

The spirit of a university; commencement address ... University of Wisconsin, June 19, 1912.

Van Hise, Charles Richard, 1857-1918.

[Madison? 1912?]

<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015075962244>

HathiTrust



www.hathitrust.org

Public Domain, Google-digitized

http://www.hathitrust.org/access_use#pd-google

We have determined this work to be in the public domain, meaning that it is not subject to copyright. Users are free to copy, use, and redistribute the work in part or in whole. It is possible that current copyright holders, heirs or the estate of the authors of individual portions of the work, such as illustrations or photographs, assert copyrights over these portions. Depending on the nature of subsequent use that is made, additional rights may need to be obtained independently of anything we can address. The digital images and OCR of this work were produced by Google, Inc. (indicated by a watermark on each page in the PageTurner). Google requests that the images and OCR not be re-hosted, redistributed or used commercially. The images are provided for educational, scholarly, non-commercial purposes.

✓
D
5142
.1912
V26

X

130 X

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

BY

CHARLES RICHARD VAN HISE
President of the University of Wisconsin

THE SPIRIT OF A UNIVERSITY

THE SPIRIT OF A UNIVERSITY

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

BY

CHARLES RICHARD VAN HISE

PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

DELIVERED AT THE FIFTY-NINTH COMMENCEMENT
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
MADISON, JUNE 19, 1912

THE SPIRIT OF A UNIVERSITY

288/1/162

At the inauguration of Dr. A. Lawrence Lowell, as President of Harvard, Ambassador James Bryce said: "A university should reflect the spirit of the times without yielding to it." Recently, Professor W. M. Childs, of University College, Reading, England, wrote, the ideal university is one "in full sympathy with the aspirations and needs of the age, endeavoring to serve them but not subjected by them."

The two phrases have the same meaning, that the university should stand for high scholarship for its own sake, but at the same time should respond to immediate needs.

While it is a first duty of the university to impart knowledge to those entering its doors, it is also its duty to advance knowledge. The scholars of the university must create other scholars. An institution which simply transmitted the knowledge of the past would be merely a school. Since a university stands for truth and recognizes that old statements of truth must be readjusted each generation in the light of new knowledge, there is in a university continual modification of the teaching of the past. Not only so, but new fields of knowledge and new points of view are ever asking for admission to a university.

All subjects in a university are plastic; no one is rigid in outline. Things taught to one generation vary from those taught to a previous generation. Indeed, in a university the teaching of any year is in advance of that of the previous year. This

freedom of thought, this inquiry after truth for its own sake, this adjustment of the knowledge of the past in the light of the newest facts and highest reason,— this is the essential spirit of a university, *which under no circumstances should it yield*. Without this spirit an institution is not a university; with this spirit, it is a university, whether it be large or small.

Whether the subject taught be that of the language or history of a people, knowledge of the universe without reference to the wants of man, or the applications of this knowledge to his needs, is a matter of indifference; provided only this broad, inexorable, uncompromising spirit, this unalterable determination to follow wherever truth may lead regardless of preconceived notions or ideas be maintained. This spirit makes whatever subject is studied a university subject, whether it be the humanities or the most modern of the applied sciences. No other spirit is proper for a university; no infringement upon it can be permitted.

It is this ideal which every true academician instinctively follows with unfaltering footsteps. It is this spirit, also, that forever makes a university a center of conflict. If a university were content to teach simply those things concerning which there is practical unanimity of opinion, as, for instance, the elementary conceptions of mathematics or astronomy, there would be quiet; but it would be the quiet of stagnation. Wherever the principle of authority prevails and things only are taught which at the time are accepted without reservation as the accepted truth of the race or the nation, or the group or sect which the school represents, there is peace. It is said that a recently installed university president has taken for his motto "Peace and Progress." Peace he may have if the institution follows the policy of teaching things only which are regarded as settled; but progress he cannot have. Peace and progress are

antipodal. Progress has never been made anywhere in the world except by struggle.

This struggle goes on within as well as without the university. It was only as a result of a bitter and prolonged contest that the movement known as humanism gained its way into the universities of the 16th century, as a result of which Hebrew, Greek, and classical Latin were first regarded as university subjects. Before that time the language of the universities was the ecclesiastical Latin. The fact that he who at that time advocated the teaching of Greek and classical Latin was a radical is mentioned because by the time the early American colleges were founded Greek and Latin had become orthodox parts of the standard courses in liberal arts. After the recognition of the classics, another two hundred years elapsed before modern languages found a place in the universities. Finally, in the 18th century, liberty, the vital thing in a university, was achieved. This was at the University of Halle. Of this revolutionary change, Paulsen says: "The older system of university instruction had started in each case from the assumption that truth was given, that education consisted in the transmission of this truth, and that it was the duty of the controlling powers to take heed that no false doctrine be imparted. The newer system starts from the assumption that truth must be sought, and that it is the proper task of education to give the skill and the impulse necessary to the search." After liberty was established in Halle it required nearly a century and a half of contest to establish similar freedom in the universities of the world.

This doctrine that progress is possible only through strife is no new discovery. Heraclitus, five centuries before Christ, said: "Without conflict no life." So it has been through the ages. Five hundred years after these words were spoken the

[5]

religion of Jesus was a heresy, and it only became the dominant religion for the western civilization as a result of many generations of bitter and bloody struggle. And after the Christian religion was firmly established, the struggle again broke out among its followers for freedom within the faith; and this contest again occupied centuries during which nations were disrupted, new alignments made, and a new continent occupied, before it was settled that each man is free to choose his own sect.

If, in the past, teaching had been confined to established practices and accepted doctrines, neither classical nor modern language could have found their way into the university, nor could the Christian religion have established itself in Europe.

As of old, so today, the spirit of the university is in irreconcilable conflict with those who hold that the present state of affairs is the best possible, who believe that existing conventions, morals, and political and religious faiths are fixed. All are fluid. For one nation they are not the same as for another. For each nation they are modified from generation to generation. And this will continue so long as the race endures. In an organization there may be those who believe in its perfection; but even the most conservative must yield to the irresistible pressure of his age and environment. Movement for many organizations may be slow and hesitant; but in the university, one of the chief functions of which is ever to inspire, ever to adjust, ever to improve, ever to advance knowledge, the flux is the greatest, the progress most rapid; and therefore these institutions are the very centers of disturbance.

This is the inevitable situation wherever is a true university, because there is progress. The conflict between the university and the reactionary is irrepressible, and will continue through-

out the future, as for a thousand years in the past, without quarter on either side.

There is no way to escape this situation but to destroy the university as an institution. If it were possible to change governing boards, even if faculties were dismissed, and "safe" governing boards and faculties appointed, this would but temporarily check the advance. The moment the grip of restraint was released from the throat of the university and the air again freely inhaled, the spirit of progress would dominate. This is proved beyond the shadow of a doubt by the history of the universities of the world.

Since modern democracy began its great struggle in Russia, during which self-sacrifice has been shown as marked as has yet been exhibited by the human race, the Czar has repeatedly closed the universities in order that the spirit of liberty there rife should be repressed. This has been found but to enhance the spirit of freedom; and consequently in 1911, when the students wished to express honor to the dead Tolstoi, the greatest genius Russia has produced, a new form of repression was begun. It was ordered that the students and professors should in no way notice this mighty life. The result was prolonged and general student resistance and finally strikes; and before the universities and professional schools were reduced to the dead peace required by the Czar, more than four thousand students were expelled, of whom six hundred were exiled to Siberia, and more than two hundred professors and instructors resigned, including many of the best known and ablest scholars of the empire. Now that the most vital blood of the universities has been eliminated, there will be peace, but for a time only. The one way the Czar can prevent the universities from being centers of progress in Russia is to destroy them.

Just as the spirit of despotism represses or destroys universities, so does the spirit of freedom create and inspire universities. Former President Adams was fond of telling of the rise of the modern system of German universities, including the foundation of the University of Berlin, during and after the awful disaster of the Napoleonic wars. These universities have wielded a mighty influence in the advancement of the great German nation to its present position, second to no power of the world, not only in strength for war, but in the sciences, arts, and industries.

But perhaps a more impressive instance of the relation of freedom and the rise of universities is that of Leyden. The desperate defense of that city during its second siege by the Spanish has been graphically described by Motley.

quod With food exhausted, with plague raging, with thousands dead from starvation and disease, the mayor said to the people: "I know that we shall starve if not relieved; but starvation is preferable to the dishonored death which is the only alternative. Your menaces move me not; my life is at your disposal; here is my sword, plunge it into my breast, and divide my flesh among you. Take my body to appease your hunger, but expect no surrender, so long as I remain alive." Responding to this indomitable spirit, the Dutch burgers cried to the Spanish: "Ye call us rat eaters and dog eaters, and it is true. So long, then, as ye hear dog bark or cat mew within the walls, ye may know that the city holds out. And when all has perished but ourselves, be sure that we shall devour our left arms, retaining our right to defend our women, our liberty, and our religion, against foreign tyrants."

William the Silent broke down the series of dikes about Leyden and let in the sea in order that his fleet might succor this valiant city. The Spaniards, terrified by the advance of

the sea, the dauntless spirit of those who rode in ships over land, and the fierce determination of the defenders, became panicstricken. They fled at a time when storm and flood made a great breach in the walls. Leyden was saved.

As the highest possible manifestation of the gratitude of the people of Holland to the stricken city, the defense of which was vital to the success of the struggle of the Netherlands for independence, and as the most appropriate recognition of the inestimable service of Leyden to the nation, the Estates resolved that a university be established within its walls; and thus was founded the University of Leyden. This illustrious institution, born in the utmost throes of the spirit of freedom, has now brilliantly served Holland and the nations of the earth for more than three hundred years.

The universities of Berlin and Leyden, founded in the midst of the darkest days of Germany and Holland, stand as lofty monuments of the irrepressible spirit of freedom of those nations.

Nowhere in the world do free universities and despotism, either of might or of spirit, develop peacefully side by side. In consequence of this unalterable fact, those who hold fixedly to the practices of the past have again and again denounced universities as the "nurseries of revolution, of social democracy, of anarchy."

As a matter of fact the very reverse is the case; the universities which give free expression to progress are the safety valves of the nation. Only when wrongs go unredressed, only when the expanding aspirations of the people are repressed, do there follow revolution and anarchy. The truth is the universities are the real sources of evolution and orderly advance, because of their continual striving to find the way, to open up the path of enlightenment to the people of a nation.

That a university is to be free does not mean that its staff are to be propogandists, nor that they shall be arrogant. The university is no place for either the agitator or the pedant. For subjects concerning which there is variance of opinion, the historical method should be followed. Different views should be fully and fairly presented in order that the student may be aware of all the essential facts bearing in every direction and thus be fully able to appreciate the different points of view.

Having pursued this method, a professor, one who professes, as pointed out by Paulsen, has the right to express his personal views and convictions, provided it be done with humility and with the realization that ultimate truth has nowhere been reached, that the advance of tomorrow may modify the statement of today.

Under the principles of liberty it does not follow that all steps of a university or of a state will finally stand and be shown to be truly progressive even when so-called. Where we have liberty, where the truth is freely developed through the eternal conflict of ideas, error will be taught, steps will be taken which must be retraced; for no machinery has yet been devised by which the fallible human mind can with certainty determine all the results of a complex political or social step. Thus, while infallibility is not claimed and errors must be rectified, if the university and state are not bound but retain freedom of spirit, fewer mistakes will be made and progress will be more rapid than when authority limits inquiry.

In this country the state university has reflected the spirit of the times, has been in sympathy with the needs and aspirations of the age to a much greater extent than any other group of universities; indeed it is the aim of the state university of America to democratize higher education. It is its aim to find a way to the intellectual life for the boy and girl of parts,

whatever may be the condition of birth. It is its aim to lend a hand to all the people of the state without respect to age, carrying out to them the knowledge which they can assimilate to their benefit. Only slowly was elementary education democratized, and still more slowly was this true of secondary education. It is the aim of the state university to democratize higher education. This is the state university ideal; and if this be accomplished, it will be a new thing in the world.

While this is the aim of the state university, it must never yield its essential spirit. It must do all these things in an uncompromising spirit of truth without regard to the prejudices or misconceptions either of the minority or the majority. The largeness of the ministrations of the state university, while the source of its greatest strength, contains also its chiefest danger.

For the great group of state universities of Germany their spirit has been epitomized into two words: "*Lehrfreiheit, Lernfreiheit,*"—freedom of teaching, freedom of learning. The state university in America, on its broader foundation, with a wider clientele, in closer contact with the people, must succeed in holding this spirit, for in it rests its only hope of highest service.

The recognition of this principle will require that the people retain largeness of view. They must be willing to give freedom for its own sake, without regard to the belief of the teaching staff. They must have faith to believe that it is best that truth should prevail, faith to believe that truth will prevail if there be full liberty of teaching and learning. The support by public taxation of a university of this type, the burden being imposed upon a democracy by itself, will be the test whether a state university in this country shall merely have the name or whether it shall be a true university because it retains its essential spirit.

Just as the state universities of Germany were in the time of the Bund the chief unifying influence of that nation, and as they now express to an extraordinary degree the spirit of the modern German Empire, so the state universities of America should perform a similar function for this nation.

I have confidence to believe that the American Democracy will take no backward step; that it will continue in the future as in the past to support universities which stand for "Lehrfreiheit und Lernfreiheit." The state universities of America already occupy a proud position of leadership. This they will retain if with unfaltering courage and steadfast faith they hold to those fundamentals of the university spirit which have justified themselves to the world by their beneficent service.

