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New York University

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Founding Vision: NYU in 19th-Century America
- **Chapter 2** Albert Gallatin and the Idea of a Modern University
- **Chapter 3** Early Years: From City Hall to Washington Square
- **Chapter 4** The Shape of Learning: Curriculum and Nonsectarian Ideals
- **Chapter 5** Establishing Professional Schools: Law, Medicine, and Beyond
- **Chapter 6** Growth and Urban Transformation in the Late 19th Century
- **Chapter 7** Expansion to University Heights: The “Second Founding”
- **Chapter 8** Forging a Metropolitan Identity: NYU and New York City
- **Chapter 9** Pioneering Business and Arts Education
- **Chapter 10** Struggles and Resilience: NYU Through Two World Wars
- **Chapter 11** The Postwar Boom: Size, Students, and Social Change
- **Chapter 12** The University Heights Era Ends: Consolidation and Crisis in the 1970s
- **Chapter 13** Renewed Purpose: Academic Excellence and Admissions Reform
- **Chapter 14** Engineering a Comeback: The Tandon School Story
- **Chapter 15** NYU’s Urban Campus: Architecture, Landmarks, and Identity
- **Chapter 16** A Global Network University Emerges
- **Chapter 17** NYU Abroad: From Abu Dhabi and Shanghai to Global Academic Centers
- **Chapter 18** The Heart of Knowledge: Schools, Departments, and Interdisciplinary Learning
- **Chapter 19** Centers of Research and Innovation
- **Chapter 20** The NYU Student Experience: Living and Learning in the City
- **Chapter 21** Diversity, Inclusion, and Changing Demographics
- **Chapter 22** Access and Support: Financial Aid and Affordability
- **Chapter 23** Alumni Impact: NYU’s Distinguished Graduates
- **Chapter 24** NYU in the Public Eye: Media, Arts, and Civic Engagement
- **Chapter 25** Looking Forward: NYU’s Vision for the Future

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Introduction

New York University (NYU) is more than just a prominent institution of learning; it is a living testament to the spirit of New York City and the ever-evolving ideals of American higher education. Since its founding in the early nineteenth century, NYU has stood at the crossroads of tradition and innovation, constantly reshaping itself in response to the aspirations of its city, its founding visionaries, and generations of students and faculty.

To trace the story of NYU is to examine the changing contours of American society itself. At a time when most universities limited entry to the privileged few and adhered to rigid, denominational curricula, NYU charted a new course by embracing nonsectarian principles and merit-based admissions. Albert Gallatin, the university's founder, was guided by a bold proposition: higher education should be practical, inclusive, and fundamentally democratic. These ideals formed the bedrock of a university that would go on to educate future leaders in fields as diverse as law, business, medicine, the arts, and engineering.

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Over nearly two centuries, NYU's trajectory has followed the currents of national transformation—the rise of urban America, industrialization, wars and depressions, civil rights movements, and the dawn of the information age. The university's physical expanse has mirrored these shifts, from the rented rooms near City Hall to its Greenwich Village campus; from the leafy precincts of University Heights to its world-spanning campuses in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai. Each chapter in NYU's history has been marked by both struggle and renewal, reflecting its resilience and commitment to growth.

Academically, NYU has evolved to meet the changing needs of society. Its establishment of pioneering programs in business, law, the arts, and science reflected—and often anticipated—the emerging priorities of modern America. The university's embrace of globalism has led to the creation of a networked campus model, providing students and scholars opportunities for international collaboration on an unprecedented scale. Today, NYU stands as one of the country's most applied-to private universities, known for its vibrant and diverse student body.

The story of NYU is also deeply personal. For generations of students, it has offered avenues for social mobility and self-realization in one of the world's most dynamic cities. It is a place where the boundaries between campus and community, scholarship and practice, tradition and innovation, are fluid and ever shifting. NYU's alumni—artists, entrepreneurs, scholars, and public servants alike—testify to the institution's far-reaching influence.

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As NYU looks ahead to its bicentennial in 2031, its story remains unfinished. The university's bold plans for expansion, deepening of research, commitment to diversity, and engagement with the city and the globe reflect both a reverence for the past and an unyielding ambition for the future. This book invites readers to explore how NYU became what it is today—a truly American university, rooted in the particularities of place but open to the world.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Founding Vision: NYU in 19th-Century America

The early 19th century in America was a time of dynamic change and fervent expansion. The young nation, still finding its footing after the Revolutionary War, was characterized by a burgeoning sense of independence and a westward push that transformed its physical and cultural landscape. Cities, particularly those on the Eastern seaboard, were experiencing rapid growth fueled by commerce, immigration, and the nascent stirrings of industrialization. New York City, in particular, was rapidly asserting itself as a commercial powerhouse. By 1820, with a population of 127,000, it had become the largest city in the United States, a title it would not relinquish.

The city's strategic location and the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, connecting the Atlantic port to the Great Lakes, solidified its status as a vital center for global trade and a gateway to the New World. This era saw a dramatic increase in population, with immigrants from Europe, including Irish Catholic, German, French, and Jewish newcomers, streaming into the city. By 1830, several million immigrants were arriving in the United States, and between 1820 and 1890, 10 million immigrants passed through New York. This influx made New York a melting pot of diverse cultures and ideas, though it also brought challenges of overcrowding, public health concerns, and social tensions.

Amidst this bustling environment, the landscape of American higher education was also undergoing a quiet, yet significant, evolution. For much of the colonial era and into the early 19th century, colleges in the United States primarily served a singular purpose: to train men for the ministry. These institutions, often founded by various religious denominations, offered a limited undergraduate curriculum heavily focused on classical studies, including Greek, Latin, ethics, rhetoric, ancient history, geometry, and logic. Science courses were notably absent from the vast majority of these early colleges.

Access to this education was largely restricted to young men from wealthy families, further entrenching the idea that higher learning was the preserve of a privileged few. While some attempts were made to modernize curricula and reduce the emphasis on classical languages, as seen at Columbia College in 1810, these reforms often faced difficulties in establishing clear objectives and implementing effective changes.

However, as American society industrialized and the demand for a more practical, commercially relevant education grew, a tension began to emerge between the traditional model of higher education and the evolving needs of the nation. The pursuit

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of personal economic success, particularly after events like the California Gold Rush, made classical studies seem increasingly out of touch with American aspirations. The professions of medicine and law, alongside the ministry, were the most common career paths requiring an academic education, highlighting a growing need for specialized training beyond the classics.

By the 1830s, the notion of higher education as solely a preparatory step for the clergy or a finishing school for the elite was beginning to be challenged. The country was dotted with numerous small colleges, many of which struggled to survive. In fact, only one out of five colleges established before the Civil War ultimately endured. These institutions were often small and lacked the complexity and variety needed to effectively serve a broader student body.

The growing industrialization of America and the increasing demand for skilled workers also began to fuel a movement toward educational democratization. This period saw the gradual introduction of scientific and technical education, initially in separate "scientific" schools, but eventually integrated into the broader curriculum. The concept of "useful knowledge" gained traction, leading to a shift in focus from the education of mechanics to the higher training of engineers and other scientific professionals.

Furthermore, the mid-19th century also marked the beginning of women's integration into higher education, with the establishment of colleges dedicated to their instruction. This push for greater accessibility and a more diversified curriculum reflected a societal awakening to the need for education that could support economic growth and cater to a wider range of citizens.

In this context, where established institutions clung to tradition and the needs of a rapidly changing nation clamored for something new, the idea for a different kind of university began to take root in New York City. It was a vision that would challenge the prevailing norms of higher education, seeking to create an institution that was not merely an ivory tower, but an integral part of the vibrant, dynamic urban landscape it called home. This ambitious undertaking, led by forward-thinking individuals, aimed to establish a university that was not bound by sectarian doctrine or elitist traditions, but rather by the principle of merit and the pursuit of practical knowledge.

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