

# Bringing Civic Education Back to Campus

*Higher education has too long ignored serious inquiry into America's past and principles. It's a problem that many donors are looking to fix.*

BY SCOTT WALTER

**D**URING HIS LIFETIME, GEORGE WASHINGTON was, among other things, the nation's single largest benefactor of higher education. Three years before he died, Washington made a major contribution to the Augusta Academy of Lexington, Virginia. It was, at the time, the largest

Washington was by no means alone. Virtually all of the Founders were great patrons of higher education. Benjamin Franklin was a founder, benefactor, and, for five years, provost of the Academy of Philadelphia (today, the University of Pennsylvania). Alexander Hamilton served as chairman of the board of trustees of Hamilton-Oneida College. Both James Madison (serving as rector) and James Monroe (serving on the board of visitors) left the White House and removed to the University of Virginia—or, as it's often called, "Mr. Jefferson's University."

The Founders supported higher education in part because they believed it would cultivate an enlightened appreciation for the principles on which they were founding the nation. Colleges and universities would, they reasoned, advance the cause of liberty. "If a [civilized] nation expects to be ignorant and free," Jefferson once wrote, "it expects what never was and never will be."

## **F IN CIVICS**

TODAY, HOWEVER, THAT CONFIDENCE SEEMS increasingly misplaced. A growing body of evidence suggests college education adds little to

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GREAT PATRONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

higher education gift in American history: 100 shares of the James River and Kanawha Canal Company, worth at the time approximately \$20,000. In gratitude for the gift, the academy's trustees rechristened the school Washington Academy; today it is known as Washington and Lee University. (Washington's will also directed that 50 shares of the Potomac Company be donated "towards the endowment of a university to be established within the limits of the District of Columbia," but the project never came to fruition.) The contribution, according to Professor Taylor Sanders of Washington and Lee, would be worth at least \$20 million today. It continues to underwrite the university's operating budget—by one estimate, \$11.06 of every current student's tuition is underwritten by the generosity of George Washington.



Washington and Lee University, where a contribution from George Washington continues to underwrite each and every student's tuition.  
(Photo courtesy of Washington and Lee University)

civic literacy—that is, to students' understanding of the country's founding principles and history—and, in some cases, even appears to erode it.

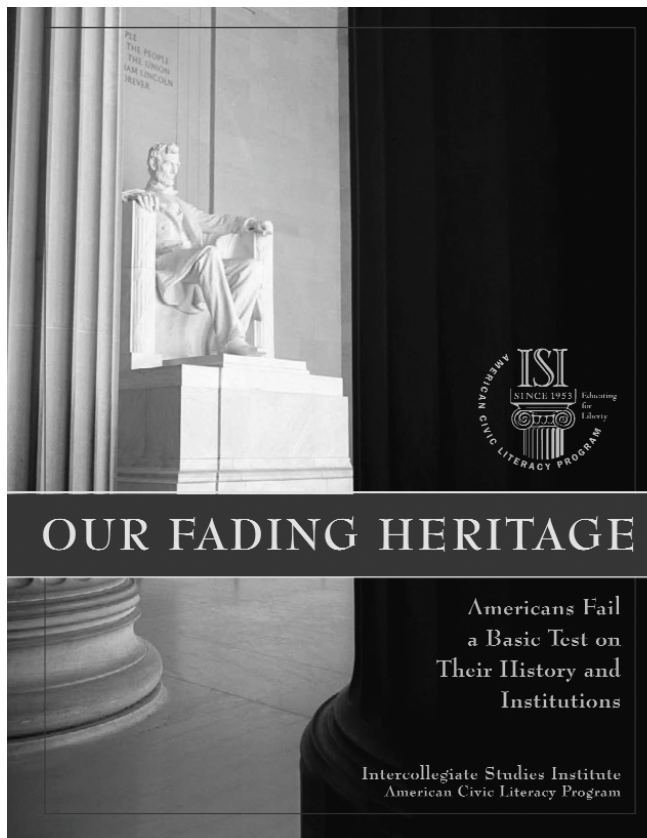
The Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI), with support from a number of private donors, has surveyed a wide variety of college students, only to find broad ignorance of basic civics. Every year since 2006, ISI has asked thousands of students at dozens of colleges to take a simple, 60-question multiple-choice exam that tests "basic knowledge of America's heritage." Every year, those respondents have had an average score of F, with the proportion of correct answers hovering around 50 percent, even though the questions would not be particularly difficult for high school seniors or immigrants applying to become American citizens. (Indeed, many of the questions were taken from civics tests given to high school students and immigrants seeking naturalization.) Among the report's findings are:

- **Widespread ignorance.** The 2008-09 ISI study, *Our Fading Heritage*, found many troubling examples of civil illiteracy among American college graduates. On a multiple-choice question, 77 percent of college grad-

uates could not identify the origin of the phrase "government of the people, by the people and for the people." On another multiple-choice question, 67 percent did not recognize that the First Amendment expressly prohibits the establishment of an official religion for the United States.

## ACCORDING TO ISI, American college graduates GET AN F IN CIVIC LITERACY.

- **Little to no added value.** The 2006 and 2007-08 ISI studies found wide discrepancies in the value added to civil literacy from various American colleges. Some schools—like Rhodes College of Tennessee—have clearly improved the civil literacy of their students, with consistently high learning gains between freshman and senior years. More disturbing, however, is the consistently poor showing of some of the nation's most prestigious universities. Yale, Duke, and Cornell have all seen student civil literacy actually *decline* after four years on



ISI's 2008-09 Civic Literacy Report, *Our Fading Heritage*, found that college graduates—including alumni of the nation's most prestigious schools—often know less about America's past and principles than when they entered as freshmen.

campus. On average, graduates of these elite schools know less about the United States after four (expensive) years than they did when they first arrived.

**FULLY 72 PERCENT**  
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- **Consensus for change.** The 2008-09 ISI study further found that fully 72 percent of respondents surveyed agreed that “colleges should prepare citizen leaders by teaching students about America.” Only 9 percent disagreed.

Donors have supported ISI's research into university civic education in order to raise awareness of the problem among students, faculty, parents, and alumni. “The ISI polling creates a sense of urgency about the failure of colleges and universities to teach the history and principles of the American way of life,” notes S. Dillard Kirby, executive director of the F. M. Kirby Foundation, a long-time supporter of ISI. “And after this research illuminates the problem, there is a greater willingness to develop programs that can rectify it.”

The F. M. Kirby Foundation began its work in this area by supporting the publication of ISI's *Choosing the Right College*. When the foundation learned that Josiah Bunting—whom the Kirbys had known since Bunting served as headmaster of another grantee, the Lawrenceville School—was helping to launch the American Civic Literacy Program at ISI, it was immediately interested. “We already thought the world of ISI,” Kirby says. “The Civic Literacy Program was a natural evolution in our support, and we were happy to help expand its poll-testing.”

**REFORMING THE CURRICULUM**

IN RESPONSE TO THE DECLINE OF CIVIL LITERACY IN higher education, a number of donors are crafting bold strategies to strengthen the intellectual quality of life on the nation's campuses. It's a daunting challenge. (There's an old saying on campuses everywhere: “It's easier to move a cemetery than to change a curriculum.”) But the signs of success are undeniable. In September 2008, the *New York Times* ran a long—and surprisingly sympathetic—article that reported on donor-led initiatives at a number of campuses to teach the basics of Western culture and American history. The *Times* described the work as underwritten by “conservative organizations and donors, [and] run by conservative professors,” but acknowledged that the programs were “decidedly nonpartisan and non-ideological.”

At the Colorado Springs campus of the University of Colorado, for instance, *Times* reporter Patricia Cohen found that a \$50,000 grant from the Veritas Fund (please see below for further details) had helped publish *A Free Society and Its Challenges*, a collection of classic writings that runs from Plato's *Apology* to the Rev. Mar-

—CONTINUED ON PAGE 31

tin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Provost Peg Bacon had assigned the book to all incoming freshmen, so freshmen seminars could be devoted to the readings.

A number of faculty, including history professor Robert Sackett, raised alarms that the project could be tainted because of the donors involved. But Sackett confessed that, although he is at odds with the political leanings of many of the funders, "an assignment that I initially had some doubts about has turned out better than I expected. I could see using it again." In fact, the provost had first vetted the book with various professors and "none detected any particular bias." After all freshmen had encountered these classics of Western culture—which they could easily have never read in their four years at the school—the faculty was so pleased with the results that they unanimously agreed to repeat the program the following year.

Robert Koons, founder and former director of the Program in Western Civilization and American Institutions at the University of Texas at Austin, underscores what makes these programs new and unique. "The kind of thing that we're proposing and developing transcends all these political differences whether you're right, left, or center," he insists. The focus is not on "the answers, but the questions." Serious questions about ethics, justice, and civic duty—these are questions that university students crave, but are not encountering.

#### **BUILDING CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE**

WHILE SOME DONORS HAVE FOCUSED ON changing the curriculum, other donors have looked to building new institutions on campus. The result has been an explosion of what are known as on-campus centers of excellence. Perhaps the most notable effort to date in this respect is the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University.

Established in 2000 and housed within the department of politics, the program is the brainchild of Robert P. George, Cyrus McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton, the chair once held by Professor Woodrow Wilson. When he first conceived the program, George took the idea to Princeton's then-president and provost, who both recognized its potential for building upon the school's distinguished tradition in the field of constitutional studies.

Today, the James Madison Program operates on an annual budget of \$1.5 million, all of which is provided entirely by contributions from individuals and foundations. (Many, but not all, donors are Princeton alumni, and George says the program

has "an excellent relationship with the development office, which has been very helpful in fundraising.") The program has not accumulated a general endowment, and George says that he is happy to show consistent results in exchange for future funding. (It has, however, received endowments for one annual lecture and one senior thesis prize.) Similarly, the program receives no allocation of funds from Princeton's general operating budget.

The Madison Program runs a wide variety of activities. Every year it brings to campus six visiting fellows and one to three post-doctoral students, all of whom use their time at Princeton to undertake specialized research, give lectures, and participate in seminars and other intellectual activ-

## Perhaps the most notable CENTER OF EXCELLENCE IS the James Madison Program AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

ities. Some offer courses. Moreover, the Madison Program hosts a series of academic conferences, which invites historians, political scientists, moral philosophers, public intellectuals, and leading policymakers to Princeton. In the fall semester of 2008, conferences were held on topics ranging from "Thomas Jefferson and the Rights of Citizens" to "The United Nations and the American Interest" to "Reflections on Religious Liberty."

One purpose of the Madison Program is to scope out academic talent. Scholars associated with the program actively promote the careers of post-doctoral fellows. (Indeed, one of its first fellows was offered a tenure-track position in Princeton's politics department.) For newly minted Ph.D.s, a year spent at the Madison Program considerably improves the chances of securing a hard-to-get tenure-track position at other institutions. Finally, the Madison Program sponsors an Undergraduate Fellows Forum, which provides 100 to 125 Princeton undergraduates with regular opportunities to interact with Madison Fellows and speakers.

The establishment of the Madison Program was a watershed event for donors interested in encouraging civil engagement in higher education. The program's manifest success has inspired similar efforts throughout the academy. According to the National Association of Scholars, today there are three dozen such on-campus centers of excellence—20 of which were formed in the past three years.



*In 2000, Robert P. George founded the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University. (Photo courtesy of Morris Abernathy, Union College)*

#### FOUNDING FUNDER

ONE MAN DEEPLY INVOLVED IN THE CREATION of on-campus centers of excellence is James Piereson. Piereson, a former professor at the University of Pennsylvania, is arguably the

## The Veritas Fund

SEES ITSELF  
as an angel investor.

most experienced donor in the field. Now president of the William E. Simon Foundation, Piereson formerly served as executive director of the John M. Olin Foundation. During Piereson's time there, Olin spent itself down, pouring roughly \$200 million into efforts to restore standards of clarity and rigor to American higher education.

Olin took the long view and was willing to seed new centers at some of the nation's top universities and support them over time. Among its most notable achievements, the foundation helped significantly improve legal education nationwide through its pioneering centers in law and economics at law schools including Harvard, Stanford, Chicago, and Georgetown. One such center, at George Mason University, has affected the entire federal judiciary with legal education programs that have been attended by nearly half of all sitting federal judges, including two Supreme Court justices.

Olin also funded research and scholarship through think tanks and intellectual journals, which housed scholars whose views often made it difficult for them to find work on college campuses. Yet Piereson acknowledges that he is "not sure we made a lot of progress at the undergraduate level." Now, he explains, he hopes to "go onto the campus and fund professors who have the support of their deans, provosts, and colleagues, and try to influence the undergraduate curriculum."

Piereson works toward that goal as part of his service on the board of the Thomas W. Smith Foundation, which has provided significant support, for example, to the new Political Theory Project at Brown University. Most recently, from his position at the Manhattan Institute's Center for the American University, Piereson has also helped launch one of the most significant efforts to remediate higher education's estrangement from America's past and principles: the Veritas Fund for Higher Education.

#### THE VERITAS FUND

THE VERITAS FUND, EXPLAINS PIERESON, IS "A pooled fund with donations from various sources. Peter Flanigan and Tom Smith were the original donors, along with a \$1 million grant from the Olin Foundation—the last grant it made as it spent down. Other donors have since come in. A small committee at the Manhattan Institute disburses the funds to create centers on university campuses that focus on Western civilization, the history of free institutions, the American Founders, and similar topics."

The Veritas Fund is administered by DonorsTrust. Donations to Veritas are not gifts to the Manhattan Institute, but contributions made to DonorsTrust for the benefit of the Veritas Fund. Ninety-nine cents out of every dollar received goes to the selected academic programs,

with a penny going to DonorsTrust for administering the fund. Veritas accepts tax-deductible investments of all sizes and from all sources: foundations, individuals, and corporations.

The fund sees itself as an angel investor, and is confident it can help successful programs find trustees and alumni to sustain them after the fund's early-stage funding. Piereson notes that Veritas is happy to assist donors who would like to focus their giving on a particular school, although he cannot promise that a particular school will turn out to have existing faculty who are willing and able to create a new center of excellence.

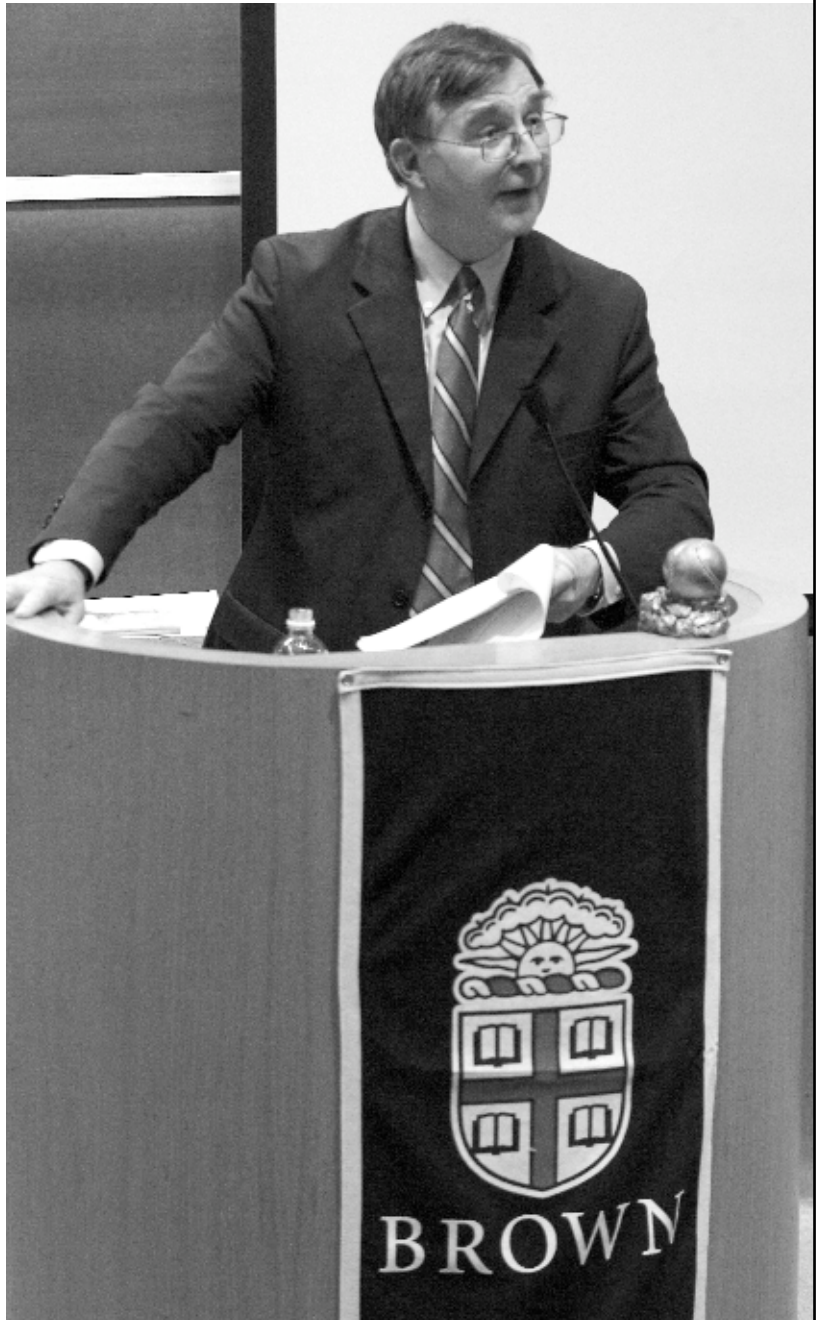
So far, Piereson says, "we've funded about a dozen such programs since we started two years ago with \$2.5 million. We've allocated about 80 percent of that to programs that vary in size." (Please see the sidebar on pp. 34-35 for a list of programs supported by Veritas.) The largest grants have been \$100,000 per year for three years, but others have been much smaller. Piereson is pleased with the results so far, both on campus and among donors. "We're in the process of raising another couple of million," he notes, "and we believe we're about to reach that, which will allow us to begin another round of grants in 2009." In the first round, roughly half the grantees were existing programs, and the other half were created from scratch, made possible with the promise of three years of Veritas support.

Again, Piereson stresses that the "main goal is to leverage changes by bringing new courses and new concentrations into the undergraduate curriculum"—though he admits it's a "tough goal." While it is relatively easy to set up centers on campus that do research and bring in lecturers, "it's much harder to introduce new courses." For that reason, Veritas reserves some of its funding for post-doctoral candidates, young scholars who have earned their Ph.D.s but have not yet secured a tenure-track position. "We get the courses they teach," Piereson explains, "and they get experience at good schools that will boost their careers."

If Piereson's fundraising hopes for Veritas are successful, the fund will provide additional support to some of the best existing centers they have funded—such as the Center for Western Civilization and American Institutions at the University of Texas, the Tocqueville Forum on the Roots of American Democracy at Georgetown University, and the Program for Constitutionalism and Democracy at the University of Virginia—as well as supporting post-docs at other institutions and providing small seed grants to new programs.

#### THE JACK MILLER CENTER

ANOTHER DONOR WHO IS ACTIVELY ATTEMPTING to improve America's colleges is Jack Miller, whose eponymous Center for Teaching America's Founding Principles and History is headquartered in Philadelphia. "Our goal is to be the unique, go-to resource for educators who want to advance profound education in America's heritage and free institutions," says Miller. "We are non-partisan. We believe that strengthening the teaching of America's founding principles and history is worthy of support by all Americans, regardless of their political persuasion."



*James Piereson, a former professor at the University of Pennsylvania, helped launch and now oversees the Veritas Fund for Higher Education.  
(Photo courtesy of John Abromowski)*

*Centers Supported by the Veritas Fund for Higher Education*

**Boston College: Clough Center for the Study of Constitutional Democracy, directed by Kenneth Kirsch, Professor of Political Science.** In 2007, the Veritas Fund awarded a grant to the Initiative on Constitutional Democracy at Boston College. In 2008, the grant was rolled into the newly formed Clough Center. Charles Clough, a former head of Boston College's board of trustees, provided the funds to start a center that would focus on constitutional democracy in the United States and around the world. The Clough Center opened in October 2008, and, once fully operational, it will support scholars and students alike, underwriting research projects, visiting faculty, and lectures from outside experts.

**Brown University: The Political Theory Project, directed by John Tomasi, Professor of Political Science.** The Political Theory Project aims to establish a small but vibrant research cluster of political theorists at Brown University, who will bring the conceptual rigor of political theory to bear on normative questions. Although the project welcomes many different perspectives on political economy, it is especially interested in market-based approaches to social problems.

**University of Colorado at Boulder, Denver, and Colorado Springs: The Center for Western Civilization, directed by E. Christian Kopff, Professor of Classics.** The Center for Western Civilization

offers an undergraduate certificate program at the Boulder campus, "Foundations of Western Civilization," for students interested in a rigorous grounding in Western culture. The certificate promotes critical reflection and academic research on Western civilization through the study of culture, science, and government in their ancient, medieval, and modern forms, with special emphasis on the classical tradition and the American Founding. The eventual goal of the center is to become a full academic department.

**Georgetown University: Tocqueville Forum on the Roots of American Democracy, directed by Patrick Deneen, Professor of Political Philosophy.** The Tocqueville Forum, an initiative housed in the department of government at Georgetown University, seeks to advance the study of America's founding principles and their roots in the Western philosophical and religious traditions. Sponsoring conferences, lectures, publications, and colloquia on Georgetown's campus, the forum hopes to deepen classical liberal learning, improve the curriculum, and elevate civic understanding among undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty.

**Cornell University: Center for the Foundations of Free Societies, directed by Barry Strauss, Professor of History.** The center's purpose is to promote the study of constitutional liberty: how it developed, where it came from, the principles that underlie free institutions, the obstacles such institutions have overcome in the past, and the threats they face today.

**Dartmouth College: Daniel Webster Center for Ancient and Modern Studies, directed by James B. Murphy, Professor of Government.** The Webster Center is a new faculty initiative that intends to bring greater structure and focus to the liberal arts experience at Dartmouth College by bringing ancient and modern perspectives to bear on issues of permanent moral and political importance. It sponsors regular lectures, conferences, and curriculum proposals designed to enrich the Dartmouth College experience, with the aim of bringing faculty, students, and alumni together around the core ideals of liberal education.

**Emory University: Program in American Citizenship, directed by Mark Bauerlein, Professor of English.** Professor Bauerlein has secured the Emory administration's support for this program, which develops coursework for undergraduates on the important political and civic traditions of the United States.

**New York University: Alexander Hamilton Center for Political Economy, directed by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Professor of Politics.** The Alexander Hamilton Center at New York University fosters the competition of ideas about policy solutions to pressing domestic and international issues, in order to provide clear, explicit, and compelling ties between logic, evidence, and policy conclusions. The center will offer original undergraduate coursework, train graduate students and young faculty (and eventually

post-doctoral students) on political economy, support original research by teams of scholars, and provide public lectures and debates featuring prominent scholars and policymakers.

**University of Texas, Austin: Center for Western Civilization and American Institutions, directed by Thomas Pangle, Professor of Philosophy.** The Program in Western Civilization and American Institutions offers an interdisciplinary concentration, courses, and events designed to help Texas undergraduates craft a course of study that exposes them to the great tradition that links the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Hebrews, with medieval and Renaissance European culture, and with the founding of the American Republic. Forty professors from a dozen departments have affiliated with the program, including many of the most distinguished scholars and teachers at the University of Texas.

**University of Virginia: Program for Constitutionalism and Democracy, directed by James Ceaser, Professor of Political Science.** Professor Ceaser, a distinguished professor at Virginia and a well-known scholar of American history and government, has built a program that hosts 12 annual outside lecturers and supports three visiting post-doctoral fellows, while offering undergraduate instruction in small seminars on courses related to the American political tradition.



The founder and former president and CEO of Quill Corporation, Miller has a deep-in-the-bones appreciation for the manifest opportunities that American liberty makes possible. In 1956, Miller borrowed \$2,000 from his father-in-law and started a small business. He sold office supplies through direct calls; his first office was an unused coal bin, with kitchen tables serving as “executive” desks. As the business grew, Miller brought in his brothers Arnold and Harvey. Together they made Quill Corporation into the world’s largest mail-order business specializing in office supplies. By the time Miller sold the company to Staples in 1998, he was employing over 1,300 people with annual sales over \$630 million.

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“that strengthening the teaching

OF AMERICA’S FOUNDING PRINCIPLES AND HISTORY

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Miller relies on multiple philanthropic vehicles to support a variety of grantees, including the Bill of Rights Institute, that strengthen Americans’ civic knowledge. He launched the Jack Miller Center with the goal of increasing the number of young faculty members who devote their careers to teaching college students, tomorrow’s leaders, about America’s founding principles and history. Under his leadership, the center has developed a three-pronged strategy. First, like the Veritas Fund, it supports centers of excellence on campus. Second, it provides a variety of development resources for academics ranging from newly graduated post-docs to seasoned scholars. The Miller Center convenes renowned academics and practitioners to conduct intensive, multi-week seminars that help faculty:

- deepen their appreciation of this subject matter;
- think through how best to advance their own careers, including securing tenure and publishing opportunities;
- develop courses;
- launch and maintain centers of excellence.

The third prong of the Miller Center’s strategy is to craft an effective communications strategy, in order to raise awareness among academic leaders, parents, and students of the need to strengthen the teaching of our nation’s history and founding principles at the undergraduate level. Its communications team works directly with national media, but also provides media relations support to faculty partners on college campuses. In addition, the center maintains a website to highlight news from campuses nationwide and allow like-minded scholars to share ideas in an electronic network.

As this article goes to press, the Jack Miller Center announced a \$2 million joint partnership with the Veritas Fund to support the expansion of highly regarded academic centers and post-doctoral fellowships at the University of Virginia, the University of Texas at Austin, and Georgetown University, and help launch similar programs at other colleges across the country. The Veritas Fund had offered a \$1 million challenge grant, and the Miller Center provided the match. “In effect,” says Piereson, “the Miller Center is leveraging the Veritas Fund and vice versa. We’ll meet together before the winter is out to begin allocating the money.” The two groups note that about \$1 million of the pooled funds will go toward the larger existing centers, and the additional money will flow to other centers, with new centers encouraged to apply for funding.

“Focused investments in outstanding programs such as those at the University of Virginia, the University of Texas at Austin, and Georgetown University, as well as seed support for start-up programs on other campuses, are essential,” says Mike Ratliff, president of the Jack Miller Center. “The Jack Miller Center’s goal is to encourage the growth of a national network of programs and professors working to strengthen serious education in America’s history and institutions.”

#### ADVICE FOR DONORS

AS UNDERGRADUATES DEMONSTRATE INTEREST IN a serious examination of America’s past and principles, donors hope students will vote with their feet, filling the new courses and demanding more such offerings and faculty to teach them. But Piereson cautions that popularity can also bring problems: “Typically, once these programs have some success, they generate opposition.

For example, the Texas program has come under attack, but luckily lots of alumni and legislators have come out in support.”

One school with a decidedly less happy story than Texas is Yeshiva University, where James Otteson was hired to be founding director of the Schottenstein Honors Program. Otteson, a distinguished philosopher with two books published by Cambridge University Press and a 2007 Templeton Enterprise Award, initially met with much success and immediately received tenure in two departments, along with a five-year contract to head the Honors Program. But before his first year was over, faculty colleagues had begun vigorous attacks on him and his efforts, and he abruptly resigned. Neither Otteson nor Yeshiva will discuss what happened, leading observers to conclude that either the Yeshiva administration purged him or he decided that the environment was simply too hostile for him to function.

This unfortunate episode reinforces the reasoning behind the creation of the Veritas Fund: Universities are difficult environments for donors to navigate, and experienced guides can be critical to successful strategic giving. Piereson urges his fellow donors to exercise extreme caution: “Colleges are always talking donors into giving to the endowment, or a scholarship fund, or to general support, but then your money gets lost and nothing changes.” Veritas offers donors the chance to work with experienced guides to the academy—for free—while pooling money with other donors.

Peter Flanigan, who helped launch Veritas, was an early backer of the James Madison Program at Princeton, from which he was graduated *summa cum laude*. Flanigan, like Piereson, stresses that “it’s easy to give money to a university, but very hard to create an organization on campus that will ensure students hear diverse points of view about America. The Madison Program has had an extraordinary effect, and Veritas will allow other universities to enjoy that kind of enriched dialogue.”

Whether a donor decides to attempt such work on his own or to seek counsel from veterans, Piereson outlines the steps of a successful effort:

- Find a tenured professor who is interested and able to lead a program (or who has already begun a program that shows signs of success). Keep in mind that a professor’s desire, however noble, does not guarantee that he or she has the non-academic skills to build and sustain a program, including the ability to negotiate with donors and administrators, raise additional funds, and maintain a back office.



“Our goal,” says Jack Miller (center), “is to be the unique, go-to resource for educators who want to advance profound education in America’s heritage and free institutions.” (Photo courtesy of walkaboutstudio.com)

- Assess the professor’s writings and courses to ensure that he or she is seriously committed to the highest level of scholarship in the

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field. Piereson warns that many professors “will take the money with the glib pretense that they will do X—but then they don’t do X. The only way to protect yourself is to see how they’ve spent their career.”

- Work directly with him or her to devise a program, and have that scholar (ideally in concert with other sympathetic faculty members) make a multi-year proposal outlining the desired program. Make each year's funding contingent on success—and never direct any of it toward an endowment.
- Finally, help the professor negotiate the grant's reception at the university. Schools will always be concerned about relations with donors and among faculty. This can be a long and difficult process, and it must be handled deftly if the program is to gain sufficient good will on the part of department chairs, deans, and provosts to approve new courses, additional faculty, and new centers.

### FEW COLLEGES ASK STUDENTS to take the basic courses that GEORGE WASHINGTON OR THOMAS JEFFERSON saw as the backbone of LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION.

Piereson stresses that nothing is foolproof, and that both intended faculty recipients and their college environments can disappoint donors in numerous ways. He also laments that much of what the programs he supports are doing would not be necessary if colleges had not abandoned the traditional core curriculum in the liberal arts. "But the trend is all away from requirements of any kind," he notes, "so a return to a core curriculum can only be a long-term hope, not a short-term goal. Today's faculty is simply too hostile, and many lack the training to teach such a curriculum, even if it were required. Too many of them would make a hash of it." Instead, donors should help "create courses as electives, and let students vote with their feet."

**THE PERILS OF UNIVERSITY GIVING**  
DONORS' DESIRE FOR ASSISTANCE IN THE challenging university environment has also led to the growth of advisors who specialize in the field. One of the more prominent consultants

in the field is Fred Fransen, a donor advisor with a special emphasis on higher education. Fransen explains that he wants to help donors achieve their goals in higher education, whether or not those goals are related to reforming college curricula. But he warns that giving to colleges is full of risks. In fact, he says a lack of intellectual diversity and a scarcity of attention to America's history and principles are only the beginning of the problems.

Start with the fact that few colleges even bother to ask students to take basic courses that George Washington or Thomas Jefferson saw as the backbone of a liberal arts education. Consider a recent study commissioned by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), a national nonprofit that works with alumni, donors, trustees, and educators to support liberal arts education and uphold high academic standards. ACTA researched the curricula at all Ivy League, Big Ten, Big Eight, and Seven Sisters colleges, plus an additional 13 representative colleges and universities around the country. It found that half these schools required students to take as few as two, one, or no core courses, such as history, literature, economics, math, or science. In the Ivy League, for instance, two of the eight schools require three core courses, four require two, one requires a single course, and Brown comes last with no core requirements whatsoever.

Bad as the curriculum problems are, Fransen insists, they are not the worst of the problems. "We've tried to engage all kinds of issues affecting higher education," he explains. "We believe there are deep structural problems that are not only ideological but also involve the lack of transparency and accountability, skyrocketing tuition, student cheating and plagiarism, grade inflation, faculty productivity, plant and equipment utilization, and boards that aren't watching the store." Addressing these problems, he adds, has little to do with "whether someone is liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican."

Fransen nevertheless warns that "once donors and other outsiders start to raise questions, the responses often come in the form of personal attacks. Universities function as closed shops and circle the wagons if someone has constructive criticism." That means donors will often be glad to have an independent advisor

who can act as a buffer with a college and, especially, handle the delicate negotiations needed to produce clear, thorough agreements with a school before it receives funds.

Fransen has even helped a client re-negotiate an existing gift. “He had given millions in endowment with various letters governing the money, then found himself in a dispute with the college. We worked with the school to change that to a 10-year amortized gift and to specify which program proposals would receive funding. There was nearly an ugly lawsuit, but now both sides are happy, including the university. It will now receive a much greater cash flow, which it can use to build its reputation.”

Donors often struggle with the question of whether to collaborate with other donors in giving to higher education. According to Fransen, “Many donors don’t want to give up final decision-making authority to a third party. Even trickier is the fact that most donors to higher education want to make a gift to their alma mater or some other particular institution they have an attachment to. Collaborative decision-making under such circumstances can be tricky, but some models are beginning to emerge.” At the University of Illinois, a group of donors has formed a support organization to pool funds to underwrite scholarship and research on capitalism and limited government. “This model will bear watching. If they are successful, they may provide a new structure for like-minded alumni to cooperate in supporting their alma maters and preserving their intent.”

“But if a donor wants to give tens or hundreds of millions,” says Fransen, “he or she doesn’t need to collaborate for financial reasons. My experience is that most people whose financial success has reached that level—as the stories of great fortunes and philanthropists regularly show—have invested heavily in things that others didn’t realize would work. That means they’re not likely to be the collaborating type. All their lives, they’ve invested their money aggressively rather than hedging bets. They often want to pursue their philanthropy in the same way.”

Fransen notes that centralized decision-making is not always effective, and the non-profit sector, including its collegiate precincts, is spurred when it functions as a kind of quasi-market of recipients competing for donors. In order for that market to function, “good independent sources of information on worthy recipients are needed.” Such independent go-betweens can also help donors maintain

anonymity—and avoid reprisals against their children and grandchildren, which Fransen has seen happen.

One anonymous effort Fransen cites involves a former *Fortune* 500 CEO who has served on the board of a state university. He and his wife have been generous but not large contributors to the school, but they have no heirs and would like to give millions to support the teaching of private enterprise at the school. Fransen is helping them launch a program that will receive those millions, not as an endowment, but with funding amortized over 25 to 30 years, so that it will underwrite trusted faculty members now in their forties. Fransen is also helping the donors find other supporters for the program’s start-up among the donors’ acquaintances who care about the school. “This is an

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instance of cooperation that has worked well,” Fransen observes. “The funder will see the program in operation before he fully funds it. He may decide to begin major funding while he lives, or he may find the administration won’t cooperate and thus save his millions from a poor investment.”

#### **BUILDING ON THE FOUNDERS’ WORK**

“IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO LAMENT PUBLIC ignorance of our nation’s constitutional ideals and institutions,” declares author and philanthropist Steve Forbes, who in 2000 helped launch the James Madison Program at Princeton. “What is needed is a revival of civic education.” Such a revival will restore American colleges and universities to the elevated role that the nation’s Founders had once envisioned for them.

One recipient of such higher education philanthropy is James Ceaser, professor of politics and director of the Program for Constitutional Democracy at the University of Virginia. Among other things, he has used his grants to bring in fellows (both pre- and post-doc) who continue their research and teach an introductory course on the basic concepts of American



*Designed by Thomas Jefferson, the Rotunda at the University of Virginia is a testament to Jefferson's conviction that "if a [civilized] nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be." (David Sailors/Corbis)*

political thought and constitutionalism. "Over the last two years," he explains, "some 250 students have enrolled in this course, which has

been a great success." When Ceaser started the program, no such general introductory course was available—a rather staggering omission, all the more so at Mr. Jefferson's University.

Nor would any such course have been taught, were it not for the initiative of philanthropists with a deep interest in the nation's colleges and universities. Grateful for their liberty and the wealth it makes possible, private funders are ensuring that American higher education conveys the exceptional principles on which this nation was founded by earlier philanthropists—like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington. **P**

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