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## Jeffersonian Ideals: Practical in the United States of the 21st Century?

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JEFFERSONIAN IDEALS:  
PRACTICAL IN THE UNITED STATES OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY?

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors

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University of Northern Iowa  
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This Study by: Charles Gustafson

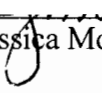
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## I. Introduction

Thomas Jefferson was President of the United States, a statesman, lawyer, scientist, author of the Declaration of Independence, and a proponent of education in the United States of America. Understandably, his educational philosophy is inextricably linked to his political philosophy, as Gordon C. Lee puts it, “. . . liberty without enlightenment seemed to Jefferson a contradiction in concepts, an anomaly,” (Lee 1961, 2-3). Thomas Jefferson emphasized the importance of education in the United States, as Roy J. Honeywell puts it, “His educational plans were a very necessary part of his political and social reforms, and his educational ideas were as vital as were his political theories,” (Honeywell 1931, xv). Jefferson was progressive, he had many ideas and plans which continue to live even today. It is important to remember that the ideas Jefferson proffered were consistent with the world he lived in, so to find use for such ideas it is necessary to tailor them to our time.

Jeffersonian ideals concerning education have influenced the system we currently have, and inspired scores of academics to build upon the suggestions of Thomas Jefferson. One of the most prominent contributors to American educational theory and practice, John Dewey, calls Thomas Jefferson “our first great democrat” (Dewey 2-3, 1940). Frank Shuffleton makes clear how highly another President of the United States thought of Thomas Jefferson, and briefly explains why; Shuffleton says, “When John F. Kennedy, in addressing a gathering of Nobel laureates, observed that the only previous time so much talent had been seated at a White House table was when Thomas Jefferson dined alone, he implicitly recognized that Jefferson’s thinking

was as important for American democratic life as his political achievements were,” (Shuffleton 1986, 472).

Many avenues could be taken when considering the influence of this great American. However, the focus of this essay is this: How are Jeffersonian ideals on education relevant and useful in the United States we live in today? Thomas Jefferson was a founding father, whose ideas helped shape the America of his day and ours. Education can be linked to many prominent social issues in the United States today: social mobility, leadership, poverty, and more. Regardless of the current state of education in the United States, there is always room for improvement; to improve, it is necessary to examine the past and the present, in order to create a beneficial framework for enhancing what is already in place. To search for new insights, it is necessary to explore Jeffersonian ideals relating to education as well as Jefferson’s overall political philosophy—the two, for Jefferson, are inseparable. Additionally, a review the current state of education in the United States will be helpful to recognize which Jeffersonian ideals are still present, which have fallen by the wayside, and to gain an overall idea of how to improve the current state of education in the United States today. By reviewing the educational contributions of someone who played such an instrumental role in the formation of the system we have today, and coupling this information with more contemporary information regarding American education in a more recent context, it will be possible to make a realistic assessment and suggestion for the course of future education in the United States of America.

## II. Literature Review

### A. Thomas Jefferson's Contributions

#### 1. *Political Thought*

Thomas Jefferson's political thought covered so many issues that it would be a near impossibility to try to summarize it all. This essay will focus on several of the most important overall themes of Jeffersonian thought, particularly in relation to education. Jefferson was in favor of egalitarianism, though not everyone is equal in talents and abilities (or even result), we are all essentially equal. Jefferson believed, and articulated this belief in the Declaration of Independence, that all people have certain rights which they cannot be deprived of, simply because we are human. Wealth, education, and station in life should have no influence on these rights. Similarly, Jefferson favored a true meritocracy, a society in which upward social mobility, particularly to positions of leadership, would fall in the hands of those who are truly good and qualified, not just those who are born into privilege. Natural talents, thought Jefferson, should have greater emphasis placed on them than a family name or a title. A fundamental component of the aforementioned beliefs is that participation and awareness of politics and government by all citizens is foundational to a successful democratic republic. If the people are not actively involved in politics, a democracy means little. These three ideals—egalitarianism, meritocracy, and a need for qualified leadership—come together to form the ideal at the center of focus in this essay: equal education for all people.

Jefferson asserts, in a letter to John Adams, that there are two different types of aristocracy, and that only one of these groups is fit to govern. Jefferson describes the first type as, ". . . a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and

talents” (Jefferson 1975, 534). This is the aristocracy that Jefferson thinks should be in power. The second type of aristocracy Jefferson discusses is, “artificial aristocracy, founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents . . .” (Jefferson 1975, 534). This seems to hold true, both in Jefferson’s time and currently. Some leaders have the necessary skills to govern, yet others have come to their position of power through considerable wealth, or name recognition by the public. Jefferson makes a crucial point in stating, “Worth and genius would thus have been sought out from every condition of life, and completely prepared by education for defeating the competition of wealth and birth for public trusts,” (Jefferson [1813] 1999, 189). It is these people, Jefferson posits, that are in the best position to govern and work towards public ends, because they have proven themselves as truly the most competent, not simply the most wealthy or from the most prominent families.

Throughout this letter Jefferson maintains that the truly qualified citizens, with the proper education, could find themselves in positions of power, not only the wealthy. This is noteworthy for a few reasons; first, Jefferson seems to recognize that there are many situations in which those who truly are intelligent or capable are denied opportunities because of their social status at birth; secondly, Jefferson is certain that an educated and virtuous populace is vital to the continuance of democracy.

Jefferson states that typically the people will in fact elect the natural aristocracy, that even if the occasional artificial aristoi is elected it will not be overly detrimental in the overall scheme of things. Jefferson’s offered solution to ensure that the true aristocracy rules is a system of small republics, each about the size of a township. Within the wards there would be free public education, and the best students would

move on to a secondary school which would be funded by the populace. The most outstanding students from this level would go on to the university. Jefferson believed that this education would qualify people to put their support behind the natural aristocracy. Also, these small republics would be self-governing, with a leader at the head of each district. These wardens would participate in meetings of all state wardens, thus ensuring that the public voice from each little republic would be heard.

In a second letter, this one to James Madison, Thomas Jefferson expresses his feelings towards the division of property. Jefferson argues that the wealthy are in possession of far too much land for the small amount of people which comprise the wealthy class. Jefferson observed that the vast majority of poor people owned very little land or none at all. Another issue discussed by Jefferson is the amount of people who want to work but cannot find jobs. Jefferson attributes this to the large amounts of unused land owned by the rich. The gains the rich would enjoy by cultivating this land would be so minuscule in comparison to the wealth they already have, that the wealthy do not find it worth it to use these lands, leaving many of the poor without opportunities to work.

Jefferson stresses the importance of legislators dividing property in a better manner. Instead of the typical practice of the day, with property inheritance going to the oldest son, Jefferson suggests a system in which property is divided equally among all children. However, Jefferson does recognize that, “. . . an equal division of property is impracticable.” (Jefferson 1988, 100). An emphasis is placed on the fact that working and living off of the land are fundamental human rights; this right is being infringed upon by systems which allow the wealthy to control so much of the land that a portion of the



poor have no land. Jefferson also discusses a system of progressive taxation, based upon the amount of land owned, with those who own more land being taxed more heavily. The passage ends with, "The small landholders are the most precious part of a state." (Jefferson 1988, 100). This accentuates Jefferson's ideal that all people should be entitled to some patch of land to call their own, even if it is just a small amount.

Thomas Jefferson proposed revised laws to the Virginia legislature banning primogeniture and entail, which is another illustration of his desire for a more equal, merit-based society. As William Sterne Randall explains it, "Primogeniture and entail had concentrated wealth and power in approximately 140 families in Tidewater Virginia, whose property by law descended to the eldest son unless a will provided for other sons, daughters, or other heirs," (Randall 1994, 288). Yet this was contradictory to Jefferson's fundamental beliefs; Randall contends, "A class system [Jefferson] argued, was against the laws of nature," (Randall 1994, 288). This proposal is a natural extension of Jefferson's belief in a meritorious, educated, and equal society.

## *2. Educational Philosophy*

For Jefferson, educational philosophy was as important as overall political philosophy, and the two are inextricably linked and must be understood in light of one another. Jefferson was a proponent of liberty for the people; eventually, his dream was realized as the United States was born as an independent and free nation. The notions Jefferson held pertaining to education were almost exclusively aimed at engendering the actualization of the overarching political philosophy he prescribed to. That is, Jefferson's educational views were all geared toward increasing social mobility in an

egalitarian society based on meritocratic values. Additionally, Jefferson's educational philosophy aimed at creating and continuing a healthy and prosperous democracy.

Education is necessary for the people to resist tyranny and oppression. Thomas Jefferson wrote, in a letter to General George Washington, "I do most anxiously wish to see the highest degree to education given to the higher degrees of genius and to all degrees of it, so much as my enable them to read and understand what is going on the world and keep their part of it going right," (Jefferson [1786] 1931, 13). Throughout his life Thomas Jefferson was a supporter of meritocracy, and yearned to see the most qualified students continue their education to the highest levels available. Indeed, Jefferson had even formulated a plan for those who would not be able to access traditional means of education—the public library—Jefferson wrote,

The people of every country, are the only safe guardians of their own rights, and are the only instruments which can be used for their destruction. To avoid this they should be instructed to a certain degree. I have often thought that nothing would do more extensive good at small expense than the establishment of a small circulating library in every county, to consist of a few well-chosen books, to be lent to the people of the country under such regulations as would secure their secure return in due time. (Jefferson [1809] 1931, 24)

Education, for Thomas Jefferson, was vital to the lifeblood of democracy; without educating all people, there is no way to be certain that elected officials will be the very best and brightest. Jefferson viewed education as necessary for the proper functioning of democracy; education is the gateway in American society through which one must pass to be able to thrive. There are natural inequalities among human beings, that much cannot be refuted. However, allowing institutionalized inequality to exacerbate these natural inequalities is a violation of the fundamental rights set out in the

Declaration of Independence. When a person attends an inadequate school, economic opportunities are often limited for that person. When economic opportunities are so limited, a person typically has to do what is necessary just to get by; owing to the difficulty of elevating one's social status without an education, people tend to have children born into circumstances very similar to the conditions they themselves were born into. In this way, educational and economic inequalities become cyclical, condemning people to live without any real freedom of opportunity, and condemning the children of such people as well.

Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr. explains one facet of Thomas Jefferson's educational philosophy concisely; Wagoner, Jr. states, "In Jefferson's mind, the very survival of the ideal of republican citizenship depended upon the spread of knowledge among the people. Whenever Jefferson looked to education in any form, he did so with the eye of a statesman concerned with the welfare and rights of the citizenry," (Wagoner, Jr. 2004, 27-28). Cameron Addis provides insight to another component of Jefferson's educational theory, claiming,

Jefferson's model for education was shaped like a pyramid, with a broad base at the bottom to encourage egalitarianism and opportunity. The pyramid shape symbolized Jefferson's overall view of the perfect republican society. Education would serve as a catalyst for upward social mobility—the way to create a natural, rather than hereditary, aristocracy. All white children would be educated sufficiently to transact business and vote responsibly in elections. (Addis 2003, 32)

This excerpt brings up another important issue worth mentioning—the role of race in Jefferson's political and educational philosophy. The concept will be examined more fully in a later section, but for now it is sufficient to note that Jefferson's ideas were for white males, because in his time that is who comprised the citizenry.

Jefferson favored accessibility of public schools to all, even those unable to pay. Despite his good fortune, Jefferson was aware that most other Americans were not in a position to finance an extravagant education—or even any education at all. Jefferson's proposals included plans to educate some of the most qualified students, even those too poor to afford an education, using state funds. Basically, Jefferson advocated for a type of education system that we have in place today; Roy J. Honeywell writes:

As free instruction in the primary school was intended to make intelligent citizens of the poorest children, without any stigma of pauperism, so the selection of the most promising among these for free higher education was to open the doors of opportunity so that exceptional ability might be developed and brought into the public service in spite of poverty. As it was intended to create the intelligent and self-reliant citizenship necessary in any democracy and to free the state from dependence upon wealth and aristocracy for the leadership, equally necessary in a democracy, it was an essential part of the revolutionary program, intended to perpetuate and complete the reforms already begun. (Honeywell 1931, 25)

The discussion of Jeffersonian ideals is directed towards this particular ideal, that of education for all people.

### *3. Educational Proposals*

One of Jefferson's greatest contributions to education in the United States is largely overlooked, James B. Conant asserts, "We take for granted our public elementary schools, free for rich and poor alike and largely locally financed, as Jefferson advocated for many years," (Conant 42, 1962). The beliefs in egalitarianism, meritocracy, social mobility, and qualified leadership were manifested in A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge. This bill was proposed to the Virginia legislature, and contains many aspects of Jefferson's views on education. Jefferson wrote:

. . . whence it becomes expedient for promoting the publick [sic] happiness that those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens, and that they should be called to that charge without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition or circumstance; but the indigence of the greater number disabling them from so educating, at their own expense, those of their children whom nature hath fitly formed and disposed to become useful instruments for the public, it is better that such should be sought for and educated at the common expense of all, than that the happiness of all should be confided to the weak or wicked . . .  
(Honeywell 1931, 199-200)

This section of the bill reflects a few of Jefferson's most adamant beliefs. First, the education of all is important in that it directly leads to the benefit of society, not just those being educated. Additionally, the passage demonstrates the need for truly good and qualified leaders, not just those who have found their way into positions of power by luck, wealth, or birth. Happiness is mentioned a few times in this section, as an illustration that the inclusion of happiness in the Declaration of Independence does not only apply to individual and personal happiness; rather, happiness occurs communally, and Jefferson finds that the most expedient means of fostering such happiness is to educate the populace, rich and poor alike. Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr. points out that, ". . . as with the bills that abolished the practices of entails and primogeniture, the Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, had it passed in the form Jefferson devised and proved effective in practice, might have had some effect in enhancing social mobility by increasing educational opportunity," (Wagoner, Jr. 34, 2004). Wagoner, Jr. simplifies Jefferson's intentions behind this bill, stating, ". . . Jefferson was less concerned with the methods of pedagogy than with purpose and system. His primary concern was to create convenient and adequately supported schools that would provide

the general population with the skills and understandings necessary to perform their duties and protect their rights as citizens,” (Wagoner, Jr. 2004, 35).

The second of Jefferson’s proposals to be covered is one he considered among his most profound accomplishments, the founding of the University of Virginia. Jefferson worked feverishly on this project, and the University remembers him for it to this day; the school’s website says, “[Jefferson] wished the publicly-supported school to have a national character and stature. Jefferson envisioned a new kind of university, one dedicated to educating leaders in practical affairs and public service rather than for professions in the classroom and pulpit exclusively. It was the first nonsectarian university in the United States and the first to use the elective course system,” (UVA website, accessed 29 April 2013). Here again we see a longstanding contribution to education in the United States, as all states have public universities now, often offering reasonably priced tuition. An innovation in itself, one cannot help but wonder if we would have institutions of higher learning unaffiliated with religious denominations or offering electives without Jefferson’s contributions.

## B. Current Issues

There are literally endless flaws in the current system of education in the United States that could be considered. For the purpose of this article, two in particular will be given particular attention: the inequality of education in the United States based on race and socioeconomic status; and the gradual decline of civic education in the United States, though this does tie into the overall inequality of education.

## *1. Educational Inequality*

There remains an overall inequality of education, we do not have a true meritocracy, and some children are disadvantaged simply because of where they are raised. Thomas Jefferson proposed a system of education in the United States where all young people would receive an education of roughly the same caliber. In his day this was a novel idea, considering that even the most basic education was rarely free and anything beyond that always came with a cost. To the outsider it may even seem like we have reached this goal—all children do receive free education through high school. However, simply attending school is not synonymous with receiving an education. Schools are far from equal, and in many cases they do lend a helping hand to the perpetuation of inequality we so frequently observe in the United States. The United States still has a failed system in regards to equal preparation to all for leadership positions; one need look no further than the composition of our elected leaders to see that this is not the case. Additionally, and perhaps most alarming, the cyclical nature of this problem is practically inescapable. Children who are poorly educated have little to no opportunity for upward social mobility; thus, when these poorly educated children become adults and have children, their children are often educated in sub-par schools as well, and the problem persists.

Preschool is essentially a “luxury” of the middle class, yet research shows that it is a vital component to development. Middle class Americans can typically afford preschool for their children, but the less well-off struggle much more, and oftentimes are incapable of paying to send their children to preschool. Obviously, there needs to be a shift in understanding regarding preschool. No longer can it be a luxury that only the

privileged may enjoy. Currently preschool serves as a head start for some, and to great benefit. But the other side is not so pleasant. For those who cannot afford preschool, it serves little more purpose than setting them behind their peers during a time crucial to social and intellectual development. The means of fostering equality in preschool education is far from agreed upon, but healthy debate, academic studies, and even some trial and error could all open the door to a more equal distribution of preschool education in the United States.

Julia Herman and Melissa Lazarin offer some helpful insights on how much of a problem preschool actually is. The problem is evident, Herman and Lazarin state:

Children in low-income families are significantly less likely to be ready for school by age 5 and are also less likely to be enrolled in preschool. In almost every state enrollment of children below the poverty line lags behind the general population. Nationwide 60 percent of all 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in preschool, compared to less than 50 percent of children below the poverty line. In total, more than 1 million low-income children do not attend any type of preschool program. (Herman and Lazarin 2013)

The authors note that even in states where there is federal funding for preschools, these schools offered as an aid to those unable to pay for preschool out of pocket are often of a much lower quality than other preschools.

## *2. Decline in Civic Education*

Civic education can be understood as educating the populace to be active and engaged democratic citizens. In a sense, democracy does not mean much at all if people do not participate in the democratic process. Recent trends show that civic education is on the decline. A significant factor in Jefferson's advocacy for public



education was the need to have an educated citizenry to effectively perpetuate democracy. Qualified leaders, educated voters, and the resistance of tyranny and oppression all stem from a citizenry engaged in public life. Social mobility can also be linked to democratic participation; policies reflect the wishes of those who are active in pursuing them, and the research shows that those groups traditionally underrepresented in American politics are precisely the ones seeing the most rapid and dramatic decline in civic education. Additionally, overarching trends in American education can be seen in civic education, such as racial and socioeconomic disparities in quality of education. For these reasons, civic education is vital to preserving the Jeffersonian ideals of education and democracy.

Education is vital to democracy, that much is sure. But education is vital to all facets of life, and the uniform education Jefferson was so fond of is not distributed evenly today. Nor is civic education as widely taught as Jefferson would have wished. In fact, civic education in the United States is on the decline. Though there is some division among scholars in how to combat the decline in civic education and the subsequent lower rates of civic participation among young people, there is no debate that civic education is, irrefutably, in decline (Campbell 2009; Flanagan and Levine 2010; Kahne and Middaugh 2008; Levine 2009; Stern 2009; and Walling 2009). Galston (2003) states, “Only 33% of freshman think keeping up with politics is important, down from 60% in 1966 . . . Only 16% say they frequently discuss politics, down from 33% in 1966. Acquisition of political knowledge from traditional media sources is way down, . . .” (Galston 2003, 5). Scholars are highly interested in turning

this trend around because being politically involved and engaged is essential to the function of democracy (Flanagan and Levine 2010).

There are several different methods proposed to improve the quality of civic education students receive. First, there is a group of scholarly literature that suggests classroom, debate, and simulation as a means of increasing students' knowledge and propensity to participate in civic life (Campbell 2008; Galston 2003; Walling 2007). Second, is the contention that the inclusion in the classroom of low-socioeconomic status students, as well as students of all races, ethnicities, and backgrounds, is the best way to reverse the decline in civic education and participation (Campbell 2008; Flanagan and Levine 2010; Kahne and Middaugh 2008). The third group of scholars propose service learning as a means of increasing knowledge and involvement of youths in the political realm (Galston 2001; Levine 2011; Mattson 2003). Finally, and this group includes many of the scholars which support other theories to fix this problem, is the body of literature which points to higher quality civics courses and teachers as the way to improve civic education and involvement in the United States. Each theory, in an attempt to determine the best method of re-involving America's young people in political life through education, will be examined thoroughly.

One theory of how to better educate students and increase their inclination to participate in civic life after high school graduation is to ensure an open classroom climate, featuring open discussion, debate, and simulations (Campbell 2008; Galston 2003; Walling 2007). Contrary to prior scholarly literature, it is asserted that simply receiving civic education is not enough; the quality of civic education is of vital importance to the formation of participatory habits among young Americans (Campbell

2008; Galston 2003). Studies have shown that students subject to open classroom discussion, as well as students who experience simulations of government, are more inclined to participate in civic life (Campbell 2008; Walling 2007).

Campbell uses the 1999 IEA Civic Education Study (CIVED), which includes a sample of 2,811 students age 14, and the results of this study show the importance of an open classroom climate in relation to the likelihood of future participation (Campbell 2008). Campbell explains his findings in this manner: "While past research has shown that taking civics courses correlates with greater civic knowledge, the above analysis suggests that it is actually the nature of political discussion in the classroom . . . which has the effect" (Campbell 2008, 450). Another extremely important finding of Campbell's study is, ". . . an open classroom climate correlates with an increased likelihood that adolescents envision themselves as informed voters, . . ." (Campbell 2008, 451).

One reason that many classrooms are lacking this open discussion format is the fear of teachers and school boards to spark controversy by discussing issues which not all people approve (Galston 2003, 9). Galston reinforces the importance of adequate civic education in the assertion, "Civic knowledge promotes political participation. All other things being equal, the more knowledge people have, the more likely they are to participate in civic and political affairs" (Galston 2003, 10). Galston cites methods that The Civic Mission of Schools proposes for schools to effectively implement civic education. These methods include stressing the importance of being politically engaged, as well as, ". . . active learning opportunities that offer students the chance to engage in discussions of relevant issues and to take part in activities that help put a

'real-life' perspective on classroom learning; . . ." (Galston 2003, 10-11). Galston also refers to the most effective methods found by The Civic Mission of Schools report, such as allowing school government, ensuring teachers have the appropriate level of civic education, and encouraging all students to be politically engaged (Galston 2003, 11).

Another form of promoting active participation in youths is through programs such as *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution*, which, ". . . is designed to teach students about their constitutional heritage so that they will become knowledgeable, thoughtful citizens of our democracy, and it does so in a way that is engaging and exciting" (Walling 2007, 285). This program can be an entire curriculum, or simply small activities that can be worked into courses. Students simulate a congressional hearing, in which they, ". . . demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of constitutional principles and then evaluate, take, and defend positions on current and historical issues" (Walling 2007, 289). Walling points to a Center for Civic Education study, which polled *We the People* alumni and found that, "Ninety-two percent of alumni reported voting in November 2004, in contrast to 78% of those surveyed in the NES [National Election Studies] study" (Walling 2007, 289).

In-class discussion and encouraging active participation in the classroom, in order to teach students how government really works and help them develop a familiarity with political engagement, is a means of showing students the importance of civic engagement and increases their propensity to be involved after they graduate (Campbell 2008; Galston 2003). Simulations of government, as well as introducing curricula that assists students in building a relationship with our political system, also increase the inclination to participate in civic life (Walling 2007). In sum, this body of

thought asserts that higher levels of involvement in classroom activities, and activities aimed at simulating the political scheme are directly related to how students perceive government, as well as how involved these students will continue to be throughout their lives (Campbell 2008; Galston 2003; Walling 2007).

Another segment of the literature stresses that non-white and low socioeconomic status students are less likely to have classroom experiences conducive to forming an inclination to participate in civic life; therefore, measures must be taken to ensure that such students are subject to these experiences (Campbell 2008; Kahne and Middaugh 2008). A key portion of this theory is the idea that the expected level of education students believe they will attain is highly related to political engagement; the higher the expected level of education, the more likely the student is to be politically engaged in the future. (Campbell 2008; Kahne and Middaugh 2008). For civic education to be effective, students of all races, ethnicities, religions, and socioeconomic statuses must be treated equally in the classroom, and this could compensate for other disadvantages the students may have outside of school (Campbell 2008, 441-442).

Campbell reports the finding that, “. . . classroom climate has the greatest impact on young people of low SES” (Campbell 2008, 449). Campbell’s data also shows that, “. . . the lower the level of education an adolescent expects to obtain, the greater the impact of an open classroom climate” (Campbell 2008, 451), though it is made clear that open classroom climate still has an effect on higher socioeconomic status students, just not such a significant effect as is seen in their counterparts. Open discussion in the classroom is said to benefit students with low socioeconomic status or low levels of

expected education, and it can make up for other disadvantages the students have outside of school (Campbell 2008).

Kahne and Middaugh's study of California high school seniors revealed some crucial differences in educational experiences between students of different races (Kahne and Middaugh 2008). It was found that white students have more encompassing experiences in their high school civics courses; African American, Asian, and Latino students reported less open discussion and fewer opportunities for simulations than white students (Kahne and Middaugh 2008). It is contended that schools are making this problem of inequality worse by isolating groups of students with lower levels of expected education (Kahne and Middaugh 2008). Though Kahne and Middaugh differ from Campbell's contention that students with low expected education levels will benefit more from their classroom experiences, they are in concurrence that something must be done to stop the problem and provide civic education of equal quality to all students (Campbell 2008; Kahne and Middaugh 2008). Flanagan and Levine (2010) sum this conundrum up simply: ". . . opportunities for civic engagement are not evenly distributed by social class or by racial and ethnic group, and wide disparities in political participation exist," (Flanagan and Levine 2010, 173).

Some literature on this topic presents the implementation of service learning as an effective means of teaching students the importance of civic education. The definition of service learning, according to The National Center for Educational Statistics, is, ". . . curriculum-based community service that integrates classroom instruction with community service activities," (Galston 2001, 229). Galston cites several prior studies which point to the fact that those young people who are involved in

service learning are more inclined to participate later in life (Galston 2001). The majority of service learning programs mentioned are college-level courses, which means the programs do not extend influence to those students who do not expect to receive higher education. Peter Levine (2011), points out another serious flaw in service learning, “. . . political theorists have criticized ‘service’ as a core component of citizenship, arguing . . . that it encourages a distinction between the active server and the passive recipient, that it marginalizes civic engagement as something to be done temporarily and unprofessionally, not as an aspect of one’s life work, and it ignores questions of power,” (Levine 2011, 14).

This service learning is far more effective in prompting future participation if explicit discussion of the service itself actually takes place in the classroom after it is completed (Galston 2001, 230). This idea is reinforced by Mattson, “Students enrolled in these programs perform service but also discuss what they are doing in the classroom,” (Mattson 2003, 41). Mattson admits that the effective service learning programs discussed are rarities, stating that, “Most service programs are pressed for time and barely succeed in getting their participants to perform the necessary number of service hours, let alone talk and think about their work,” (Mattson 2003, 44). This is a key flaw, “Service program leaders need to think critically and thoughtfully about how they can relate experiences in public service to politics,” (Mattson 2003, 44), but this seems unlikely due to the time constraints.

The final school of thought regarding how to improve civic education and increase political involvement of young people is an increase in the volume of high quality civics courses and ensuring that those instructing these courses are, in fact,

qualified to do so. For instance, Campbell's idea of open classroom climate is hinged upon the ability of teachers to operate their classrooms in this manner, paying special attention to be inclusionary and to address multiple views on each issue discussed (Campbell 2008). Galston (2003) furthers this notion, asserting that, ". . . studies indicate that a significant percentage of history and social studies teachers, who typically end up leading civics classes, have little formal preparation for that task, (Galston 2003, 9.)

Problems have arisen from the No Child Left Behind Act, which encourages teachers to teach to a standardized test, which does not include civics education, as it is not a section on such tests (Galston 2003; Kahne and Middaugh 2008). Stern (2009) cites, ". . . to produce informed citizens . . ." (Stern 2009, 212), as one of the reasons for public education, as well as pointing out a need for more civic education outside the classroom, due to the, "teacher quality-quantity quandary," (Stern 2009, 228). Walling's desire for the implementation of programs such as *We the People*, as well as Galston and Kahne and Middaugh's claims that standardized testing is partly responsible for the decline in civic education, are indicative of the need for a policy shift toward providing better civics courses for America's youth.



### **III. Discussion and Analysis**

#### **A. Differences Between Jefferson's Ideas and Our Current System**

A fundamental difference between Jefferson's vision and our own system is that "everyone," to Jefferson, typically included only white males. Jefferson would not have envisioned the system of free and, to a degree, equal education that we currently have. Cameron Addis claims, "Jefferson's own plan was limited to white males, but the basic thrust of using public schools to offset aristocratic privilege remains the strength of the current system when it works. Today even the most strident conservatives would not openly disagree that education should provide opportunities for upward mobility," (Addis 141, 2003). This is significant; even though it often appears that education is a setback for the underprivileged, it truly can be a gateway. This must be taken with a grain of salt, for there is evidence showing that minorities and low-socioeconomic status students tend to receive lower quality education than their white, high-socioeconomic status counterparts. On paper our system has evolved quite a lot from Jefferson's time, but in practice there is still a rift between the highest and lowest levels of education, with race continually presenting itself as a fundamental aspect of this issue.

There is not, in the form that Jefferson proposed, a uniform system of advancement through the American education system today. There is no ward system with the very best pupils from each ward being selected to move forward with their education on the taxpayer's dollar. However, there is financial assistance offered to those who qualify in the form of loans and scholarships. This does not ensure that the very best students are being identified and propelled to the uppermost echelons of education, but it does enable many people to go to college who otherwise probably

would not be able to. Thomas Jefferson suggested a system with three years of free education for all citizens, and today we have a system very much advanced from this initial idea. Kindergarten through twelfth grade is free and available to all, an additional ten years of education has been added from what Jefferson suggested 200 years ago.

B. Which of Jefferson's suggestions would be or are still useful today?

Jefferson's proposal to the Virginia state legislature was a foundation of free and universal education for all. This idea is alive today; though much of this project could be interpreted as an attack on American education, it is not. No matter one's station in life, and even though the quality may be lacking, everyone in the United States is entitled to a public education, at government expense, until they receive their high school diploma. The very best public schools in America far surpass much of the rest of the world, a fantastic achievement. The real change needs to be a shift in focus towards bringing the rest of American schools up to this level, keeping them there, and gradually improving as a single unit rather than as a competing league of funding and acclaim-starved institutions.

Meritocratic advancement through the education system for the most promising students regardless of financial status, as Jefferson envisioned, is simply not a reality today. Undoubtedly, many of the most qualified and promising students are overlooked each day in the United States, because they are never given the chance to hone their skills and refine their intellect, due to the school they attend. Paying more attention to this issue could help solve the problem, for a few reasons. For one, identifying promising students early on could help facilitate their development even more. Also,

students who know that they have a chance of getting a college education, even if they cannot afford it, would probably be more inclined to stay on track and succeed scholastically.

Research indicates that civic education is declining in prevalence and quality throughout the United States. If American students are not educated in how to be citizens in a democracy, how can they be expected to produce the most qualified, virtuous, and effective leaders possible? Aside from civic education, if education in general varies from school to school, what certainty can there be that all students receive a viable chance to become leaders in any field, much less politics? Again, the cyclical nature of the education dilemma is noticeable; if one segment of the population receives a better education than the rest, those students will most likely produce the leaders of tomorrow, and those students left behind will have no elected officials representing them, making their voice heard. Jefferson's contention that education is central to the realization of a successful democracy is still very much alive, and this matter needs to become a matter of vital importance as the United States moves forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### C. Recommendations

What is important here is the most basic aspect of Thomas Jefferson's educational philosophy—free and equal education for all children. The idea does need some tailoring to fit our more modern society, but the crux of the matter is that this notion truly has not been actualized in the 200 years since Jefferson proposed it. An admittedly obvious means of bettering education in the United States would be to

reduce the disparity in dollars spent per pupil in public schools. One study found significant differences in per-pupil spending depending on the racial composition of the school. The study displays the data several different ways, and each depiction makes the truth very clear—non-white students are, by and large, shortchanged by government funding for education. Pumping money into presently affluent areas whilst barely keeping struggling schools afloat appears to be blatantly disregarding the conviction of equality embraced by this country.

Civic education in the United States has fallen by the wayside. This is unfortunate for a few reasons. First, in order to have meritorious and virtuous leaders, the populace must be knowledgeable enough to make proper decisions. Otherwise the positions of leadership will go to those most willing to say what people want to hear, or most capable of purchasing advertising. A society of democratically educated citizens would also promote social cohesion and a sense of community. People are more involved and inclined to participate if they feel that they have a stake in the results of politics. Instead of having those students already at the best schools receiving the best civic education while students elsewhere are having their programs cut to fund basic subject areas, civic education needs to be equal and top-notch everywhere. Leaving some students without a base of knowledge in democratic citizenry is a gateway to an elitist society, one in which those who are already the best off continue to prosper, while those left behind are pushed further and further away.

#### D. Limitations

There is a tremendous amount of literature on the subjects this work has covered. As such, it would be nearly impossible to conduct a comprehensive review of the literature. Something as complex as the American system of education has countless academics, politicians, and laypeople offering suggestions for improvement, and it would be impractical to include all different accounts in this domain. I am not a policymaker, so it must be noted that my recommendations are simplistic. Indeed, the recommendations made in the previous section are idealistic—perhaps nothing more than a quixotic pursuit. However, until it is clear for certain that these means are impossible, they are worth considering, if only as a foundation for future policy.

## **IV. Conclusion**

### **A. Summary**

This has been an attempt to explore Jeffersonian ideals of education, compare them with the current system of education in the United States, and review ways the two have been, have not been, or could be reconciled. In particular, this essay is meant to call attention to the vision of one of America's founding fathers and demonstrate how that view, despite being progressive at its time and in accordance with the path the United States has gone down, is not being realized in the classroom today. By reviewing Jefferson's writings, secondary literature on Jefferson, as well as current research on the state of education today, it has been shown that some hints of Jeffersonian ideals are still very present. This is significant because right or wrong, conflicting views or not, we can never stop talking about education. Education in the United States has boundless potential, and by continuing the discussion improvements can always be made.

### **B. Major Findings**

The most significant finding of this project is the realization that the Jeffersonian proposal of free and equal education for all is, at least theoretically, the framework for the current system of education in the United States. However, it has also been shown that there remain enormous disparities in education between racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. The research has demonstrated that there are ways to alleviate this inequality. If the means of improvement suggested are not practical, then more work must be done to find new methods of more equally educating American students.

### C. Significance

As has been mentioned, the significance of this work is in part that it is a continuation of the discussion on education in the United States. Building a better framework for providing an equal, high quality education to all of America's youth, is a work in progress, and it always will be. Thomas Jefferson's ideas led to the public school system that we enjoy today. Perhaps it is time to revisit his suggestions again, in order to more equally distribute education to our young people.

### D. Future Research

This is far from a comprehensive work; as has been mentioned, vast amounts of literature exist on the topics discussed here. As such, there is always room to expand the review of literature, particularly in a field which has near-constant contributions to the body of publications, such as this. Additionally, it might be helpful to consult more political thinkers to gain supplementary insights or even conflicting viewpoints. Potential writers who might be useful include Adam Smith, Jean-Jacque Rousseau, John Dewey, John Locke, and many more.

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