

Chapter 5

Reed: A Middle Course

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The idea of Reed College was conceived October 17, 1887, when Thomas Lamb Eliot wrote to Simeon Gannett Reed and his wife Amanda:

There is always something to busy to us, always something to develop. I want you to celebrate some of these birthdays by founding a Reed Institute of lectures and art and music and museum. It will need a mind to run it. (Ritz, 1990:7)

After a few months, Eliot wrote another letter to the Reeds suggesting they provide for, “Some noble and wise philanthropies or services for your time and country, especially for the city and people among whom you live” (Ritz, 1990:7).

Thomas Lamb Eliot, pastor of the Portland, OR, First Unitarian Church, had moved West in 1867 from St. Louis, MO. His father had founded Washington University in St. Louis, where Thomas Lamb was a member of the first graduating class. He then attended Harvard, where he earned a graduate degree from the Divinity School in 1865. After arriving in Oregon, Eliot’s interest soon turned to the cultural and educational needs of fledgling Portland, and he determined that a fine college with stable financial backing would best support those needs.

Simeon Gannett Reed, originally from Abington, MA, amassed a fortune by moving up from proprietorship of a small merchandise store to investments in mining, farmlands and steel concerns throughout the West. On his death, he bequeathed almost all his property to his wife, Amanda. His will, taking advice from Eliot, stated:

Feeling as I do a deep interest in the future welfare and prosperity of the city of Portland, Oregon, where I have spent my business life and accumulated the property I possess, I would suggest to my wife that she devote some portion of my estate to benevolent objects, or to cultivation, illustration or development of the fine arts of said City of Portland, or to some other suitable purpose, which shall be of permanent value and contribute to the beauty of the city and to the intelligence, prosperity and happiness of its inhabitants. (Ritz, 1990:8)

Amanda Reed decided an institution of learning would benefit Portland and donated \$1,821,560 (current value, approximately \$50 million) for the establishment of Reed Institute in 1895.

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A Preference for Teaching

As an experimental college Reed is first and foremost a teaching institution. A strong commitment to excellence in teaching and a traditional liberal arts curriculum have supported Reed's consistent rankings among the very top colleges in the United States. The first college catalog in 1911 established the philosophy as follows: "Only those who want to work, and to work hard, and to gain the greatest possible benefit from their studies are welcomed" (Reed Catalog, 1911).

The 1990-91 Reed College catalog states that all faculty are expected to commit themselves primarily to teaching, with scholarly and scientific research aimed at furthering this primary goal.

Reed's instructional format is built on small and interactive classes, the cornerstone of its liberal arts program. Learning how to think, not what to think is fundamental to all classes. Students are not routinely given their grades, although they can see them on request, but are encouraged to work toward personal intellectual growth rather than letter ratings.

Demographic Profile

Reed's total enrollment just over 1,200 with a faculty of approximately 120 (about 70 percent full-time). Eighty percent of the full-time faculty have doctoral degrees. About 52 percent of all applicants are accepted, and a typical Reed freshman class is largely (83 percent) students from the top fifth of their high school graduating class. About 24 percent of these students come from private schools; 9 percent from parochial schools.

The 100-acre Reed campus is located in a residential area of Portland, five miles from the center of the city.

Reed has gained a particularly favorable reputation for assuring broad access to computer facilities for all members of the Reed community. An accreditation committee which visited Reed noted that campus computerization and access to computer use for students and faculty achieved a level rare in American higher education technology—networked and available to students 24-hours-a-day. (Osgood, 1985)

Financial Base

Tuition at Reed is high—approximately \$15,000 annually at this writing. Room and board add nearly another \$5,000. Reed's own funds are the primary source of student assistance, with individual student awards ranging from \$4,500 to \$14,000. About 45 percent of the students receive financial aid from the College, the average grant totalling more than \$6,000. Reed maintains its determination to extend its educational opportunities to all qualified students, regardless of family financial circumstances.

The board of trustees has a fundamental responsibility for the financial health and the ongoing success of the institution. A small group, including the College president, make major financial and planning decisions. In practice, many decisions are influenced by the students. This occurs through consultation with faculty and governmental bodies as well as with individual members of the community.

Student Involvement

The centerpiece of teaching is the seminar of 10 to 20 students, with an emphasis on personal initiative. Lauro Martines wrote about his teaching experience at Reed from 1958 to 1962:

In those years the College had about seven hundred students and a faculty of seventy. Class sizes ranged, in my experience, from six to fifteen students. My job was to teach first-year humanities, a team endeavor, which turned out to be, I now realize upon looking back, the most exciting course I have ever taught. . . It took half of their weekly class time: three hours of lectures and four more in conference. The lectures were given by twelve instructors from a variety of disciplines: literature, classics, philosophy, anthropology, history, and art history. All of instructors were expected to attend each other's lectures, and in term time, on any Monday, Wednesday, or Friday morning, we all, save for that day's lecture, could be found sitting at the back of the College chapel, the entire freshman class stretched out before us, all the way up to the front row of seats just under the podium. (Martines, 1985:194-95)

Reed students are assisted in finding summer jobs related to their academic focus through the Office of Career Advising and Job Placement. Most students also participate in a "community service project." These projects connect students with local volunteer projects such as the Student Mentoring Program (matching a college student with an eight-grade student who is at risk of dropping out of school), the Community Energy Project (students winterizing homes for low-income citizens), the Oregon Food Bank, and local high school tutoring in math, science, and English. Every community program is on a volunteer basis.

There are relatively few rules at Reed. The belief of this college is that an "Honor Principle" will invigorate and inspire academic and social life. The preamble of the Reed Community Constitution, framed in 1988-90, emphasizes a commitment to mutual respect and support:

We declare our commitment to responsible and honorable conduct in academic and community affairs, and we reaffirm one another's rights to freedom in inquiry and expression in coursework, scholarship, and day-to-day life of the Reed Community. Since such freedom requires an atmosphere of trust and mutual confidence, we further declare that dishonesty, intimidation, harassment, exploitation, and the use or threat or force are incompatible with the preservation of this freedom.

The Honor Principle rests basically on individual judgement and conscience, with minimal formal enforcement.

Reed students also have many opportunities to work closely with faculty members. Christopher Fast explained his student experience at Reed as follows:

Since my sophomore year I have had the opportunity to work together with a Reed professor, a well-known South Asia scholar, who edits an oriental studies journal. It has given me the opportunity to build a relationship with a professor based not only on academics but also on friendship too. (To Choose Reed, p. 8)

Reed requires a senior thesis for graduation, with thesis work stemming from the student's research experience in the major field and developed in consultation with faculty advisers.

Curriculum

Even though the curriculum has evolved for years, Reed has never compromised its central educational philosophy. All students must master a core of studies to ensure the growth of intellectual skills and to lay a cultural foundation for a broad education, including: a humanities program, devoted to a systematic interdisciplinary study of the basic texts of the Western intellectual tradition; an interdisciplinary survey to ensure breadth and integration of education; and a substantial project to synthesize the knowledge and skills learned in the major field.

One of the fundamental goals of Reed's program is that all students master certain intellectual skills which underpin a liberal education. Therefore, Reed requires that all freshmen enroll in a year-long interdisciplinary course on the classical and Judeo-Christian foundations of Western civilization. Some of the specific topics include specific social, religious and philosophical systems. Subsequently, the students begin to narrow to their major areas of study.

With the vision of pioneers, Simeon and Amanda Reed felt that the classic liberal curriculum spoke to the core of human knowledge and understanding. Therefore, the curriculum is designed as an honors program.

Teaching/Learning Approaches

Reed tries to have as many small classes, taught by Socratic methods, as possible. In fact, 90 percent of the classes have fewer than 25 students and one-third have fewer than ten. Students and professors have an opportunity to know each other as colleagues. The college believes that academic life takes precedence over social life. Prospective applicants are cautioned in by the College prospectus to anticipate limited extracurricular socializing and free time. Only on occasion do students go to Seattle or San Francisco for a well-deserved weekend break.

The College believes that students and professors are partners. They interact with one another through classes, labs, individual conferences and informal meetings. Students work hard for their own reasons, not to "come out ahead of" their classmates. Therefore, every activity focuses on learning outcomes. Many students find their greatest learning through their work in their major fields. Students are often invited to participate in faculty research.

Reed students have designed their majors in a wide variety of fields in traditional departments or in interdisciplinary combinations. The senior year at Reed typically provides the most meaningful learning experience. Each senior is encouraged to explore in depth a specific topic. To assist each student an individual work station in the library, laboratory or studio is provided during the thesis project.

Reed is noted for having committed instructors who bring their research into the classroom setting. The college mission suggests that a good education is the basis for a lifetime of learning and achievement. The Reed College Catalog (1990) states that faculty members possess not only fine minds and scholarly expertise but also strong commitments to teaching.

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