

Starting Fresh in Westfield: The Roots of Westfield State University

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Do you know where Bates Hall got its name from, what about Davis Hall? The origins of Westfield State University can be credited to William Bates, the local attorney, and Emerson Davis, the local clergyman. The unsuccessful try of a Normal School in Barre, Massachusetts is what ignited the Westfield Academy and started what is now Westfield State University. Learning about the early years of this institution, from 1839 to 1856 can reveal many hidden facts about the campus today, which is particularly interesting to Education majors.

Horace Mann wanted a school in the rural western counties, and what better location than in the unified center of Westfield, Massachusetts. In 1844 Westfield was the largest settlement between Springfield and Albany. Due to the production of whips and tobacco, Westfield was known as “the industrial center”(Brown). The Normal School opened on Court Street in 1844. There was only one building at first which resulted in an overcrowding issue, so as a result the basement of the town hall became a classroom. They opened two more rooms before the model school was built on Washington Street in 1846. The model school was where the students did what today we call a student teaching practicum. Some “public-hearted” men from Boston gave five thousand dollars to both Westfield and Bridgewater to expand the schools (Brown). A citizen of Westfield, James Fowler, donated the land for the school. In 1846 the school expansion was completed accompanied by a new president, David Rowe. These new schools were now named “State Normal Schools” and were solely dedicated to teaching future teachers (Brown). Evidence of the physical history is in the town of Westfield, yet bits have transferred onto campus, as seen through the names of the buildings.

The first ever president was Emerson Davis who met with the students at ten o'clock to read the daily scripture (Workers). There were a total of twenty-three male and twenty-six female students, many of whom did not have a high level of previous academic preparedness. Students are not allowed to attend Universities without having graduated high school and meeting certain academic standards. The students were from families who lived on farms so those types of students would go to the school until they couldn't afford it anymore; however, the majority of students only attended the school for one term. To gain entrance into the school a certificate of character along with a written statement with intent to continue to teach in Massachusetts was presented. This initial certificate of character is similar to a teachers letter of recommendation. Most applicants and students had previous classroom experience, as majority of them had taught at a school before attending the Normal School (Brown). Comparing the Normal School to today, going into undergraduate school right after high school doesn't offer time to have taught in school prior. There are no teachers without a license in teaching, so the student must attend college if they plan on teaching. The closest you can get to teaching before you graduate college are internships, day cares, or camps.

The classes that the students were taking ranged from geography, English grammar, music, to models of teaching. These classes are not far off from what current day students take as well. In 1849, the curriculum was expanded upon and specific categories and classes were created. In 1858, a version of what could be considered the modern day honors program was created. There were classes made strictly for those students who had graduated from the school. Classes started at eight-thirty on Tuesday through Friday as well as a half a day on Saturday. All the students would study the same classes at the same time. If students were to stay past the typical one

term, they would be placed in student teaching or work on an independent study. Not all students could afford to do this, so it was seen as a luxury.

Similar to today's student activity on the green, that involvement was taking place in 1854 as well. Outside of academics students enjoyed doing yard work on the green as well as the occasional music performer or guest speaker. Activities were not only held on the green. Clubs that are still around today started with the first Normal School. The debate society was revived and the female students would write essays while the male students would debate current issues. The essays the students wrote were compiled and created the first newspaper, "Star of Hope" (Brown).

Today major changes are fairly popular, however students make those changes while they are still attending the university. Back when the Normal School was in session many graduates did not continue to teach. In 1856 the Normal School had a total of two hundred and sixty students, one hundred and six of whom were newly enrolled, similar to modern day freshman. From 1844 to 1857 there were a total of nine hundred and twenty-seven students enrolled. Out of the nine hundred and twenty-seven students, seventy percent came from families who made a living by farming. Slightly over half of the students had taught at a school before attending the Normal School, a common theme between the students. Surprisingly only thirty-nine males and ninety-five females were still teaching after graduating and an even more shocking one hundred and twenty-six male and three hundred and twenty-eight female students never pursued a teaching career after graduating from the school (Brown).

The State Normal School would have never been founded if it hadn't been for the unsuccessfulness of the Barre School. Barre was very isolated which contributed to the school closing, along with the fact that the president of Barre was deemed to be an orthodox (Workers). The val-

ue in knowing this information adds to the connection one can grow while attending Westfield State University. Being aware of how this University started out adds a piece of history to today's students. As Tom Mayes said, "In a world that is constantly changing, old places provide people with a sense of being part of a continuum that is necessary for them to be psychologically and emotionally healthy." The history of Westfield State adds to the continuity that one strives to feel. As Education majors it would be hard not to find this historical information interesting. As current students here today, we are fulfilling and now a part of this continuum that started in 1839.



The Normal School located on Washington Street.

Works Cited

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