

# Bulwark of Liberty: Dickinson College

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## 1 Introduction

Dickinson College is notable for its commitment to civic engagement, inclusive and diverse environment, and globally-focused curriculum. This institution has a long history of creating the future and has been educating global leaders since the eighteenth century. Revolutionary in both spirit and life, Dickinson College was established with the intent of providing a different kind of liberal arts education. Students are encouraged to be actively engaged with the world and challenged to think differently. They are guided by a core set of values that highlights cultural influence in local and global communities as well as promoting equity and diversity.

## 2 Historical Background

John Dickinson was the namesake of Dickinson College, formerly called John and Mary's College (Colbourn, 1959). He served in the army and his patriotism elevated as a high regard by those who knew him. He was also a Founding Father of the United States and also a politician from Philadelphia. The desire for higher education was on the rise and a grammar school was subsequently built in Carlisle in 1773, which served as the foundation of the new college (Dickinson College, n.d.). Dickinson College was later founded by a prominent physician, Dr. Benjamin Rush on the 9th of September, 1783 (King, 1897). He was a signer of the United States Declaration of Independence, a civic leader, politician, social reformer, and an educator. In its early beginnings learning remote was the primary objective of the institution and thus, it was viewed to be chimerical by many. According to King (1897), the borough of Carlisle was about one hundred and twenty miles from Philadelphia and Dickinson College was erected there as its main site. Carlisle rose into prominence during the Revolutionary War in which it became a confinement for the prisoners as well as a place to gather recruits.

After the Board of Trustees was established in 1784, Dickinson and Rush adopted a characteristic seal which consists of the Bible, a telescope, and a liberty cap that presented the institution's motto in Latin, *Pietate et Doctrina tuta libertas* which translates to "Freedom is made safe through character and learning" (Furst, 1894). The motto was suggested by Dickinson, which embodied a new liberty through the safeguards of virtue and learning. For twenty years, classes were held in a two-story brick building and some portions of the old barracks were occupied for recitation rooms and dormitories. There were also lack of funds and problems of acquiring enough students and keeping them at work once they were admitted (Smith, 1949). In 1796, the campus was purchased and erected but destroyed by fire in 1803. Sellers (1973) pointed out that students of the eighteenth century knew when their tuition fees made the difference between solvency and disaster. They demand education tailored to their careers they have in prospect. At its first public commencement in 1787, nine young men received an A.B. degree, followed by eleven more two years later.

## 3 Student Life

Furst (1894) explained that the student life began a long series of difficulties in college during the War of 1812. Students made themselves felt by requesting more recitations and examinations and fewer lectures. A large number of seniors had been summoned to the defense of Philadelphia that it was necessary to confer degrees in *absentia*. In 1815, a death of a member of a junior class from a duel and the disappearance of five other students involved in the matter resulted to a distressing effect to the institution. Dueling was a common practice in the last decade of the eighteenth century and many duels were fought to defend one's honor (Bell et al., 1950). This was predicated from political debates, bitter discussions during literary society meetings, and ongoing disputes among students.

There were also local chapter fraternities, Greek letter societies, and other co-ed groups that existed on campus. In college affairs, the chapter has always been prominent in a number of movements. In addition, successful college annuals were published and chapter houses were comfortably furnished. Smith (1949) explicitly stated that the faculty and local trustees took in some of the boys, for there were no adequate public houses they might lodge. Charles Nisbet, who was the first principal of the college, was very worried about the moral problems involved in students living there (Smith, 1949). College publications known as *The Dickinsonian* were interesting reflections of the mind that served as opportunities to develop the power to speak and write effectively. The college in all its parts were carefully organized, and the law and preparatory departments were added. Attending a ball, private party, theatrical exhibition, dancing school, horse-race or any similar result during a class session is subjected to dismissal and suspension. The college under this regime have built a stronger faculty, larger body of students, and a better equipment than ever before.

## 4 Population

While the institution is non-sectarian and the larger part of the trustees and faculty belong to different denominations (Episcopalian, German Reformed, and Protestant), most of them are members of the Presbyterian Church (Sellers, 1973). Rush needed an established organization to draw students, political support, and money. Thus, the importance of public financing led him to spearhead a non-denominational institution. Furst (1897) presented a data of the college's proportion with a summary of 3,600 graduates of 430 lawyers, 431 ministers, 5 bishops, 180 doctors, 203 professors, 250 teachers, 70 army officers, 61 legislators, 30 state senators, 41 members of the Congress, 8 United States senators, 50 journalists, 42 judges, 2 governors, and one President of the United States. In 1836, there were 244 registered students and it was a deeming success for the administration (Furst, 1894).

Within three years, college enrollment had risen from thirteen freshmen and five sophomores to over a hundred,

and the first seniors of the new regime graduated in 1837 (Sellers, 1973). That level was maintained until the Civil War, while the crowded grammar school population allowed to drop to a lower figure. These developments brought new faculty to the college and began the practice of using recent graduates of high standing as instructors for a year or two of preparatory work. King (1897) stated that the scholarship system went into operation in 1854 and a greater number of students overflowed into the private boarding houses. The institution was not capacious enough, however the scholarship included room-rent, fuel and board, and lights. Many were also unprepared to enter the college course and returned home leaving the total of 245 students at the end of the year. The class of 1854 was the highest number of enrollment rate at that time. After the sifting process has been completed, the political agitation which preceded the election of Abraham Lincoln as President and the success of the Republican party had an unfavorable effect upon the attendance of students (King, 1897). When the war came, it exacerbated the depleting numbers student body to increase ranks in the army. Dickinson College struggled financially and their existence nearly came to an end, but hope revived and the college took a new lease of life.

When Carlisle was emerging from the status of primitive frontier outpost, it was inhabited by a small cluster of white men in Indian country (Smith, 1949). The population was highly homogeneous consisting of almost exclusively Scotch-Irish families. By 1782, a few Germans had moved into the community, but not more than a dozen were of this nationality. In the examination of the college class list, the predominant racial component of the student body was Scotch-Irish. These class lists reveal other interesting information besides the homogeneity of the student body. According to Smith (1949), the majority of the students entered the ministry since Dickinson College is a Presbyterian school. The vocational pattern of training students for the ministry was common to all colonial colleges.

## 5 Faculty and Curriculum

Teachers wear the crown of altruism. Their willingness to work for little pay and that, as the world sees it, was not a sign of success due to the challenging trustee-faculty relationship. This was caused by a faction between the Presbyterian ideals and Methodist control in 1833 (Sellers, 1973). According to Morgan (1933), the early faculty are making approximately between £120 to £180 per year. Religion was the main outline of the institution's curriculum or more succinctly, "Without religion, a college is a curse to society" (Sellers, p. 8). It all sustained the ritualistic character of the curriculum during those years and faith is the epitome of learning. Textbook revolves around the gospel as its divine authority.

Discipline was the key to everything and success was dependent on the character of the teacher than theory and wisdom. Smith (1949) presented that the records of teaching and administrative work at Dickinson College were inadequate, particularly as to the latter. Seven courses or series of lectures were focused on each of these segments: one on logic, another on philosophy of the mind, three of which dealt with the three fields that were divided namely, ethics, economics, and politics. In addition, belles lettres and systemic theology were also included comprising of a total of 418 lectures. They were delivered

every day of the week, carefully written out and reviewed, and each student was required to take down verbatim. Its curriculum included all the common English studies, along with botany, chemistry, astronomy, French, Spanish and Italian languages, music and drawing (Sellers, 1973). More various subjects of the college course have been taught as follows: sociology, history, and mathematics (Morgan, 1933). Subjects and departments were not clearly separated and some subjects not formally provided for were certainly taught. These other subjects were taken by those whose schedules would permit it. This liberal arts program gave the college faculty an additional source of income and sometimes brought the women into college classes.

## 6 Developments

Dickinson College's commitment to global learning has benefitted the broader community. Civic engagement is one of the pillars of a Dickinson education, along with global education and study of the environment and sustainability. All three are integrated into the curriculum and campus life. This exemplifies the college's commitment to providing education for the common good. Students are encouraged to actively engage with multiple cultures and thus, their inclusivity is widely recognized and practiced. The president of Dickinson College, William Durden, communicated this statement: "Rush was against slavery, supported the mentally challenged, an advocate of women's education, and a strong believer of free public education system" (Dickinson College, 2007, 0:55). All these defining characteristics have shaped Dickinson College to who they are today. They appreciate cultural differences and foreign language is the key to their curriculum.

According to Bylander and Rose (2006), the institution designed a program called *Crossing Borders* to encourage culturally diverse students to live, work, and study together in multiple contexts both within the United States and abroad. The program consists of 20 students from Dickinson College with several other universities, and also with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Students spend four weeks studying together for one semester and at a HBCU for one semester. This was the biggest change that developed since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the earlier times, the custom of sending young men to Europe for education was frowned upon by the patriots and John Dickinson took it upon himself to contribute freely to make this undertaking possible (King, 1897). In addition, the *Crossing Borders* program provides a transformative experience with diversity. Chang, et al. (2003) proved a significant point that through these curricular innovations, it has empirically shown to increase critical thinking skills, decrease levels of ethnocentrism, and produce higher levels of intellectual engagement and motivation. Another significant development is the institution's support for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) community by providing a strong foundation for growth and resources to create a welcoming, safe, inclusive, and equitable environment (Doran & Loveland, 2016). The goal is to enhance the campus community and build an environment free from homophobia, heterosexism, cissexism, and gender bias.

## 7 Demographics

Dickinson College is a small, yet highly selective liberal arts college. As a historically white college, it remains predominantly so, although it has advanced during the 20<sup>th</sup>

to 21<sup>st</sup> century in diversifying its student body. In 1995, students of color represented 7% of the student body and in 2006, they represented 13% of the student body (Bylander & Rose, 2006). Research clearly indicates that college students are at a critical development stage in their lives. Their identity and how they relate with others are enhanced through interaction with their diverse peers (Chang et al., 2003). According to a study by Fry et al. (2009), studying abroad demonstrates a significant impact on the students' long-term global engagement. Moreover, study-abroad experiences can profoundly individual's pursuit of further graduate studies, other career paths, and promoting cultural relations with one another. What has also changed is the dramatic increase of enrollment rates between 1998 to 2006, which rose from 3,030 to a record of 5,844 students (Massa & Parker, 2007). The number of full-time matriculated minority and international students grew from 1% to 14%, fluctuating respectively between those years. With the rising number of students, tuition rates have also increased. In a recent survey from Almanac (2018), Dickinson College was ranked as one of the most expensive four-year private institutions costing \$52,955 in tuition and fees, with \$13,236 in room and board totaling \$66,191 per year between 2017 to 2018.

## 8 Conclusion

Dickinson College has thrived after decades of challenges and success. The distinctive elements of Dickinson College are 1.) a campuswide global awareness, 2.) commitment to sustainability, 3.) emphasis on hands-on and experiential learning, and lastly 4.) providing a useful, 21<sup>st</sup> century skillset that goes beyond graduation. In 2019, 98% of Dickinsonians are employed, completing an internship or attending graduate school (Dickinson College, n.d.). Community engagement, volunteering and engaging with the world are key components of the college. With successful graduates of all kinds, from lawyers to researchers, to writers to CEOs, Dickinson College's brand of liberal arts has been around for more than two hundred years and continues to equip the future generations making an impact around the world.

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