



MINERVA

ACHIEVING EXTRAORDINARY

Founder's Letter – January 13, 2015

Dear Friends of Minerva,

This past year, many of you have asked me what it feels like now that Minerva is no longer an idea, but very much a reality. After all, 2014 was a tremendous year for us, where we received formal accreditor approval for our relationship with the Keck Graduate Institute and officially launched the Minerva Schools at KGI; welcomed our Founding Class; built and launched our curriculum and Active Learning Forum; and announced our second round of financing to scale our operations. It is hard to imagine that just three years ago, Minerva did not have a single employee or dollar of funding. The answer most people expect is that of overwhelming joy, and indeed there were many joyous moments this year.

We attracted an exceptional group of students to join our Founding Class. Since their arrival in September, our diverse [28 Founding Class students](#), who hail from 14 countries and territories, have been impressing us every step of the way. With energy, passion and commitment, they are immersing themselves in their studies; exploring San Francisco and experiencing the city as their campus; defining their student life experience; and providing critical feedback to improve our technology platform and curriculum.

Our reinvented curriculum is put to the test with each class session. Delivering on our commitment to teach critical thinking, creative thinking and effective communication, the students are introduced to new habits of mind and foundational concepts in every class session. The Founding Class students learn on our proprietary [Active Learning Forum](#) which provides the perfect environment for a fast-paced, engaging, seminar-style class. The students actively participate in discussions and debate to effectively reinforce the concepts for each session.

When not in class, the students immerse themselves in activities designed to facilitate their personal growth, both intellectual and emotional. Minerva facilitates unique co-curricular experiences, co-designed by community partners, that provide students the opportunity to apply what they are learning to real-world projects. Co-curriculars during the first semester included learning about “venture philanthropy” by evaluating startups with investors; learning about storytelling by creating and pitching campaign ideas to executives at a top advertising agency; and learning about how music communicates by writing, composing and performing a libretto with musicians from the San Francisco Opera. The students also explore their interests through a reimagined extracurricular ecosystem and have launched the first cohort of student run “MiCo’s” (Minerva Communities) that are building community within the student body, while impacting the city they are living in. For example, the students have created a Skillshare Society to facilitate peer-to-peer learning amongst students, as well as those in need in San Francisco. The students are also establishing traditions for the Minerva student body — present and future — including weekly “family feasts,” which Founding Class student Brianna Smrke brilliantly describes in this [Huffington Post column](#).

When I first started working on Minerva, the second biggest criticism I got (after the all too common “That’s impossible!”) was that I was too worried about what the education would look like. “After all,” Ivy League graduates would proclaim, “nobody learns anything in college.” Though it is true that the existing curricula and pedagogical models — or lack thereof — leave a great deal to be desired, it does not delegitimize the critical need for universities to educate and do so better than they currently do. For those of you who have met the Founding Class students over the past four months, you have seen how they are already putting the habits of mind and foundational concepts to work: how they hear a statistic and immediately look for biases, how they read an article and intuitively look for counterpoints to what is presented, or how they have learned to appreciate things to which they previously had no exposure. An academic employed by one of our illustrious competitors declared at the end of the first month of classes that the students had already demonstrated better systems thinking than any undergraduate or graduate student that she had encountered in her own institution. We are proving that because one type of medicine is not effective to cure a malady, the alternative should not be the rejection of treatment — nothing is more personally gratifying and, I dare say, more important to our system of higher education, than that.

2014 was also an important year for raising both global awareness and funding for Minerva. We announced the first closing of our Series B financing, led by TAL Education Group, which, very much like Benchmark Capital, deeply believes in our mission and has exhorted us to never compromise our ideals or our brand. We are extremely fortunate to have such supportive and aligned backers and look forward to announcing additional investors for the round, once we have closed later this quarter.

Global media coverage showcasing Minerva has been exceptional and several media outlets took significant time and care to dig into the depths of what we have been working on and what makes Minerva so unique. It was humbling to be highlighted as the cover story in the September issue of [The Atlantic](#), as the education solution in the [Newsweek](#) “Silver Bullets” special edition, and to be recently featured on [PBS NewsHour](#). We also enjoyed coverage in the leading news weekly in Brazil, [Veja](#), which featured an in-depth interview of our Founding Dean, Dr. Stephen Kosslyn, as well as coverage on [national television in China](#) and in India’s most important business publication [Mint](#), among many others.

In 2014, educational visionaries Michael Horn and Stacey Childress joined the board of the Minerva Institute for Research and Scholarship. Led by executive chairman Senator Bob Kerrey, the Minerva Institute formalized a scholarship program for future Minerva students. Minerva now offers full [academic scholarships](#) in ten categories, for students of any nationality, who excel in areas Minerva values and demonstrate financial need. These scholarships recognize students in categories such as social justice, institutional reform, entrepreneurial initiative, and global understanding.

2014 also marked the first gathering of the Minerva Academy. Fifteen educational innovators were inducted last year into this honorary institution, which awarded the inaugural Minerva Prize for Advancements in Higher Education to Dr. Eric Mazur, a world-renowned professor at Harvard School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, for his development of the innovative Peer Instruction teaching methodology.

This year also promises to hold many joyous moments starting with the new class that we will welcome to join us when admissions decisions are announced this spring. We are currently [accepting applications](#) for our first full class of students to matriculate in the Fall of 2015. We have already seen thousands of applications from

individuals representing over 120 countries. We look forward to welcoming the most diverse undergraduate class in the history of higher education, with students coming straight from high school, as well as transferring from other prestigious institutions from around the world.

As our student population grows, so does our faculty and we are thrilled to announce today that Dr. Vicki Chandler has joined Minerva in the permanent role of Dean of Natural Sciences. In addition, we have grown our team of Curriculum Directors and are actively [recruiting faculty for Fall 2015](#). We have received inquiries from nearly one thousand academics, who are excited to join a team focused on rethinking curriculum and teaching in service of student learning and outcomes.

In the upcoming weeks, we will wrap up our Series B funding and announce some exciting additions to the Minerva Board of Directors.

Year over year, our goals change, yet at the core, the vision remains the same: provide an extraordinary educational experience, without equal, for the brightest, most motivated students in the world. It is not every day that a new higher education program is built from scratch, and it has been an exceptionally rewarding and joyous experience thus far. Nonetheless, my personal answer to the question I so often get asked is not predominantly satisfaction or joy, but incredulity.

Incredulity that in one year, Minerva has gone from a theory to being selected and named the “Silver Bullet” for education by [Newsweek](#) magazine; that every day we are helping to profoundly shape the lives of extraordinary individuals; that presidents, provosts, chancellors, trustees, and professors from all over the world are looking to Minerva as a new model for what higher education should be. Ultimately, it is the incredulity that an idea, born within a university more than twenty years ago, about what an ideal university should be — an idea that was, by all accounts, impossible — has become a reality, without a single compromise to that fundamental vision.

I also recognize that our ability to make Minerva such a success is very much due to your continued interest and support. For that, I thank you deeply.

Sincerely,
Ben Nelson
Founder and CEO of Minerva Project