

# What Would Thomas Jefferson Say?

By Anne Neal

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Wow, this is great! I am so thankful for the Society and alumni members who have put together this discussion.

As you have heard, I am president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni—ACTA for short. [www.goacta.org](http://www.goacta.org). We are an independent, nonprofit organization that advocates for quality higher education at an affordable price. We adhere to the three A's—academic excellence, academic freedom and accountability.

I'm here today to talk about higher education for the same reason you are here—we all love and have a profound dedication to quality education in a free society. And William and Mary, one of our nation's oldest and finest institutions, has played a vital role in ensuring not only that Americans have the knowledge and skills they need to function effectively—as citizens and as workers—but also in educating some of the most important leaders in our history.

These include U.S. presidents James Monroe and Jon Tyler; chief justice John Marshall; former U.S. secretary of defense Robert Gates; former chair of the Council of Economic Advisors Christina Romer; *Comedy Central*'s Jon Stewart; and, of course, Thomas Jefferson.

When we think of Jefferson, we think of the author of the Declaration of Independence. We think of the third president of the United States. We think of the founder of the University of Virginia. We think of the tobacco farmer who was also an architect, a diplomat, a connoisseur of fine wine, and a prolific author. Some of us with more arcane interests may also think of him as the man who invented a revolving book stand that allowed one to read five books at once; a cipher wheel for encrypting State Department communications; and a clock powered by the gravitational pull on Revolutionary War cannon balls.

But Jefferson wasn't always a founding father, a great statesman, and a tireless polymath. When he was young, he was none of these things. He was just a bright, unformed, promising boy with his future ahead of him—and the luck to be admitted to the College of William and Mary.

Jefferson was all of 16 when he matriculated here. He lived in the dorms—in this very building! He ate in the dining hall. He took classes and went to chapel twice a day. And two years later, he graduated with highest honors. Academically, by all accounts, he was an *animal*. He studied fifteen hours a day for the sheer joy of it. His friends joked that, given the slightest excuse, he would abandon them for his books. He studied mathematics, physics, metaphysics, rhetoric, logic, ethics, French, and Greek.

Somewhere in there he found time to hone his considerable skills on the violin. After taking his undergraduate degree, Jefferson stayed on at William and Mary and read law. By the end of it all, he was thoroughly educated, having acquired a depth and breadth of knowledge that served him—and his emerging nation—remarkably well.

Of course, college educations don't take care of themselves. They require professors, scholarly experts with a strong commitment to teaching. Jefferson had some spectacular ones. There was professor William Small, who introduced him to the thinking of Locke, Bacon, and Newton. "From his conversation," Jefferson said, "I got my first views of the expansion of science and of the system of things in which we are placed." That's a bit of an understatement. Jefferson could not have written the Declaration of Independence without deep working knowledge of the thinkers and ideas he studied with Small.

There was also professor George Wythe, with whom Jefferson read law. Wythe later became a signer of the Declaration of Independence—which his student wrote! He was also a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. It's a wonderful example of how good teaching pays itself forward—Wythe gave Jefferson the tools, and Jefferson used those tools to change the world. Wythe had that effect a lot. Henry Clay studied with him, and so did James Monroe and John Marshall.

All of this is to say that the College of William and Mary is a national treasure. As one of our few "public Ivies," William and Mary has long offered an exceptionally fine education at an affordable price. And for centuries, it has exemplified the promise of this great republic of ours—that with education and opportunity, we can not only survive, but thrive, regardless of our backgrounds, biology, or beliefs.

But excellence is hard work. That is especially true during trying times. And these are trying times indeed. For years now it's been nothing but plummeting and unpredictable markets; gridlock on Capitol Hill; trade deficits, unemployment, and skyrocketing debt. And our colleges and universities are feeling the pinch.

Endowments have shrunk, states are cutting higher ed funding, and private fundraising is much harder than it used to be. And schools are passing the squeeze on to students and families. Over the past 25 years, college tuition and fees have risen 440 percent, four times faster than inflation. Two thirds of today's college graduates took out loans to complete school, accumulating an average debt of more than \$23,000. Only about 57% of first-time full-time students graduate in six years. And these are not faring well. Almost one-third of the class of 2009 has moved back home with their parents; 9 percent are unemployed, and of those that are working, most earn less than \$30,000 a year.

Meanwhile, employers are complaining loudly about what passes for college education. 63% say that new college grads don't have the skills they need to succeed in the global economy, and 87% say colleges need to raise the quality of student achievement. They have good reason to complain.

Consider a few choice facts.

In a recent survey of more than 3,000 college students, New York University professor Richard Arum and UVA professor Josipa Roksa found that:

- 45% of undergraduates learn little or nothing in their first two years of college.
- 36% learn little or nothing in four years.

And small wonder. In a typical semester, 32 percent of the students surveyed did not take any courses with more than 40 pages of reading per week. 50 percent did not take a single course in which they wrote more than 20 pages over the course of the semester. Students are putting in about half as many hours studying today as they did fifty years ago, and it shows. You can't learn if you aren't being challenged. And today's college students aren't.

My organization studies the question of what students do—and don't—learn. And in years of research, we've found that colleges and universities have, by and large, abandoned their obligation to point students to the key subjects that will ensure success after graduation.

Our research, which we publish at [www.WhatWillTheyLearn.com](http://www.WhatWillTheyLearn.com), shows that barely 5% of colleges require students to study economics before they graduate—certainly an area of knowledge which, given these times, would seem essential to our wellbeing.

Only 20% expect students to take a broad survey of American history or government.

And at a time when we urgently need workers in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), 39% of the private and 29% of the public colleges and universities we have surveyed have no college level math requirement.

So that's the big picture. Excellence in higher education, as you can see, is not a given. Our colleges and universities are frankly pandering to students by offering them a dizzying array of choices—while failing to do the hard work of making sure that they learn what they need to know to succeed as adults. We've been failing for a long time—and now those failures are being exposed and exacerbated by our economic troubles. And I think the new curricular proposal suggest these problems.

So where does William & Mary fit in? Is the nation's second oldest college still setting the standard by providing a top-flight education at an affordable price? Do undergrads still acquire the knowledge and skills they need to go on to great things—whether that's in the White House or on the *Daily Show*?

The answer, sadly, is “not quite.”

William and Mary, currently requires all students to show competence in math, science, and a foreign language. That's good—and it's better than many schools are doing. In a

global economy where strong STEM skills are increasingly in demand, William and Mary graduates have a leg up. But as you will hear later, this strength is threatened severely.

What about other vital subjects—such as writing, history, and economics? Here’s more disturbing news. The College doesn’t require graduates to take even one solid course in any of these subjects. Technically, there is a “writing proficiency” requirement—but students fulfill it by taking freshman seminars that do not focus primarily on composition. Then there is the “World Cultures and History” requirement. A U.S. history course does satisfy this requirement—but so do courses on jazz, hip hop, European history, and archaeology. In other words, the College thinks U.S. history is optional—even though statistics show that most elite college students cannot pass a high-school-level multiple choice test on U.S. history. As for economics—there is no mention of it whatsoever in the College’s course requirements. It’s as if economics doesn’t exist!

Clearly, William and Mary’s curriculum leaves a few things to be desired. And that’s not all. Tuition and fees have risen 49% since 2004. And where is that money going? Here’s a fun fact for you: since 2002, William and Mary has increased instructional spending by 40%—but administrative spending is up by 60 percent.

That’s the bad news. The good news is that the College posts exceptional figures on retention and graduation. 95% of freshmen come back in their sophomore year—and 82% of all students graduate in four years. Most schools don’t even come close to that. But I’m sure you will agree that the numbers should *mean* something—that the William and Mary graduate should know economics and U.S. history as well as science and foreign language; that he or she should be able to write as well as calculate.

After all, it’s not just our children’s economic success that hangs in the balance—it’s also the future of our republic. No one knew this better than Jefferson, who wrote endlessly about the importance of education to democracy. I could quote from him all day, but for the sake of time will just share a single, eloquent line: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

Jefferson wrote that in 1816, during the first difficult decades of our national experiment. As a founding father, a statesman, and a president, he knew how true his words were; the Revolutionary War could not have happened, and this nation could not have been founded, without an informed citizenry willing to fight—and die — for principle. But his warning it reminds us that the question of what college students learn is more than academic. It is, quite literally, a question of national significance, and a matter of life and death.

So here we are today, comfortably gathered on this gorgeous campus, talking about education. And talking is all very well. But it isn’t enough. If we care, we must act.

Students first. Make sure your undergraduate education is everything it should be—and everything you need it to be. The College doesn’t think you need to study writing,

history, and economics. But the College is wrong. Make sure you get a strong grounding in each of these areas.

Now for faculty, administrators, and trustees. Assess what students here know—and don't know. Look at where they are when they arrive—and when they leave. What are they learning? And where are the gaps? You should also look at what happens after graduation. Are William and Mary graduates finding good jobs? Or are they moving back in with mom and dad and picking up stray hours slinging lattes at Starbucks?

You should also review the curriculum look up to Jefferson's ideas. You can start by adding a real writing requirement, and by requiring all students to take survey courses in U.S. history and economics. You should also look at doing more with less—stop passing runaway administrative costs on to students, and make sure tuition increases don't exceed the consumer price index. I know that adding graduation requirements sounds expensive. But believe it or not, instituting a strong core curriculum can actually save you money. It's all there in ACTA's guide, [Cutting Costs](#). I've got copies here for anyone who would like one.

And finally, a note for alumni. You are a major source of higher ed funding—nationally, your generous giving runs into the billions every year. Make sure your gifts count. Instead of giving to the general fund, restrict your gifts for specific uses—academic programs—that will enhance William and Mary's ability to offer a quality education at an affordable price. My organization publishes a book called [The Intelligent Donor's Guide to College Giving](#) that can give you ideas. I've got copies here with me if you would like one.

This great institution owes it to Jefferson's memory—not to mention to its students—to set the standard for what higher education ought to be in this country. To quote the College's greatest alum one last time, "I look to the [diffusion of light and education](#) as the resource most to be relied on for ameliorating the conditions, promoting the virtue, and advancing the happiness of man."

Thank you sincerely for having me here today.