

Andrew D. White's Ideal University

*Transcript of a letter from Andrew Dickson White to Gerrit Smith, September 1, 1862.
The original letter is part of the Gerrit Smith Papers, Special Collections Research Center at
Syracuse University: http://library.syr.edu/digital/guides/s/smith_g.htm*

Syracuse
Sept. 1st 1862

Hon. Gerrit Smith

Dear Sir

I write you on a subject which occupied your thoughts in days gone by, and to wh., I hope, you may be turned again – the subject of a new University, worthy of our land and time.

To this my own most earnest thinking and planning have been given for years.

As a student at two American Colleges and at two European Universities, – and as Professor at a third American College my main aim has ever been to fit myself to help in founding and building a worthy American University.

And I have aimed not merely to urge others to work and give; – let me state to you, in confidence, what I am prepared to give and do myself.

Within eighteen months from this date I expect that, by the settlement of my father's estate, I shall be put in possession of about three hundred thousand dollars – of wh. over two hundred thousand are productively invested.

The greater part of this I am anxious to devote to the work above suggested; but the whole sum would not be enough – nor half enough.

It would suffice to build and fill a magnificent University Library – or to build and equip one of the finest Observatories or Laboratories in the world; but, expended on a whole University, – spread out to cover all the needs of all its departments, it would but give the Country one more petty begging institution – and of such there are too many already.

There is needed a truly great University.

First – to secure a place where the most highly prized instruction may be afforded to all – regardless of sex or color.

Secondly – to turn the current of mercantile morality wh. has so long swept through this land.

Thirdly – to temper & restrain the current of military passion wh. is to sweep thro. the land hereafter.

Fourthly – to afford an asylum for Science – where truth shall be sought for truth's sake – where it shall not be the main purpose of the Faculty to stretch or cut Science exactly to fit "Revealed Religion"

Fifthly – to afford a center and school for a new Literature – not graceful and indifferent to wrong but earnest, – nerved and armed to battle for the right.

Sixthly – to give a chance for instruction in Moral Philosophy, History and Political Economy unwarped to suit present abuses in Politics or Religion.

Seventhly – to secure the rudiments, at least, of a Legal training in which Legality shall not crush Humanity.

Eighthly – to modify the existing plan of education in matters of detail where it is in vain to hope improvement from the existing Universities.

Ninthly – to afford a nucleus around which liberally-minded men of learning now scattered throughout the land – comparatively purposeless and powerless, – could cluster, – making the institution a center from wh. ideas and men shall go forth to bless the nation during ages.

But, sir, an institution to do these things must be splendidly endowed. It must have the best of Libraries – Collections in different departments – Laboratory – Observatory – Botanical Garden perhaps, – Professorships – Lectureships

If the institution is to be effective in reform it must be on such a scale as to force the public to respect it – and it must present such decidedly superior attractions that students will flock to it – despite the pulpits.

To admit women and colored persons into a petty college would do good to the individuals concerned; but to admit them to a great University would be a blessing to the whole colored race and the whole female sex, – for the weaker colleges would be finally compelled to adopt the system.

To support pure Science by a struggling College with small endowment against the pressure of the existing Colleges would be vain. Pure Science must have a stronghold – and therein can we place Agassiz and the young men whom he is rearing.

To support reforms in the existing modes of instruction a feeble college would be powerless; – but a great University with such men as you could choose would be invincible

My soul is in this. The offer of my fortune and life for it is not the result of any sudden whim – it is the result of years of thought and yearning for better things in our beloved Country. No other bestowment seems to me to strike so deep or reach so far. None seems likely to be so long deferred if we cannot do something now.

Noble charities of the ordinary sort will always be cared for by Christians at large: – educational institutions of the ordinary sort are arising on all sides. Vassar's College endowed with 500,000 dollars for the Baptists – the Sheffield Scientific School at New Haven with 100,000 dollars endowment for the Congregationalists – Geneva College with over 200,000 dollars endowment from Mr. Ayrault, Mr. Swift & my father – for the Episcopalians.

But who shall give for this greater purpose? – Who shall establish a center of Education permeated with the true spirit of Christ, – yet unshackled The men who are able, willing and well inspired come rarely. Probably no one whose ideas on religion and education are so correct as yours, and whose power to give is so great as yours will stand in our state during the present century.

Were my fortune larger I should begrudge you the noble fame which would come by such a foundation, – as it is, I am ready to throw in the bulk of my property and to you shall be the glory.

May I ask now finally whether in view of the foregoing statements you can give me any encouragement to devote myself to the elaboration of views [views struck out in original] thoughts & plans with a view to a study of your own. [paragraph struck out in original]

May I ask then – if you encourage me to hope – even a little – for your leadership: – and if so may I ask for some of your thoughts & plans?

From some things wh. have been told me I am led to believe that, by independent processes of thinking, I have arrived at some theories and plans much like your own, and, should you encourage me, it would be the happiest duty of my life to exchange thoughts, and to elaborate my own proposals in view of yours.

I write in one of the darkest periods of our national history; but I remember that the great University of Leyden was founded when Holland was lying in ruins.

In the hope of living to see a true & liberal University in Western New York – acting with power on a regenerate nation I am, Sir, – with great respect

Heartily yours

And. D. White