The Selection of an Alma Mater by Pre-Revolutionary Students

The administrator of the colonial college found his finances a constant source of embarrassment. It was his duty to maintain a faculty against the attractions of the relative personal independence and superior remuneration granted by the pastorate. He was forced to provide board and lodgings for the students for a yearly term lasting from forty-one to forty-six weeks. He found it necessary to raise costly buildings and provide for equipment and a library. It is true that the administrators of a few of the schools—Harvard, Dartmouth, King's, and William and Mary—could count upon a considerable income from invested funds or regular governmental subvention. But the remainder were forced to live upon the proceeds from students' tuition fees or to draw upon capital. Obviously, a large enrollment meant a prosperous college; a small student-body meant the blight of insolvency.

The president's primary effort, of course, was to induce boys to secure at his college the four years' training required for a bachelor's degree. In solving this problem, the administrators were aided by a generally heightened interest in a college training. Thus, Yale granted twenty-seven A. B. degrees in 1745, forty-two in 1763, and thirty-five in 1775. The College of New Jersey (Princeton) graduated eleven in 1760 and in 1775, twenty-seven. These two schools were among the largest in the English colonies in America, but of the colleges between Rhode Island and Delaware fifty-eight bachelors' degrees were granted in 1760 and one hundred and one in 1775.

In these institutions between Rhode Island and Delaware, the competition for entering students was particularly keen. In 1745 Yale had been the only college in these six provinces; in 1775 there were seven—Rhode Island (Brown), Yale, King's (Columbia), New Jersey, Queen's (Rutgers), Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) and Newark.
Perhaps this development had been faster than the supply of prospective students warranted. Even in 1775, if one may judge from the numbers graduated, most of these schools had at best only thirty or forty students enrolled. Naturally, each college sought not only to attract prospective students from its immediate neighborhood, but also attempted to invade the territory of its rivals. In the latter respect their efforts were eminently successful; with the exception of King’s, each of these colleges could boast that a large proportion of its students had entered from a province other than that in which the school was located. During Philadelphia’s first six years, only 60% of its entrants were drawn from Pennsylvania. At New Jersey, 25% of its students of the pre-Revolutionary era came from New England or provinces south of Pennsylvania, apparently drawn in part by the influence of alumni and in part by religious loyalties engendered by Presbyterian controversies. This phenomenon was most marked at Rhode Island College, for prior to the Revolution only 30% of its graduates were natives of Rhode Island.

One of the most marked results of the foundation of these new colleges was this student migration, and by it these schools expanded their hinterlands for prospective students. The aggressiveness, the far-flung nature, and the financial importance of this competition suggest the value of ascertaining the considerations which determined a prospective student’s selection of his alma mater.

It must be granted that most prospective undergraduates—or their parents—chose the college nearest to their homes. Thus, slightly over 75% of Yale students came from Connecticut; a considerable proportion of the matriculants of the College of New Jersey entered from that province; almost certainly Pennsylvanians predominated at Philadelphia and New Yorkers at King’s. This provincialism resulted in large measure from the problem of distance, for the College of Philadelphia relied heavily on that city for students, King’s on New York City, while Yale received more students from the county of New Haven than any other county in

2 Dr. Thomas J. Wertenbaker was good enough to make this estimate for me.
3 Total graduates were fifty-three, but the early residence of only fifty is noted. The percentage is based on the fifty located. Brown University: Historical Catalogue of Brown University, 1764–1914 (Providence, 1914), [53]–56.
the province. In actual fact, some of the interprovincial migration occurred only because the college in another colony was nearer the undergraduate's home than that in his own province. For instance, Yale consistently attracted students from Long Island and particularly from that portion of the island directly south of Connecticut. From 1750 through 1776, of the forty-one New Yorkers who were graduated from Yale, twenty-six lived on Long Island and all but two of these in Suffolk County.

In good measure, attendance at the nearest college must have been the course of least resistance, but to some degree a near-by college must have been selected simply to save traveling expenses. In fact, there is no question but that the cardinal factor in determining the selection of a college by a migrating student was the relative cost of an education at the several institutions. Naturally, in order to attract students, the colleges in their promotion literature stressed the moderation of their rates. Samuel Blair in his promotion pamphlet of 1764 not only accentuated the cheapness of education at New Jersey—he allowed six pence for books, clothing, and spending money for a year—but by bland inference pointed out that disciplinary fines were not assessed at New Jersey with the monotonous regularity of President Thomas Clap of Yale. Queen's opening announcement assured parents: "The Public may depend upon finding good and sufficient Board at private Homes at said Place, and as cheap (if not cheaper) than at any other Places where Colleges are erected."

Popular reaction to rather slight increases in fees was often violent,


6 Oliver Partridge to Dennis Debert [Dennys DeBerdt], Hatfield, October 3, 1766, Emmet Collection 177, New York Public Library (NYPL); Reuben Aldridge Guild, *History of Brown University* (Providence, 1867), 187.

7 Alexander Cowie, *Educational Problems at Yale College in the Eighteenth Century* ([New Haven], 1936), 9; [Samuel Blair], *An Account of the College of New-Jersey* (Woodbridge, 1764), 19, 20, 39; *New Jersey Archives, First Series*, XXVII, 608.
and both the New Jersey and Philadelphia trustees upon occasion reversed their policies to meet objections to higher bills.  

It is virtually impossible now to compute the total cost of a college education prior to the Revolution. It is probable, however, that a fair approximation can be reached by tripling the cost of board, room, and tuition. Hence, by computing the charges for these three services, the relative costs between the colleges probably can be determined fairly well. These fees were those which varied most widely, and, of course, all students, except those living at home, were required to meet them.

During the early 1750's, Yale charged the least for board, lodging, and tuition because it had dormitory lodgings and a commons in which to feed its students. Except at Harvard, students attending the other northern institutions were forced to live and board in private homes in which they were required to pay about 30% more than they would have been charged for equivalent services in a college hall. But Yale soon lost its advantage, in part because other institutions by opening college dormitories were able to reduce their students' bills, and in part because Yale between 1755 and 1764 heavily increased its fees for board, room, and tuition to £28 a year.

---

8 New-York Journal, January 8 and February 19, 1767; New-York Gazette, revived in the Weekly Post-Boy, October 17, 1768 (hereafter cited as N. Y. Post-Boy); minutes of Trustees of the College of Philadelphia, I, 86 (June 14, 1757), University of Pennsylvania (UP).


10 All statements of monetary amounts have been translated into the New York pound at the ratio of 180 New York to 100 sterling. The estimates used in reevaluating the other currencies were Pennsylvania 170:100, New Jersey 172:100, "legal money" 133:100.

11 This estimate is necessarily rough. But compare Aaron Burr, Account Book, 123, 154, with ibid., 76, 78, 123, 179, 186, 203, 226, 257, 264, 290, Princeton University Library (PUL); New Jersey Archives, First Series, XXVI, 334, with N. Y. Post-Boy, October 17, 1768; Benjamin Franklin to [Francis] Barnard [sic], Philadelphia, March 28, 1764, (photostat), Society Collection, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP); receipts of Mary Searle to John Dickinson, June 4 and August 22, 1774, [April and September, 1775], Logan Papers, XLI, 32, 34, 43, 46, HSP, with Pennsylvania Gazette, March 12, 1772.

12 It must be emphasized that all statements in regard to college expenses relate solely to minimum charges for tuition, board, and room. At Yale, a weekly charge was made for room cleaning and bedmaking which I have estimated to have been twelve shillings a year, and which was reduced to six shillings a year in 1774. Dexter, Yale Biographies, II, 142; III, 59, 93; Yale College Records, I, 200 (September 14, 1774), Secretary's Office, Yale University (YU). These sums I have added to my figures for Yale, since they were included in the dormitory charges of other colleges. Furthermore, five pounds should be added to the bills of all the colleges for washing, mending, candles and firewood. Since assessments for these items did not
As a result, after 1756 New Jersey almost certainly asked much less than Yale—£16 8s in 1757 and £20 18s in 1764—and this advantage New Jersey was able to hold for fifteen years. Nor could New Jersey's rivals compete. To be sure, King's began to feed and lodge its students in 1760, and Philadelphia in 1765. But their bills remained comparatively high; Philadelphia demanded as much for an education as did Yale, and King's asked £32 13s, a sum 17% higher. Furthermore, because of the unpopularity of the college hall at Philadelphia, most students lived in private homes at a much higher cost. Thus, from 1757 to 1772, the expense of a college education was lowest at New Jersey, considerably higher at Yale and Philadelphia, and highest of all at King's. And the range between the schools was considerable; in 1764 King's charged 50% more than did New Jersey.

However, in 1772 Rhode Island, upon opening its college hall, fixed its fees at £22 8s, a sum roughly equal to that asked by New Jersey. This schedule of billing Rhode Island maintained until the Revolution, while New Jersey was raising its rates to £26 10s, and Yale was lowering its charges to £24 13s. At Philadelphia, students could live in the college hall for about £24 14s, but most seem to have lived in private boardinghouses at much higher rates—approximately £32 10s. King's still charged the most—£32 13s. Thus, by 1774, Rhode Island was offering the cheapest education, followed by Yale, New Jersey, Philadelphia and King's.

vary appreciably, I have excluded them from my comparative figures. N. Y. Post-Boy, October 17, 1768; minutes of Trustees of the College of Philadelphia, I, 275, 281 (August 21 and September 11, 1764), UP; [Blair], 39.

13 Ibid.; minutes of the Trustees of the College of New Jersey, September 27, 1757, August 17, 1758, PUL; Aaron Burr, Account Book, 76, 78, 123, 179, 186, [205], 226, 257, 264, 290, PUL.

14 Earlier, during the presidency of Samuel Johnson, the cost was £33 10s because of a longer academic year. Bill of Governors of King's College to Epenetus Townsend, [1761], College Papers, CUL; Columbia University: Early Minutes of the Trustees (New York, 1932), I, June 3, 1755, March 2, 1763; Weymans New-York Gazette, July 27, 1761; Edward Potts Cheney, History of the University of Pennsylvania, 1740-1900 (Philadelphia, 1940), 56; Pennsylvania Gazette, March 12, 1772; [Benjamin] Franklin to [Francis] Barnard [sic], Philadelphia, March 28, 1764, (photostat), Society Collection, HSP; minutes of Trustees of the College of Philadelphia, I, 754, 281 (November 10, 1750, September 11, 1764), UP.

15 Ibid., I, 86 (June 14, 1757); II, 34, 92 (November 4, 1771, October 3, 1775), UP; Pennsylvania Gazette, March 12, 1772; receipts of Mary Searle to John Dickinson, June 4 and August 22, 1774, [April and September, 1773], Logan Papers, XLI, 32, 34, 43, 46, HSP; Walter C. Bronson, The History of Brown University, 1764-1914 (Providence, 1914), 118; minutes of Trustees of the College of New Jersey, October 1, 1772, October 1, 1773, PUL; Edwin Mark Norris, The Story of Princeton (Boston, 1917), 55; agreement of Elias Woodruff with Trustees of the College of New Jersey, April 29, 1773, Maclean Papers, PUL.
The relative growth of the number of graduates of these institutions gives abundant proof of the influence of the cost of schooling. During the years from 1757 through 1776, Yale and New Jersey consistently had the largest enrollments. But Yale was losing ground, and, although there was many another difficulty at Yale after 1763, Ezra Stiles attributed the decline in enrollment to the “late Time of heavy Expence. . . .” Some years later Benjamin Trumbull voiced the same opinion. Accordingly, the colleges to evidence marked and consistent growth were the two, Rhode Island and New Jersey, where the charges were for most of these years the lowest. From 1758 through 1763, therefore, there were graduated at New Jersey 24% of all men awarded degrees by colleges in this region, and from 1769 through 1776, 29%. Rhode Island, having graduated its first class in 1769, had awarded degrees by 1776 to 8.7% of all men commencing as bachelors in these schools from 1769 through 1776. Likewise, it was Yale, New Jersey, and Rhode Island which attracted the greatest proportion of their students from other provinces.  

Closely linked with the problem of expense was the question of entrance requirements. New Jersey must have enjoyed its remarkable growth in part to her willingness to permit students to offer a cheaper grammar school training in lieu of college residence, at first for three of the required four years and, after 1760, for the freshman and sophomore years. When the college in 1768 attempted to insist on four years’ residence for a degree, an enraged Presbyterian denounced the plan in the public press as an effort to educate only “gracious, holy, humble (and I may add rich) youths for the ministry. . . .” As a result, the new rule was revoked, and up to

---


17 The college required payment of at least part of the tuition fees and an examination upon the work of the years not spent in residence. Minutes of the Trustees of the College of New Jersey, September 26, 1750, September 30, 1762; John Maclean, History of the College of New Jersey (Philadelphia, 1877), I, 211.
the Revolution boys were able to waive the first two years of college.18

Far more difficult to judge is the extent to which students were attracted or repelled by a college's religious affiliation. The mere fact that each sect was anxious to found its own college would suggest that sectarian loyalty should have exercised a powerful influence in attracting students. And the enrollments of the dissenting colleges do indicate that such institutions did profit to some extent from this influence. The most marked instance of this motivation was the New Light migration from New England to the College of New Jersey. This exodus was serious enough not only to affect markedly Yale's enrollment from 1748 to 1752, but to cause President Clap of Yale to revise his own theological opinions and to retain a New Light preacher for the college.19 New Jersey may also have benefited from the objections of southern Presbyterians to institutions controlled by Anglicans.

However, it seems to have been rare that theological opinions markedly affected a college's enrollment. Although it is perfectly evident that colleges were eager to draw as great returns from their sectarian alliances as possible, the college administrators usually preferred to play both sides of the game and so advertised their institutions as nonsectarian. This constant insistence on nonsectarianism shows only too clearly that no religious sect, from among its own members and by virtue of a plea purely of partisan loyalty, could furnish enough students and endowment to operate a college successfully. Furthermore, an effort to maintain a college as the citadel of a given faith was apt to prove a double-edged sword. The demands of the president of Rhode Island College that his Baptist brethren act as recruiting agents were intermingled with his denunciations of the Congregational pastors of New England for placing an interdict on his college.20 Perhaps the Anglican proselyting of Dr.

18 New Jersey Archives, First Series, XXVI, 195; N. Y. Post-Boy, October 17, 1768, May 1, 1769.
19 Dexter, Yale Biographies, II, 198, 441-443; [John Graham], A Letter to a Member of the House of Representatives . . . (New London, 1759), 6, 7, with a manuscript note by Ezra Stiles on YUL copy; (?) to Ezra Stiles, "reed. 24 Sept. 1766," Stiles Papers, Quarto Bound Letters, VI, 114, YUL.
20 Reuben Aldridge Guild, Early History of Brown University (Providence, 1897), 183, 191, 237, 342, 343.
William Smith, the Philadelphia provost, increased enrollment from the southern colonies; certainly his activities caused the Pennsylvania Old Light Presbyterians at first to send their children to New Jersey as the lesser of two evils and ultimately to found Newark Academy.\textsuperscript{21} In simple substance, the plea of sectarian loyalty was too dangerous and too ineffective to use publicly as an argument with which to attract students. One must conclude that this pressure, whenever present, must have been supplied largely through the advice of local pastors.\textsuperscript{22}

Of slighter importance was the relative quality of instruction, and only occasionally do references appear to increases or decreases of enrollment because of excellent or poor teaching. King's weathered with difficulty a bad beginning while the faculty consisted only of Samuel Johnson, and later, after 1759, it fell into bad repute for several years because of Johnson's flight from smallpox and the death of Daniel Treadwell, the science instructor.\textsuperscript{23} Philadelphia suffered in the 1760's because of an inadequate staff to train students properly in public speaking, and it experienced chronic difficulty in securing a capable science tutor.\textsuperscript{24} From 1762 to 1769, Yale labored beneath a decline of admissions and an increase of dismissions in part resulting from the chaotic conditions during the last years of Clap's administration and the subsequent poor teaching of an incapable faculty. In fact, from 1763 to 1765 enrollment fell 25\%, and the number of A.B. degrees awarded at Yale from 1766 through 1776 was much less than of those granted from 1757 through 1765.\textsuperscript{25}


\textsuperscript{22} See the influence of Samuel Davies. William Henry Foote, \textit{Sketches Of Virginia, Historical And Biographical} (Philadelphia, 1850-1855), I, 220, 221.

\textsuperscript{23} Herbert and Carol Schneider, eds., \textit{Samuel Johnson} (New York, 1929), I, 37-40; IV, 98.


In its distress, Yale was aided by the loyalty of its alumni. This sentiment must in large part explain the fact that Yale, faced with a falling enrollment, disciplinary anarchy, inferior teaching and insolvency, was yet always able to maintain the largest or next largest student body of these seven colleges. In the twenty-five years before the Revolution there were a number of Yale fathers who sent their sons back to their Alma Mater from homes not only in Connecticut, but also in New York, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. Clergymen who were Yale alumni likewise aided through their influence as teachers or pastors. A marked instance of their influence was shown in the town of Southold, New York, whence twelve boys were sent to Yale between 1750 and 1776—half of the total number who entered the college from Long Island. While this constant flow of students is partly accounted for by geographical proximity, alumni loyalty and the advice of Yale pastors must have been partially responsible. To some extent, New Jersey also benefited from the enthusiasm of its alumni schoolmasters, and it is possible that the heavy migration of southern students to New Jersey partly resulted from their propaganda. The other colleges could have gained little aid from this source; either they were too young or their alumni did not consider teaching a desirable vocation. Upon the whole, therefore, alumni enthusiasm contributed little to student recruitment for these colonial colleges.

Promotion literature stressed two more factors to be considered by a prospective student: healthful climate and the advantages of a college located in the country or—if the argument better fitted—in a city.

Climate probably was most important as a piece of sales-talk. References were made to the superior climate of a given town as proof of its availability as a college site, but the place usually selected

---

26 Ibid., passim.
27 For the Southold students, ibid., II, 301, 308, 319, 343, 459, 489, 654, 745; III, 33, 43, 335, 681. From 1750 to 1776 nearly all the Southold pastors were Yale men. Ibid., I, 700, 701; II, 177, 178; III, 673, 674; Benjamin Franklin Thompson, The History of Long Island; From Its Discovery and Settlement To The Present Time (New York, 1843), I, 398, 399, and note. See also Dexter, Yale Biographies, III, 353.
was chosen because it offered the largest subsidy. Only occasionally is there evidence that a student selected his school for climatic reasons.  

The rivalry between city and country colleges was a bit more important. The city institutions urged that their students were given opportunity to profit from the higher culture of a metropolis, and John Trumbull, with vehemence if with unkindness, vindicated this claim for the students of King’s. Cities also supplied for a college such facilities as churches of all denominations, libraries, and living quarters. On the other hand, the rural colleges boasted of their ability to provide cheaper board and to protect the students’ morals.

The point of cheapness was well taken, for there is no question but that in the eighteenth century provisions were much cheaper in the country than in the city and that this advantage was reflected in the college board bills. The relative morality of the several colleges is harder to determine. It is true that Dr. William Smith howled with rage because two Philadelphia students were so engrossed in spending from £100 to £150 a year that they never got around to lectures and so gave the institution a bad reputation. William Logan educated his sons in England because Philadelphia was “full of Ensnaring Youth on the high Road to Destruction—With Sorrow & Certainty I may say it more So than any City of its Size in the Kings Dominions. . . .”

At King’s a student arose from his seat during recitation to challenge the president to a duel with pistols. But New Haven was no metropolis and the corporation’s minutes are studded with stern, sterner, and ever sterner injunctions to the students to


30 Ibid.; [John Trumbull], The Progress of Dulness, Part Second ([New Haven], 1773); Maryland Gazette, May 16, 1754, November 7, 1771; [Chandler?], Candid Remarks on Witherspoon’s Address, 27–41, 56, 57; Witherspoon, Address to the Inhabitants of Jamaica, 10–13, 23, 24; John Ewing and Hugh Williamson, To the charitable and humane Friends of Learning, public Virtue, and Religion (London, 1774), (broadsheet), 2.

31 William Smith to Richard Peters, Charlestown, December 2, 1771, Richard Peters Papers, VII, 93, HSP.

32 William Logan to Dr. John Fothergill, Philadelphia, May 5, 1768, Em. 4061, NYPL.

33 Draft minutes of the Governors of the College of New-York, September 2, 1773, CUL.
refrain from unwarranted imbibing of alcoholic liquor.\textsuperscript{34} And to one Yale commencement the corporation invited the local constabulary in order to prevent the president and fellows "from being insulted. . . ." It was a thoughtful precaution, for the president and fellows were soon suing students for assault.\textsuperscript{35} This collapse of discipline at Yale in the early 1760's is the only instance in which it is clear that student conduct affected an institution's enrollment. Nor did the lads at Princeton find all their extracurricular activities in such tasks as sorting out the proper French pronunciation from Witherspoon's Scottish burr. There are songs among the papers of William Paterson which suggest that they owed inspiration for proper rendition to Bacchus, as well as to the muse of poetry.

\begin{quote}
"Cupid triumphs over passions,  
Not regarding modes, or fashions,  
Firmly fix'd is Cupid's law. . . .  
Then ye maids and men be wary;  
How you meet before you marry  
Cupid's will is solely law. . . ."
\end{quote}

And a letter from Paterson, then a young alumnus, to a college chum suggests that the boys at Princeton did at least a bit more than sing about such matters.\textsuperscript{37} The country colleges may have been purer, but at least the students were not holy.

Beyond doubt, many of the parents must have thought of protection of their sons' morals when it came time to send them to college and so they may have been affected by the propaganda. But a father who would have been greatly influenced by this argument must have been, in the light of contemporary conditions, highly religious. Such a man would probably have preferred to send his son to the college of his own denominational faith, and so in the last analysis would have given little weight to the allegedly superior morals prevailing in the country village. But the cheaper rates prevailing at rural schools, in

\textsuperscript{34} Yale College Records, I, 91, 121, 138, 139, 141, 146, 147, 149, 164 (March 28, 1750, September 8, 1756, September 12, 1759, April 16, 1760, July 21, and September 16, 1761, November 22, 1763), YU.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 170, 171 (July 31, and September 11, 1765).


\textsuperscript{37} William Paterson to John MacPherson, Jr., New Bromley, November 10, 1770, William Paterson Letter Book, 1770-1776, PUL.
part because of their location, was indeed an influential factor in their favor.

Thus students selected their alma mater because of geographical proximity, the expense involved, its entrance requirements, the pressure of sectarian loyalty or—as the case might be—the desire for a nonsectarian education, the quality of the instruction, the influence of the alumni, its discipline over students, and perhaps its climate. Of these several factors, the statistics indicate that, then as now, the mere nearness of the college was the most decisive influence in fixing the choice of most students. Interprovincial migration would seem to have been most affected by the relative costliness of the several institutions. Entrance requirements were likewise of great importance. However, two of these considerations, geographical proximity and entrance requirements, to some extent attained their importance because of their bearing upon the total cost of a college education: enrollment at a near-by college cut traveling expenses, and tutoring at home or in a clergyman’s house was cheaper than attendance at college. Of much less weight, though influential, were sectarian pressure and loyalty. Alumni enthusiasm was still of very slight weight and dissatisfaction with instruction only upon occasion influenced enrollment. The institution’s moral atmosphere and the healthfulness of its climate probably loomed larger to the college propagandist than they did to the prospective students or his parents.

*State Teachers College*
*New Paltz, N. Y.*