The trustees followed several principles in setting up the university. One was that of combining scientific and classical education. They considered both to be practical. The principle carried forward an ideal of the great 17th century Moravian educator, John Amos Comenius. A motto taken from the works of Francis Bacon was used to summarize this principle, namely, Homo minister et interpres naturae — man, the servant and interpreter of nature, to use a free translation. That motto lives on at Lehigh, being an element in the university seal.

The trustees chose as first president a man whose education and habits expressed this principle, Henry Coppee. They established five schools, including a school of general literature in addition to four scientific schools of, respectively, civil engineering, mechanical engineering, mining and metallurgy, and analytical chemistry.

Another principle upon which the trustees insisted was that of keeping the size of the student body proportionate to the abilities of the faculty to teach them well. The university would admit only as many freshmen each year as it could be assured of providing with the highest quality of education. In the 19th century the total enrollment never exceeded several hundred students; the size has increased significantly in recent decades, along with the number of faculty members.

The trustees also insisted that Lehigh was to be nondenominational and would have an admission policy based on merit. Competitive examinations were held for applicants for admission. From 1871 to 1891 no tuition was charged, but the national financial crisis at the turn of the century decimated the value of the Lehigh Valley Railroad stock that Packer had given to Lehigh, which was the principal source of income.

At first the student body was entirely male. The contemporary ideological climate would permit nothing else. But around 1916, women were admitted to graduate programs. In 1971, the university opened its undergraduate program to them as well. Today men and women applicants are considered on an equal basis.

From the first, the students were serious-minded. In 1924, Catherine Drinker Bowen, daughter of president Drinker and later a famous biographer, published a brief history of Lehigh University, in which she commented:

"Ask any college professor which brand of boy he would prefer to teach, the cigarette brand or the flannel shirt variety. Right here we offer ten to one the flannel shirts...Lehigh still holds to the emblem teach, the cigarette brand or the flannel shirt variety. Right here we offer ten to one the flannel shirts...Lehigh still holds to the emblem of the flannel shirt—long may it wave! Engineers come to college to work. A writer in the Syracuse Post in 1895 spoke truthfully when he said, 'From the first, Lehigh's characteristic has been her earnestness. It is the boast of her graduates, the inspiration of her students. Men go there to learn to take a useful part in the economy of life.'" The university community was constantly infused with new faculty and students determined to renew and rework the original principles in the light of changing times. The students' ambition and zeal bore fruit; as alumni they carried the university's educational goals into the work of nation-building. And, having received, they gave to perpetuate Lehigh's work of service.

Today, Lehigh University still adheres to Asa Packer's goal of a liberal and scientific education for practical service. Faculty and students work to maintain high quality in instructional programs. Generous support from individuals, foundations, industry, and government help Lehigh to retain high quality of education and faculty while keeping tuition as low as possible. (Tuition covers only a part of the cost of a Lehigh education.)