The debate over the role of a traditional liberal arts curriculum in the education of students focused on professional development has storied antecedents. Some of America’s greatest intellectual figures have struggled with the question of how best to provide students with an education that was both intellectually rigorous and but also practical. It is a debate that continues today.

In colonial days, there was little debate. Long before the creation of modern political parties, the modern banking system, and our modern system of trade and commerce, the nation’s oldest colleges had established a curriculum of classical history, classical languages, ancient literature, and theology. Over time, these institutions gradually added courses in ‘practical’ subjects, but at its core American higher education remained committed to the European model of classical learning.

Harvard was the nation’s first college, created in 1636 and offering a curriculum in philosophy, history, mathematics, physics, and literature. The liberal arts curriculum at the nation’s first colleges reflected the visions of colonial theologians, merchants, and planters to develop a sound and prosperous society of educated tradesmen, ministers, teachers, and public servants. The College of William and Mary (1693) educated Virginia’s planter class in logic and rhetoric. Yale College (1701) offered courses in languages and civil policy, and graduates bound for careers in medicine, law, and commerce were equally required to master Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. At the College of New Jersey (1746), later Princeton, the sons of the colonial mercantile class read Homer, Cicero, Shakespeare, and Milton.

Primary among the goals of colonial colleges was to educate students in the classical tradition as well as in theology, and to train students to develop the critical faculties essential to a liberalism of spirit. Many
of the founding fathers who led the revolutionary generation were first-generation college graduates who had received their training in rhetoric and oratory at colonial colleges. Despite regional differences in the economic, political, and religious life of the colonies, the curriculum at William and Mary (Jefferson’s alma mater), King’s College (where Alexander Hamilton was educated), and Harvard (the college John Adams attended) provided the revolutionary generation with a common intellectual vocabulary and a dedication to the liberal spirit.

In the decades after the Revolutionary war, colleges became more liberal in both curriculum and more demographically inclusive, offering courses in modern languages, political science, and practical sciences, and educating an increasing number of students from middle class families.

The question of whether, or how, to integrate a liberal arts curriculum and professional degree programs first arose significantly in 1819, when former president Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia. Long before the creation of modern political parties, the modern banking system, and our modern system of trade and commerce, the nation’s oldest colleges had established a curriculum of classical history, classical languages, ancient literature, and theology, and then gradually added courses in ‘practical’ subjects. Jefferson designed the curriculum of his beloved university to include courses in law, medicine, and science, believing that institutions of higher learning should provide highly specialized professional training. Students were able to choose from elective courses rather than follow the prerequisites of a set curriculum, in the belief that the spirit of liberty was integral to the intellectual development of an engaged citizenry. In his 1818 ‘Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Fix the Site of the University of Virginia,’ Jefferson argued that one of the purposes of higher education was ‘to harmonize and promote the interests of agriculture, manufactures and commerce...and give a free scope to the public industry’ as well as ‘to develop the reasoning faculties of our youth...and to form them to the habits of reflection and correct action.’ Jefferson knew that his commitment to training students for ‘the various vocations of life’ was unorthodox: ‘Some good men, and even of respectable information, consider the learned sciences as useless acquirements,’ he noted, lamenting the reactionary view that ‘what has ever been must ever be, and that to secure ourselves where we are, we must tread with awful reverence in the footsteps of our fathers.’ Yet the country was full of ‘real and living examples’ of Americans who had made ‘wonderful advances’ in science and technology, Jefferson said, because they had the opportunity to