

Chapter 9

St. John's: Back to Classics

Keith Wilson ⁹

Experimental colleges, with all their diversities, usually sound two common themes: flexibility and practicality. However, one experimental college runs deeply contrary to these themes. St. John's College, with campuses in Annapolis, Maryland, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, rejects these norms and has flourished under the ethos of rigidity and intellectualism. In stark contrast to most experimental colleges, St. John's symbolizes the neoclassical model of liberal arts colleges.

Evolution

Founded in 1696 as King William's school, this institution changed to become St. John's College in 1784. The small, traditional, private college meandered for the next 150 years until crisis struck in 1935. A combination of staggering institutional debt, administrative malaise and loss of accreditation brought St. John's to the brink of collapse. The board of directors sensed that only a drastic change would help. They turned to two men known for their energy and commitment to liberal education. In 1937 Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr initiated a radical reform through a curriculum based solely upon Western classical literature.

Some 50 years later St. John's has not only persisted at Annapolis but in 1964 opened a second campus in Santa Fe. The combined student bodies total approximately 800 students. The College remains principally a 4-year undergraduate college even though in recent years a few select masters programs have been added. St. John's is a private, non-denominational institution that caters to the intellectual and financial elite. For two semesters the tuition eclipses \$13,000. The average incoming student will score in the 650s on the SAT math and verbal tests (just slightly lower than Princeton's beginning students).

The faculty emerge mostly from the fields of philosophy, language, theology, music, law and natural science. About one-half of them hold a Ph.D degree, even though it has no direct impact on their acceptance within the college. Approximately one-third of the 60 teachers at Santa Fe were graduates themselves of St. John's, and 50 percent of all faculty attended colleges with strong liberal education programs such as St. Mary's, Reed, Shimer, Antioch and the University of Chicago.

The physical aspects of the two campuses neither diminish nor enhance the St. John's concept. The colonial style of Annapolis contrasts sharply with the Spanish aura of Santa Fe. And yet, virtually the same program proceeds on each campus. St. John's is a residential campus where all single students are required to live in campus dormitories. Even though campus life revolves around the unique curriculum, there is still interaction between "St. Johnnies" as they are known and members of the respective communities.

⁹Keith Wilson, Assistant Professor of Religion, Brigham Young University.

Philosophical Roots

In the mid-30s Scott Buchanan turned a generic liberal-arts college into a curricular experiment based upon Plato's Academy and classical humanism. The origins for these changes had predated the 20th century by hundred of years.

The English were the first in modern times to fashion a college with a classical approach to liberal education. This classical approach included an immersion in Greek and Greek literature as well as an emphasis on teaching, discipline and structured living. This early model was quickly attenuated in the United States with the utilitarian movement that swept through colleges in the last half of the 18th and 19th Centuries. This utilitarian movement was a blend of democracy, enlightenment and practicality. In higher education it supported such values as education for all, applied skills and student centered programs. The War of Independence added force and legitimacy to these values. And yet it did not bring closure to the battle between liberal education and utilitarianism.

The pendulum continued to oscillate through such events as the Yale Report of 1828, the Harvard elective curriculum, and the progressives of Theodore Roosevelt and John Dewey. In 1916 Alexander Meiklejohn became president of Amherst College and his agenda focused on liberal education as a means for training the mind. He adopted the Socratic method in both his teaching and his administration at Amherst. Questions such as "Why do we do this?" and "Why do we do that?" probed the heretofore sacred cows of curriculum, college organization and teaching methods. Meiklejohn organized a faculty seminar during his stay at Amherst. The seminar participants were relatively few, yet it did propitiously include a senior student by the name of Scott Buchanan. This seminar became a forum for his ideas and reforms. He proposed a curriculum of the classics with the goal of exposing students to the timeless questions of the great Western philosophers. Meiklejohn's ideas evoked scattered pockets of support, but his own colleagues at Amherst did not rally behind him. He was forced to resign in 1923 by the Amherst Board of Trustees before he could even begin his experiment. For the next 4 years Meiklejohn published articles about the ideal college for The Saturday Review and The New Republic. A bold new president at the University of Wisconsin, Frank Glenn, invited Meiklejohn to establish his Experimental College at Madison. This college, which was really a 2-year college within a University, opened in 1927. Meiklejohn set his dream in motion. He implemented a fixed classical curriculum with emphasis on small seminar classes of 10-20 students. He secured a dormitory, Adam's Hall, and began a residential college program. At its crest the Experimental College socratically taught 155 freshmen and sophomores the lessons of the ancient Athenians. But the principles of free speech, dialectical learning and freedom of thought were anachronistic. By 1932 Meiklejohn's opponents succeeded in dismantling his Experimental College under the charges of Communism and free love. What his critics really objected to was his unswerving view of classical western thought as the fountainhead of undergraduate education.

Meanwhile, in 1930, a young 31-year-old president took the reins at the University of Chicago. Robert Hutchins disdained the emerging university emphasis on research and specialization and proceeded to change things. Working with the faculty and trustees he abolished competitive athletics, instituted course credits and took a firm stand against vocationalism. But his most proactive idea was a "Great Books" curriculum that followed the model of Plato's Academy. When the faculty resisted, he mustered all his persuasive powers and finally succeeded in 1936. But a deep schism remained between Hutchins and the trenchant faculties at Chicago. The "Hutchins College" survived only a few years before the deep-seated conventions of university structure reabsorbed it back into the traditional departments. Even though Hutchins eventually left Chicago for the presidency of the Ford Foundation, both he and Meiklejohn had significantly involved and impacted Buchanan.

During the early 30s Buchanan secured a faculty position in the philosophy department at the University of Virginia. Here he renewed a friendship with Stringfellow Barr which dated back to 1919 at Oxford. Barr had been teaching history continuously at Virginia since 1924. Meanwhile, a new president at the

University of Virginia appointed among others Barr and Buchanan to give their judgment on the Virginia honors program. Their committee went far beyond what their administrator had commissioned. Barr and Buchanan drafted a radical program for liberal education that centered in reading and discussing 100 of the great Western classics. Their proposal was mothballed at Virginia, but would emerge in a few short years in a different location.

At the same time the small private college of St. John's had reached the point of institutional collapse. The board approached Buchanan and Barr and offered them the leadership of St. John's. Barr became president and Buchanan, who disdained administration, became the dean. Buchanan set out to totally revamp the College. He drew from Meiklejohn, Hutchins and the Virginia Committee. He charted a direction that redefined the meaning of a classical, liberal arts college. Buchanan, described by some as a restless spirit, served St. John's for 10 years. He left his infant college in a dispute with the Navy over the Annapolis campus. However, his imprint serves them to this day.

Buchanan's new program centered on approximately one hundred Western European great books from the ancient Greeks to the present (see Appendix). The approach postulated that it was better to read Isaac Newton or Plato first-hand than to read what someone else said about their ideas. Teaching proceeded in small seminars with the professor acting as a facilitator and a resource. The College was a radical departure from compartmentalized learning and instead reflected the language of the mental disciplinarians of the 1800s who viewed higher education as the training of the mind. "This college makes no claim to training specialists," Buchanan said, framing his instructional creed (Self Evaluation Report, 1955:3). The curriculum became the first fixed curriculum in this century. It rejected the elective system for undergraduates which Harvard introduced prior to 1900 and virtually all had accepted.

The transition in 1937 from a small generic college to a radical liberal arts college occurred rather quickly. Of the 25 faculty members who were a part of the old St. John's, only four were destined to remain and finish their careers under the "New Program." The others left quietly either at the initial announcement of the pending metamorphosis or after attempting the program for a year or two. Barr and Buchanan brought with them a cadre of classical disciples to shore up their enterprise. They also introduced their curriculum reform which was a carbon copy of their Virginia honors committee report. Owing to the desperate condition of St. John's in 1937, Barr and Buchanan encountered little opposition. In fact, the St. John's Board of Directors gave Barr carte blanche approval for anything he deemed desirable for the New Program. St. John's welcomed this friendly coup.

St. John's became the pedagogical testing ground for the philosophies of both Meiklejohn and Hutchins. It stood in opposition to what Hutchins called the "false democracy"—that one kind of knowledge is as good as another. This small college, which began in 1937 with only 20 daring students and a handful of faculty, came to symbolize the debate between the educational progressives and the conservatives. The progressives led by John Dewey espoused more democracy, service, and vocationalism in the universities. The conservatives, led by Meiklejohn responded that through the methods taught in the classical texts one can come to know what science is and does and how it relates to the modern world. Meiklejohn was accused of dogmatism to which he responded:

Why should the study of the past, as carried on at St. John's College lead to dogmatism? When in the experimental college we turn to Athens or read what Homer, Euripides, Lucretius and Plato have said about judgments of value, it did not mean in our opinion those writers had, for all time, fixed standards of value that we must accept as unchanged and unchangeable. . . We are not looking for the last words on those subjects, but instead the first words. . . From the time of the Greeks, until the present. The knowledge and wisdom of men has been growing. . . (Fortune, 1945:208)

Mark Van Doren, a colleague of Buchanan's and an ardent supporter of St. John's remarked that this was,

The first serious effort in contemporary America to build a single and rational curriculum suited to the needs of minds which have work to do, and which some day should be unwilling to forgive any system of education that has required of them less discipline than this. (1944:53)

Thus St. John's took as its creed the training of the human mind through the classical texts. This small college believed that once trained, their students would be better suited to make their impact on society. In contrast, the progressives felt that the classics were outdated and that it was absurd to use them as the basis for confronting contemporary challenges.

To this day disciples of the St. John's philosophy recite the words of the philosopher Lucan, "Pygmies placed on the shoulders of giants see more than the giants themselves." The progressives respond that past giants are dwarfed by our twentieth century problems. Robert Hutchins differentiates the two camps with the simple dichotomy: "St. John's educates people to live instead of to earn a living" (Hutchins, 1937).

Academic Program and Curriculum

Today the academic program at St. John's remains virtually the same as it was when Buchanan first implemented it in the fall of 1937. This program is a unified curriculum with approximately one hundred western great books forming the superstructure. Buchanan defined this "Great Books" curriculum at St. John's as books of lasting appeal with varied interpretations and constant reference to the "unanswerable questions in European thought" (Catalogue 1937:22). Winfree Smith, a respected Dean at St. John's during the seventies stated that there is no such thing as "the great books" since they do not constitute a rigid canon. His concept circumscribed "a" list of great books in contrast to "the" list of great books (Smith 1983:1). The reality is that the original reading list of 1937-38 has remained largely unchanged and the list has been referred to since its adoption as "The Great Books." Freshmen study Greek, literature, philosophy, history, mathematics and natural science. The texts are the original works of the classical authors. In the second year the primary emphasis continues on the study of the Greek language with the addition of a class in music appreciation. The third year replaces the Greek language with the study of French. This carries on through the fourth and final year.

The weekly study regimen follows a set pattern. Students attend a Great Books seminar on Monday and Thursday evenings for about two hours. A three-hour laboratory class meets twice a week. Mathematics tutorials convene three times a week. And language classes also meet three times a week. The total instruction time amounts to 16-19 hours each week. Every student has the same schedule. The overarching goal of this rigidity is to immerse the students in an environment of common studies and conversation.

Grades and examinations assume a subservient role to the dialectal format. Three forms of examinations do exist. The "don-rag" is a carry over from Oxford. It consists of an oral examination twice a year in which individual students face their teachers in a grueling one hour interrogation. Once each year the student writes an original essay and during his/her senior year a thesis is submitted. Grades are not published or distributed even though they are tabulated each semester. At the completion of a degree, grades and credits are released for the purposes of articulation into advanced graduate and professional programs.

The Student at St. John's

The 700 current students at St. John's in Annapolis and Santa Fe represent a very dedicated group of academics. With 89 percent of all applicants gaining acceptance, the dean of admissions attributes this high rate to "being selected rather than being selective" (Boroff, 1963:9). Each prospective student must write an essay, discuss a significant book and project his or her future career path.

The St. John's lifestyle contributes to a pressurized academic environment. Three evenings a week are spent in scholarly discussions. There are few if any extracurricular activities or clubs. Those that the

administration does allow seem to complement the classical tone of St. John's. Fencing and formal dancing are popular activities. And yet the mood of this college is mostly one of hard work and deep intellectualism. Often the pressure overwhelms the younger students. Over 50 percent of incoming students never reach graduation. Weekends tend to become an escape from all the pressure. Loud music, drinking and dancing represent a release for many of these students of Socrates. Often the weekend will afford students either a waltz party or a beer bash or both in an interesting mix of cultures. But when Sunday evening rolls around most students find themselves busily preparing for Monday's classes.

The high cost of tuition often dictates the type of student who can attend St. John's. "We receive mostly the sons and daughters of professional people," reports Eva Brann, Dean of the Annapolis campus (Brann, 1991). This financial sieve surfaces in other ways. At Santa Fe only 10 percent of the student body is from a minority group and no blacks are currently enrolled. Dean William Carey quietly laments that St. John's has become a school for the wealthy and the poor (Carey, 1991). With over 50 percent of the student body financial aid is a necessity. For the other half of the students money appears to be no obstacle. The financial profile then of the St. John's student seems to be widely divergent with little representation from middle income families.

"The program" as it is called at St. John's is highly structured. This frustrates some students who come with interests in music performance or art. The routine is so concentrated and rigid that little time remains for daily practice or individual discretion. The administration and faculty view this rigidity as essential to the St. John's atmosphere. They quote in their defense Buchanan's colleague, Mark Van Doren. "Education is honored when it is hard, and it is more honored when it is hard and good" (1944:153). Gerald Grant writes that teachers openly professed "We will not pander to students. Many will leave; the way to wisdom is not easy, and few will persevere" (Grant and Riesman, 1978:41).

This atmosphere of intellectual rigor and discipline does generate some staunch disciples amongst the students. David Boroff in The Saturday Review recounts some of his interviews with such students. One transfer student commented that, "This was the first time he had not been bored by April." Another scholarly immigrant from a Midwest school remarked, "Ideas there were extracurricular." And a Princeton transfer student responded, "The difference there and here is between being a technician and a philosopher" (1963:9). Grant recalls one sophomore student defending St. John's with these words, "If there is anything wrong here, it's wrong with me" (Grant and Riesman, 1978:61). Kathy Quintero, a student during the seventies at St. John's recently put it in this perspective: "St John's will always be my intellectual home" (Interview, 1991). Obviously, for many there is only one real college for serious thinking students. And yet the rigidity and the narrow focus force many others to leave St. John's with dissenting rather than positive opinions.

The Faculty

The promotional booklet which each prospective student receives in the mail begins with this announcement: "The following teachers will return to St. John's next year: Homer, Sophocles, Galileo, Newton, Einstein, Plato. . ." (and some one hundred others). The only true faculty at St. John's are those who have etched their names in the classics. There are teachers who interact with the students, but these are known modestly as "tutors." This rubric underscores the faculty concept at St. John's. The role of the tutor is to facilitate the interaction between the great books and the students. While most tutors enter St. John's with an academic specialty as well as a Ph.D., there is little faculty stagnation. Instead all instructors are required to teach all disciplines and subject areas. This has the effect of putting the faculty through the same paces that the students experience. In fact in most classes at St. John's two faculty members are involved. One is the instructor and the other is preparing to teach the class. Even the instructor has the responsibility to reread the classic in preparation for a given class. The net effect of this format is that

faculty either learn to master and enjoy all the traditional topics in the liberal arts curriculum or they part company with this school and its demands.

A second pressure point for the instructors surfaces in their visibility. Classes are frequently observed and audited by other senior faculty. In addition to this all senior students who have been tutored by a certain instructor are asked to give their evaluation of his/her teaching prowess. When it comes time for a tenure decision, there is an abundance of teaching information upon which to base the judgment. As one tutor complained, "Too many of the faculty live in lucite cylinders" (Grant, 1984). Constant observation and public visibility intensify the pressure that faculty experience at St. John's.

This college takes pride in the abolition of academic departments and faculty rank. These unnecessary structures leave more space for the strong teaching emphasis. The tenure process is highly selective with only a spartan 25 percent of the faculty receiving approval. Of those faculty who leave 90 percent would stay if they could according to Anthony Carey at Santa Fe (Interview 1991). The tenure process includes four individual teaching appointments during a 7 year period. In the sixth year a tutor is either terminated or given tenure after the following year. All teachers are expected to minimize outside interests and concentrate full time on their students and teaching. Research and writing are optional, but must not interfere with the instructional format. Some tutors such as Eva Brann and J. Winfree Smith publish in various fields, but they are the exceptions.

These radical departures from traditional faculty mores create a distinct dichotomy in each instructor's professional path. The pressure to master new bodies of knowledge, the constant exposure and the lack of faculty security can combine to crush the untenured instructors. However, these same radical departures become strong motivations for others and serve to enamor and envelope them in the aura of St. John's College.

The St. John's Saga

With a tradition that now spans more than 50 years, St. John's nurtures a rich pervasive saga. This saga is fostered by devote faculty, loyal alumni, and upper level students. But one other aspect of St. John's assumes a preeminent position in this arena. This maverick college takes its entire *raison d'être* from the tradition of the "Great Books." The curriculum, the heart of the matter at St. John's, revolves around the most traditional works in western literature and civilization. Is it any surprise then that St. John's drips in the richness of its own saga?

Stellar leadership has also left an indelible impression in the mosaic of the St. John's saga. The decade of the Barr-Buchanan era provided this small college with an abundance both of history and folklore. Buchanan's spirit seems to stalk the hallways and his aphorisms are frequently cited. His statement to Hutchins towards the end of his administration symbolizes the saga of this early founder. "This spiritual and moral revolution is the only thing in the world worth living for" (Kass 1973:28). And yet, ironically, Buchanan resigned his post after 10 years and attempted to found an imitation of St. John's College in Massachusetts. It never materialized and subsequently Buchanan returned often to St. John's as a commencement speaker or guest lecturer. Statements that he made late in his life indicated his displeasure with his decision to leave St. John's in 1946 (Smith 1983:87). But even his impetuous departure did not lessen his imprint on St. John's.

The intensity of Buchanan's persona merged during the 1940s with some of the brightest names in education. People such as Robert Hutchins, Alexander Meiklejohn, Mortimer Adler and Mark Van Doren publicly defended St. John's in the national press. Their opponents were such heavyweights as John Dewey, Sidney Hook, and Helen Lynd. And yet, even St. John's critics unintentionally strengthened the presence of this small college. Their public assaults on the St. John's philosophy were presented in such national magazines as The New Republic, Fortune, Harpers and The Saturday Review. Win or lose, the debates

placed St. John's on the map and ultimately enriched the saga that pervades this maverick college.

The current saga of St. John's draws deeply upon the decades of the thirties and forties. But there is more. There is Richard Weigle who presided over St. John's for 28 years and won accreditation for the College in 1953. There is the transcendent dean, Jacob Klein. Many view this German immigrant as the crucial spoke that kept the wheel turning in the aftermath of the Barr-Buchanan departure. And there are more legends in the making like Eva Brann, a respected tutor who has taught at Annapolis since 1957. Perhaps the deepest reservoir, however, of the St. John's saga resides within the current alumni. Fiercely loyal, this group will talk endlessly of their halcyon days as students. They alone sufficiently insure that the St. John's tradition will not be forgotten.

Does It Work?

One of the best responses to this question echoes in the saying, "The proof is in the pudding." The graduates reflect favorably on St. John's. Over 60 percent of St. John's graduates pursue advanced degrees in their first year following graduation (compared to 53 percent at Princeton and 46 percent at Amherst). Twenty percent of these graduates enter teaching, 25 percent enter business or industry, 13 percent enter government or law, and the remainder disperse themselves over social work, medicine, library science and religious professions ("Self-Evaluation Report," 1955, 4). In an different alumni report funded by the Ford Foundation, 92 percent of the respondents expressed approval for the St. John's program. One third of those who replied went so far as to express "complete satisfaction with the present distribution of emphasis in the program" (Grant, 1984:73). The biggest advantage that these alumni identified from their St. John's experience was the ability to face and solve problems dealing with unfamiliar data.

On the flip side of the slate some negative marks also appeared in that 1955 alumni survey. One-half of all respondents regretted their lack of specialized skills when they left St. John's. Many cited the need for better writing skills than they currently possessed. And most gave the laboratory classes unsatisfactory marks.¹⁰ The debate ranges over the entire expanse of this "Great Books College." Disciples claim that St. John's is the very essence of learning; critics counter that it is simply adopting an abstract frame of reference. Proponents laud the virtues of thinking and training the mind; opponents assert that St. John's fosters intellectual prejudice against professional training and practical skills. Supporters extol the self-confidence that graduates possess; skeptics suggest that alumni are misfits and at odds with the world. And so the debate continues without a final word or closure.

There is one defense of St. John's that subdues most critics. St. John's has withstood the test of time. It continues to move forward much like it did in the fall of 1937. Unlike many other educational experiments this one has endured virtually unchanged. The leaders are different. Where there was once one campus now there are two with plans for a third. In 1971 Ronald McArthur paid the supreme compliment to St. John's. He modeled the new Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, California exactly after the St. John's format. These developments lend substance to Eva Brann's claim that, "St John's is no experiment unless western civilization is an experiment." Perhaps she is right or perhaps the final word is yet to be written on, "The Great Books College."

¹⁰The author acknowledges the age of this alumni report as a limitation. However, St. John's administrators were reluctant to share their most recent self-evaluation reports. Two factors mitigate somewhat the age of this 1955 survey. First, a large number of alumni were sampled (600). And second, St. John's more so than other colleges has been very slow to change or alter portions of its program.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

ES.291 Learning Seminar: Experiments in Education
Spring 2003

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.