

Constituciones De La Real Y Pontificia Universidad De San Geronimo: Fundada En El Covento De San Juan De Letran, Orden De Predicadores, De La Ciudad De San Cristobal De La Habana, En La Isla De Cuba – Primary Source Edition. (Facsimile Reproduction) Charleston, NC: Nabu Press 2013. 136 pp. \$16.66 paperback (ISBN 978-1289778668)

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The University of Havana is not only the oldest institution of higher education in Cuba, but also one of the oldest in the Americas. It was founded in 1728 as “Real y Pontificia Universidad de San Gerónimo de la Habana” (Royal and Pontifical University of Saint Jerome of Havana). As is the case with many universities in Europe, it had to have the backing of both the State (represented in this case by the King of Spain, who at that time was Felipe V (Philip V), and the Church (in this case Pope Innocent XIII). This was a reflection of both the ties that European universities had with the Church since medieval times and the need feudal states had to educate the people who ran state affairs.¹ By 1842 the university became secular changing its name to “Real y Literaria Universidad de La Habana” (Royal and Literary University of Havana) and during the twentieth century the university was at the center of many of the political movements in Cuba, always on the progressive side.²

Now Nabu Press, a publisher that specializes in printing books that because of their date of publication are in the public domain, has produced a facsimile version of the 1833 policies and rules of that university approved by Fernando VII [Ferdinand VII] then King of Spain. This is a reproduction of an original that was deposited at the Harvard University Library in 1925. As a result of the U.S. embargo against Cuba, it is not easy for researchers outside Cuba to access this kind of material and, therefore, reproductions like this are always a welcome addition to primary sources that can be accessed easily.

This document reveals a number of historical details that are useful to better understand the history of institutions of higher education in Spanish America. One is that the new Cuban university was modeled after the one in Santo Domingo on the island of Hispaniola (today known as the “Univerisidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo” and founded in 1538, which makes it the oldest universities in the Americas). Yet, when it came to writing their policies, they could not find those for the university of Santo Domingo, so they were compelled to create original policies, which were developed with the assistance of the faculty and alumni indicating a very early manifestation of an advanced practice of shared governance.

Still, in the preamble of the book it is recognized that some of the policies were derived from other Spanish institutions of that time like the Universidad de Alcalá (in Madrid) or the Universidad de Salamanca, probably because some of the faculty in Cuba had studied in those institutions.

The policies made clear that the university was closely tied to the members of the convent of San Juan de Letrán who would occupy all the positions in the upper administration of the institution. The document goes on to establish all procedures to a fine level of detail including for non-academic functions such as how funerals of faculty should be conducted, salaries determined, and other minutiae.

Except for page 71 of the facsimile reproduction (which is barely legible), all the pages are well reproduced. Almost half of this book also contains “Reales Disposiciones” (Royal Decrees) that go as far as detailing attendance policies. It seems that the Spanish monarchy felt compelled to micromanage the university from about 7,500 km (about 4,660 miles) away. This reflects the strict sense of control that the Spanish crown had regarding what was going on in its territories. So much for shared governance.

In summary, this facsimile reproduction represents a valuable source of information for those interested in the history of universities in Spanish America and of Cuba in general, particularly for those residing outside Cuba.

¹ See pp. 206-213 in David C. Lindberg (1992) *The Beginnings of Western Science*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 455 pp.

² See <http://www.uh.cu/universidad/historia-de-la-uh> (accessed 14 February 2014) for a more detailed history of the institution.