WHY THIS GUIDE EXISTS AND HOW TO USE IT

John Zmirak

I'd like to introduce this guide to major American universities by talking about an enormous Spanish church. Begun in 1883 by the visionary architect Antonio Gaudi, the Shrine of the Holy Family in Barcelona is widely lauded as one of the greatest buildings in the Western world, even though it isn't even finished. (Work on the Shrine is expected to continue until at least 2026.) Like most of the great cathedrals of Europe, it was planned on a scale that outstretched the life of its creator. That is, it was meant to remain the task of generations not yet born. Unlike monstrous monuments to dictators, or skyscrapers named for the state-subsidized moguls who financed them, the Shrine of the Holy Family was designed to point to truths which outlast the individual, to evoke not the ephemeral whirrings of a publicity or propaganda machine, but rather those eternal realities that underpin the lives of all men, everywhere, in every age. In its slow emergence from the Spanish stone, the shrine mimics the growth of civilization in the womb of time, the organic emergence of institutions like representative government and ideas like the dignity of the person and the sanctity of human life. Built in a boldly modern style, the shrine nevertheless pays homage to medieval and Renaissance influences. Designed by a solitary genius, it is now the work of a community.

One can find few better examples than this church of the healthy exercise of "tradition," as defined by the great modernist and conservator T. S. Eliot in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In that lastingly influential piece, Eliot describes tradition as something far different from a heritage passively accepted, or a dead past preserved in amber. Instead, Eliot says,

> if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, "tradition" should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon

> lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

It is this conception of tradition which infuses a real liberal arts education, the sort we attempt to uncover at a wide variety of schools in this hefty volume—and which we find is all too rarely offered. Too often, the heritage of our civilization, that slow accretion of truths of faith and reason which made possible the first stirrings of human liberty anywhere on earth, is tossed aside because of its inevitable imperfections—for instance, because our ancestors were too slow fully to extend that civilization's benefits to every individual of any race or either sex. In the place of a rich, historical (and critical) understanding of the values that make the West, one finds in too many classrooms an angry, adolescent rejection of the institutions and influences that planted the seeds of our current unprecedented liberty and prosperity. Like spoiled heirs who despise the family business that funds their leisure, contemporary professors indulge in Oedipal ideologies that focus on killing, over and over and over again, our fathers. The temptation of such tenured radicals is to take for granted the hard-won advances of Western millennia, to sneer at the staggering quantity of intellectual and humanitarian work undertaken by monks and humanists, Puritans and patriots, pedagogues and philanthropists in creating and nurturing that fragile, almost fancifully impractical institution we call a college—and its flower, freedom.

Too often, the only alternative available to this brand of callow leftism comes in the form of hard-headed "realism," or the natural disdain felt by the practical-minded for abstruse ideologies. Undergraduates who might have developed an interest in the arts and humanities turn aside when they are taught to view the novels of Jane Austen or the paintings of Renaissance masters through jaundiced, Marxist eyes. Such students learn the false and poisonous lesson that the liberal arts are for "liberals"—and not the old-fashioned (nineteenth-century) lovers of liberty, but the modern sort who combine certain features of both totalitarianism and libertinism. Students who might have (like Wallace Stevens) practiced poetry alongside selling insurance are turned by necessity into philistines. And the arts are left to their enemies. When a culture's best and brightest are systematically trained by the cultural left to despise what Matthew Arnold called "the best that has been written and thought," the results are easy to see: grim, megalithic cities of soulless towers constructed by "practical" men whose only oases of art are narrow galleries full of protest works created by bitter Bohemians.

Which brings us back to Barcelona. Even as the great Shrine slowly grows toward its completion, its foundations are being undermined by the forces of bureaucracy and "progress." Newspapers around the world, including the *Guardian*, have reported in recent

months that the building which has come to embody Barcelona to the world may very well collapse before it is finished, thanks to a rail tunnel currently planned by the city's government. The proximity of the tunnel—a mere seven feet—to the Shrine's deep roots in the stone, and the rumbling of incessant rail traffic, pose a mortal threat to the building, according to architects who and structural engineers. These experts have lodged a belated protest against the tunnel, yet many local businessmen have sided with the tunnelers.

This threat to a timeless work of religious art posed by a short-term hunger for profits recalls to observers of education the successful attack waged by leftist reformers (and their "pragmatist" enablers) on the curricula of hundreds of U.S. colleges and universities in the 1960s and '70s. In the wake of Harvard University's decision to dismantle its core curriculum, nearly every elite institution of higher education (and most of the second- and third-tier schools that ape their ways) eliminated the survey courses in history, art, literature, and other humanities which once had worked to provide students of every ethnic and social background with the intellectual and cultural capital of centuries. The very mission of an American liberal arts college—to make available to the many the cultural riches and options for personal development once confined to the elite—was abandoned.

In its place, we find vague, broad "distribution requirements," which require students not to master particular facts about the civilization that formed them (and their educational institutions), but rather to explore different "modes of analysis" and "ways of knowing." The implicit relativism of this endeavor is checked only by the occasional insistence of educators hostile to the West that students take politicized courses to broaden their cultural "diversity." While at some schools such requirements can be fulfilled through admirable classes on the real achievements of other (Eastern, pre-Columbian, or African) civilizations, at others most of the classes that allow students to check off their "diversity" box are fixated on less intrinsically worthy topics, such as unreconstructed Marxist or radical feminist analyses of minority experience in Western societies. Ironically, while the deconstruction of curricula was promoted most fervently by ideologues of the left, in many places it has been abetted by the complacence of administrators, trustees, and even professors who might self-identify as "conservative"—that is, who are unconcerned about the content of what they regard as distractions from the real business of universities: churning out employees, investors, and consumers.

The results of dismantling American education are undeniable: thoughtless decisions have produced ignorant students, a reality that has now been documented—and you can read the document in this volume's appendix titled "The Coming Crisis in Citizenship." This social-scientific analysis investigated the state of knowledge and understanding among both freshmen and seniors at fifty American colleges and universities. The test asked straightforward factual questions about American history, civics, and economics, questions one might expect in a decent high school course. The findings were discouraging: according to this study, seniors at many elite schools know no more about these core subjects than they did upon entering college. Many know even less. Conversely, seniors at some less famous schools that have retained core liberal arts requirements advanced in knowledge, gaining a mastery that will serve them well as informed citizens.

This study's results should trouble even those pragmatic parents whose primary concern is to advance their children's economic interests. As the nature of the postmodern economy continues to morph and traditional careers become less stable, successful adults must change jobs and sometimes even professions with unprecedented frequency. Instead of a dogged mastery of a particular trade, what adults require today is the flexibility of mind and broad, deep knowledge of culture that come only as the result of a genuine liberal arts education. This assertion is supported by research: Canadian economist Robert C. Allen of the University of British Columbia has found, for example, that a "background in social sciences and humanities appears to have a major impact on earning power. From their twenties to their fifties, men who graduate in humanities see their income rise, on average, by 78 percent. Graduates in social sciences see their income rise 106 percent over the same period. That compares favorably to a 47 percent increase in income for community college graduates and an average 76 percent increase for university graduates across all fields."

In other words, even on a nakedly economic analysis, pragmatism is impractical. It is folly to allow students to narrow their educations prematurely based on their unexamined preferences at age eighteen. Like the city fathers of Barcelona, who are willing to risk the destruction of their city's most distinctive and attractive landmark, administrators who neglect the humane education of undergraduates are mistaken both about culture and economics. Like imprudent farmers, they are eating their seed corn. Indeed, they are popping it to serve with melted butter. It is our task in this book to help students outwit the educrats who have tried to dumb them down, inflame them with ideology, or constrain their horizons while they are still young and eager to explore.

In this guide you will find colleges that survived the philistine outrages of the 1960s and '70s and retained (or regained) their mission of humanistic education. You'll find others founded in response to the educational crisis of that time, schools that are consciously countercultural in their emphasis on the great books and ideas. Mostly, however, you'll encounter profiles of highly selective public and private schools, including practical suggestions on how to obtain a serious education at these schools by carefully choosing courses and professors while avoiding the ideological traps that await the unwary.

Colleges can form your character—or twist it. They can challenge, enrich, and deepen your treasured beliefs—or trash them and leave you with nothing. They can help you develop lifelong friendships, professional contacts, and intellectual mentors—or drop you in the world with not much more than a degree and a load of debt. Success depends on intelligent choice.

Reading through these essays, you'll find comments by current students, professors, and graduates, quotations from research studies and investigative articles, analyses of curricula, fond reminiscences, and horror stories. Each profile has been compiled by a team of reporters who consulted a wide range of sources to give you the most candid, comprehen-

sive, and up-to-date description of what life is really like on each campus. You'll read about the elitist Ivies, where world-famous scholars deliver lectures to hundreds of ambitious pupils, tiny religious colleges that study the great books and the Bible, workaday state universities with a few excellent programs—and just about everything in between. You'll also learn which colleges have strong sports teams, vital, faith-filled chaplaincies, and good systems for providing academic advice. And which ones have coed bathrooms, by the way.

Unlike some other guides, we are independently researched, written, and funded. (Believe it or not, some books make schools pay in order to be included.) Others let schools write their own profiles. How helpful is that? If you want to know what a school says about itself—go check its website. Or call its public relations department. (They sometimes call us, complaining about our candor.)

We're also up front about our point of view. We have an agenda, and it's laid out right here in these introductory pages—our view of what constitutes a good education. There are many different views out there on this topic, and most of them are partial or just plain wrong. Is a "good education" one that gives students the best chance to land a high-paying job? One that gives them entrée to the circles of cultural power? One that drenches them in diversity, introduces them mainly to foreign and marginalized cultures, or teaches them to undermine the "status quo"? And how should such an education be structured—like a Shonee's breakfast, where students pick and choose every item on their plate? Or like a thoughtfully constructed prix-fix menu at a fine restaurant—with a careful balance of flavorful and fresh ingredients prepared in a classic style? The latter, we believe.

While it may seem un-American to say it, we don't believe in the absolute virtue of choice. Not every high school kid comes into college knowing what he needs to learn or how to learn it. U.S. secondary education does not compare to what is offered in Europe or Japan. The egalitarian ideology that pervades our secondary schools has dumbed most of us down. To expect every American teenager to take responsibility for planning every detail of his education is to guarantee that most of them will fail. They will emerge with a few specialties, a grab-bag of information, a pile of fashionable prejudices, and little else. This is what happens when we treat the fragile, multifarious fruit of thousands of years of human culture as a pile of consumer goods to be handled, sniffed, and accepted or rejected according to whim. We agree with what John Henry Newman wrote in 1852 when he described a university as

> [an]n assemblage of learned men, zealous for their own sciences, and rivals of each other, . . . brought, by familiar intercourse and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation. They learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other. Thus is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the student also breathes, though in his own case he only pursues a few sciences out of the multitude. He profits by an intellectual tradition, which is independent of particular teachers, which guides him in his choice of subjects, and duly interprets for him those which he chooses. He apprehends the great outline of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shades, its great points and its little, as he otherwise cannot apprehend them. Hence it is that this education is called "Liberal."

One good test of a college is whether it teaches all its graduates—not just its English or philosophy majors—how to read and comprehend such a paragraph.

Another is whether its curriculum partakes in this broadly traditional vision of the mission of education as something which forms the self, trains the mind, disciplines the habits, and connects the student as one more link in a chain of civilized liberty that ties us to the ancient citizens of Athens, the prophets of Israel, the fathers of the Church, the humanists and philosophers of the Renaissance, and the scientists of the Enlightenment.

The place which colleges still hold in our culture tells us that we remember, albeit dimly, that they are meant to form the free citizen, prepare the future parent, and fortify the soul. Universities train us to think and argue for ourselves, but also to listen to older and wiser authorities, to question but also to take seriously the wisdom of other periods and peoples, to learn from our contemporaries and serve as mentors to the young. Most of us carry with us memories of one or two faculty members who stand in our minds as models of how to teach, how to counsel, how to correct—memories that guide us when we have children or students of our own. Schools also ought to teach us how to wisely spend our time, how to choose among the myriad political, cultural, and social options that a free society offers. (That—and not keeping the kids entertained—is the secret function of a university's extracurricular activities.) The workload imposed should be sufficient to engage the bright and awaken the lazy. A university must challenge us to succeed, but also to get up again when we fail. It is by these criteria that this book judges a college.

Needless to say, we are often disappointed.

But after one recovers from the shock of seeing how far many schools have fallen, it is possible to seek out signs of hope. Let's admit that the great edifice of traditional education has crumbled, that the Roman aqueducts and Gothic arches are broken, and look (in Robert Browning's words) for "love among the ruins." Few schools still fully embody a vision of liberal education that Newman would recognize. But at many of them, there are still significant remnants, or recent growths, of excellence—brilliant scholars, committed but fair-minded teachers, extraordinary libraries and museums and intellectually motivated students. Some places have clung to their traditions (see, e.g., Hampden-Sydney, Providence College, and the University of Chicago); some have begun to remember why they were founded (see Seton Hall, Baylor, Villanova); and still others have sprung up to fill the academic void (see Christendom, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas More). And even on campuses where none of this is true, one can still usually piece together a first-rate education by choosing carefully among professors and programs.

There are other schools whose stories are still "developing," where well-intentioned educators have founded colleges or universities intended to pass along the faith and values of traditional religious groups who have found themselves unrepresented or excluded from the educational "mainstream." We watch with interest the efforts of Ave Maria University in Naples, Florida, where philanthropist Tom Monaghan is trying to develop a

traditional Catholic university surrounded by a Catholic-friendly town. Another recently founded school with similar aspirations is Wyoming Catholic College, which is scheduled to welcome its first class in fall 2007 and promises to offer students a liberal arts education steeped in the great books of the Western tradition and illumined by "the awesome beauty of our created, natural world." In the evangelical Protestant tradition, Patrick Henry College, in Purcellville, Virginia, has grown from its original base of almost exclusively homeschooled students to welcome ambitious, active Christians from around the world (see box, next page).

In selecting 134 schools for this guide, we have included the top forty most selective national universities and the top thirty-five most selective liberal arts colleges according to the objective selectivity rankings used by *U.S. News & World Report*. We have then chosen fifty-nine more schools from different regions of the country (and, for the first time, Canada), with special emphases, unique virtues, or distinctive missions. This edition also includes the three U.S. service academies, which offer excellent educational opportunities for those willing to risk life and limb in defense of their country.

We couldn't fit every school—or even every worthwhile school—in a single book and hope to do any one of them justice. So if you're considering one of the places not included here, do your own research using the sort of criteria we outline here. (See the appendix of this guide for a list of specific questions to ask when visiting a college or university.) We also encourage readers to check out our companion guide, *All-American Colleges: Top Schools for Conservatives, Old-Fashioned Liberals, and People of Faith*, and to keep an eye on www.collegeguide.org, where beginning this fall we will be posting full essays on schools not covered here.

Each institutional profile is divided into two sections: "Academic Life" and "Student Life." In the Academic Life section, our team of researchers gathered information pertaining to the following questions: What is the school's academic reputation? Is a genuine core curriculum in place? If not, how good a job do the general education requirements do in ensuring students receive a broad liberal arts education and take foundational courses? Who are the best professors and which are the best departments or programs? Which departments are the weakest or most politicized? What kind of academic advising do students receive? How strong are the relationships between faculty and students? What percentage of classes are small, intimate seminars? To what extent are graduate students relied on for teaching and grading? How bad is grade inflation?

A word is in order here about what we are attempting to do when we recommend professors. When we list an institution's "top professors," we are certainly not pretending to present an exhaustive list, nor are we applying a political test. Some of these professors are known to be conservatives, others radicals, but in most cases we have no idea where they stand politically. Instead, we commend professors named by their colleagues and students as being fair, nonpoliticized, and talented teachers.

PATRICK HENRY COLLEGE

PURCELLVILLE, VIRGINIA

Patrick Henry College promises to "provide students with a broad background in classical languages, logic, rhetoric, biblical studies, history, English composition and literature, philosophy, science, and mathematics," and to ensure that its students "encounter a multiplicity of ideas animating the world's great leaders and thinkers of the past in order to see how God has worked in and continues to work in His creation." Like many of the better-established traditionalist liberal arts colleges we cover in this book, PHC centers its education on a modified version of the traditional core curriculum that we laud (and the near-disappearance of which almost everywhere we deplore). Patrick Henry students, regardless of major, must take courses such as "Theology of the Bible," "Principles of Biblical Reasoning," "Constitutional Law," "Freedom's Foundations," and "Economics for the Citizen," as well as core classes in logic, rhetoric, Western literature and history, and American history.

This is an impressive curriculum. We especially recommend, for interested students, Patrick Henry's rigorous "political theory track," directed by assistant professor of philosophy Mark T. Mitchell. Housed in the Department of Classical Liberal Arts (en encouraging moniker, that) this program is spoken of highly by participating students. Besides Mitchell, a very incomplete list of other excellent professors at PHC would include Gene Edward Veith, professor of literature, and President Graham Walker, professor of government.

Recent stories in the secular and educational press have highlighted PHC's role as an incubator for conservative Christian activists, as many undergrads at Patrick Henry seek to apply their learning and traditional biblical theology to contemporary issues of policy. Many students at PHC intern at think tanks and activist organizations such as Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, and other groups that lobby on Capitol Hill for profamily legislation. The school promises prospective students that they will have the chance to put their "knowledge to work" as they "undertake practical professional training." "You could find yourself tackling real-life problems, working alongside experts in and around our nation's capital, putting your knowledge to work in congressional offices, intelligence and law enforcement agencies, think tanks, newspapers, publishing houses, private and home schools—even the White House."

PHC's faculty and students cohere firmly around the conservative evangelical vision of the school's founder and chancellor, longtime homeschooling-rights advocate Michael Farris. Accrediting agencies and critics in the evangelical academic community have worried about PHC's success at reconciling the aspirations of a traditional liberal arts education with its commitment to activist training. However, the recent appointment of the distinguished scholar Graham Walker as president of the school is evidence that the school is committed to achieving a healthy balance between free academic inquiry and its commitment to a particular civic-religious position. Check www.collegeguide.org this fall for a full profile on Patrick Henry and several other newer institutions.

An exclusive feature of *Choosing the Right College* is the inclusion, in each institutional profile, of an inset box that tells students how to build their own core curriculum. In this box we highlight eight specific courses that cover the eight areas we believe together make for a decent substitute for a traditional integrated core. These areas are:

1. Classical literature (in translation)
2. Ancient philosophy
3. The Bible
4. Christian thought before 1500
5. Modern political theory
6. Shakespeare
7. U.S. history before 1865
8. Nineteenth-century European intellectual history

The rationale behind this vision of the core curriculum is explained in detail in Mark Henrie's *A Student's Guide to the Core Curriculum*. In essence, this grouping of courses reflects the input of dozens of distinguished professors from a wide variety of disciplines as to what a brief but genuine core curriculum ought to cover. If taught well—and especially if taught using primary texts—these courses will help students obtain a broad and sophisticated understanding of the West, that is, an understanding of the narratives, beliefs, events, thinkers, and institutions that have shaped not only the world around them, and the core beliefs encoded in our culture and the American Constitution.

If students take the eight courses we recommend, and especially if they can contrive to take them from professors we recommend, they should graduate with at least the semblance of a true liberal arts education. That means they will have minds which are free to go on learning all through life from a vast variety of sources, supported by hard-won skills and guided by a sure intellectual compass.

The Student Life section tries to give readers an idea of what it's like to go to each school. Here is where we go into detail about each institution's residential life: Are all dorms coed? If so, are there coed rooms? Coed bathrooms? Does the school guarantee housing for all four years? Would you want to live in the dorms in any case? (Some are Gothic gems, others Stalinist monoliths.) In this section we also try to give some idea of how students spend their time outside the classroom. Is this a service-oriented school? Do the kids party five nights a week or are they a studious, intellectual bunch? In addition, we discuss whether campus crime is a problem, the extent to which athletics, particularly intercollegiate athletics, shapes the campus atmosphere, and whether school traditions still create a spirit of cohesion. There is much else in this section besides, depending on the character of the institution—including everything from controversial mascots, quaint customs, and school songs to curious but telling facts. (Did you know, for instance, that in the chapel of Washington and Lee, General Robert E. Lee is actually buried under the main altar? That Louisiana State University keeps a live tiger on campus? That Caltech freshmen are encouraged to try to vandalize the dorm rooms of seniors—who fortify them like bunkers to weather the siege?)

We also include short, representative incidents and evaluations of the state of political discourse, intellectual freedom, and free speech at the colleges we cover. These "red," "yellow" and "green" lights serve as shorthand for the state of civic liberty at a school. They are drawn from reports by students and faculty and journalistic accounts of the sometimes disturbing degree to which administrators and faculty members employ their institutional power to promote their own private ideological agendas. These sidebars should help students and parents select which colleges are appropriate for them.

Finally, we provide some "vital stats" that we believe help bring into focus the character of each institution. These statistics reflect the best and most up-to-date information available as we went to press. Beware: the costs of tuition and room and board often increase between press time and the following school year. Also note that the precise metrics provided by schools for some statistical categories are not always the same, especially when it comes to schools' average standardized test scores.

As Mark Twain once quipped, "There are lies, damned lies, and statistics." We agree. Statistics can be spun like sugar into almost any shape. Take the "courses taught by graduate TAs" question, for example. While this number (which many schools are not willing to give) provides a rough idea of how much TAs are being used, it is almost always deceptively low. Typically, it does not include the discussion sections attached to large lecture courses, which are usually taught by TAs. Nor does it accurately reflect the percentage of students taught by TAs over the course of a semester, a statistic that we have never seen reported. Not that all TAs are necessarily bad teachers. But it's important to realize that you will probably spend a lot more of your time at some schools talking to harried graduate students than to the Nobel Prize winners featured on the front of the college viewbook.

As always, it is our hope that *Choosing the Right College 2008–9* will do a better job than ever of informing students, parents, grandparents, teachers, and guidance counselors about the state of higher education at 134 of our nation's top schools. We offer it with our sincere belief that it is the most incisive and compelling college guide available.

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