

The Response of Four Colleges to the Rise of Intercollegiate Athletics 1865 - 1915

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The integration of athletic competition into the formal organization of colleges and universities has been an important and unique development in America. In contrast to higher education in most other societies, a sizeable bureaucratic apparatus has emerged to administer and regulate intercollegiate sports in many American institutions. The basic pattern for this model developed between the Civil War and World War I. In this period intercollegiate sport evolved from a relatively minor, student-directed phenomenon into a major and formal part of institutions of higher education.

The standard works on higher education have generalized about this process on the basis of the experience of a few universities.¹ This paper examines the process of the institutionalization of sport through a multiple-case study of four private, Protestant, dominantly male colleges in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Bucknell University, Franklin and Marshall College, Princeton University,² and Swarthmore College were selected for the study as representatives of the mainstream eastern colleges.³ This study shows that denominational colleges followed approximately the same pattern as the universities, with slight variations, despite their different academic orientations.

A small number of students initiated the team sports that came to be a dominant factor in collegiate life. Traditionally the extra-curriculum consisted of literary society meetings, a few extemporaneous games, and perhaps the baiting of some zealous guardian of morality on the faculty. As students began

¹ See especially, Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University* (New York: Random House, 1962), Ch. 18. Laurence Vaysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), Chaps. 5, 6. Conc. John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 130-135, 347-349.

² Although Bucknell and Princeton used the appellation "University" for part or all of the period they remained principally colleges.

³ One similar study of a different type of institution is Ronald A. Smith, "Athletics in the Wisconsin State University System, 1867-1913." *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, LV (Oct. 1971), pp. 3-23. For a study of one aspect of the institutional response of a public midwestern college see Michael D. Smith, "Origins of Faculty Attitudes Towards Intercollegiate Athletics: The University of Wisconsin." *Canadian Journal of History of Sport and Physical Education*, II (Dec., 1971), pp. 60-72.

to adhere to a more gentlemanly self-image, pranks and rebellions gave way to more organized forms of group activities. Fraternities, musical groups, and athletic clubs became centers of student activity. The evolution of once informal games into contests with neighboring colleges caught the imagination of growing numbers of students in the last decades of the century.⁴

At first, the student organizers encountered some hostility or apathy among their peers. While football was generally popular, baseball and track teams led uncertain existences. Enthusiasm was highest at Princeton where the Yale football game became a major New York City social event in the mid-1870's. Bucknell and Swarthmore also regularly fielded squads. Franklin and Marshall did not compete on the gridiron until the 1887 season. Student newspapers were not always supportive at first. Bucknell's *College Herald* editorialized that walking provided sufficient exercise for young scholars.⁵ Franklin and Marshall's *College Days* saw little value in athletics.⁶

After these initial jibes student publications vigorously promoted sports. The *College Herald's* successor, the *University Mirror*, lauded the effect sports were having at the Lewisburg campus.⁷ At all four schools the temporary deaths of teams were mourned and disinterested students were ridiculed and attacked. "Unfortunately, laziness reigns supreme" Swarthmore's *Phoenix* lamented when the track and football teams fared poorly.⁸ The newspapers increasingly carried news from other campuses, thus helping to create a consciousness of other institutions and paving the way for the growth of a collegiate culture. The articles conveyed a new and romantic self-image of students as vigorous and virile young gentlemen preparing to assume the burdens of "rugged individualism." Athletics appeared to infuse the formerly bookish and monastic collegiate life with a new element that was more appropriate to this "active life".

Woodrow Wilson, as a student editor of the *Princetonian* in the 1870's, exemplified the attitudes and enthusiasm that were becoming part of student journalism. Of seventy-two editorials attributed to his pen by Arthur Link, twenty-two concerned athletics. Wilson made winning a matter of cosmic importance

⁴For an overview see, Guy Lewis, "The Beginning of Organized Collegiate Sport," *American Quarterly*, XXII (Summer, 1970), pp. 222-229.

⁵*College Herald*, VI (Nov., 1875).

⁶*College Days*, V (Oct. 1878).

⁷*University Mirror*, II (Oct. 1882).

⁸*Phoenix*, I (Jan., 1882).

and engaged in petty bitterness against victorious rivals. He publicly rebuked students who failed to attend matches and criticized teams that did not practice hard enough to suit him.⁹ As Englishmen were wont to attribute victory at Waterloo to practice on the fields of Eton and Harrow, so too were young Americans coming to attach great moral influence to athletics.

The faculties also saw moral overtones, but were less certain that they were beneficial. Throughout the 1870's and 1880's the older faculty and the presidents sought to limit if not prevent the growth of intercollegiate athletics. Requests for permission to go on "road trips" to challenge other institutions were regularly delivered to the faculties for consideration. The response was ambiguous. In some cases permission to miss classes was granted and the younger faculty were often sympathetic. At other times presidents and faculties rejected requests for permission to leave campus or even to form teams.¹⁰

The hostility of many college officials stemmed from their fears that athletics were disrupting the intellectual and moral tone of the campuses. Some disliked the glorification of physical activity and hoped to see the growth of a "disgust with such muscular culture."¹¹ Others were disturbed that the growth of athletic teams, fraternities, and other student initiated activities created an aspect of student life that was unregulated, drew attention away from academic work, and sometimes led to the evils of drinking, gambling, and cheating. The traditional literary societies were more appealing to the older faculty, since they were both easier to control and more intellectual in nature.¹² Faculty and trustees sought to reinforce societies influence, sometimes with temporary success. Franklin and Marshall even required extra work for students who refused to join one.¹³ Despite this assistance the literary societies declined in the face of the new alternatives. The secretary of Theta Alpha society at Bucknell unwittingly summed up the situation when he scribbled in the minutes "no society [meeting tonight] owing to

⁹Arthur S. Link (ed.), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), I, pp. 260-479.

¹⁰Bucknell University, Faculty, Minutes (Bucknell University Archives), 1874-1890. Franklin and Marshall College, Faculty, Minutes (Franklin and Marshall Archives), 1871-1890. Princeton University, Faculty, Minutes (Princeton University Archives), 1870-1890. Swarthmore College, Faculty, Minutes (Friends Historical Library), 1877-1890. See *Phoenix*, I (May, 1882) for story on the rejection of baseball at Swarthmore.

¹¹J. M. A. Bamberger to Edward Magill, April 8, 1889, Magill Papers (Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College).

¹²See Thomas S. Harding, *College Literary Societies* (New York: Pageant, 1971), p. 317 on faculty view on literary societies.

¹³Franklin and Marshall College, Trustees, Minutes (Franklin and Marshall Archives), June, 1896.

big blazing bonfire and lively time on the campus in honor of the great football victory over Dickinson College.”¹⁴

The attitude of James McCosh, President of Princeton, illustrates the ambiguous reaction of many older educators to intercollegiate competition. He had initially encouraged athletics, soliciting the funds for a gymnasium and hiring a European gymnast to administer it. McCosh convinced the faculty to require two exercise periods per week and informed the donor that gymnastics “is promoting morality and preventing mischief. by fully occupying the physical energy of our youth.”¹⁵ His enthusiasm waned however when students proved to be more interested in the more glamorous intercollegiate outdoor team sports. In response he sought to restrict the time and energy that students were putting into athletics.¹⁶ By the mid-1880’s he was trying to goad other institutions into adopting formal restrictions. He wrote a fellow president that he was “so glad to find that you are favoring the movement to lay an arrest on the excesses” of collegiate athletics.¹⁷ In 1886 he circulated a letter to other presidents in which he urged joint action to correct the abuses which “are in danger of having all the evils of our horse races, with their jockeying, their betting and drinking.” He felt that the eastern colleges could revise the practices so that they would receive “all benefits which may be had from manly exercises, of which we highly approve, without their incidental evils.”¹⁸

In the 1890’s and early 1900’s intercollegiate athletics flourished, drawing increasing support from students and alumni. Teams no longer had to send their warriors out on shoe-string budgets. Football teams continued to grow. Princeton’s Thanksgiving Day game with Yale attracted 30,000 fans one year, while smaller Swarthmore netted over \$1300 from a game at the University of Pennsylvania.¹⁹ Bucknell’s Athletic Association built a track and began basketball competition in the mid-1890’s.²⁰ Franklin and Marshall began football in 1887

¹⁴Theta Alpha, Minutes, Nov. 2, 1888 (Bucknell University Archives).

¹⁵James McCosh to Robert Bonner, Dec. 29, 1870, McCosh Papers (Princeton University Manuscript Collection). See also McCosh’s address in Princeton College, *Opening Exercises of the Gymnasium* (Princeton, 1870), pp. 1-27.

¹⁶For one instance see Henry W. Bragdon, *Woodrow Wilson: The Academic Years* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 18.

¹⁷James McCosh to Charles W. Eliot, Sept. 18, 1882, Eliot Papers (Harvard University Archives). On the same subject see also McCosh’s letters of Oct. 11, 1882, Dec. 7, 1886, Jan. 12, 1887 and Jan. 15, 1887.

¹⁸Letters from McCosh to college presidents dated Dec. 6, 1886, Eliot Papers.

¹⁹Wheaton J. Lane, *Pictorial History of Princeton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 159. Swarthmore College, Athletic Advisory Board, Minutes (Friends Historical Library), Oct. 20, 1916.

²⁰Lewis E. Theiss, *Centennial History of Bucknell University 1846-1946* (Williamsport, Pa.: Grit Publishing Co., 1948), pp. 222-224.

and four years later constructed a gymnasium.²¹ Baseball, track, and basketball also became permanent fixtures. The thriving athletic associations began hiring coaches and trainers and planning extensive schedules with frequent traveling.

Student support remained fervent, as reflected in the campus newspapers after 1890. Stories on athletic contests continued to dominate the pages and school spirit was the prevailing ethic. Criticism of the sporting mania was very rare in the student press at these four colleges. Increasingly social and political issues were shunted aside, even at the height of the “progressive era”.²² The student press continued to promote a romanticized and isolated version of “life”; success in athletics and other peer groups was depicted as being more worthy than academic proficiency for most students. Articles urged students to invest their emotional and physical strength in what was viewed as the “real” college world while dismissing intellectual activity that kept one from “doing something” for *alma mater* as self-centered.²³ Paradoxically students appealed both to the individualism of athletic success and to conformity of group values. The latter aspect was expressed, with some hyperbole, by a writer in the Franklin and Marshall *Student Weekly* who asserted that if one does not feel ashamed to miss a mass meeting or to be absent from the cheering section, then you were a “plain, ordinary slacker and you don’t belong here.”²⁴

Growing support from young alumni was another major factor in the new prosperity of the athletic associations. Previously run solely by students, the associations now began to receive help in financing and coaching from recent graduates. Athletics provided a glamorous rallying point for retaining alumni interest in their *alma mater*. This potential was illustrated by the campaign to build the gymnasium at Franklin and Marshall in 1890. While other fund drives at the institution were moving slowly, alumni and citizens of Lancaster raised the money for this project in just a few months following a successful football season.²⁵

²¹M. M. J. Klein, *History of Franklin and Marshall College* (Lancaster, Pa.: 1952), pp. 112-113.

²²*Franklin and Marshall Weekly*, I-XXV (1891-1915). *Orange and Blue*, I-XVIII (1896-1915). *Phoenix*, XI-XXXVI (1891-1917). *Princetonian*, XV-XL (1890-1916). Laurence Vaysey reports a similar apathy towards social issues nationally in *The Emergence of the American University*, p. 279.

²³For an excellent account of fin de siècle student life in New England Colleges that corroborates my general findings see, Henry S. Conby, *Alma Mater: the Gothic Age of the American College* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1936).

²⁴*Student Weekly*, IV (Nov. 5. 1919).

²⁵Klein, *Franklin and Marshall*, p. 112-113.

In contrast to the earlier ambiguity, college officials were nearly unanimous in their praise of the moral potential of athletic contests. The new generation of faculty members and presidents who came to power in the 1890's fully subscribed to the ethos of the "active life". President John Harris of Bucknell was undoubtedly the most sanguine saying that his heart never failed "to warm to the young giants who risk life and limb on the field of strife for the glory of alma mater. This intense struggle for glory other than their own cannot fail to have a beneficial effect upon those who take part in the game."²⁶ Most agreed that athletics lessened the attractiveness of drinking, smoking, and other sensual vices. In the age of Teddy Roosevelt vigor was the order of the day. President Swain even told a conference of Friends that there was "as much evil wrought in the world from weakness as from wickedness," and without vigor, life's affairs did not "look roseate and hopeful as they should."²⁷ At Princeton a number of professors attended football practice and guests at the annual team banquets included professors, trustees, and influential alumni. President Patton believed that "out of these brawny contests some of the very best elements of manhood may emerge."²⁸ Woodrow Wilson defended football in public debate stressing its qualities for building moral character, manliness and self-denial.²⁹ Professor Jefferson Kershner of Franklin and Marshall disagreed. Offering one of the rare post-1890 dissents he maintained that moral training came "from serious things of ilfe and not from play and sport" and further pointed out the paradox that intellectual work was most like the work of later life, yet in comparison with athletics was disparaged as being of little use as preparation for a career.³⁰ He disagreed with the romanticism of his colleagues including President Apple, who had played on the College's first football team and believed strongly in the primacy of the "making of a man" through active participation in student organizations.³¹

But beneath the glowing rhetoric and the moral support for intercollegiate sports even the most supportive educators were becoming convinced that they had to find ways to regulate

²⁶ John H. Harris, *Thirty Years as President of Bucknell* (Washington: 1926), p. 523.

²⁷ Joseph Swain, "The Educated Man", *The Proceedings of the General Conference of the Society of Friends*, (1904), p. 173.

²⁸ Francis L. Patton, *Speech* (New York, 1888).

²⁹ Link, *Papers*, VIII, pp. 449-450, 482-484. Although Wilson later attacked the "sideshow" of collegiate life he continued his love affair with football. Also see Brogdon, *Woodrow Wilson*, pp. 212-13.³⁰ 298.

³⁰ Jefferson E. Kershner, "The Moral Value of College Work," *Reformed Church Review*, XIV (Oct., 1910), pp. 429-449.

³¹ Henry H. Apple, "The Function of the College in the Making of a Man," *Reformed Church Quarterly*, XVII (Oct., 1913), pp. 505-516.

Sports. The athletic associations, with alumni support, remained relatively independent from the institutions. Also, the increased demands upon students' time and the general distraction from academic work began to disturb even the youngest faculty. The demand for winning had encouraged a variety of questionable procedures. Professor William Scott of Princeton, for instance, had avidly defended early sporting ventures against McCosh's restrictions. But he became disillusioned when he discovered that many of the charges made by opponents had been true after all.³² An alarming number of gridiron deaths also created nation-wide demands for reform of that sport. The newspaper photographs of a bloodied Swarthmore warrior leaving the field after a game attracted additional attention and brought to a head concerns over that game.³³

All four faculties established committees to deal with what had been almost exclusively a student and alumni arena. Princeton's Committee on Out-Door Sports began placing some restraints upon the teams in the early 1890's.³⁴ Bucknell's faculty set limits on schedules and trips as part of a new interest in regulating student life.³⁵ The new spirit was shown by President Swain who had to write an alumnus on the eve of Swarthmore's traditional football game with Haverford in 1903 that the faculty's Athletic Committee had decided not to allow one of the players to participate on account of inadequate attention to his studies. The following year Swarthmore published their guidelines on athletic eligibility and adequate academic performance for athletes.³⁶ Franklin and Marshall's faculty created a Committee on Athletics in 1906 to handle athletic matters.³⁷ Thus, the college officials accepted the students' view on the value of athletics, but showed a determination to bring them within the fold of general collegiate oversight.³⁸

The faculty committees were able to deal with eligibility and approval of absences from classes, but other parts of the athletic program were more difficult to control. Financial matters, the purchase of equipment and transportation, and the hiring of

³²William B. Scott, *Some Memoirs of a Paleontologist* (Typescript: Princeton University Archives), pp. 571-578.

³³Rudolph, *American College*, pp. 375-6.

³⁴Link, *Papers*, VIII, pp. 54-56, 403-404.

³⁵Bucknell University, Faculty, Minutes, 1902-3, esp. Jan. 21, 1903.

³⁶Swain to Morris Clothier, Nov. 10, 1903, and "Athletic Eligibility Rules of Swarthmore College — 1904," Swain Presidential Papers (Friends Historical Library).

³⁷Franklin and Marshall, Faculty, Minutes, 1906-7.

³⁸See the minutes of all four faculties from 1890 to 1917 as cited in footnote No. 10. These become less useful, however, when the work is delegated to committees. Only Swarthmore's committee records appear to have survived. Swarthmore College, Athletic Committee (later Advisory Board), Minutes, (Friends Historical Library), 1911-17.

coaches had been handled outside of college channels, particularly with alumni assistance. The power of students and alumni had to be recognized. The standard arrangement was the creation of a joint committee of faculty, alumni, and students. Princeton was the first to formalize this arrangement by creating the University Athletic Association in 1891.³⁹ A General Athletic Treasurer was appointed to replace the student treasurers of the athletic organizations. At Bucknell the faculty was unable to control many of the abuses until the Board of Trustees incorporated their especially fervent alumni into a reorganized Athletic Association, with an executive committee consisting of three professors, two students, and two alumni in 1911.⁴⁰ In 1914 Franklin and Marshall created a Board of Control with a similar composition and duties as those at Princeton and Bucknell.⁴¹ These groups selected the coaches, audited financial records, and generally regulated athletics more closely than had been done before.

The institutionalization of athletics occurred within a generally supportive atmosphere. As seen above, the type of serious moral objections to the existence of intercollegiate athletics that had motivated some college presidents and faculty members before 1890 were rare after that date. A few misgivings were expressed outside of the institution; some members of the religious denominations that founded the colleges and guided their early development were unhappy with the new style of student life. The Presbyterian *New York Observer* reminded Princetonians that the men who graduated “before the passion for athletic superiority set in were not physical invertebrates.”⁴² The *Messenger* criticized the emphasis placed upon athletics at Reformed institutions like Franklin and Marshall.⁴³ Other members of the denominations disagreed and accepted intercollegiate athletics as a positive moral influence.⁴⁴ As the latter group increased and the denominations influence over the colleges waned, the college officials paid less attention to the complaints. In one instance, however, a denominational demand that a college remain aloof from the collegiate way had a hearing.

³⁹Link, *Papers*, VII, p. 303, and VIII, pp. 415-416.

⁴⁰Oliphant, *Rise*, pp. 237-238. For examples of the extreme alumni interest see the “Bucknell Edition” of G. J. Rosenn, *Intercollegiate Athletic Calendar, 1907-8* (New York, 1907), and a letter from “The Bucknellians”, July 15, 1908 both in the Bucknell University Archives.

⁴¹Henry H. Apple, *Report of the President of Franklin and Marshall College: 1914-5*.

⁴²*New York Observer*, Dec. 13, 1894, p. 643.

⁴³*Reformed Church Messenger*, June 17, 1909.

⁴⁴For instance, Samuel Ranck, “The Oxford Idea in Education,” *Reformed Church Review* VII, (Jan., 1903), pp. 24-30.

The only attempt, after 1890, to totally suppress intercollegiate athletics occurred at Swarthmore. Founded and controlled by Hicksite Friends, Swarthmore's movement toward mainstream college practices had been questioned by some elements in the denomination. This was brought to a head in 1907 when a wealthy Friend, Miss Anna Jeanes, bequeathed Swarthmore a sizeable amount of money on the condition that the College permanently abolish intercollegiate athletics. For a year a committee of Managers (i.e., trustees) weighed the offer and sampled the opinion of college presidents across the country.⁴⁵ A hot debate raged over the issue in the *Friends Intelligencer*. Some Friends vigorously opposed intercollegiate athletics and especially the relatively violent game of football. But others, primarily young alumni, came to the defense of athletics. A young alumnus from the influential Clothier family defensively retorted that "after all, what does a broken bone here and there amount to compared to the great amount of good which football accomplishes."⁴⁶ Although they rejected the bequest, the Managers compromised with the denominational opposition by abolishing football and basketball for one year to allow time for eliminating some of the worst abuses and for curbing professionalism.⁴⁷ By 1915 The *Intelligencer* was including sports news in its "Swarthmore College Notes", indicating that the denomination was also compromising and becoming less distinct from the rest of society.⁴⁸ The Managers created the Swarthmore Athletic Committee, composed of three faculty members, two alumni, and one student. The committee hired a Physical Director to replace the student managers and took over the hiring of coaches. It also set limits upon team trips and schedules and carefully audited the financial records.⁴⁹ The resolution of the Jeanes controversy brought Swarthmore into line with the consensus that was emerging at the other three campuses. Intercollegiate athletics were accepted as an integral part of higher education, but were to be formally brought under institutional control.

In conclusion, between 1870 and World War I intercollegiate athletics evolved into a significant and formal part of American

⁴⁵Swarthmore College, *Papers on the Bequest of the late Anna T. Jeanes* (Philadelphia, 1907).

⁴⁶*Friends Intelligencer*, LXV March 28, 1908. See also Jan. 4, Feb. 1, March 14 and 28.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, June 13, and October 3, 1908. The fact that the Bequest, which was in real estate, turned out to be worth less than originally hoped made the final decision somewhat easier. For an overview see Burton R. Clark, *The Distinctive College: Antioch, Reed, and Swarthmore* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1970), pp. 181-2.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, LXXII (1915).

⁴⁹Swarthmore College, Athletic Advisory Committee, January 31, June 5, December 11, 1911, and April 9, 1913; Swarthmore College, Athletic Advisory Board, Minutes, September 26, 1913 to June 11, 1917 (Friends Historical Library).

higher education. At first it was a student inspired variation on the traditional collegiate life. Many students and their newspapers rallied to these activities and developed organizations to promote and administer them. But the institutional response was ambiguous. Sports were viewed as useful in diverting students' energies away from mischief. On the other hand many collegiate officials saw serious moral and intellectual dangers stemming from the games and they made sporadic attempts to restrict or abolish the teams.

After 1890 the situation changed.⁵⁰ As a new generation took over college governance there was official praise for the moral aspects of athletics and sympathy for the new collegiate life-style. Accompanying this support was a determination among the presidents and faculties to institutionalize the new collegiate way. The student athletic associations, with alumni support, had been virtually autonomous. But their abuse of power and flaunting of educational purposes created demands for reform and control even among avid admirers. Committees and procedures developed to control finances, eligibility, and coaching. These developments echoed changes in the universities. The pace was slower⁵⁰ and the scale was smaller, but a consensus was growing in American higher education. By World War I the basic pattern for the American practice of institutionalizing the extra-curriculum was clearly emerging at these four colleges.

⁵⁰At these colleges, especially the three smaller Pennsylvania institutions, the 1890's and 1900's was the crucial time for formalizing sports, rather than the 1880's as Rudy and Brubacher found, *Higher Education in Transition*, p. 131.