministry, but the college was never a seminary and always committed to an arts education. Becoming a minister was the only distinctive “career” existing in seventeenth-century New England. More than half of Harvard students entered the ministry until about 1720, but ministerial preparation occurred after the bachelor's degree. A few students remained at Harvard to read for the master's degree, while most apprenticed with local ministers. Entrance into the profession required both acceptance by a congregation and ordination. The large number of graduates that pursued this demanding route reflects the prominence of ministers in Puritan society. Conversely, the variety of callings followed by the remaining graduates suggests mixed rather than fixed occupations. College graduates by definition assumed the status of gentlemen. As such they were expected to fill public offices in their community (although Harvard graduates were exempt from military service). Similarly, most probably raised a good portion of their own food and traded goods. Many young graduates spent some time as teachers, but only a handful became career educators. Fewer than 10 percent became physicians, as few settlements were large enough to support a medical doctor. Finally, the law did not become a distinct profession in America until the middle of the next century.¹³

In the hierarchical society that the Puritans brought from England, education and property were markers of status. A college education signified high social status, but also the expectation to play a prominent role in community or church affairs. The Harvard College curriculum inculcated the culture associated with this status. On one hand, the omnipresence of God and His handiwork

12 Marjory Somers Foster, “*Out of small Beginnings . . .*: An Economic History of Harvard College in the Puritan Period (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 83–84; James Axtell, *The School upon a Hill: Education and Society in Colonial New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 207–18.

13 Morison, *Harvard College*, 556–65; Bailey B. Burritt, “Professional Distribution of College and University Graduates,” U.S. Bureau of Education, Bulletin No. 19, 1912.

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permeated their intellectual world, and what the Puritans called godliness was an expected outcome for a college graduate. But learning itself—the basic arts curriculum—was universally recognized as the foundation of the culture of a gentleman. The polite learning acquired from ancient literature was certainly a part of this culture. But the College also inculcated a sense of *eupraxia* (well-acting), the Aristotelian notion embedded in Puritan theology that the end of knowledge is praxis, or knowing how to act.¹⁴ This gentleman's culture was the implicit content of a Harvard education for ministers as well as laypeople. It permeated status relationships and everyday life in Puritan society. It was explicitly celebrated on special occasions like Harvard's annual commencements, where educated men from throughout the colony gathered to ritually induct graduates into the culture of gentlemen.

YALE COLLEGE

The Puritan settlers of Connecticut were an offshoot of their counterparts at Massachusetts Bay, and they too felt the need for a college to uphold and perpetuate religion and learning. Hopes of founding a college centered on New Haven, but the only serious attempt to launch such a school foundered around 1660 for lack of students or support. The small and dispersed settlements in the colony frustrated any concerted effort. Instead, aspiring ministers endured the difficult and expensive trip to Cambridge, where they comprised 12 percent of Harvard graduates. However, by century's end conditions finally seemed propitious for the colony to have a college of its own.

The governor of Massachusetts described Connecticut, circa 1700, as “thirty-thousand souls, about thirty-three towns, all dissenters, supplied with ministers and schools of their own persuasion.” It was a homogeneous Puritan society in which church and state functioned as parts of a coordinated whole. Under its corporate charter the colony enjoyed self-government with an elected governor and general assembly. The social and political units were actually the forty-six independent church congregations. All residents paid taxes to support the Congregational churches. Ministers took the initiative to launch a college. Led by James Pierpont of New Haven, ministers from several coastal towns met and agreed upon the desirability of such an effort. At this juncture the status of the American colonies was under scrutiny in England. Fearful of taking any step that

14 Morison, *Harvard College*, 163–64; Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 190; Norman Fiering, *Moral Philosophy at Seventeenth-Century Harvard: A Discipline in Transition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 44–47.

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might disturb Connecticut's relative autonomy, they sought legal advice about the possible status and scope of a college. The responses offered cautious encouragement, but recommended a low profile—giving the “Accademie as low a name” as possible and the master a title “which shows Least of Grandeur.” With this timid backing, ten ministers brought the plan to the General Assembly, which on October 9, 1701, passed “An Act for Liberty to erect a Collegiate School.”¹⁵

This entire process was encouraged through an ongoing exchange of letters and advice from conservative Harvardians in Massachusetts. In 1701 the staunchly Puritan minister and statesman Increase Mather was being forced from the Harvard presidency (see below), and he and his supporters were eager to see an alternative school established that would uphold Puritan orthodoxy. Early in that year an anonymous letter, attributed to his son Cotton, suggested that Connecticut establish a university to be called “The School of the Churches,” with the pastors of twelve churches serving as external government. In September Increase Mather, no longer president, wrote to provide his encouragement. Interestingly, both Mathers advocated an institution quite different from Harvard. They envisioned a college entirely controlled by Congregational ministers, who could be trusted to preserve the “purity of religion.” They rejected the collegiate way of living in favor of having students room in the town as they did in continental universities. And they condemned the boisterous public commencements that had become the custom at Harvard and “of late years proved very expensive & are occasion of much sin.” More direct assistance was provided by Massachusetts Judge Samuel Sewall (H. 1671). Upon request of the Connecticut ministers, he provided a draft charter for the college. With only slight editing, this was the document enacted by the General Assembly.¹⁶

The charter of the Collegiate School gave its sponsors the authority and powers needed to found an institution but left other particulars open for the trustees to determine. The purpose was clear: “the founding, suitably endowing & ordering of a Collegiate School within his Majesties Colony of Connecticut wherein Youth may be instructed in the Arts & Sciences who thorough the blessing of Almighty God may be fitted for Publick employment in both Church and Civil State.” Complete authority over the institution was accorded to ten named trustees, all senior ministers of the larger colony towns, with the right to name their successors in perpetuity. The General Assembly granted the new school an annual grant of £120 country pay (i.e., in kind), and the right to acquire and

15 Richard Warch, *School of the Prophets: Yale College, 1701–1740* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), quotes pp. 41, 25, 24, 30; Brooks Mather Kelley, *Yale: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 3–10.

16 These documents are presented in George Wilson Pierson, *The Founding of Yale College: The Legend of the Forty Folios* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 3–12.

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own other assets. As for the school itself, the trustees were to hire a rector and tutors, as well as “grant degrees or Licenses” as they deemed proper. Subsequent controversy over whether Yale was a public or private institution would invoke different interpretations of these events. However, for Connecticut Puritans the churches and civil state were each playing their accustomed roles in adding a college to the polity.

The trustees wasted no time, gathering in Saybrook, at the mouth of the Connecticut River, only 1 month later to lay the foundation for the school. It was here, according to venerable Yale legend, that the trustees allegedly pledged their own books—some forty folios—to give the college its first tangible property.¹⁷ They designated Saybrook as the provisional locus of the college and named one of their number, Abraham Pierson of nearby Killingsworth, as rector. Curriculum was not an issue, since all but one of the trustees were Harvard graduates and well understood that their purpose was to teach the “liberal arts and languages” and to confer bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Having all attended during the Chauncy era, they replicated Harvard of the 1650s. This November meeting in Saybrook marks the true founding of what became Yale College.

The early years of the Collegiate School were disorderly, but the resolve of the trustees and the general support of the colony preserved a viable and growing enterprise. At the outset, Rector Pierson was unable to secure a release from his Killingsworth congregation to move to Saybrook, so the students instead came to him. He began instructing the first student in his home in 1702, and that same year the school awarded its first degrees, both BA and MA, to an exceptionally well-prepared student. It thereby asserted its status as a true college despite its unassuming title. Pierson provided sound leadership and instruction, although finding satisfactory tutors proved difficult. In the first 5 years of operation, the school enrollment rose to seventeen undergraduates and produced fourteen graduates. However, when rector Pierson died in 1707, new arrangements had to be made. The college finally moved to Saybrook, but there teaching was conducted by tutors since, again, no rector could be persuaded to relocate. The college persisted in Saybrook for 8 years, although in far from satisfactory conditions. In 1716 the unhappy students dispersed to study with ministers independently, most going to Wethersfield (near Hartford) or New Haven. The trustees from the Hartford churches then asked the General Assembly to locate the college there permanently. For a year, students were instructed in three different places—Wethersfield, New Haven, and a few still in Saybrook. At this point New Haven made a concerted effort to claim the college and began erecting a true college building for its new home. The General Assembly finally intervened,

17 For the circumstances and significance, see Pierson, *Founding of Yale College*.

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eventually deciding in favor of New Haven, but both Saybrook and Hartford contested the decision for another 2 years.

While still in this precarious state, the college had the good fortune to receive a major gift from Elihu Yale, an English Anglican originally from New England who had grown quite wealthy in the India trade. Cotton Mather had written to Yale promising him a naming opportunity: “what is forming at New Haven might wear the name of YALE COLLEGE.” Jeremiah Dummer, a Harvard graduate who was the London agent for Connecticut and Massachusetts, secured Yale’s donation. Dummer convinced the Anglican Yale to support a dissenter college since, Yale reasoned, “the business of good men is to spread religion and learning among mankind without being too fondly attached to particular Tenets, about which the World never was, nor ever will be agreed”—a sentiment shared by no one connected with the Collegiate School.¹⁸ In August, 1718, his donation arrived in Boston: a large box of books, a portrait of King George I, and goods from the East Indies that sold for more than £500. The new college building was quickly named for Yale, and soon the institution itself was called Yale College. By 1720 the Collegiate School had a new name, a permanent home, and a building for the collegiate way of living. It also obtained a resident rector for the first time. The Reverend Timothy Cutler was considered one of the colony’s most effective preachers and just the sort of leader who could discipline the students and overcome the previous fissiparous tendencies.

Yale College thrived in its new home and quickly grew. It averaged twelve annual graduates in the first half of the 1720s and sixteen in the second half. It also became somewhat more worldly. Whereas almost three-quarters of earlier graduates entered the ministry, that proportion fell to around one-half from the 1720s onward. Yale was fulfilling its mission of fitting youth for employment in both church and civil state. However, its parallel mission of upholding the purity of Puritanism would prove more challenging.

THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM & MARY

Virginia was chartered in 1606 as a Crown colony with Anglicanism as the established church. Hence, affairs of church and state were legally set in London, including provisions for education. Only 10 years after Jamestown was settled in 1607, King James asked his subjects to contribute toward “the erecting of some Churches and Schooles for the education of children of those Barbarians.”¹⁹ This

¹⁸ Warch, *School of the Prophets*, quotes p. 85.

¹⁹ For Colonial William & Mary, Thad W. Tate, “The Colonial College, 1693–1782,” in *The College of William & Mary: A History, vol. I (1693–1888)* (Williamsburg: King and Queen Press, 1993), 3–162;

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initiative blossomed into a plan for a full-fledged university inland from Jamestown at Henrico. Land was secured, settlers were brought in, and in 1622 a rector was named. Before he could set sail, however, the unappreciative Barbarians massacred the settlers, and the venture was abandoned. Not until William and Mary assumed the throne in the Glorious Revolution of 1688 would conditions in London again be propitious for planting a college in Virginia. That these conditions were exploited to create the College of William & Mary was the single-handed accomplishment of an individual who today might be labeled a policy entrepreneur, James Blair.

Son of a Scottish minister, Blair was educated in the arts and theology at the University of Edinburgh before assuming his own parish. A liberal Anglican, he was purged from that position for not supporting the Stuart monarchy. Moving to London, he established good relations with Anglican opponents of the Stuarts. In 1685 Blair was persuaded to accept a parish in Virginia, which was always in need of clergy. He apparently distinguished himself among rather undistinguished peers and also married into a powerful Virginia family. He was a rising political force within the colony when the Glorious Revolution brought his patrons to power in London. Blair was appointed commissary, or head of the Anglican clergy in Virginia, and at his first convocation in 1690 he secured a resolution to establish a college. He soon enlisted the support of the colony and in 1691 traveled to England to secure a royal charter. Nearly 2 years of bureaucratic wrangling ensued, but in 1693 Blair succeeded in having the monarchs issue a charter for a college bearing their names.

Certainly the College of William & Mary was less premature than the Henrico venture 70 years earlier, but it was nevertheless created for a land that had little use for advanced education. Virginia by the 1690s had a dispersed population of large plantations that were growing wealthy through tobacco and slaves. In many ways still a frontier society, it lacked both towns and schools, and it had large numbers of unattached and unruly young men. No doubt Blair and officials in London felt the need for a college so that—in the words of the charter—“the Church of Virginia may be furnished with a Seminary of Ministers of the Gospel, and that the Youth may be piously educated in good Letters and Manners.” But these were wishful thoughts. Whereas the early colleges of New England were founded and supported by their communities, the chartering of William & Mary was an act of a distant government. Still, obtaining a

J. David Hoeveler, *Creating the American Mind* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 79–100; Arthur P. Middleton, “Anglican Contributions to Higher Education in Colonial America,” *Pennsylvania History*, XXV, 3 (July, 1958): 49–66, quote p. 52. Most records of colonial William & Mary were destroyed in successive fires, so there is much uncertainty about many aspects of the college.

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royal charter was something of a feat—unmatched by any other college in the American colonies.

The college charter specified four levels of instruction—a grammar school to teach basic Latin, a school of philosophy in which collegiate subjects would be taught, and a school of divinity to prepare Anglican ministers. A separate endowment provided for an Indian school as well. The charter also specified a faculty of six—single teachers for the grammar and Indian schools, professors of moral and natural philosophy, and two professors of divinity. The institution was to be liberally supported with land grants and shares of various royal revenues. Just as Oxford and Cambridge each elected a member of the House of Commons, the college could elect a burgess to the Virginia legislature. Initially, a board of trustees was responsible for the college assets until the terms of the charter were fulfilled; those powers would then revert to the president and faculty of the college. However, more than 30 years passed before this occurred. In the meantime, James Blair was in full control. He was named president of the college for life, which turned out to be 50 years. He also served on the board of trustees and the Board of Visitors that succeeded it. Unlike northern college presidents, he never taught in the college. This was but one of many anomalies in the unique model of the College of William & Mary.

The early years of the college saw three notable accomplishments. First, Blair succeeded in hiring an able schoolmaster for the grammar school, and instruction commenced in 1694. Second, with the funds promised for the founding of the college, an impressive collegiate building was erected over the next 5 years. Third, as complications grew at the Jamestown settlement, Blair helped arrange the relocation of the colony capital to Williamsburg, close by the college. Twenty-nine registered students were reported in 1702, all in the grammar school, but the situation soon deteriorated. Blair's growing involvement and power in the colony came with neglect of the college. He quarreled (victoriously) with succeeding royal governors and alienated the grammar schoolmaster. Enrollments shrank (Blair withdrew his own nephew), and the trustees withheld Blair's substantial presidential salary due to lack of progress in fulfilling the charter. Then, in 1705, the college building burned to the ground, followed shortly by the resignation of the only teacher.

Barely a decade after its founding, the College of William & Mary was close to collapse. But it slowly recovered over the next decade. The Indian school was organized for the first time, fulfilling the obligation of its endowment. It appeared to serve its purpose for a number of years before the unrealistic expectations of the English toward Native Americans became evident. A new master was retained for the grammar school, although one less reliable than his predecessor. And a new college edifice was slowly raised—the building that now

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stands in restored form at the College. For a short time (1717–1721) the college even managed to retain a professor of mathematics and natural philosophy. But Blair's political intrigues caused the college to dissolve into factionalism once more. For at least two decades, James Blair's ongoing political battles had made the founder more of a liability than an asset. However, at this juncture he endeavored to revive the college and fulfill the terms of its charter.

In order to have the charter transferred to the college, thus giving sovereign authority to the president and faculty, Blair had to obtain the six professors or masters originally specified. Only in 1729 was he able to make a pretense of doing so. His most solid appointee was a recent Oxford graduate, William Dawson, who was made professor of moral philosophy. Dawson filled that post for 14 years and succeeded Blair as president (1643–1652). The masters of the grammar and Indian schools also counted. To fill out the faculty he appointed two parish clergy to the chairs in divinity, although they had no apparent duties. The chair in natural philosophy was awarded to an Edinburgh graduate who was otherwise occupied on a surveying expedition. On his demise in 1731 a competent replacement was named, who actually did teach in the college. Historians of the colonial college doubt that the six charter masters were ever in the same room together, but on paper they were sufficient to fulfill the terms of the charter.²⁰

In 1729 the royal charter, amended with additional statutes (1727), was transferred from London to Williamsburg.²¹ The college now had both a grammar school and a school of philosophy with two qualified teachers. Moreover, since the college's founding, Virginia had evolved into a society with growing numbers of wealthy planter families, now more appreciative of cultural gentility and some kinds of practical learning. According to the statutes of the college, the grammar school offered a 4-year course, capped by an examination at or about age 15. Two more years of study in the school of philosophy could lead to a bachelor's degree (extended to 4 years in 1758). But, in fact, the sons of Virginia had little desire for so long a course or for formal degrees. Most probably acquired some Latin from local tutors or ministers and then attended for two or three years in the grammar school and possibly in philosophy, but apparently none graduated. Nor did the faculty offer any encouragement for them to do so.²² As for preparing ministers

20 Tate, "Colonial College," 62–72.

21 August 15, the date of the transfer, was henceforth celebrated as Transfer Day, an event similar to commencements at northern colleges.

22 The absence of graduates presents a puzzling contrast with other colonial colleges. Most William & Mary masters were the product of Oxford colleges, which provided instruction but not degrees. The university conducted examinations and awarded degrees. Without the sanction of examinations and degrees, instruction was most likely offered and received in a casual manner. Only in 1770 were efforts made to upgrade the course of study, and the first BA degrees were awarded in 1772: Tate, "Colonial College," 113.

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of the gospel, ordination into the Anglican clergy could be performed only by a bishop, which meant travel to England. Among early William & Mary students, only a handful seem to have followed that path, and they all finished their education in England. Total enrollments rose to around 60 in the 1730s and fluctuated near that level for the rest of the colonial era.

Throughout the history of the colonial college, the grammar school enrolled the largest number of students. Presumably most of these students would have been age 11 to 15, and they no doubt set an unfortunate tone for residential life in the college. The college building also included quarters for philosophy students, but they were not required to live there. It is difficult to compare the college course with that in New England or, for that matter, Oxbridge, the putative model for William & Mary. The grammar school was intended to prepare students in Latin and Greek for collegiate studies, but apparently not many proceeded to the school of philosophy. There, all the other subjects of the collegiate course were taught by the two professors in unknown sequences, if any. In striking contrast with the northern colleges, tight class cohorts were entirely absent, as were the recitations that structured students' daily life. Only at the end of the colonial period was a regular plan of lectures in place. Before then, the rapid turnover of masters must have precluded a consistent or complete curriculum.²³ In one sense, the College of William and Mary offered the amount and kind of advanced education that eighteenth-century Virginia could assimilate. However, the principal constituencies could not agree on a formula that met their divergent interests, with consequences that will be seen below.

CONFLICT AND NEW LEARNING IN THE EARLY COLLEGES

The first three colleges of British North America followed the pattern of Reformation Europe, in which universities were territorial organizations under the combined authority of an established church and the civil state. Each college was configured somewhat differently but retained the same common elements. Teaching was under the supervision of members of the clergy, and all learning was placed in a religious context. Representatives of the established church provided some or all of the external governance of the institution. And representatives of the civil government were involved as overseers at all but Yale. The colonies provided financial support and had ultimate oversight over the colleges.

²³ Robert Polk Thomson, "The Reform of the College of William and Mary, 1763–1780," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 115, 3 (June 1971): 187–213.

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This model of joint church-state effort worked well enough for the establishment of these “schools of the Reformation,” as historian Jurgen Herbst has termed them.²⁴ However, problems soon developed. As new ideas emerged questioning the reigning dogmas of the churches, the ramifications were quickly transmitted to the colleges. Further, the ambiguous sharing of clerical and secular authority proved inherently unstable. Thus, the early histories of these institutions were characterized not by the unity of church, state, and college, but by conflict and controversy.

The seventeenth century experienced greater intellectual advancement than any previous era in human history, marked above all by the scientific revolution, embodied in the Royal Society of London (f. 1662), and the beginnings of the Enlightenment, the dominant intellectual movement of the next century.²⁵ Neither of these developments affected the curriculum of colonial colleges for some time. The arts course was largely frozen in the trivium and what was still largely Aristotelian philosophy. Moreover, the deeper purpose of the college course and the overriding preoccupation of the institutions were to demonstrate the truth of Christianity. The new learning affected attitudes toward religion first, church polity second, and colleges third.

The new ideas of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries are best described as the Early Enlightenment, to distinguish them from later, more vigorous phases. The two intellectual giants who symbolized the movement in England were John Locke (1632–1704) and Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727). Their achievements were monumental. Newton’s *Principia Mathematica* (1689) described the physical laws governing matter and motion and superseded all previous formulations. Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) ignited an ongoing reappraisal of how and what the human mind knows; his *Two Treatises on Government* (1690) anchored the Whig tradition of limited monarchy in England and was later an inspiration for the American Declaration of Independence. For contemporaries, however, the contributions of both men had a multitude of possible meanings. According to historian Norman Fiering, “Locke’s philosophy and Newton’s discoveries were important in early America only in highly qualified ways, and neither the *Essay* . . . nor the *Principia* . . . may be considered crucial documents for comprehending the development of thought in America before about 1735.” This was largely because the intellectual leaders of New England sought initially “new forms of integration of reason and religion.” In this quest, Fiering proposes, they were

24 Herbst, *From Crisis to Crisis*, 3–16.

25 Peter Dear, *Revolutionizing the Sciences: European Knowledge and Its Ambitions, 1500–1700*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

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more immediately inspired by a contemporary of the two giants, John Tillotson (1630–1694).²⁶

Elevated to Archbishop of Canterbury in 1691, Tillotson was known above all for his widely admired sermons. Published in various forms and editions beginning in 1664, he was considered “not only the best preacher of his age, but seemed to have brought preaching to perfection.”²⁷ These sermons were probably the most widely read religious literature in the American colonies from 1690 to 1750, not only for their literary qualities but because they also had a generic appeal that transcended religious dogma. They conveyed two principal ideas. First, “nature itself, including human nature, is a revelation of God that may be trusted as an independent source of divine truth.” This idea was consistent with Protestant theology, which had always regarded the universe as a manifestation of God’s work. Now Newton (or more accurately the popularizers of Newton) had shown the cosmos to be an even more glorious creation than previously realized. But with Tillotson the idea of natural religion distanced itself from other Protestant doctrines. Second, the free exercise of reason could be a guide to religion in itself, without reference to theological commentary. None other than John Locke furthered these arguments with *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), where reason guided by the New Testament yields the simple moral truths of Christianity.²⁸ Tillotson, whom Locke greatly admired, had also joined reason and revelation by arguing that “the law of God requires nothing of us, but what is recommended to us by our own reason.” These sentiments, embellished by Tillotson’s literary flair and broad appeal, established a foundation for what Fiering calls “philosophical Anglicanism”—a broad reorientation of the Church of England toward an inclusive, tolerant posture, otherwise known as latitudinarianism. In America, James Turner calls this tradition more simply “reasonable religion.”²⁹

Numerous other writers contributed to this movement, but the result was official endorsement for a benevolent and intelligent deity, whose guidance for humankind could be known through nature and reason. This was a far cry from

26 Norman Fiering, “The First American Enlightenment: Tillotson, Leverett, and Philosophical Anglicanism,” *New England Quarterly* 54, 3 (Sept. 1981): 307–44, quotes pp. 332, 334. See also, Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), esp. 10–13; May identifies these developments as the beginning of the “Moderate Enlightenment,” which reconciled reason and Protestant religion and spanned most of the eighteenth century. He identifies the rational Christianity of Samuel Clarke as foundational, whose influential lectures were given a decade after Tillotson’s death and developed these themes further: 13–14.

27 Quoted in Fiering, “First American Enlightenment,” 310n; Tillotson’s sermons were sold to a publisher after his death for £2,500, the largest sum paid to date for rights to an English book. The fourteen volumes were reprinted as late as 1735.

28 Roger Woolhouse, *Locke: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 336–44.

29 James Turner, *Without God, without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 28–34.

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the vengeful God of Calvinism. For New England Puritans this view was a challenge quite different from the persecution of the Stuart church; it was rather the challenge of seduction. However, the implications were not apparent until the end of the century. Before then, even Increase Mather admired “the great and good Archbishop Tillotson.” And so did Mather’s future nemesis, John Leverett, who brought these same ideas into Harvard College.³⁰



HARVARD COLLEGE, 1685–1724. Following the death of President Chauncy in 1672, Harvard’s weak enrollments were compounded by a series of short-term, ineffective leaders and increasing intellectual isolation from England. Its fortunes began to change, however, when Increase Mather, minister of Boston’s Second Church, accepted the presidency (1685–1701). Mather was one of the most learned and prominent figures in the colony—so prominent, in fact, that he had little time for the college. He declined to relinquish his pastoral post or to reside in Cambridge. Moreover, the years of his presidency coincided with a long-running constitutional crisis. In an attempt to reorganize the New England colonies, London abolished the original charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company (1684) and with it the Harvard charter of 1650. The college continued to operate, as did the colony, but Mather was continually involved in negotiations to resolve this situation, including 4 years spent in London. In the meantime, the governance of the college by Corporation and Overseers was uncertain at best. The college nevertheless gained renewed vigor under the direction of two dedicated tutors, John Leverett and William Brattle.

Leverett and Brattle both belonged to prominent Boston families. They were educated together at the Boston Latin School and Harvard (1680). Appointed tutors in 1685 and 1686, respectively, they resided in the college and taught all subjects until both resigned in 1697, Brattle to become pastor of the Cambridge church and Leverett to rise in public office to Speaker of the House of Representatives. During these years the size of the college roughly doubled,³¹ but more importantly the two tutors opened the college to the new ideas of the age, especially those of liberal Anglicans. Given Boston’s frequent intercourse with the mother country and its growing merchant class, it could scarcely remain isolated from English thought, but Leverett and Brattle were key agents in implanting those ideas. They prompted some modernization of the curriculum, with Brattle

³⁰ Quoted in Fiering, “First American Enlightenment,” 340, 314.

³¹ In the decade before 1685, Harvard averaged ca. twenty-five students and six annual graduates; in the 1690s, ca. fifty undergraduates and twelve bachelor’s.

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contributing an introductory text for Cartesian logic that was used almost until the Revolution.³² They probably had a greater impact by setting the intellectual tone for the college community. At nightly meals masters and divinity students and other recent graduates joined Leverett and Brattle for stimulating conversation. They thus had a profound influence on numerous Harvard graduates and future ministers, introducing them especially to “episcopal” literature and philosophical Anglicanism.³³ This influence led to the emergence of a distinctly liberal faction, with consequences for the colony and the college.

The liberal Puritans emerged as a distinct party with the organization of Boston’s fourth church in 1699. This effort was bankrolled by Thomas Brattle, William’s brother, who was also treasurer of Harvard. It gathered liberal Harvard graduates, including its new minister Benjamin Colman, who had studied in England. The new church remained faithful to much of Puritan theology but broke decisively with prevailing church practices by relaxing requirements for membership and foregoing religious tests. Inclusiveness, greater doctrinal flexibility, and the “catholick spirit” better suited the predilections of the city’s growing merchant class, who were also gaining influence in the government. The liberals next succeeded in ejecting Increase Mather from the Harvard presidency. The pretext was the long-simmering issue of mandatory residence in the college. Presented with an ultimatum, Mather finally moved to Cambridge, but he could endure it for only 6 months. When he returned to Boston in 1701, the presidency was considered vacated. His successor, Samuel Willard (1701–1707), was also unwilling to forego his Boston congregation. Instead, he was appointed vice president with no residential requirement, merely a promise of regular visits. During these years the college operated much as it had previously; Leverett’s former students were tutors, and both Leverett and Brattle were close at hand, residing literally next door. Upon Willard’s death in 1707, the corporation defied tradition by electing Leverett, a layman, to a post that had always been filled by Puritan ministers. This act alienated the orthodox Puritans, led by the Mather clan, from the liberals; but the deal was sealed by the colony governor, who offered to reinstate the Charter of 1650 if Leverett were made president. In a stroke, Harvard acquired an on-site leader of enormous stature in the community and resolved the

32 “In nearly every discipline—logic, metaphysics, ethics and natural philosophy—the Aristotelian Scholastic inheritance was largely abandoned”: Fiering, “First American Enlightenment,” 322; however, Morison considers the elements of the curriculum to have been quite stable: *Harvard College*, 147; on Brattle, 192–93; Thomas Jay Siegel, *Governance and Curriculum at Harvard College in the Eighteenth Century*, PhD Diss., Harvard University, 1990, 372–88. Siegel provides a detailed sequel to Morison for issues of governance and curriculum.

33 Morison, *Harvard College*, 504–9; Specifically, they introduced doctrines of rational Christianity of Cambridge Platonist Henry More: Fiering, “First American Enlightenment,” 322–23; Hoeveler, *Creating the American Mind*, 44–47.

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uncertainties of its governance. These steps established a solid foundation for its efflorescence in the remainder of the colonial era and beyond.³⁴

To Samuel Eliot Morison he was the “Great Leverett,” who “was steadfast in preserving the College from the devastating control of provincial orthodoxy . . . kept it a house of learning under the spirit of religion . . . [and] founded the liberal tradition of Harvard University.”³⁵ Indeed, his control over the college was challenged by Puritan conservatives until the end of his presidency. The greatness of President Leverett (1708–1724) did not stem from pedagogical or organizational innovation. Rather, his personal charisma and complete devotion to the institution served as aegis under which the college prospered, grew, and changed with the times.

Harvard College roughly doubled in enrollments during the Leverett years. In 1721 it counted 124 students, including resident graduates. Only Yale and Harvard attained larger enrollments in the colonial era, and the size of the average American colleges would not exceed this figure until the 1890s. The General Court voted funds for Massachusetts Hall (1720) to accommodate these students in the college. A good part of this growth apparently came from the rising merchant class of the region, whose sons often wished above all to become gentlemen. Their presence enlivened extracurricular life at the college with clubs, the first student periodical, and abundant illicit activities. This behavior was sufficiently notorious that a 16-year old Benjamin Franklin satirized these would-be gentlemen who left Harvard “as great Blockheads as ever, only more proud and self-conceited.” Those destined for the ministry declined from nearly two-thirds at the end of Leverett’s tutorship to under one-half at the end of his presidency—still by far the college’s largest constituency.³⁶

Leverett seems to have had less impact on the curriculum as president than he did as a tutor. That he hired a permanent instructor in Hebrew suggests how traditional the arts course remained. But within that structure unmistakable progress occurred. During these years tutors served increasingly lengthy tenures, led by Henry (“Father”) Flynt, who held that post for 55 years, abused by students and beloved by graduates. Thomas Robie, who tutored from 1713 to 1722, made important contributions to advancing science in the college. His scientific observations brought election to the Royal Society, and he resigned to practice medicine, which he taught himself. These older and more professional teachers were more competent than the typical tutors—recent graduates, usually

34 Hall, *Last Puritan*, 292–301; Morison, *Harvard College*; Morison, *Three Centuries*, 45–53.

35 Morison, *Three Centuries*, 53–75, quote pp. 74–75.

36 Morison, *Three Centuries*, quote p. 61; Burritt, “Professional Distribution”; John D. Burton, “Collegiate Living and Cambridge Justice: Regulating the Colonial Harvard Student Community in the Eighteenth Century,” *Perspectives on the History of Higher Education*, 23 (2003–2004): 83–106.

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preparing for ministerial careers.³⁷ Of greater significance was the creation of permanent professorships. This academic milestone was made possible by the gifts of a London Baptist, Thomas Hollis. At the urging of Benjamin Colman, now a fellow of the Corporation, Hollis endowed a professorship of divinity in 1722. Although he stipulated only that the chairholder be accepting of adult baptism, Harvard's governors insisted on strict religious tests before appointing Edward Wigglesworth—further evidence of the limits of “liberal” Puritanism. But Hollis fortunately ignored this slight, and Wigglesworth, during his 41-year incumbency, subtly chipped away at bedrock Calvinist doctrines. In 1727 Hollis donated a second chair in mathematics and natural philosophy, this time encouraged by a recent Harvard graduate studying in England, who was then named to fill it. Isaac Greenwood strengthened the teaching of science and mathematics during his short tenure (1727–1738) before succumbing to intemperance; and his successor, John Winthrop (1738–1779), achieved far more.³⁸ The Hollis professorships gave an American college an intellectual foundation for the first time. These individuals had a secure position in which to develop expertise in their subjects and to convey that expertise not only to students but to the community at large. The eighteenth-century holders of these chairs thus played a crucial role in overcoming the outmoded worldview of Puritanism and bringing the Enlightenment to America.



YALE, 1718–1740. New Haven proved more resistant to intellectual advancement. Boston was a thriving seaport in constant intercourse with England. Many Harvard graduates, like Colman and Greenwood, traveled to the mother country for further study and there imbibed the prevailing spirit of toleration, reason, and scientific inquiry. Connecticut remained quite insular, even as its Puritan homogeneity slowly eroded. In addition, while the transformation of Harvard had been led by secular leadership on its governing boards, Yale was effectively under the thumb of its clerical trustees. The congregational church, moreover, had solidified its internal discipline by adopting the Saybrook Platform in 1709. Drawn up by church leaders who were also trustees of the Collegiate School,

37 John D. Burton, “The Harvard Tutors: The Beginning of an Academic Profession, 1690–1825,” *History of Higher Education Annual*, 16 (1996): 5–20; Clifford K. Shipton, *New England Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 6–12; Frederick G. Kilgour, “Thomas Robie (1689–1729), Colonial Scientist and Physician,” *Isis*, 30, 3 (Aug. 1939): 473–90.

38 Morison, *Three Centuries*, 66–68; Theodore Hornberger, *Scientific Thought in the American Colonies, 1638–1800* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1945), 44–51; Hoeveler, *Creating the American Mind*, 215–36.

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the platform specified traditional Calvinist articles of faith and established associations to oversee the individual congregations. Concerned above all with disorder within their churches, Connecticut Puritans were only dimly aware of the new ideas of the Moderate Enlightenment, which were closer at hand than they realized.³⁹

Just 4 years before he secured Elihu Yale's gift, Jeremiah Dummer had assisted the Collegiate School by gathering a large donation of books (1714). Well connected himself, he managed to acquire gifts from London's leading men of letters, including a second edition of the *Principia* from Sir Isaac Newton. In all, he dispatched nine crates of books containing more than 800 volumes. The school suddenly possessed perhaps the largest and most up-to-date library in the colonies, but given its disorganized state there were few beneficiaries. Early colonial college libraries were off limits to undergraduates and used chiefly by master's or divinity students. However, one recent graduate took a keen interest and began to peruse the collection.

Samuel Johnson graduated from the Collegiate School in Saybrook in 1714. He began teaching in nearby Guilford and borrowing books from the new collection. Johnson had a penchant for constructing comprehensive philosophical systems from his student days to his later writings. However, confronting the new learning was like leaping across centuries from the outdated curriculum he had just studied. He abandoned the geocentric Ptolemaic cosmology for the Newtonian universe only in 1717, for example. He initially sought to assimilate the empirical epistemology of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* with the teleological systems he learned in college. He next attacked astronomy by reading the popularizers of Newton, but he quickly discovered he lacked the mathematical knowledge to read the master. As he read, Johnson formed discussion groups with nearby teachers and ministers and continued this practice when he became a tutor at New Haven. Johnson was a learned but unpopular tutor from 1717 through 1719, quite likely because he attempted to teach new learning that he did not fully understand himself. He was forced to leave to ensure internal peace for the new rector, Timothy Cutler, and took a post as minister in nearby West Haven. As he continued his reading, the focus shifted to philosophical Anglicans like Tillotson. Johnson's reading circle now included Rector Cutler, who as a 1701 graduate of Harvard would have been more familiar with the new learning and had already begun flirting with Anglicanism.⁴⁰

39 Warch, *School of the Prophets*, 52–57; Hoeveler, *Creating the American Mind*, 55–62.

40 Joseph J. Ellis, *The New England Mind in Transition: Samuel Johnson of Connecticut, 1696–1772* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 34–75.

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At the 1722 graduation, Cutler concluded prayers with a passage from the Anglican liturgy. In doing so he signaled his apostasy from the Congregational Church and acceptance of the great enemy of Puritanism, the English Church. He was joined by Samuel Johnson and five others, only one of whom followed through with his apostasy. Subsequently examined by the trustees and then by the governor, Cutler, Johnson, and a Yale tutor stood their ground. They resigned their positions and soon set sail for England to become Anglican clergy. The specific issue that had prompted the break was their doubts of the legitimacy of Puritan ordination rather than ordination by a bishop in the apostolic succession. However, behind this recondite theological issue lay the weight of the new learning, rational Christianity, and natural religion.⁴¹

The apostasy at Yale reverberated throughout New England, giving false hopes to Anglicans and unwarranted despair to Puritans. As for Yale, the trustees reacted predictably by imposing church discipline: They declared that all college officers would henceforth be required to swear acceptance of the Confession of Faith of the Saybrook Platform.⁴² As far as its governors were concerned, Yale was a sectarian college. And, for a time it prospered as such. Elisha Williams (1726–1739) was installed as the new rector, and for his tenure Yale at last had stability to grow and prosper. Williams was recognized as an admirable college leader. The number of graduates rose by half to average 18 per year, and the colony provided ample support. A church-state consensus upheld Puritan orthodoxy, which now emphasized a heightened guard against “Arminianism.” This doctrine implied that salvation could be achieved in some measure though good works and had always been rejected vehemently by Calvinists in favor of predestination. But Arminianism was now the *de facto* creed of the Anglican Church, if not liberal Puritans. When Williams resigned to follow other pursuits, the trustees chose as successor Thomas Clap (H. 1722), a young Connecticut minister who had distinguished himself through fierce opposition to Arminianism. Clap (1740–1766) was the first Yale rector to have a normal succession and the first as well to assume the direction of a tranquil and settled college. It would not remain so for long. Clap would spend his tenure in a futile struggle to uphold Puritan orthodoxy—to preserve a school of the Reformation in an age of Enlightenment.

41 Existing historiography emphasizes Samuel Johnson, his reading of the Dummer collection, and his subsequent reading circles for the apostasy. However, it seems more likely that Cutler led the actual break, possibly after receiving assurances from Anglicans of appointment as minister to the new Anglican Church being erected in Boston. In that position, Cutler subsequently became a strident conservative, alienating both Harvardians and liberal Anglicans: Shipton, *New England Life*, 79–101.

42 Ironically, the same year that Harvard imposed a rather superficial religious test on one individual, Edward Wigglesworth, Yale imposed a more stringent test on all future teachers.

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WILLIAM & MARY. The Virginia college felt no such tension between Calvinism and philosophical Anglicanism. James Blair was aligned with church liberals who triumphed in the Glorious Revolution and even corresponded with John Locke. Later, William & Mary would embrace enlightenment thinking as a matter of course. However, new learning and old learning were scarcely issues when the institution was only a grammar school; nor did sympathy toward the new learning spare it from conflict afterward. Rather, an ambiguous governance structure and the political fault lines of the colony produced repeated, debilitating confrontations.

James Blair seems to have set a pattern with his clashes with the colony's governors, which were symptomatic of a latent antagonism between the interests of the Anglican clergy and those of native Virginia planters. After a period of relative calm during the aged Blair's final years and the tenure of his successor, William Dawson, this conflict intensified. The charter accorded the president and faculty control over the college. Once a full faculty was resident, they became more assertive. Most were products of Oxford colleges, where they had absorbed a strong sense of entitlement. Being members of the Anglican clergy, answerable to the Bishop of London, gave them additional independence. They provoked the ire of governors by taking stridently partisan positions on local political issues. In the college, they defied prohibitions against marriage and ministering to local parishes for extra income. They also resisted residing in the college and refused to take responsibility for disciplining the (mostly grammar school) students. The Board of Visitors, representing the Virginia political elite, held powers of appointment but was otherwise frustrated by its inability to intervene in the operations of the college. The 1750s and 1760s witnessed a continual battle between these two sides. Typical of this stalemate, a confrontation in 1757 culminated with the Board of Visitors firing the entire faculty, only to have their action reversed on appeal to London 6 years later. Both sides invoked the interests of the college: the faculty claimed the right to control teaching and students, while the Visitors sought to rectify what they considered low standards and lax discipline. Ineffectual and self-serving actors on both sides exacerbated these conflicts, but basically their differences were fundamental.

The William & Mary charter envisioned a school of the Reformation in which the interests of state and church were joined, but this unity of purpose was never achieved in colonial Virginia. Instead, the Anglican clergy and the planters who dominated the Virginia polity each pursued their own vested interests. Worse, neither side's interests supported the integrity of an institution of advanced learning. The faculty defined its role as "training up Youth, who

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are intended to be qualified for any of the three learned Professions, or to become Gentlemen, and accomplished Citizens.”⁴³ Yet the college prepared few “Ministers of the Gospel,” as specified in the charter, and those few finished their training elsewhere; also, it taught neither medicine nor law. Students had no incentive to complete a college course even if one had been defined. For the colony’s elite families, the college assumed a purely cultural role, serving as a finishing school where their sons acquired the patina of gentlemen. They too had no need for college degrees. Only at the end of the colonial era did the Virginians take an interest in raising curricular standards and granting degrees.

This tardy development can be seen in the contrasting experiences of two of the college’s most accomplished citizens. Thomas Jefferson, after a rigorous preparation in an academy, came to the college at age 16 for a leisurely 2 years (1760–1762), which happened to be a hiatus in the faculty wars. He studied classics, philosophy, and law but otherwise had a student experience like no one else. Jefferson was essentially tutored by the lone professor of philosophy, William Small, a rare noncleric who was aloof from the church’s battles. Jefferson often joined his professor at the governor’s table for “rational and philosophical conversations.” Jefferson treasured this experience but also seems to have left the college convinced of the need for its complete restructuring.⁴⁴ Just 10 years later, James Madison, second cousin to the future U.S. president and subsequently president of the college, received the first bachelor’s degree awarded by William & Mary. He had studied at the college for 4 years and was a mature 23 years old in 1772. By that date considerable agreement existed on the desirability of separating the grammar school and expanding the collegiate offerings.⁴⁵ Reform would await the Revolution, but Virginia would persist with its own distinctive interpretation of American higher education.

THE EMBRYONIC AMERICAN COLLEGE

The college founders of the first century had sought to re-create the English patterns of higher education with which they were familiar, but the small scale of operation, limited resources, scarcity of qualified teachers, and closeness of external governors all skewed the development of the colleges. These factors made the three original colleges differ from each other, but they nevertheless shared similarities of mission, aspiration, and operations. By 1740 these, in turn, produced

43 Faculty statement of 1770 attributed to John Camm: Tate, “Colonial College,” 116.

44 Mark R. Wenger, “Thomas Jefferson, the College of William and Mary, and the University of Virginia,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 103, 3 (July 1995): 339–74, quote p. 359.

45 Tate, “Colonial College,” 112–20. See below, chapter 2.

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in embryonic form the distinctively American patterns of collegiate education and governance.

The American model of a strong president under the authority of an external governing board with a relatively weak faculty was the product of evolution rather than design. The starting point for this process lay with the efforts of Henry Dunster and James Blair to design quite similar structures of governance. The Oxbridge colleges were largely controlled by their masters and permanent fellows, subject to the oversight, if any, of a Visitor. Accordingly, Dunster devised a Harvard Corporation consisting of the president, treasurer, and five fellows, who he assumed would in the future be the teachers in the college. The William & Mary charter similarly placed control of the college in the hands of the president and masters. Both charters gave broad, loosely defined powers to the external boards: the Overseers had the right to review and approve all actions of the Harvard Corporation, and the Visitors had authority to enact laws and rules for William & Mary. Behind both boards stood the governments of the respective colonies, which became involved on infrequent but important occasions.

The original presidents dominated their fledgling institutions for lack of alternatives, but other possibilities soon emerged. William & Mary was atypical in acquiring more or less permanent masters by the 1730s. But these individuals soon contended for control of the college, challenging at different times the authority of the president, the Visitors, and even the governor. Harvard before Leverett and Yale before Elisha Williams endured extended periods of weak or absent heads. In those cases tutors basically conducted day-to-day affairs but never acquired governing powers. Unlike the fellows in the Oxbridge colleges, the tutors/fellows did not have permanent posts. They were essentially candidates for future positions, usually as ministers. For this reason, local dignitaries were recruited to also be fellows of the corporation. By controlling appointments, presidents could assure themselves of a cooperative board. Leverett took this approach after the charter was reinstated, but then unusual circumstances found the college with three “career” tutors who preferred the college to a pulpit—Flynt, Robie, and an ex-minister, Nicholas Sever. When the latter was not appointed to the corporation, he launched a prolonged campaign to have tutors automatically named as fellows. Had he succeeded, Harvard might have evolved toward faculty governance—a discouraging prospect considering the self-serving rule of fellows at Oxbridge colleges and the subsequent example of William & Mary.

Instead, the American pattern of strong college presidents began to crystallize with Leverett’s presidency. After the long drift under absentee heads, he solidified the operations of the college and foreshadowed the dominant role of presidents: “Leverett did not articulate the separate functions of the college

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government, preferring instead to place himself at the center of the governing system and to exercise all functions himself.”⁴⁶ For most of his tenure, he worked with a friendly corporation and minimized the opportunities for Overseers’ inputs. Only in the last years, during the Sever affair, did this change. The Overseers became far more intrusive, even conducting a formal visitation in 1723. The Sever controversy also embroiled the college in colony politics—one of the potential liabilities of external governance. Although Leverett’s death stilled this controversy, the president and Overseers contended for authority throughout the colonial period, but the relative authority of president and corporation largely endured. This pattern of strong presidents was confirmed at Yale in a different manner.

Connecticut largely followed Cotton Mather’s advice in establishing a “school of the churches” with a single, clerical governing board, as they sought to avoid the ascendancy of secular interests that was occurring at Harvard. Even so, the colony repeatedly intervened in college crises. Preponderant trustee power over the institution produced dismal results. The college head was only designated “rector,” not president. Having the college run by tutors brought discontent and ultimately disintegration. Stability was achieved only when an effective head, Elisha Williams, was in place; but the rector’s office was apparently not attractive enough to retain him. Finally with Thomas Clap, Yale obtained a powerful campus leader. Clap, in fact, wrote a new charter incorporating the “President and Fellows of Yale College in New Haven” (1745), thus giving the president a seat on the board. Although the new title changed little in daily operations, it empowered President Clap for the forceful role he would fulfill for the next 2 decades.

The American college president evolved as a complement to powerful external governors and weak, temporary teachers. The external governing boards represented the social support that sustained the colleges. Originally, at least for Massachusetts and Connecticut, the colleges drew support from unified Puritan communities, but over time that support increasingly reflected powerful groups within those communities. In either case, a strong executive figure was the necessary intermediary to keep the college faithful to the interests of its patrons—a role the independent faculty of William & Mary disdained. Events also seemed to prove that a strong resident president was needed for internal management. In the hierarchical societies of the English colonies, a president of high social standing and dignified personal bearing seemed a necessity. A person of equivocal stature could be mercilessly harassed by socially superior students, as sometimes happened to tutors. The president’s prestige was, in fact, a critical factor in upholding respect for the entire “immediate government” of the college. Finding

46 Siegel, “Governance and Curriculum,” 20.

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an appropriate figure to fill this position was a grave problem for the early colleges and a persistent difficulty throughout the colonial era.

For students the distinctive experience of the American college, at least the northern ones, was what Cotton Mather called the collegiate way of living and the strong loyalties of class cohorts. Residential colleges seemed necessary to anchor the schools as permanent institutions. Colleges without them tended to fare poorly in the first century (Yale) and later. These structures were meant to copy the Oxbridge colleges, but they quickly acquired a distinct character. The tutors who also dwelled there were young recent graduates, unlike the scholarly fellows in England. Each tutor assumed instruction for a single class of students rather than a self-selected group. These individuals went through their entire academic exercises as a unit and thus acquired a strong sense of solidarity that often endured through their lifetimes. By the same token, hazing and class rivalry tended to discourage bonds across classes. In addition, class cohesion allowed the curriculum to assume a standardized form for each separate class.

Both the objectives and the methods of seventeenth-century colleges had been refined for centuries but are quite remote from modern education. The colleges took as their fundamental purpose that “the main end of [a student’s] life and studies is, *to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life*, Joh. 17.3.”⁴⁷ For Puritan educators, everything in the world was an idea in the mind of God—a single unified body of knowledge, which man in his fallen state could grasp only imperfectly. They assumed, consistent with Aristotle, that everything had a purpose and that knowledge of purpose could be deduced through logic.⁴⁸ This approach had been most fully developed by Peter Ramus, a sixteenth-century French humanist, in his *Technologia*. This all-encompassing system of logic reduced all knowledge to 1,267 propositions. As taught in the colleges, the *Technologia* was the system of logical deduction that progressively revealed the mind of God. Students had to master this approach in order to earn a bachelor’s degree and become scholars in their own right. Hence, students had a great deal to learn before they could “know God and Jesus Christ,” and the curriculum was designed to impart this knowledge.

47 *New England’s First Fruits* (London: 1643), quoted in Morison, *Founding of Harvard*, 434; the Yale college laws stated: “Every student shall consider the main end of his study to wit to know God in Jesus Christ and answerably to lead a Godly sober life”: Warch, *School of the Prophets*, 191. The following account of curriculum draws on Morison, *Harvard College*; Siegel, “Governance and Curriculum”; Morgen, *Gentle Puritan*, Warch, *School of the Prophets*; and Carl A. Hangartner, *Movements to Change American College Teaching, 1700–1830*, PhD Diss., Yale University, 1955.

48 Morgan quotes as example: “The end of the Sunne, Moone, and stares is, to serve the Earth; and the end of the Earth is, to bring forth Plants, and the end of Plants is, to feed the beasts”: *Gentle Puritan*, 54.

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In most basic terms, the college course can be seen as imparting three kinds of learning—linguistic skills, logical argument, and general knowledge. Latin, of course, was the language of learning and instruction. Proper preparation was the prerequisite for college studies, and polishing these skills occupied much of the first year. Greek was largely employed to read the New Testament, and Hebrew was limited to reading and translating the Psalms. The study of these languages thus complemented the religious mission of the colleges. When students made sufficient progress in the “tongues,” they began the study of logic, which was the focus of the second year. The aim was to develop the skill to engage in syllogistic [using logical deduction] disputations. These were stylized debates, conducted in Latin, in which students rehearsed arguments for and against propositions, largely drawn from the *Technologia*. Disputations continued during the third and fourth years, incorporating material drawn from the philosophical subjects covered in those years.⁴⁹ These exercises were central to the curriculum and featured in graduation ceremonies. For commencement, students would publish a list of *theses* that they were prepared to defend, thus demonstrating their fitness as scholars. It is largely from these lists that historians have deduced what was taught in the early colleges. Finally, general knowledge was drawn from Aristotle’s three philosophies—mental, moral, and natural—and subsequent elaborations. This was the content knowledge that informed the propositions of the *Technologia*. Various subjects might be incorporated. However, content knowledge in this scheme played a limited role, and for that reason advances in knowledge did little to drive change in the curriculum until the last years of the colleges’ first century.

The organization of the curriculum reveals how the basic aims were accomplished. Dunster, who had to teach all three classes himself, treated a separate subject each day. Monday and Tuesday were devoted to disputations and philosophy; Greek and Hebrew filled the next two days; Friday was devoted to rhetoric and declamations, Saturday, to divinity, and the Sabbath was observed on Sunday. This basic pattern endured and was reproduced at Yale as well. At the end of Leverett’s presidency, disputations were still held on Mondays and Tuesdays, and rhetoric and divinity occupied Fridays and Saturdays, respectively. Friday’s declamations were an important exercise. Each student in turn had to compose (and later memorize) a brief Latin oration and “declaim” before the whole college once every 6 or 8 weeks. These speeches were written and turned in as well, thus developing both oratory and composition. Content knowledge was conveyed to students in lectures, usually by the president, and recitations were conducted by the tutors. Originally, when books were scarce and expensive,

49 For example, the Harvard plan of study for 1723; Morison, *Harvard College*, 146–47.

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recitations were intended to repeat and clarify materials from lectures or texts that students had copied. As books became more widely available, tutors used recitations for oral questioning, in which students had to demonstrate that they had mastered the day's lessons. Hence, schedules usually allotted 2 hours of preparation time before each recitation. The material for which the tutors were responsible—linguistic skills, learning logic, and fairly basic subjects—did not require advanced or specialized knowledge and thus should have been within the competence of inexperienced recent graduates to teach, if not very well. Tutors apparently might or might not bother to explain the material in recitations. In fact, tutors who attempted to push students beyond these basics, such as Samuel Johnson, proved more unpopular than those who offered no guidance. In recitations all students were expected to master, or memorize, the lesson (no scholar left behind); students had opportunities to display their "genius" in declamations and especially disputations.

The fundamental historical question is how and when the college course began to incorporate the new learning and a more secular outlook. To appreciate why this process was so slow, one must recognize the effectiveness of this course for its primary purpose as well as its deep immersion in Puritan Protestantism. First, the content and the exercises of the course gave graduates the cultural grounding and the oratorical skills for future careers. Second, even before formal training for the ministry, all graduates were saturated with Christian doctrines.

Consider the fixtures of the college course. Each day included morning and evening chapel, which consisted of prayers and scripture. Saturday and Sunday were devoted entirely to religion. On Saturdays students heard lectures on scripture or divinity and recited on classic works of Puritan theology. On Sundays they heard two sermons, which they later had to explicate. Work in Greek and Hebrew focused almost entirely on the Bible as students learned to translate passages of the New Testament back and forth from English, Latin, and Greek. And the ubiquitous disputations reflected the theocentric propositions of the *Technologia*. This grounding in Puritan doctrines prepared graduates to serve the "church and civil state" but particularly the church. The majority of students who attended Harvard and Yale in the first century undoubtedly aspired to the ministry. The proportion that attained pulpits, cited before, actually undercounts these aspirants, since it fails to account for those with unknown careers and an appreciable number, like Flint and Robie, who prepared for the ministry but did not obtain a pulpit.

Given this rigid and time-honored structure, new knowledge was not easily incorporated. A consensus exists among historians that the new learning only began to make significant inroads at Harvard and Yale in the 1720s and that

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meaningful change in the college course occurred after 1740.⁵⁰ During those years the gradual acceptance of new ideas along with the decline of Ramean thinking can be charted in commencement theses. Acceptance of the Newtonian revolution and experimental science is most readily documented. These doctrines did not encounter philosophical barriers but rather a scarcity of individuals capable of fully comprehending and utilizing them. At Harvard the foundation seems to have been laid by tutor Robie. He became a self-taught Newtonian and was also responsible for the acquisition of philosophical apparatus. These activities seem to have occurred toward the latter years of his tutorship, when he no doubt taught Newtonian disciples Thomas Clap (H. 1722) and Isaac Greenwood (H. 1721). The latter acquired much deeper knowledge by studying in London from 1724 to 1726. As the first Hollis Professor of Natural Philosophy in 1727, he was a committed Newtonian who brought the new science to the college and the public. He advanced the woeful teaching of mathematics in particular and employed the college's growing collection of instruments for experiments. When John Winthrop succeeded Greenwood in the Hollis professorship (1739–1779), the new science was not only a permanent part of the curriculum, but experiment and observation were accepted as the means to access an open and growing body of knowledge. Yale, which began the century in far more benighted condition than Harvard, soon caught up. Newton was incorporated into the course by 1730, and in 1734 rector Williams led a concerted effort to acquire philosophical apparatus. His successor, Thomas Clap, was an enthusiastic proponent of Newtonian science and especially devoted to astronomy.

The basic ideas of John Locke were more difficult to assimilate since his emphasis on empiricism challenged not only the *Technologia*, but the more advanced rationalism of Descartes. However, Lockean perspectives, or at least the spirit of empiricism, were just as necessary as philosophical apparatus for opening inquiry to observation and experiment and for challenging adherence to a fixed body of knowledge. A turning point was the English publication in 1725 of a logic text by Isaac Watts, a dissenter and scholar well known to the American colleges. Watts' *Logick: Or, The Right Use of Reason* incorporated basic Lockean views into a more traditional framework but still highlighted key concepts like the importance of experience as a source of new truth. By the 1730s Locke had become part of the curriculum at both Yale and Harvard. In 1743, Harvard students were assigned Locke's *Essay* itself, which quickly became standard practice.

⁵⁰ Morison, *Harvard College*, 139–284; Siegel, "Governance and Curriculum," 155–468; Warch, *School of the Prophets*, 186–249; Morgan, *Gentle Puritan*, 47–57; Hornberger, *Scientific Thought*. See also chapter 2.

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These developments were important in themselves but also symptomatic of a larger transformation taking place. The new learning of the eighteenth century was beginning to penetrate the American colleges, not as triumphal doctrines but as additional materials in an increasingly cluttered course of study. As colonial historian Edmund Morgan observed: “Students were not presented with opposing views and asked to choose between them. Instead they were expected to assimilate Aristotelian rhetoric, Ramist theology, Berkeleyan metaphysics, and diluted Newtonian physics. These were all incompatible in varying degrees and on different levels. . . . [I]t would have required a real genius merely to ascertain the precise points of conflict among the various parts of the Yale curriculum.”⁵¹ Or Harvard’s, for that matter. However, at the end of their first century, American colleges had transcended the closed world of Puritan theology and were about to embark on a new Age of Enlightenment.

51 Morgan, *Gentle Puritan*, 56.