The Road Less Travelled: L.L. Nunn and the Birth of the Nunnian Microcollege

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical roots of the microcollege movement focusing on the establishment of the first microcollege institutions: the Telluride Institute (1891), the Telluride Association (1910), and the Deep Springs College (1917). These microcollege-type institutions were founded by the eccentric Gilded Age energy tycoon L.L. Nunn. While Nunn's educational ventures often reflected broad trends in higher education at the time, his core educational principles evolved over his career. This paper argues that the concurrent application of Nunn's four primary principles of education (self-government, intellectual and academic rigor, physical work, and societal isolation), which evolved gradually to receive full expression at Deep Springs College, represents not only a divergence from higher education trends of the time, but also provides an opportunity for scholars of higher education today to reconsider the fundamental principles of higher education in a modern democratic setting.

Keywords: Microcollege movement, L.L. Nunn, Deep Springs College, Telluride Institute, Telluride Association, alternative higher education, Progressive Era education, educational innovation

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I–
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
–Robert Frost, 1916

Since the turn of the 20th century, there has been a general movement towards the organizational and curricular homogenization of colleges and

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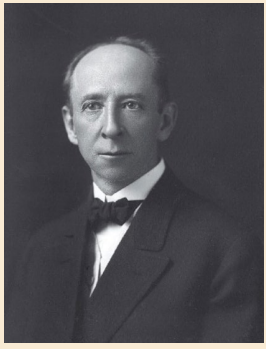
universities in the United States. Writing over 40 years ago, Birnbaum (1983) noted that "[it] appears that the higher education system has used the vast increases in resources [diverted towards higher education following the Second World War] primarily to replicate existing forms...rather than to create new ones" (p. 144). As higher education faces a looming "enrollment cliff," due to declining national fertility rates, institutions around the county are desperate to differentiate themselves from the masses as they fight for survival (Copley & Douthett, 2020, p. 22). Many education leaders have turned to the future for a solution, looking to leverage innovative technology and eschewing traditional standards to appeal to the modern college student. This paper turns instead to the past, to examine a road less travelled in the field of higher education. The history and theoretical underpinnings of the Nunnian microcollege movement provide a rarely studied example of an alternative approach to higher education, with roots in both traditional American liberal arts education and Progressive Era teaching philosophies. This paper argues that L.L. Nunn's early institutes in the developing American West and his "magnum opus" Deep Springs College in rural California represent a series of successful experiments in higher education worth examining for their modern applications. This historically-grounded analysis suggests that the Nunnian microcollege movement holds valuable insights for niche groups and investors willing to participate in the rejuvenation of modern American higher education.

Figure 1
L.L. Nunn, Circa 1900.



Note. Source: Deep Springs College Archive. https://archive.deepsprings.edu/items/show/587

Lucien Lucius Nunn, better known as L.L. Nunn, was a leading innovator during the American Gilded Age (Figure 1). Following a rigorous education in the classical liberal curriculum of Oberlin College and a brief stint dabbling in the study of law at Harvard University, Nunn became a significant investor and market leader in hydroelectric power in the developing West–especially in Utah, Colorado, and Idaho (Bailey, 1933, p. 23; Lovin, 2008, pp. 138–142). A doggedly energetic man, Nunn fully embodied the spirit of entrepreneurial success that characterized the

last quarter of the 19th century often known in America as the "Gilded Age." Nunn leveraged his experience in hydroelectric power and business acumen to eventually found the Telluride Power Company, one of the primary drivers of the advent of the "Electricity Age" in the American West (Anderson & Diehl, 2004, pp. 12–13; Lovin, 2008, p. 139). Whether one considers him a savvy businessman or a robber baron, Nunn was a shrewd industrialist who sought to monopolistically corner various energy markets to ensure stability in his enterprises.

While most of his eclectic energy went into expanding his hydroelectric empire, Nunn showed interest in education for the modern leader from an early age. Throughout his life, he experimented with several forms of managerial training and educational sponsorship. He eventually sold most of his hydroelectric empire for nearly $2 million dollars in 1912 (Bailey, 1933, pp. 94–95; Lovin, 2008; "The Life of L.L. Nunn," 2003). Though he continued to dabble in electrical companies for a few more years, Nunn turned most of "his energy and financial resources to establishing unique educational institutions in which to train people for the electrical industry" (Lovin, 2008, p. 147). While many of these efforts were short-lived, Nunn's educational legacy endured throughout the 20th century and reemerges in the 21st century as an inspiration for those disenchanted with current trends in American higher education.

Nunn's first foray into education was something of a fusion of managerial and technical training. The school, initially referred to as the Telluride Institute, opened first at the Bear Creek Mill, one of Nunn's mining sites just outside of Telluride, Colorado, in 1891 (Britton, 1972; "The Life of L.L. Nunn," 2003). As part of this experimental institute, Nunn's mining company organized a course "to provide training in shop work, wiring, and insulation" for local young men who were interested in working as operators, or "pinheads", at one of the company's power plants (Bailey, 1933, p. vi; Britton, 1972, pp. 190–191). As Britton (1972) further describes, to support the students in this course, the Institute assembled a technical library and test room in the first days of the school. While the institute initially focused almost exclusively on technical training, Nunn soon promoted the inclusion of a more traditional liberal arts curriculum. This curricular development contributed to the growth of the Institute in 1904, when Nunn moved most of the educational operations to one of his hydroelectric facilities, the Olmstead Power Station just outside of

Provo, Utah. This structure of the institute in Utah resembled more closely the traditional colleges of the day, complete with classrooms, laboratories, a library, and living quarters for the students. The institute closed in 1912 by the new management after Nunn sold his stake in the Telluride Power Company (Bailey, 1933, p. 101; Britton, 1972).

As Nunn's involvement in his power companies began to diminish, the depth of his interest in education increased. His early educational investments, such as the Telluride Institute, were directly tied to his interest in having well-trained men of character to work at his hydroelectric facilities (Bailey, 1933, pp. 28–29). Nunn's early efforts reflect a broader trend in American higher education in the latter half of the 20th century of investing in what Geiger (2000) calls "multipurpose colleges" (p. 128). Geiger notes that "even as classical colleges of the traditional type continued to be founded," these new "multipurpose colleges...adapted their degree courses in the face of an expanding academic knowledge base, eclectic student constituencies, and emerging markets for practical, vocational skills" (Geiger, 2000, p. 128). While Progressive educators such as John Dewey and David Snedden debated the appropriate application of the scientific method in the sphere of education, colleges responded to the scientific trends of the late Gilded Age and early Progressive Era by emphasizing vocational education and an increasingly granular specialization of study (Labaree, 2010, pp. 163–165). As Labaree notes, the dominant Progressive Era view of education, the so-called "social efficiency" view, held that education is primarily a "social investment in the social and human capital needed for a healthy and productive society" (p. 169). Nunn's elevation of managerial training to the level of a formal college venture well reflected the spirit of the Progressive Era.

If Nunn's first foray into education reflected the dominant trends of higher education of the day with its emphasis on specialized technical training, Nunn's educational ventures in the latter years of his life returned to a version of the classical liberal arts education of his youth. An example of this turn materialized in 1910, when Nunn founded and began constructing a residential house at Cornell University as part of a broader initiative to invest in potential future leaders at some of the nation's most influential universities (Lovin, 2008). In sponsoring a house on the campus of a prominent university, Nunn hoped

to give his more advanced students from the Telluride Institute the "advantages of residence and study at a university" (Bailey, 1933, p. 98).

The following year, in 1911, Nunn committed most of his fortune to a perpetual trust to help fund the establishment and ongoing operation of the Telluride Association, an organization that formalized a social program for the residents of the house at Cornell that supported young people who desired to "pursue their ideals with practical and responsible action" ("About Us," 2009). In part founded by Nunn to showcase his unique educational philosophy in action, the house and associated programming was intended to give its residents a "release from all material concern, a background of culture, the responsibility of managing their own household, and the opportunity to live and learn from resident faculty members and eminent visitors" (Morris, 1962, p. 410). Still active today, the Association's mission is "to prepare and inspire promising students to lead and serve through free, transformative educational experiences rooted in critical thinking and democratic community" ("About Us," 2024). This move back toward the established liberal arts tradition of the East Coast was a notable shift away from the so-called "multipurpose college" movement that was especially prevalent in the West. As Harper (1905) argued, around the turn of the 20th century, the colleges of the American West were generally of a decidedly more "modern" spirit than their Eastern counterparts, due to their rejection of particularly "medieval" constructs that still held many traditional universities captive (pp. 142–143). Having experienced both educational traditions, Nunn sought to delicately navigate the ideological divide to draw the best from each world.

While Nunn was initially inspired to support higher education to develop more capable managers, his passionate study of the nature of academic inquiry gradually shifted his utilitarian view of education over the course of his life. This change in emphasis, from a technically oriented managerial training purpose to a broader investment in developing cultural leaders through a classical liberal arts education, was gradual but intentional. As longtime scholar of Nunn and his educational experiments L. Jackson Newell notes (2015), following the establishment of his first institutes, Nunn's "educational vision evolved into a passion for developing societal leaders and furthering what he termed 'the moral order of the universe' through a rigorous combination of liberal arts and practical training" (p. 35). As seen in the growth and expansion

of the initial Telluride Institute and in the increasing complexity of his educational ventures, Nunn's perception of what it took to properly educate young leaders advanced as his own understanding of learning progressed.

By the late 1910s, as Nunn grew increasingly fascinated with higher education, his apprehensions for the existing higher education approaches grew as well. His "overriding concern was with the [perceived lack of] development of courageous leadership in American society. He saw in the traditional American colleges and universities deplorable academic standards, lopsided curricula, and frivolous activities" (Newell, 1982, p. 122). For Nunn, college should address the whole of a man and not just his intellect. Thus, by the founding of Deep Springs College in 1917, Nunn's educational philosophy ultimately boiled down to an idealistic preparation for social participation and leadership. He felt that "education…must be dedicated to developing in a young man what the world needs in him, namely, responsibility, initiative, and leadership. Learning and intellectual training are of great value, but only when they are the tools of these characteristics" (Kimpton, 1937, p. 533).

Nunn's first attempt at founding a formal "microcollege" on these principles occurred in Virginia in 1916. Within a short time, however, the institution floundered as almost the entirety of the prospective class pursued military service due to the impending threat of World War I (Bailey, 1933, pp. 102–103). Undeterred by this failure, Nunn purchased a working ranch in remote east-central California and founded Deep Springs Collegiate and Preparatory (Bailey, 1933, p. 103; Newell, 1982, p. 122). Inspired by ideals of a meritocratic society, Nunn crafted a unique educational institution where student's "character would [be] strengthened not only by reading great literature, but also by real struggles with ethical issues and economic necessities" (Newell, 1982, p. 122). Launched as a two-year program with approximately 20 students, the College quietly established itself as one of the most unique experiments in American higher education (Newell, 1982, p. 122; Figure 2). Today, over a century later, the College's enrollment remains around two dozen, admitting a tiny fraction of hundreds of interested applicants (Samuels, 2023). From its inception, Nunn wanted students from any background or social class to be able to attend Deep Springs, and tuition has always been fully covered by his generous founding endowment and later gifts (Newell et al., 1993, p. 24).

The continuation of founding principles and methods is a defining element of Deep Springs College. Speaking 20 years after the initial founding of Deep Springs, President Lawrence A. Kimpton extensively reflected on Nunn's founding principles, highlighting his driving educational ideals of self-government, intellectual and academic rigor, physical work, and societal isolation as catalysts for serious education (Kimpton, 1937, p. 533). As President Kimpton noted,

Figure 2
Deep Springs College, Class of 1920

Note. Source: Deep Springs College Archive. https://archive.deepsprings.edu/items/show/1533

> First, [Nunn] realized that self-government among a group of young men did more than anything else to develop leadership and a feeling of responsibility... Second, he had found that …classes must be small, the standards must be set very high, and the boys must be encouraged in … wide reading and independent thought. Third, he discovered that physical work of some kind … made the boy a better-balanced person, it gave him a genuine respect for work… And lastly Mr. Nunn had found that almost complete isolation from the distractions of modern civilization … allowed a boy to accomplish a great deal by way of self-development and self-analysis. (p. 533)

The combination of and dedication to these four principles of education are Nunn's unique contribution to the world of higher education and are worth examining in detail, especially in their application at Deep Springs College.

For Nunn, student self-government was the heart and soul of education. Throughout his life, he espoused the idea that young men had to learn to govern themselves so they might live a life of service to humanity (Bailey, 1933, p. 113). A key factor in the establishment and maintenance of Nunn's conception of student self-government was the institution's size. While modern colleges and universities had pushed for exponential growth, Nunn's ideal institution was and continues to be intentionally kept very small and intimate (Newell, 1982, pp. 125–126; Samuels, 2023). L. Jackson Newell, a 1958 graduate of Deep Springs

College who served as the institution's President during the 1990s and into the early 2000s, described Deep Springs commitment to an intimate student body:

> In an era when institutions are increasingly large, complex, and immobile, students (and other citizens) frequently experience feelings of impotence or alienation. The literature about college students is rich in the analysis of this phenomenon. Due to the small size of Deep Springs, however, and the prominent role that its founder assigned to students in every phase of the institution's life, students come to assume that they can make a difference. They do make a difference. (Newell, 1982, p. 127)

This dedication to a small, deeply involved student body is in many ways the defining feature of Nunn's educational philosophy, especially as it lives on today in the idea of the Nunnian microcollege. As political philosophers from ancient Greece to the modern West have argued for millennia, direct democratic rule is best-suited for small, intimate communities that maintain a high degree of interpersonal trust. Since its inception in 1917, Deep Springs College has kept its student body at approximately 25 students. By intentionally crafting a self-governing community where anonymity is impossible, Nunn sought to develop a college experience that did more than just instruct a student's intellect. At Deep Springs students gained the opportunity to take meaningful responsibility as Nunn aimed to "educate the 'whole man'" through immersion in an intense environment (Newell, 1982, p. 122). Newell argues that Nunn believed that "students would acquire a sense of duty only if they were granted responsibility," especially in the daily management of their affairs (Breiseth, 1983, pp. 32–33; Newell, 1982, p. 122).

The ultimate beneficiary of the system of immersive self-government went beyond the students themselves to include the society at large. While Nunn's entire educational philosophy promoted the notion of self-improvement in service to the advancement of society itself, this premise took root in the idea that students had to learn to govern themselves to live in a free society. As President Kimpton noted in 1937, "the obligation which a [Deep Springs] student incurs by his attendance is to devote himself to the service and betterment of humanity throughout his life" (p. 535). He continued, noting how this obligation typically played out in students pursuing service-oriented careers, specifically "the professions of engineering, law, medicine, government

service, and education" (Kimpton, 1937, p. 535). While the "service-oriented graduate" has in many ways become an academic platitude, it was a central tenet to Nunn's educational philosophy.

The second pillar of Nunn's educational philosophy was his fervent commitment to intellectual and academic rigor. Nunn was critical of the path of American higher education in the early 20th century, which Roger Geiger described as "a time of disorganization and meager accomplishments for American colleges" (Geiger, 2015, p. 124). As an alumnus of Oberlin College and Harvard Law School, Nunn was no stranger to the rigorous curriculum seen in the traditional American liberal arts education. However, Nunn originally took a far more utilitarian approach to education, with his initial managerial programs far more closely resembling vocational programs than a traditional liberal arts college education. While his later programs featured some sort of blend between vocational training and liberal education, Nunn formed Deep Springs College as a traditional liberal arts institution that emphasized rigor through small class sizes and intense student responsibility for their own success. As Kimpton (1973) noted, this approach to education began first with a "carefully selected" faculty, "made up for the most part of men with the Ph.D. degree" (p. 534). This unusual commitment to faculty of the highest degree, even at a tiny college of two dozen, was again a defining feature of the early Nunnian microcollege.

As Newell and contemporaries described, Deep Springs "faculty members were expected to offer traditional instruction in the liberal arts, based especially on the biographies of great men" (Newell, 1982, p. 122). This inspiration to exceptional living has been historically taken very seriously at Deep Springs, where students who could not "measure up to the standards set by the educational plan" would be expected to drop from the program (Kimpton, 1937, p. 534). Today, this rigor is seen not only in the unique curricular offerings, but in the class structures themselves. Classes depend "heavily on student participation; thorough preparation and robust engagement is seen as a student's responsibility to the entire class" (Deep Springs College, 2024). Additionally, students are expected to take the lead in classroom conversations and are heavily involved in course improvements and curricular development. Similar to his commitment to an environment of self-government, Nunn viewed academic rigor as a critical component of a holistic

education. Rather than leaning on rote consumption of knowledge to shape individual character, the rigor of the Nunnian educational experience shaped the whole person through intense personal challenge and discipline in the classroom and study hall" (Deep Springs College, 2024).

This intellectual toughness was paired with intense physical work, the third pillar of Nunnian philosophy. Inspired by Nunn's experience in training engineering managers who would be tasked with running power plants in remote Western locations, Deep Springs sought to develop and nurture an "intellectual toughness" through "severe physical challenge," often found in the daily work students engaged in on the College's active ranch (Newell, 1982, p. 122). Throughout the College's history, students have prided themselves on a grit atypical of elite academic institutions. President Kimpton attributed this sentiment to a sincerity not usually found in traditional higher education. In his discussions of the value of hard work, he suggested that the young men who underwent this training were best described as:

> An adequately grounded and trained, well-balanced and responsible young man, rather mature and serious-minded for his years, but neither a pedant nor a prig. He knows the value of hard work, and he can be trusted to do and do well what should be done. He is an excellent student, but not in the usual "grade-grabbing" sense. He has a sincere and earnest desire to learn and to improve himself. (Kimpton, 1937, p. 534)

This earnest sincerity was a key outcome of the Nunnian approach to higher education and remains a pillar of Deep Springs and other Nunnian programs today. For Nunn and those who have carried on his academic legacy, this desired "intellectual toughness" has been shaped only "by severe physical challenge" that has allowed student's "inner man" to "grow where solitude can foster introspection" (Newell, 1982, p. 122).

The final pillar of Nunnian education was also the most unique. With his intentions to locate Deep Springs College in the remote California wilderness, Nunn aimed to create an educational environment that would not only physically test the students, but also physically isolate them from the rest of society. This intentional separation from the distractions of modern society has proven to be especially prescient in recent years, given the rapid decline of interpersonal interactions with the almost universal adoption of smartphones

and other technological distractions. As modern advocates of the microcollege argue, this intentional "limiting of technology in favor of face-to-face interactions" is a fundamental component of meaningful education that is quickly being lost in traditional higher education (Thoreau College, 2023). There is little doubt that one of the key reasons Deep Springs has been able to successfully maintain its identity and commitment to Nunn's founding principles for so long has been its geographical isolation.

Under these four guiding principles, Nunn launched Deep Springs with an initial class of 20 young men. Unaccredited for its first 40 years, the College remained committed to its founding principles even as higher education changed dramatically around it. As President and Deep Springs alumnus L.J. Newell noted in 1982, little had changed about the school over the first 65 years of existence and yet its impact on the select few students that attended was notable (p. 122). While Nunn died in 1925, his founding trust provided the financial stability for Deep Springs to survive the Great Depression and the subsequent second World War. A half of century of consistency in the Board of Trustees during this era provided an additional key stabilizing factor that contributed to lasting success (Newell, 1982, p. 123). While the College became coeducational in 2018, much of the curriculum and day-to-day work still strongly resembles what Nunn established in 1917 (Deep Springs College, 2024). In shaping Deep Springs College's commitment to appeal to students' need to meaningful contribute to the life and work of the institution, Nunn created something special with lasting influence–truly a road less followed.

How then do these principles of an eccentric energy tycoon and the niche movement that still advocates for them fit into the "big picture" of 21st century higher education? While Deep Springs College remains the primary example of Nunnian education in the higher education space, there is a growing movement that seeks to expand the influence of Nunn's core educational principles. Known simply as the "microcollege movement," this unofficial collection of institutions and programs collectively aim "to re-create post-secondary education as a place where, as Nunn wrote of Deep Springs, students go not "to find either absolute truth or absolute wisdom, but to think, to read, to grow, and above all, to securely establish the one and only purpose which can justify man's existence" (Thoreau College, 2023). The movement comprises approximately a dozen institutions across the United States, many of which are

located in remote or rural areas. While the details of each institution vary, they all reflect a "significant inquiry into what and how [people] should learn" (Thoreau College, 2023).

This reimaging of the ethos and telos of higher education reflects the seriousness of the movement. Microcollege programs are not merely offering quirky alternatives for a small group of societal outcasts. Rather, they are proposing a fundamental shift in higher education. The legacy of Deep Springs College is perhaps the clearest example of this shift. While success for colleges and universities today is typically defined in endowment and enrollment size, Deep Springs and other Nunnian-inspired programs intentionally focus on small, intimate, hands-on, work-infused, relationally-based programming to foster in-depth personal development. Proponents of the microcollege movement argue that this programming is a critical piece in countering what they deem the "meaning crisis" in higher education (Springboard Foundation, 2024, p. 3). Citing cognitive science John Vervaeke, they describe a generation of college and university students "disconnected from themselves, each other, and the world" (Springboard Foundation, 2024, p. 3). For many of the institutions in the microcollege movement, the four collective principles of Nunn, as put into practice at Deep Springs College, represent a path for higher education to address the alienation, anxiety, and absurdity that defines modern society (Springboard Foundation, 2024, pp. 16, 21, 26).

In a 2016 magazine article, Dr. Marcus Ford, co-founder of microcollege Flagstaff College, offered a broad critique of the modern university system while advocating for the proliferation of what he called "tiny colleges." He critiqued the modern higher educational system for its abstract claims to craft students into "better people," while solely focusing on education in economic terms (Ford, 2016). He noted the cultural shift in society's expectations for college, arguing that "we have come to think of higher education as a means to making a living rather than making a life" (Ford, 2016). The comment parallels Nunn's philosophy of education that very much focused on the holistic development of the individual, in the context of service to and a life within a larger community. For Ford and other proponents of the Nunnian microcollege, these small and intentionally crafted institutions offer a unique opportunity to regain something that has been lost in the commercialization and commodification of the university.

While Nunnian institutions create distinction from the modern university in part through programmatic differences, the primary alterations in the educational experience rests in the intentionality of education as a collective social experience in a unique place. As Ford states, "the ultimate justification for a tiny college is the conviction that each of us comes into our full humanity by close interaction with those who know and care for us, and that one of the basic purposes of higher education is social" (2016). This is a serious claim that goes far beyond the platitudes of higher education marketing collateral. For Nunn and his disciples, the moral element of education is inherent in the college experience. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to shape young people for a life of service to others–itself perhaps a remnant of a "noblisse oblige" of days past by reminding them in the most intentional way "of the fact that we are individuals in community with others" (Breiseth, 1983, p. 33; Ford, 2016).

In conclusion, while four individual principles of education (self-government, intellectual and academic rigor, physical work, and societal isolation) make up the core of Nunn's unique contribution to the world of higher education, it is the combined application of these principles in the microcollege setting that leads to a uniquely complete education that stands decidedly apart from increasingly homogenous mainstream institutions. This complete education makes a claim to a moral advancement of humanity through the experientially-driven development of a few dedicated leaders–a claim that still animates the life and work of Deep Springs College today. While a microcollege education may not be feasible or accessible for most of the population, it remains a fascinating sliver of the history of higher education. The continued success of Deep Springs College and the establishment of other Nunnian microcollege-inspired programs across the world challenges the increasingly homogenous status quo of modern higher education and demands a careful re-examination of the purpose and place of higher education in society.

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