

Muscle, Mind and Agon: Intercollegiate Debating and Athletics at Harvard and Yale, 1892–1909*

Roberta J. Park
Professor of Physical Education
University of California
Berkeley

In 1985, a lengthy article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* compared the intensity of intercollegiate debating in contemporary colleges and universities with the fierceness of a basketball play-off game. The preparations of the debaters, the author also noted, often resembled those engaged in by athletes.¹ This was not the first time that parallels had been drawn between agonistic verbal contests and varsity athletics. Speaking before the Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools of the Middle States and Philadelphia in 1900, Harvard's George P. Baker pointed to similarities in debating and athletics, asserting that both offered the same kind of excitement, prospects for victory and acclaim, and opportunities to bring honor to one's *alma mater*.² Introducing the third edition of *Competitive Debate: Rules and Techniques* a half century later, George Musgrove declared: "Most debaters do not go out for debate to improve their thought processes any more than football players go out for football to strengthen their muscles." What both found enjoyable, Musgrove held, was the intrinsically competitive nature of their "sports."³ Similar comparisons between these two forms of agonistic encounter have been drawn by other commentators during the last century, but the conjunction was possibly the closest in the decade following the Harvard-Yale inaugural debate of 1892.

This paper focuses on the decade and a half between 1892, when Harvard and Yale met in what is generally accepted to have been the first *intercollegiate* debate, and 1909, the year of the first *Triangular Debate* of the Eastern "Big

* This is an expanded version of a paper delivered at the 1986 Annual Convention of the North American Society for Sport History.

(The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful criticisms.)

1. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 8 May 1985.
2. George P. Baker, "Intercollegiate Debating," *Educational Review* 21 (1901): 244-257.
3. George McCoy Musgrave, *Competitive Debate: Rules and Techniques* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1955), 3-4. A useful bibliography of debate is Arthur N. Kruger, *A Classified Bibliography of Argumentation and Debate* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1964).

Three.”⁴ To be sure, students in American colleges had already engaged in public speaking contests for well over a century, Additionally, the first strictly “intercollegiate” debate was possibly the one that had occurred in 1881 between Rutgers and New York University. Moreover, collegiate oratorical competitions had been held in the Midwest since 1874 (with at least 100 colleges participating by 1895). At many of the smaller western colleges, the yearly “oratorical contests” (the descriptor normally used) were often greeted with more supporters and “greater enthusiasm than at any foot-ball game or other event of the year.”⁵ These, however, were not considered by contemporaries to be the same thing as the *new* form of *intercollegiate debating* that the highly elaborated Harvard-Yale contest of January 14, 1892 launched.

According to Egbert R. Nichols, the pattern initiated by the Harvard-Yale debate was rapidly replicated at several other universities; the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin met in their first dual debate in 1893; in 1894-95, the University of Pennsylvania first held a debate against Cornell University and the University of California debated Stanford University. In the decade between 1892 and 1902, most “were single debates, or annual contests between rival institutions.” This form of debating, Nichols contends, was “from the beginning a type of intercollegiate sport in the minds of many persons who did not inquire very deeply into it.”⁶

By the late 1890s, other colleges and universities in New England, the Midwest, and the Pacific Coast had also initiated the new form of debating. Ralph Curtis Ringwalt, a former member of the Harvard University Intercollegiate Debating Team, declared in *The Form* in 1897: “a wonderful revival of interest has taken place throughout the colleges of this country in public speaking and discussion.” At least the following institutions were said to be engaged in dual leagues patterned more or less on the Harvard-Yale model: Princeton, Cornell, University of Pennsylvania, Stanford, University of California, Michigan, Wisconsin, Northwestern, Boston University, Wesleyan, Bates College, Williams, Dartmouth, University of Chicago, and Columbia. These contests had so grown in popularity that fifteen years later Nichols was able to issue a second volume of *Intercollegiate Debates*, a year book for debate fashioned loosely upon that which Walter Camp was annually providing for intercollegiate football. By the 1900s, increasingly intense efforts were being made to publish handbooks and other aids to debating, organize high school debaters into leagues (especially “with an eye to recruiting” for the college

4 See, John S. Watterson III, “The Football Crisis of 1909-1910: The Response of the Eastern ‘Big Three,’ ” *Journal of Sport History* 8 (1981): 33-49 for a discussion of some of the athletic events in which these three elite colleges engaged.

5. “College Oratory in the West,” *Review of Reviews* 21 (1895): 665-669. Women students participated in these oratory contests. In 1876, Miss Laura A. Kent of Antioch college was runner-up, in 1892, DePauw’s Miss E. Jean Nelson won the first place award. David Potter, *Debating in the Colonial Chartered Colleges: An Historical Survey, 1642 to 1900* (Teachers College, Columbia University, Contributions to Education, 1944).

6. Egbert R. Nichols, “A Historical Sketch of Intercollegiate Debating.” I & II *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 22 (1936): 213-220, 591-602.

ranks), hold state championships under the auspices of colleges and universities, and extend coaching and preparation.⁷

The Harvard-Yale intercollegiate debates (and many of those that followed their lead) were from the outset, presented, discussed, and reported in the press and yearbooks in ways that bore a number of striking resemblances to the already enormously popular physical agonistic competitions in football, baseball, and other sports of the extracurriculum. The much smaller-and less significant-world of debating was repeatedly placed alongside that of the larger and more important world of athletics by means of numerous rhetorical and symbolic parallels. Those who set out in 1891 to re-establish oratorical contests recognized that it would be necessary to make these sufficiently *spectacular*⁸ if they were to appeal to students and younger alumni who had become accustomed to the elaborated extended “texts” of intercollegiate sports like football and baseball. The new intercollegiate debates incorporated, therefore, much of the metaphor and many of the symbolic accoutrements that had grown up around athletics-suitably modified, of course, to suggest adequate decorum for an event that focused on intellectual ability and linguistic skill. Additionally, several types of difficulties that had become associated with athletics by the 1890s soon also emerged in debating (e.g., disagreements about coaching, the composition of teams, and methods of officiating).

Drawing from the work of Gregory Bateson, Erving Goffman, and Victor Turner, John MacAloon has pointed to the importance of understanding that athletics-at least the more prominent forms-may be analyzed as extended and ramified texts in which the central agonistic events are “framed”⁹ by a number of highly symbolic features and phenomena. Because these extended texts are constituted of *shared public meanings*, they may be “read” much as one might read a literary text; that is, meanings are elicited as one works back and forth between the central contest, its various frames, and the larger culture of which it is a part.”¹⁰

This paper is especially concerned with the ways in which the rhetoric, symbol, and metaphor of athletics were used to frame these early intercollegiate debating contests.

7. Ralph C. Ringwalt, “Intercollegiate Debating,” *Forum* 22 (1897): 633-640; George P. Baker, “Debating at Harvard,” *Harvard Graduates Magazine* 7 (1899): 363-372.

8. “Spectacle”—from Latin *specere* (“to look at”)—John MacAloon holds. is one of the more important and least considered aspects of extended cultural performances. It is also less often considered by anthropologists than is ritual and, perhaps, even festival. “Spectacle is a dynamic form. demanding movement, action, change, and exchange on the part of human actors who are center stage, and the spectators must be excited in turn.” John J. MacAloon, “Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle,” in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Towards A Theory of Cultural Performance*, ed. John J. MacAloon (Philadelphia ISHI, 1984), 244.

9. The notion of “framing” in relation to athletic contests, especially those of the more elaborate public form, has yet to receive the attention that it merit. See MacAloon, “Olympic Games.” For extensive treatments of the general concept of “framed” experience. see: Gregory Bateson, “Theory of Play and Fantasy,” *Psychiatric Research Reports* 2 (1955): 39-51 and Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

10. On “reading texts” in relation to athletics. see Roberta J Park, “Hermeneutics, Semiotics, and the 19th-Century Quest for a Corporeal Self,” *Quest* 38 (1986): 33-49 and the references cited therein. See also, Margaret C. Duncan, “A Hermeneutic of Spectator Sport. The 1976 and 1984 Olympic Games.” *ibid.*, 50-77.

The Background to Late Nineteenth Century Collegiate Debating

Syllogistic and forensic disputation had formed an important part of colonial college life. In the 1700s, Potter and others contend, students began to reject the traditional formal Latin disputation of the required curriculum and organize their own literary societies where they debated topics of timely interest. Harvard's Spy Club offered such opportunities as early as 1719. On September 11, 1770 Samuel Phillips (founder of Phillips Academy) established a Speaking Club; by 1774, two other secret societies—the Mercurian Club and the Clintonian Club—were in existence. At Yale, students organized the Critonian Society before 1750. The Linonian Society was established in 1753 to further literature and oratory; a similar group, Brothers in Unity, was organized in 1768. These associations, Frederick Rudolph has concluded, provided the only real arenas for active intellectual discourse in the American colleges before the Civil War since the classroom was devoted to “molding character and denying intellect” rather than fostering reasoned discourse. In their literary societies and debating clubs students argued exciting political and social issues of the day. By 1853, Yale's three public speaking societies occupied elaborately furnished rooms in Alumni Hall and boasted impressive libraries which were considerably larger than the collections belonging to the College. Yet, shortly before the Civil War, interest in the literary societies had begun to wane, and by the 1870s public speaking at both Yale and Harvard had reached a low ebb.¹¹

Those who have studied the history of public speaking and debate in American colleges have offered several suggestions why these literary societies declined: the rise of fraternities in the 1830s offered social amenities which only they had previously provided; an extended curriculum that included subjects like political economy and science attracted students away from the societies; expanded college libraries came to surpass the holdings of the literary clubs. Moreover, the Civil War severely interrupted student life; in the decades following the War, the extracurriculum expanded rapidly, offering to the undergraduate an unprecedented number of opportunities to fill his leisure hours.¹²

The rise of intercollegiate athletics was also surely influential. However, one should not necessarily conclude that the rise of athletics was the direct cause of the decline of public speaking. The shift from a *verbal* to a *physical* form of agonistic contest may reflect deeper cultural and ideological transformations that occurred around mid-century. I have suggested elsewhere that more attention needs to be devoted to developments in the “life sciences” and how physiological metaphors and corporeal images dominated much of Anglo-

11. Potter, *Colonial Chartered Colleges*, chapters 2-4; Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard, 1636-1936* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), chapter 7; Brooks Mather Kelly, *Yale A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), chapters 13 and 15; Lewis S. Welch and Walter Camp, *Yale: Her Campus, Class-rooms and Athletics* (Boston: L. C. Page, 1899), chapter 13; Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), 137-152.

12. Potter, *Colonial Chartered Colleges*; Rudolph, *American College*; Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), chapter 1.

American literature and thought in the nineteenth century. Certainly, there is no mistaking the fact that by the 1830s a wide range of books, journals, and periodicals included an increasing amount of commentary in which “the body” was the central focus. Neither can one mistake the marked differences between the first and second halves of the century with regard to an increasing interest in the mesomorphic male form and purposeful, controlled, dynamic, *action* expressed literally and symbolically in a variety of contexts—business, politics, military engagements, and the athletic arena.¹³ By the 1870s and 1880s, baseball, crew, track, and most especially football, had come to occupy an important place in student life at both Harvard and Yale, with other colleges and universities following the lead of those two prestigious institutions as rapidly as possible.

The Emergence of “Intercollegiate” Debating at Harvard and Yale

During the nadir of oratory and public-speaking in the middle decades of the century, some faculty, alumni, and even students remained interested in debating, lamented its decline, and tried to revive interest. At the urging of Francis Parkman, Harvard established a course in Oral Discussion (English 6) in 1878-79. The Harvard Union, reorganized in 1880, also managed to attract some participants for the annual prize debate. Several members of the Union who had been debaters at their preparatory schools (e.g., Boston Latin School, Roxbury Latin School) proposed holding debates with other colleges in the late 1880s; the idea was initially met with considerable ridicule. At Yale a few devotees also attempted, with little success, to reestablish debating in the early 1880s. Although there had been small senior and junior debating clubs in the 1870s, the only active group at Yale in 1889 was the Law School’s Kent Club.¹⁴

Early in 1891, Harvard’s Fred W. Dallinger (later a Massachusetts Senator) approached the Secretary of the Yale Union with a proposal for a series of debates. It is not certain to what extent this attempt at a foray into a new form of agonistic activity was intensified by Harvard’s inability to succeed on the athletic field; however, the fact that Harvard had not fared well for some time against her arch rival cannot be overlooked. *The* very first issue of the *Harvard Graduates Magazine*, for example, lamented: “Harvard’s almost unbroken series of defeats during the past twelve years in Rowing, Baseball, and Football contests with her old rival Yale have caused her alumni the deepest chagrin.” A resigned, but not too pleased, *Harvard Crimson* editor admitted that the 1891

13. See Roberta J. Park, “Biological Thought, Athletics, and the Formation of a Man of Character. 1830- 1900.” in *Manliness and Mowlity: Images of the Male in the Old and New Worlds, 1800-1950*, ed. J. A. Mangan and J. Walvin (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1987); idem., “Physiologists, Physicians, and Physical Educators. Nineteenth Century Biology and Exercise, *Hygienic and Educative*,” *Journal of Sport History* 14 (Spring, 1987): 28-60.

14. Potter, *Colonial Chartered Colleges*. 94-95. John Lorange, “The Renaissance of College Debating” [Typewritten manuscript, 1895 (?)]. (Yale University Archives, Yale University Library: by permission. Hereafter YUA).

defeat in football by a score of 10-0 had been no surprise as students at Cambridge had become quite accustomed to losing to Yale.¹⁵

Yale declined Harvard's overture on the grounds that there was insufficient interest in public-speaking. However, a series of debates was quickly arranged with the Kent Club in an effort to improve forensic skills, and by the fall students at New Haven felt adequately prepared. A week after Yale's powerful football team defeated Harvard by the 10-0 score (the sixth such defeat in seven games) the Yale Union challenged the Harvard Union to a joint debate. Representatives met at Cooley's Hotel in Springfield on November 28, 1891 to arrange two contests, the first to take place at Cambridge early in 1892.¹⁶

There was far from unanimous enthusiasm for the initiation of intercollegiate debating at either campus, although some students, faculty, and alumni who held that the "intellectual side" of college life should receive at least as much attention as the "athletic side" seem to have been in favor of the effort. Carl Vrooman, President of the Harvard Union, complained that whereas debating at Oxford and Cambridge was an important feature of university life (with an estimated twenty to twenty-five debating societies at each), Harvard and Yale had only two each. The time had come, Vrooman maintained, that "in college life, as mirrored in the daily and weekly press and monthly magazine, the cerebrum should figure as prominently as the biceps; when the victors in contests of the intellect should receive honors no less desirable than those awarded to a triumphant football team." In anticipation of the first debate, the *Crimson* declared: "We would not plead for less interest in athletics among our students, but for a corresponding interest in scholarly attainments. . . ." Students were urged to become active as either supporters or participants: "Having undertaken the debate with Yale the honor of the college is as much at stake as it is in any of our athletic contests. We have another side of college life to vindicate and uphold." For its part, the *Yale Alumni Weekly* stated rather flatly: "everything which brings us into friendly rivalry with Harvard ought to be welcomed"; while the *Yale Daily News* looked forward to "a most successful and enjoyable time. . ."¹⁷

The drama and action of football might offer far more glamour and excitement—and unquestionably appealed to a much larger and broader audience—but debating soon attracted substantial attention at both campuses and in the pages of both the student and public press. Intercollegiate debating was, in fact, a kind of microcosm of intercollegiate athletics. It was frequently suggested that institutional status-seeking could be acted out on the podium as well as on the playing field. (At the turn of the century, the nation's two oldest universities, with Harvard in the lead and Yale constantly trying to topple her rival, were so

15. Lorance, "Renascence of College Debating": A. N. Levin and H. B. Goodfriend, *Harvard Debating, 1892 to 1913* (Cambridge, MA: Press of Caustic-Clafin, 1914). This contains a synopsis of each of the Harvard-Yale and Harvard-Princeton debates between 1892 and 1913. Frederick W. Thayer, "Harvard's Loss of Athletic Prestige," *Harvard Graduates Magazine* 1(1892): 31-37; *Harvard Crimson*, 23 November 1891.

16. Ringwalt, "Intercollegiate Debating": Potter. *Colonial Chartered Colleges*, 96-97.

17. Carl Vrooman. "College Debating," *Arena* 10 (1894): 677-683; *Harvard Crimson*, 28 November, 4,5, 11 December 1891; *Yale Alumni Weekly*, 12 January 1892; *Yale Daily News*, 13, 16 January 1892.

fascinated with reassuring themselves-and convincing others-of their status that they also held intercollegiate contests with each other, and a few select institutions like Princeton and Columbia, in chess and whist, tried to do so in glee, and kept what amounted to annual “box-scores” of their comparative enrollments.) Both Harvard and Yale subsequently agreed to annual debates with Princeton, but turned down Brown’s proposal in 1892 to enter into an intercollegiate debating league.¹⁸

It was recognized that interest in debating could be increased by incorporating into the contests various features that had made intercollegiate *athletics* popular, and careful plans were laid. Harvard’s representative wrote to his counterpart at Yale: “We shall spare no expense in advertising or in having announcements in the newspapers. We expect to make it an occasion of great success.”¹⁹ *The New York World* reported that every seat and every inch of standing room for the first debate was filled by graduates, undergraduates, relatives, friends, and “fifty pretty Wellesley girls.” In an atmosphere of holiday exuberance, “the crimson and blue, intertwined and interlocked, were everywhere.” The return contest at New Haven garnered even more press coverage: “The utmost enthusiasm was manifested everywhere about the house [the Hyperion Theatre]. . . . On the stage sat college professors, local dignitaries and the most prominent friends of the college boys.” *The New York Times* suggested that the 3,000(!) spectators enjoyed an atmosphere reminiscent of that encountered at an intercollegiate athletic contest: “The blue of Yale and the crimson of Harvard waved as inspiration, and the enthusiasm which urged the contestants on the football field on to victory greeted every argument tonight.”²⁰

The January debate took place at Sanders Theater, the site of the annual Harvard commencement exercises. Massachusetts’ Governor William E. Russell presided. Representing Harvard and arguing the *affirmative* were: George P. Costigan, Jr. (‘92), Randolph C. Surbridge (Law School), and Arthur P. Stone (‘93). Yale was represented by Ralph R. Upton (‘92), William E. Thorns (‘94), and William P. Aiken (Law School). The question debated was: “Resolved,” that a young man casting his first ballot in 1892 should vote for the Democratic party.” In general, each campus had different views regarding how the initial debates should be conducted. The Harvard Executive Committee maintained that “without a decision the debate will be like a football game without any points.” Yale dissented, however, and by mutual agreement it was finally decided that no winner would be declared at the first or the return debate to be held at New Haven on March 25, 1892.²¹

18. Potter, *Colonial Chartered Colleges*, 99.

19. James M. Perkins, letter to John Lorange (Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Yale Union), 28 November 1891 (YUA).

20. *New York World*, 15 January 1892; *New York Times*, 15 January 1892.

21. *Harvard Crimson*, 5 December 1891; Levin and Goodfriend, *Harvard Debating*, 26; Fred W. Dallinger (Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Harvard Union), letter to John Lorange, 5 December 1891 (YUA). The editor of the *Crimson*, however, was glad that no formal decision was to be rendered, holding that this “would not have settled at all any question regarding the general oratorical and debating abilities of the two colleges, but would have been, on the whole, rather an undignified ending to the debate.” He also suggested that the subject of the second debate should be one which would interest more students—one of a more “collegiate” nature. *Harvard Crimson*, 22 December 1891.

The Crimson's coverage of the first Harvard-Yale debate very loosely resembled that usually given to their annual football matches. The editorial column concluded: "It is well that there be a rivalry on this side of the college life as well as in athletics; that there be the same sort of stimulus to intellectual that there is to physical activity." The *Yule Daily News* judged the affair to have been "very successful in every respect." The visitors were tendered a reception attended by a large delegation from Wellesley, Tufts, Boston College, and Boston University.²²

Announcing the return meeting at New Haven in March, the *Crimson* declared: "The credit of Harvard is as much at stake in this debate as in any of the other contests, athletic or otherwise." Before a packed house, Presiding officer Chauncy Depew (who was not required to render a verdict) informed the large audience that fortunately he was free from the perils that beset a referee at a regatta or an umpire at a ball match. Invoking other sporting phrases to open the debate, Depew announced: "If I were the referee I should say 'Go,' if I were the umpire I should say 'Play ball.'" It is eminently fit and proper, he held, that the new era should be inaugurated by Yale and Harvard as "the best reforms in education have always been by the crimson and the blue."²³ Depew was apparently not the only one who thought so for several other colleges and universities quickly followed suit.

Noting that for the last thirty years "the struggle between those ancient universities has been purely upon the playing field . . . at the bat, at the oar, and with the ball . . .," Depew declared the neglect of debating to have been harmful to the man and to the nation. Numerous alumni, faculty, and friends of the two universities, especially those who had been in college in the 1850s and 1860s, agreed. One wrote: "I would like to give testimony by my presence that there are associations worth following at Yale outside the province of 'athletics'—a fact we are almost in danger of forgetting." The value of public speaking in preparing men to be eloquent and effective speakers was frequently mentioned; so was the role of oratory in enabling men to be "successful in the larger and harsher competitive struggle of the great world outside of college walls."²⁴ The latter argument—appropriately structured to reflect the "physical" aspects of agonistic sports—was also repeatedly invoked in support of intercollegiate athletics.

A banquet of sumptuous proportions closed the New Haven oratorical performance. The typical late Victorian-inspired menu included oysters, salmon, filet of beef, duck, chicken, sweetbreads, and other rich and hearty dishes, coffee, Charlotte Russe, and cigars. The evening opened with a toast to Harvard and one to Yale, and closed with a toast to athletics. Appropriately situated between these two ceremonial frames were the acknowledgments of

22. *Harvard Crimson*, 12. 15 January 1892; *Yale Daily News*, 16 January 1892.

23. *Harvard Crimson*, 19 February, 28 March 1892; *Yale Daily News*, 26 March 1892; *New York World*, 26 March 1892.

24. Dow G. Mitchell, letter to John Lorance, 7 March 1892 (YUA); also [U.S. Senator] H. L. Dawes, letter to John Lorance, 7 March 1892 (YUA); *New York World*, 26 March 1892.

verbal/cerebral achievement: Toasts to the Harvard and Yale Unions, Linonia and Brothers (Yale literary/debating societies dating from the 1700s), college journalism, the law, and “The Scholar in Politics,” (given by Professor Hadley).²⁵

The Harvard Crimson, *Harvard Graduates Magazine*, *Yale Alumni Weekly*, and *Yale Daily News* all voiced their approval of the initiation of a new field for intercollegiate combat between the two universities. *The Yale Courant*, more interested in literary accomplishments, rather genteely hoped that the debates would be the beginning of efforts to “work hand in hand for training the mind and voice with the muscle.” Various sources expressed optimism that interest in debating would now grow rapidly in colleges and preparatory schools. Not everyone was quite so enthusiastic, however. Probably more reflective of the general student sentiment were the views of a young Yale undergraduate who wrote to his “Uncle Henry” in April 1892 about the “windy speeches” and the way the speakers “bore the discussion as if the world depended on it.” He found the banquet, which “filled all voids, mental and physical,” to be far more satisfying than the debate. The writer was more interested in describing a kind of “free-for-all” baseball that the students played after the noon-day meal and listening to the Glee Club in the evenings. *The Harvard Crimson* objected to the question for the second debate—“Resolved, that immigration to the United States should be restricted”—because it did not offer enough that was of interest to the general college undergraduate.²⁶

Students at both colleges, and many alumni, felt that a contest from which no “winner” emerged was fatuous. It was mutually agreed, therefore, that a victor was to be decided beginning with the 1893 Harvard-Yale debates. *The Crimson* declared: “The two universities, having tested each other’s strength, are now ready for the real contests.” Real contests, obviously, resulted in the defeat of an opponent. The necessarily subjective nature of determining a victor in debating, however, was a recurring source of annoyance for many commentators. (Many contemporaries stated—and recent sport historians have observed—the substantially unambiguous manner of defining “winner/loser” of athletic contests has been one of their major attractions and appeals.) Only 600 of those who had requested seats could be accommodated at Cambridge on the evening of January 18, 1893, the occasion of the first *adjudicated* debate. (One hundred seats were reserved for Yale’s contingent; fifty were made available for Wellesley students; and another thirty for the Annex.) The judges were E. B. Andrews, President of Brown University, Professor E. R. A. Seligman of Columbia University, and the Honorable W. E. Barrett, Speaker of the Massachusetts House. President Eliot presided, and commented briefly on the importance of debating in bringing about a return of the ability to speak

25. Banquet Program, Harvard-Yale Joint Debate, Moseley’s New Haven House. Friday. March 25, 1892 (YUA). Other banquets offered similar elaborate comestibles and ceremonies, as for example, the December 6, 1898 Princeton-Yale meeting. Program, Fifth Annual Princeton-Yale Debate and Menu, Princeton-Yale Banquet. Contine Hotel, New Haven, December 6, 1896 (YUA)

26. J. (?) Woodbridge Riley. letter to “Uncle Henry,” 7 April 1892 (YUA): *Yale Courant*. 20 January. 6 February 1892; *Harvard Crimson*, 30 January 1892

forcefully. In reporting Harvard's victory, the *Crimson* noted that although there had been some concern that intercollegiate debating would not be popular, it was beginning to attract many of "the same public as have the athletic contests."²⁷

The Extension and Expansion of Activities Associated With the Harvard-Yale Debates

It was no easy task to develop skilled debaters. Attempts were made to attract men who had graduated from preparatory schools that had good debating teams, and a variety of efforts were necessary at each campus to expand the pool from which contestants could be drawn. Each student body was repeatedly reminded that it was as much a *duty* to represent the university in debate as it was in athletics. Harvard opposed the faculty coach system; Yale favored it. Early in the series Professor (later President) Arthur T. Hadley and Dr. Edward V. Reynolds began to coach the Yale teams. Yale also organized "scrub" teams to provide practice for her representatives. Candidates were selected in a series of preliminary contests then given over to the care of the "faculty coaches" who might call upon other faculty for assistance. When by 1895 Yale had yet to win a decision against Harvard, more vigorous efforts were made to develop teams that could win in debate as well as in athletics. An editorial in the *Yale Daily News* reported that various New York alumni were seeking ways to encourage public speaking: "When Yale can lay her hands on a few recent alumni who will do for our debaters what coaches do for the University football players, we need no longer fear almost regular defeat at the hand of other Universities." Basking in oratorical successes-but not athletic victories-the *Crimson* declared that Harvard's reputation was above "even the potent influence of football scores." Harvard's prestige, the writer intoned, rested on more important powers than muscular ones as was evidenced by unmatched successes in intercollegiate debating.²⁸ Although some students and alumni may have shared this opinion, victories in debate were more generally seen as poor compensation for a continuing series of losses on the athletic field.

The first victory for a Yale debating team came in late 1895—against Princeton. *The Yale Daily News* bombastically declared:

Harvard and Princeton [are] no Longer to be our acknowledged superiors in oratory the men who brought about this result deserve just as much college praise as the member of any of our athletic teams. It took brains, and hard, conscientious training to bring about this victory. As in football, the coaches and members of the second eleven are largely responsible for a successful team, so in this case Professor Hadley and Dr. Reynolds have been especially helpful in training for the debate.

Concerned about improvements at New Haven, the *Harvard Graduates Maga-*

27. *Harvard Crimson*, 6, 10, 12, 19 January, 3, 4 May 1893; *Yale Courant*, 6 February 1892; *Yale Daily News*, 20 January 1894. Also, Vrooman, "College Debating." Between 1892 and 1909, judges were customarily men who had attained eminence in education, government, law, theology, publishing and similar professions.

28. *Yale Daily News*, 19 November 1895, *Harvard Crimson*, 29 November 1895.

zinc informed its readers that a standing committee composed of students, faculty, and alumni had been formed “to take entire charge of the intercollegiate debate” and bring about a unity of effort.²⁹

As at other colonial chartered colleges, literary and oratorical societies had been organized at Princeton in the eighteenth century: the American Whig Society in 1769; the Cliosophic Society a year later. Both remained active and were among the few college debating societies that continued to be influential following the Civil War. In November 1892, a committee from Whig and Clio challenged the Yale Union to a debate; this was held on March 15, 1893. By agreement no decision was rendered. The next Yale-Princeton debate took place on May 1, 1895, but it was not until seven months later that Yale finally achieved a victory over Princeton—her *first* victory in intercollegiate debating. Harvard’s first debate with Princeton was held at the latter’s campus on March 27, 1895. Although somewhat apprehensive because it was known that “Princeton paid more attention than Yale to speaking,” Harvard emerged the winner. The next spring one undergraduate and one graduate delegate from each of the three institutions met at New Haven to set the dual debates for the 1896-97 year. Agreements were ultimately reached on several points: the home college would submit the subject seven weeks in advance; the visiting team had the choice of sides; the three judges would be mutually agreed upon from a list of twenty names submitted by the home team (none could be a graduate of either college). Other points remained in dispute, and the unresolved differences were a source of recurring difficulty for several years. Princeton and Yale favored limiting participants to men who were pursuing “a regular undergraduate course as a candidate for a bachelor’s degree in arts, science, or philosophy.” Harvard insisted that graduate and special students should be eligible. Harvard and Princeton united on the issue of limiting faculty, alumni, and other outside assistance to the “giving of information.” Yale countered that she failed to see why coaching during the practice debates by members of the faculty was in any way objectionable. Since no compromise could be reached, it was decided to let each campus go its own way on these matters.³⁰

On the occasion of Yale’s first debating victory over Harvard in 1896, Albert Shaw, editor of the *Review of Reviews*, and one of the judges, asserted that too much emphasis was given to victory in *all* kinds of intercollegiate competitions. Yale’s faculty coach E. V. Reynolds, however, opined that now that Yale had won it was to be expected that the same criticisms would be levelled in debate as had been hurled in athletics for the past several years. There was nothing wrong with the desire to win, Reynolds insisted; the “debate team should be chosen like the crew team.” Yale supporters were so encouraged by this success that the *Yale Alumni News* gave extensive attention to the subject and hoped that these debating contests would enable Harvard and Yale to “come again to understand

²⁹ *Yale Daily News*. 7. 9 December 1895; *New York Evening Post*, 7 December 1895; Baker, “Debating at Harvard.”

³⁰ *Potter. Colonial Chartered Colleges*. 98; Levin and Goodfriend. *Harvard Debating*. 6-11. *New York Evening Post*. 25 May 1896. See also the extended discussion in the *Yale Alumni Weekly*. 13 May 1896.

each other. . . in order that they should be in all things friendly.” (A reference surely directed at repairing the rupture in athletic relations between the two universities that had occurred in 1894.) After Harvard’s second consecutive debating defeat at the hands of her arch rival in March 1897, the *Crimson* retorted, in a barely veiled condemnation to “faculty coaching,” that it would be “desirable that the two universities come to an understanding and meet hereafter on terms that are unquestionably equal.”³¹

As debating became more popular the number of clubs quickly increased at both colleges. Under the column headed “Debating Society Notes” for January 17, 1896 the *Yale Daily News* listed meetings of: the Yale Union; the Junior Eating Club Debate; the Freshman Union; the Kent Club; and the Wayland Debating Club. Additionally, the Sheffield Debating Club was available for those men who were ineligible for the Union. Various prizes and awards were established in the hope of encouraging more men to participate. When the Yale Freshman Union defeated the Harvard Freshman Union in May 1895—a full year before the first Yale “varsity” victory—there had been so much enthusiasm that alumni donated enough money to refit Calliope Hall for the use of the Yale Union. Six months later, the Yale Alumni Association of New York presented gold medals to the men who had represented Yale during the year and established the Thatcher prizes. These actions were seen by many as expressions of Yale’s desire to reverse the taunt “Harvard brain and Yale brawn.”³²

By 1894, Harvard had organized the Wendall Phillips Club, the Forum, and a Freshman Debating Club in addition to the Harvard Union. The University Debating Club was formed in 1898 as an administrative unit by uniting the Forum and the Union. Several courses (e.g. English 6, English 18, and English 30), conducted by such eminent Professors as Taussig, Hart, and Baker, were devoted to public speaking and debating; these were thought to be of considerable consequence in the perpetuation of Harvard’s forensic successes. Although Harvard rejected the “faculty coach” system used at Yale (which permitted faculty to hear trial debates, arrange the arguments, and set the order of speakers), students had ready access to their faculty on such matters as the selection of material and points of evidence. They could also enroll in the various courses taught by the Department of English. In 1899, after three successive losses to Yale, the Harvard University Debating Club circularized alumni and friends in an attempt to raise monies for annual prizes. This request was endorsed by President Eliot, although it is doubtful that football’s most severe critic could have been persuaded to give such ready support to Harvard athletics. In response to the appeal, T. Jefferson Coolidge (class of 1850) promptly contributed \$5,000 to establish two \$100 annual prizes—or the best representative at the Yale and the Princeton debates.³³

31. *Yale Alumni Weekly*. 13 May 1896; *Harvard Crimson*. 27 March 1897; *Yale Daily News*, 27 March 1897.

32. *Yale Daily News*. 17 January 1896; also, *Yale Daily News*. 9 December 1895; Welch and Camp, *Yale: Her Campus*. chapter 13.

33. Printed letter from Philip G. Carleton, Wilbur Morse, L. Graham, O. Smith, 14 January 1899. (By permission of the Harvard University Archives); Baker, “Debating at Harvard.”

Other enticements were also available to Harvard students in the 1890s. The Subridge Cups were awarded to members of the class team that won the inter-class contests; the Wendell Phillips Memorial Scholarship offered seventy-five dollars to a man with “special oratory powers” who was about to enter the Junior class; and the Coubertin medal, donated by the founder of the modern Olympic Games, was awarded to the winner of an annual speaking contest on a subject drawn from French politics. At Harvard a “camp” system developed in the 1890s. Each class elected two captains and divided into two “camps” that opposed each other on a regular basis. This, in effect, amounted to a series of intramural competitions from which eventual finalists emerged. It was believed this arrangement encouraged a spirit of rivalry that resulted in better training, brought a social side to debating which made it more attractive, and offered an equitable opportunity for all men to make the University team.³⁴

Harvard's First Debuting Loss to Yale

There was broad, even if somewhat grudging, agreement in the 1890s that Harvard was the nation's premier academic institution. Although many, perhaps most, of Harvard's students, alumni, and friends might have preferred a more impressive record in contests where physical prowess was the central focus, they could take at least a modicum of solace in asserting—as some had been doing since 1892—that Harvard's intercollegiate reputation appropriately rested on debating rather than athletic skills. The first loss to Yale on May 1, 1896, therefore, was viewed with alarm. The *Crimson* declared it to be “a reflection of the [same] overconfidence that lost us the Princeton football game last year.” It fell, then, to the Freshman team to vindicate Harvard in its 1896 debate against Yale. The *Crimson* editorial page intoned: “a victory in baseball or even a victory in boating at Poughkeepsie will not bring so much credit to the class as the defeat of the Yale freshmen tonight.” Much to the relief of supporters at Cambridge, victory was achieved. Suspended in 1899 because many of the Harvard faculty felt that such contests by untrained men were not in the best interests of either the participants or the college, the Freshman Debates were soon reinstated, in substantial measure because it was believed they provided valuable training and preparation for the major annual events.³⁵

Intercollegiate debating even offered a useful opportunity for the two elite universities to continue their agonistic association at times when their athletic relationships were troubled. In 1894 Harvard and Yale had severed relations in all major sports, though competitions in “minor” sports and intercollegiate debating continued. The anticipated return to their annual fall football meeting three years later was eagerly and enthusiastically supported by students, alumni, and friends of each institution. In a self-laudatory paean, the *Harvard Crimson* declared that the formal renewal of friendship was more important than any victory: “Yale men and Harvard men, however their petty prejudices

34. Baker. “Debating at Harvard”; Levin and Goodfriend, *Harvard Debating: Harvard Crimson*. 14 December 1898 and 15 October 1900.

35. *Harvard Crimson*. 2, 4, 15, 18 May 1896; Baker, “Debating at Harvard,” 366.

and superficial traits may differ, are nevertheless of the same stock. They are both more thoroughly cosmopolitan than men from other colleges. . . . They are prepared side by side in the same schools [and are] 'natural friends and rivals.' " These "natural friends and rivals" struggled to a O-O score in football on November 13, 1897—which satisfied supporters at neither institution. This was followed three weeks later by Harvard's third consecutive debating defeat at the hands of Yale. Yale characterized this as a very close contest and ". . . the best ever held in the Yale-Harvard series." At Cambridge, however, many expressed doubts about the future of debate.³⁶

The two rivals did not meet again in a contest of forensic skills until May 1899. The *Crimson* devoted extensive attention to victorious Harvard's defense of forensic honor, relegating both picture and story of the track team that was to compete against Yale to the second page. The editorial column declared: "Just as much necessity was there for our winning this debate, as there was for our football victory at New Haven in November." (Harvard had finally beaten Yale at football in 1898 by a score of 17-0.) The ensuing debate, held on March 30, 1900 at New Haven, was attended by an unusually large crowd that included two representatives from Princeton who had come to study the tactics of the Yale speakers.³⁷

Debate and Athletics: Rhetoric and Symbols

As debating became a more established part of the extra-curriculum at Yale and Harvard it took on various other features that were already associated with intercollegiate athletics. In 1898, for example, Harvard students had decided to regularize the awards that were given to varsity athletes: black sweater with red numerals for football; red sweater with black numerals for baseball; red sweater with white numerals for track; white sweater with red numerals for crew. Corresponding caps and hatbands were also designated. By 1900, Harvard debaters had won eleven of the fourteen contests against Yale and all six against Princeton. In gratitude, members of the intercollegiate debating team were awarded a black cap with a red "H" over crossed gavels, a University hat band, and a gold medal shaped in the pattern of a Roman coin. Quite appropriately, the *heads*, not the *bodies*, of debaters would be adorned with the emblem of agonistic success. Harvard was not the only institution to so honor its verbal gladiators. Writing on the subject of "Intercollegiate Debating" for *The Forum* in 1898, C. F. Bacon observed that several colleges had established debating awards "on the same principle that they reward their foot-ball and base-ball champions" giving to the debaters items more in keeping with their cerebral accomplishments. It was only within the last few years, Bacon declared, that the new form of intercollegiate debating had brought oratory to the attention of the larger public. The Central Debating League (Northwestern, University of Michigan, University of Chicago, University of Minnesota) had devised what

36. Albert Bushnell Hart, "Harvard's Athletic Policy," *Harvard Graduates Magazine* 4 (December 1895): 209-214. *Harvard Crimson*, 13 November, 4 December 1897; *Yale Daily News*, 4 December 1897.

37. *Harvard Crimson*, 13 May 1899, 31 March 1900.

he considered to be “the most comprehensive union of the kind yet produced. The four universities dispute in groups of two each; and, later, the winners of these two contests meet for a final *battle*.” (Emphasis added.) Invoking sporting analogies, Bacon proclaimed “team-work” to be “. . . almost as important in debate as in foot-ball or rowing. . . .”³⁸

Other devices and actions also served to affiliate intercollegiate debating with intercollegiate athletics in the 1890s. The reporting of both the Harvard-Yale, Harvard-Princeton, and Yale-Princeton debates in student publications loosely resembled the play-by-play reporting that was used to describe football games. Both types of contest were “front page” items. The *Harvard Crimson* typically featured pictures of the football and debating teams just prior to and/or after their respective competitions with Yale-and somewhat less so, with Princeton. At Yale, such pictorial representations were more likely to be found in the *Yale Alumni Weekly* than in *Yale Daily News*. In keeping with the dignity of their positions, the men on debating teams appeared in tuxedos or dark lounge suits, and usually in sedate and stylized poses. Phrases like “creditable showing,” “on their mettle,” “did not lose a single opportunity,” “thoroughly prepared on all sides” were used with debate as well as with football. Additionally, the ways in which the “vital statistics” of the participants were presented suggested certain parallels between the two forms of contest. In announcing the 1897 Yale debates, for example, the *Crimson* provided biographical sketches of the participants as follows: “Fletcher Dobyns ‘98, of Oberlin, O., will make the last speech for Harvard. He prepared for college at Oberlin Academy and later at Oberlin College. While there he was president of the leading debating society. Last fall Dobyns was president of the Intercollegiate Sound Money Democratic League and stumped the Middle States in its interest. In his freshman year he was alternate on the Yale debate and has twice been on winning teams against Princeton.” The *Yale Daily News* wrote of its representatives: “Austin Rice is from Danvers, Mass. He is a graduate of Amherst College, of the Class of ‘94, and is at present in the Divinity School, this being his second year here. He is the most experienced debater. . . . His chief strength lies in his quick perception of the bearing of every point brought up by either side in the discussion. He is the most enthusiastic of the speakers, and also the most earnest.”³⁹ Although by no means identical, the method of reporting of “vital statistics” of members of football teams also might suggest certain similarities, *The Crimson*, commenting on Harvard’s 22-0 gridiron triumph in 1901, wrote: “Oliver Frost Cutts, 2L [Harvard] right tackle, came from Bates, where he played tackle and guard for two years. He is 28 years old, weighs 196 pounds and is 5 feet 11½ inches tall.” “Thomas Hetherington Graydon, [Harvard] ‘03, fullback, prepared at St. Paul’s School. He played tackle on his Freshman eleven and substitute tackle on the university eleven last

38. *Harvard Crimson*, 1 December 1898, 15 October 1900; Cecil Frederick Bacon, “Intercollegiate Debating,” *Forum* 26 (1898): 222-228.

39. *Harvard Crimson*, 26 March 1897 and *Yale Daily News*, 6 December 1895 are but two of many such examples.

year, playing in the Yale game. He is 20 years old, weights 175 pounds and is 6 feet 1 inch tall." "[Yale's] Captain Charles Gould '02, left end, prepared at Albany Academy, Albany, where he played on the team. He also played end on his Freshman team, and the same position on the university eleven of '99, '00, and '01. He is 5 feet 9 inches in height, weighs 166 pounds and is 20 years old."⁴⁰

The ways in which both papers recounted the annual contests also suggested various analogies with accounts they offered of the annual gridiron matches. Full, or at least abridged, texts of the debaters' arguments were published along with commentaries about the proceedings. By these means, the reader might vicariously participate in somewhat the same manner when he scanned the diagramed plays that appeared after football games and debating contests. Even the descriptions provided by editors suggested some rough parallels. Of the spring 1902 debate, the *Crimson* wrote: "Harvard's superiority lay in excellence of form, clear presentation of the case, strong emphasis on the main arguments, and telling evidence in support of these arguments. . . . Harvard gained a great advantage at the end by presenting a concrete analysis of the debate; and closing with a brilliant summary of their own case." The Harvard football victory the previous fall was described thus: "Harvard had a mode of attack that was so well executed that Yale's strong defense could not stop it. . . . The victory was complete, and left no doubt as to the intercollegiate championship."⁴¹

The send-offs given to the debating teams might also be smaller versions of those given to athletic teams. At the rally preceding the departure of the 1896 debating team for New Haven, Fletcher Dobyns (a representative or alternative on three successive Harvard debating teams) presided. Professor George Baker, credited by as many as the man most influential in the development of Harvard debating, commented on the hard work and self-sacrifice of the debaters, assuring them of his confidence in their abilities and the superiority of the Harvard system of teaching debate. (Similar statements about hard work, self-sacrifice, and the superiority of the "system" were routinely made at football rallies.) The team was then informed that it had the support of "the athletic side of the University"; each man was given a "three times three" and the team was dispatched with three long "Harvards." The attention that debating received in the student yearbooks at each college could also be indicative of ways in which connections were made with athletics. *The Yale Banner* often placed the section on debating adjacent to the section on athletics. *The Harvard Album*, likewise, associated debating activities with athletics on various occasions. In 1901, for example, the debaters appeared on the same page as the "class champion" lacrosse and hockey teams—both "minor sports," to be sure.⁴²

The second 1905 Harvard-Princeton debate was scheduled for December 15th. This placed it less than a month after the N.Y.U.-Union College tragedy

40. *Harvard Crimson*, 23 November 1901.

41. *Harvard Crimson*, 25 November 1901, 12, 13 May 1902.

42. For example, *Yale Banner*, 1896, 1897, 1898; *Harvard Portfolio*, 1895; *Harvard Album*, 1898, 1899, 1900. *Harvard Crimson*, 30 April 1896.

that precipitated what has come to be known as the “football crisis of 1905.”⁴³ Quite understandably, perhaps, the question argued was: “Resolved, that intercollegiate football in America is a detriment rather than a benefit.” In announcing the meeting, the *Crimson* declared: “The value of intercollegiate football is a question which undergraduates are entitled to discuss with considerable authority, and upon which their point of view is highly useful. Both as an interesting discussion, and as a contest that we care a great deal about winning, it is hoped that the debate will draw a large audience of undergraduates.” Princeton argued the *affirmative*, focusing on such things as statistics of injuries and assertions of mental and ethical harm. The Harvard speakers used testimonies from former football players about the importance of football as an outlet for “surplus animal spirits” and the inculcation of “executive” abilities. When the judges awarded the victory to Princeton, the *Crimson* intimated that the decision was prompted more by a preference for Princeton’s anti-football stance than the abilities of the speakers. Having observed that it was rare for debating teams to meet on a question that was of such interest to a general college audience, the editor decried Harvard’s fourth consecutive debating loss to Princeton and admonished the student body for the lack of undergraduate interest in debating. Harvard’s defeat of Yale the following spring, therefore, was proclaimed a “pleasant renewal of our former prestige in debating,” removing, at least according to the writer, any doubts about Harvard’s oratorical supremacy.⁴⁴

The Emergence of the Harvard-Yale-Princeton Triangular Debate, 1909

By the early 1900s, the debates between Harvard and Yale (and those with Princeton) had assumed a standard and predictable form. Teams were given considerable journalistic attention just prior to and following each of the contests, but little was said at other times. Nichols has referred to 1903 as the beginning of the “second decade” of intercollegiate debating—one characterized by a “passion for organization,” formalization of procedures, and an emphasis on the technical conduct of the debates. Various attempts were made to eliminate the possibility that one team could gain an advantage by composing the question in such a way that the other side was hampered by “tricks” and contrivances; and an increasing number of colleges and universities entered into triangular or quadrangular agreements.⁴⁵

As debating became more established at Cambridge and New Haven, victories continued to be greeted with such comments as “the team’s success last night is particularly gratifying,” but repeated efforts were needed to attract men

43. There is now a considerable literature on this topic. See, Ronald A. Smith, “Harvard and Columbia and a Reconsideration of the 1905-06 Football Crisis,” *Journal of Sport History* 8 (Winter, 1981): 5-19 and the references cited therein.

44. *Harvard Crimson*, 15, 16 December 1905. Harvard was represented by G. J. Hirsh, ‘07, A. Fox, 3L, and W. M. Shohl, ‘06, the alternate, who replaced the ill A. Tulin. 3L. Princeton was represented by K. M. McEwan, ‘06, P. McClanahan, ‘06, and T. S. Clark, ‘08.

45. Nichols, “Historical Sketch of Intercollegiate Debating”; 591-596. The report of the Fourteenth Annual Debate between Harvard and Yale that appeared in the 14 May 1902 *Yale Alumni Weekly* contained hints of efforts to determine which was the more important in intercollegiate debating, “form” or “substance.”

and develop teams. To stimulate interest for the 1906 meeting with Yale, the Harvard University Debating Council set a series of three trials, open to students in all departments of the University, at the conclusion of which the \$100 Coolidge Prize was awarded to the undergraduate judged to have done the most effective work. On the eve of the Seventeenth Harvard-Yale debate the *Crimson* published the results of all their contests since 1892. Boasting of twelve victories in the sixteen previous encounters, the editor noted that all seats at Cambridge had been sold. Professor Baker presided, the glee club entertained while the judges decided the winner, and both teams were tendered a formal reception and dinner.⁴⁶

Differences of opinion-at Harvard and Yale and elsewhere-developed regarding which should receive the greater attention: "power and strength of delivery" or "knowledge of the subject." Criticisms were levelled at clever phrasing, quibbling over the meaning of terms, and technical matters of arguments and evidence rather than at an emphasis on the speaker's convictions, such as Rudolph has noted in his study of the American college and university, were evident by 1908.⁴⁷ In the opinion of many, an overwhelming interest in contest victories had moved debating from an intellectual challenge aimed at getting "at the truth of a contemporary practical problem" to memorized speeches and the loss of "that running rebuttal, that one feature which distinguishes the real debater from the elocutionists." In the absence of the "head-on collision" of real debating-an affair for "grown-up men"-these events had turned into "parlor performances of children." The author of these sentiments, Bowdoin College's William T. Foster, complained that set speeches, lifeless discussion, and sweeping but shallow conclusions of teams of undergraduates rendered these debates "little short of ridiculous." Reporting the results of the 1906 Harvard-Yale debate, the *Yale Alumni Weekly* reminded readers that judges were to take into consideration "thorough knowledge of the subject, logical sequence, skill in selecting and presenting evidence, and power in rebuttal" as well as quality of voice, pronunciation, ease, gesture, and the like. The artificial nature of the latter items was one of the developments that was often criticized. Foster, for example, observed that courses in Pantomime and Gesture were referred to by students as "Pant" and "Jest."⁴⁸

Trials for the teams that would represent each university began immediately after the subject was announced. Members were speedily chosen so that ample time could be given to the preparation of the case and regular practices held under the direction of a coach. Similar intense efforts were made to prepare Freshman debating teams. The *Crimson* reported that all the members of the Harvard team selected for the 1907 debate with the Yale Freshmen had had high school debating experience and that they had been carefully coached. When Yale's representatives won with greater "finish of style" compared to Harvard's

46. *Harvard Crimson*, 31 March. 7 December 1906.

47. Rudolph. *American College*, 451-452; *Harvard Crimson*, 23 March 1907.

48. William T. Foster, "Intercollegiate Debating." *Nation* 86 (4 May 1908): 420-421; *Yale Alumni Weekly*, 4 April 1906, p. 569 and *Yale Alumni Weekly*, 23 May 1906, pp. 755-756.

“more combative and forceful arguments,” the issue of which criterion should be considered most important was itself debated in various publications.⁴⁹

Since their inception, the Harvard-Princeton, Yale-Princeton, and Harvard-Yale debates had all been treated as separate affairs. There was, for example, no one topic that was debated by all three teams. Because such arrangements left “the question of real supremacy” in doubt, many individuals were eager to see a change. This was especially urged by Harvard supporters, who were becoming restive on account of the growing number of losses to Princeton—six times in seven meetings between 1902 and 1908. Yale, on the other hand, had defeated Princeton four of six times in the same period, while losing all but one of her seven debates with Harvard. When the Harvard debaters once again defeated Yale in 1908, a Yale supporter complained that Harvard’s tactics had been so questionable that “the ethics of football so decried by President Eliot [were] decidedly superior in comparison.” It was alleged that Harvard had protected her position from reply and behaved in a most ungentlemanly fashion. The writer, identified only as H.C.L., also chastised the judges, especially Professor Henry Van Dyke of Princeton, for favoring “slick lawyers rather than commanding advocates.” If these tactics were intended to prove the intellectual superiority of Harvard “against the merely physical precedence of Yale,” he would have preferred to have his son on the beaten Yale team.⁵⁰

Borrowing from a scheme that was already in use at several New England colleges, Princeton proposed the establishment of a triangular meeting at which a total of six teams (two from each institution) would debate the same topic at the three colleges on the same evening. This was intended to make competitions more equitable and permit an overall “winner” to be declared. The plan was endorsed for the 1909 season. Because no formal league was established—or written agreement promulgated—the actual conduct of each of the debates depended upon whatever customs and traditions could be drawn upon and what each of the two opponents would agree to. This permitted differences in training and the selection of teams and fostered continuing disagreements. The *Crimson* announced the first Triangular Debate with guarded enthusiasm, acknowledging that Harvard did not currently enjoy “the high position she used to hold in intercollegiate debating.” Harvard debated Princeton at Princeton and Yale at Cambridge, and Yale opposed Princeton at New Haven on March 26, 1909. The question was: “Resolved, that all corporations engaged in interstate commerce should be compelled to take out a federal charter.” Because each of the “home” teams was named the winner, the first Triangular Debate was not deemed the success that supporters had hoped it would be.⁵¹

What was alluded to as an interesting “coincidence” of universal home-team victories was not lost on many commentators; neither was what some observers considered to be an increasing and undue emphasis on winning. Several hoped

49. *Harvard Crimson*, 26, 27 April 1907.

50. *Harvard Crimson*, 22 March 1907.2 May 1908; Levin and Goodfriend, *Harvard Debating*, 24-25; *New York Evening Post*, 5 May 1908.

51. *Harvard Crimson*, 26, 27 March 1909; *Yale Alumni News*, April 1909.

for more “decisive results” in the future, but an anonymous author complained in the *Yale Alumni Weekly* that of the six men who represented Yale against Harvard and Princeton “three were graduates of other colleges and two were regularly admitted attorneys-at-law.” Harvard was also condemned for “professionalism” and accused of engaging in similar practices. How could it be, the author demanded, that in “all other intercollegiate contests the most rigid rules against professionalism are enacted and jealously enforced.” Men who had received money for playing any sport were barred from intercollegiate *athletic* competitions, and those who had played on teams elsewhere were required to have a year of residence at a second institution before competing. Yet, “lawyers and preachers and public speakers . . . who have been earning their livelihood by argument and address and who happen to be taking a year or two of study at a university are allowed to represent that university in an intercollegiate debate”; men who had entered from another college were permitted to immediately represent the new one in debate. This situation, the critic concluded, had made intercollegiate debating by 1909 little more than “an individual sparring match between a few professionals.”⁵²

Intercollegiate Debating Compared and Contrasted With Intercollegiate Athletics: Some Tentative Historical and Cultural Observations

Although there were numerous similarities between the two types of agonistic events, there were also differences between intercollegiate debating and intercollegiate athletics. Beyond the obvious fact that the former focused upon intellectual and linguistic skills, and the latter on physical skills, there were other more subtle, but nonetheless important, comparisons and contrasts. In general, there was never anywhere near the same concern about professionalism in debating as there was in athletics. Several reasons seem likely. First, there was the long tradition in the Western world that things of the mind are of “finer stuff” than things of the body; it was easier to sustain the belief that “training” for debating was directed to the attainment of higher ends. This is not to suggest that late nineteenth century commentators did not also believe that training the muscles might provide an important means to a higher moral development. Indeed they did! As Haley, Mangan, Park, and others have shown, Victorian and Edwardian supporters of a “muscular Christian” ideology and games-playing repeatedly insisted that by strengthening his muscles a man also strengthened his *character*.⁵³ Theologians, educators, men of letters, physicians, physical educators, coaches-and even some biological scientists-were of the opinion that physical exercise, especially in the form of team

52. “Professionalism” in Debating, *Yale Alumni News*, April 1909, p. 688 Levin and Goodfriend contend that although it had been suggested that much of Harvard’s success was because the Law School and other graduate departments often contributed men, Yale had drawn “. . . more Varsity debaters from her graduate departments. . .” *Harvard Debating*, 21. Although graduates were certainly used by all three universities, undergraduates were the majority of the teams in most instances.

53. Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); James A. Mangan, *The Games-Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal* (Hammondsworth: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1986). Park, “Biological Thought”

sports, could be a powerful means to total human perfection, provided, of course, these were not tainted by excesses of commercialism or professionalism. The agitation over collegiate football in 1905, although precipitated by injuries and deaths, was surely driven as much by a fear that the “professionalized” forms of games would no longer contribute to a man’s moral development as it was by medical concerns.

Intercollegiate debating contests seemed to extend and expand what had long been the acknowledged and legitimate core of university life-intellectual achievement honed and expressed in a tradition of oral disputation that could be traced to the Middle Ages. Walter Ong has argued that as the oral performance culture that once characterized the academic world was increasingly eroded by writing as the dominant medium for the exchange of ideas and information much of the agonistic competitiveness of the verbal tradition was transferred to other modes of expression, most notably intercollegiate athletics.⁵⁴ The new form of intercollegiate debating initiated by Harvard and Yale reinstated this earlier form of male competitiveness, but within those frames that enclosed the newer-and now far more prized-physical contest. The rhetoric and symbolism derived from athletic contests helped legitimate debating as an intercollegiate “sport.” It was necessary, however, that the verbal encounters remain actual contests between men, not the staged events that some critics thought they had become by the early 1900s, if they were to retain the interest of the general student and alumni.

Intercollegiate debating incorporated and drew strength from the same late nineteenth century inter-institutional rivalries that were powerfully expressed in the athletic arena. Oscar and Mary Handlin, and others, have argued that after 1870 the American college increasingly performed a major *rite of passage* function for males in a society where the hope of upward social mobility-or the maintenance of achieved status-was a highly sought and prized goal. In spite of regional and other differences, institutions of higher learning endeavored to make “the college man.” This was to be done not through formal courses of study, but through a variety of extracurricular agencies which emphasized the formation and maintenance of a sense of uniqueness and community that set “the college man” off from those who had not shared the same experiences.⁵⁵ The great unifying ritual form for such “*communitas*”⁵⁶ was the athletic contest. These highly elaborated performances drew students and alumni together in a common effort aimed at the defeat of an outsider. It is not surprising that

54. Walter J. Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality and Consciousness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981); Angelo M. Pellegrini, “Renaissance and Medieval Antecedents of Debate,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 28 (1942): 14-19.

55. Oscar Handlin and Mary F. Handlin, *The American College and American Culture: Socialization as a Function of Higher Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1970); see also, Roberta J. Park, “Boys Into Men--State Into Nation: *Rites of Passage* in Student Life and College Athletics, 1890-1905,” in *The Masks of Play*, ed. Brian Sutton-Smith and Diana Kelly-Byrne (New York: Leisure Press, 1984).

56. Victor Turner has done much of the important work on “*communitas*.” He has also authored two intriguing papers on this concept in relation to play and games: “From Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology,” in Edward Norbeck, ed. *Rice University Studies: the Anthropological Study of Human Play* 60 (1974): 53-92 and “Variations on a Theme of Liminality,” in *Secular Ritual*, ed. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (Assen/Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1977), 36-52.

institutions quickly designated a particular rival college or university whose annual defeat (especially in football) was frequently deemed the single most important event on the year's calendar. Encased in layers of songs, yells, banners, rallies, and other accoutrements, the intercollegiate contest focused and intensified a sense of mutual identity among supporters and mutual rivalry toward the opponent.

Successful debaters, especially initially, received the accolades of their peers much as did successful athletes; and victories in debating could bring financial support from alumni. However, it is patently clear that debating contests never attained anything like the intense and broadly-based appeal that athletics enjoyed. While a small number of devotees of public speaking were undoubtedly interested in the subtleties of argument and riposte, the vast majority of those who followed the yearly Harvard-Yale debates were attracted by the opportunity for yet another *contest* in which one could establish or reinforce institutional superiority against one's "equals" - on the podium as well as on the playing-field. It was far easier, of course, to follow a run back punt or buck through the line than it was to follow the thread of a complex argument. One could shout and encourage one's favorites at almost anytime during a game, but this was not possible during the speeches-although there appears to have been cheering at appropriate times preceding, during, and afterwards. Spectators could become part of the game-and all it symbolically conveyed-far more deeply and completely than they could be part of the debate. Moreover, the necessarily subjective nature of determining the victor in debating almost always left the resolution of the contest open to doubt. These were among the several reasons why athletics were much more attractive.

The over-riding reason, however, might more profitably be sought in pervasive nineteenth century concerns about the human body. These were acted out in several contexts, one of the most powerful being the athletic arena. Drawing upon the work of historians of science and medicine like Jacyna, Figlio, Smith, and Temkin, from the work of literary critics like Cameron and Shuttleworth, and from the insights of anthropologists like Douglas and Turner, I have suggested elsewhere that the growing interest in athletic sport-and physical education-after mid-century was intensified by popular interpretations of biology that permeated English-speaking nations. To a society anxious about nervous diseases, "neurasthenia," and the debilitating effects of modern life, the well-ordered and powerful icon of the athletic male body offered hope that neither the individual nor the society was coming apart.⁵⁷ Quite the opposite!

57. Park, "Biological Thought," *idem.*, "Physiologists. Physicians and Physical Educators.": *idem.* "Healthy, Moral, and Strong: Exercise and Athleticism in Late Nineteenth Century America." Paper presented at the Fit for America Symposium, Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum, Rochester, New York, April 25-26, 1986
John O'Neill. *Five Bodies: The Human Shape of Modern Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985) contends that the biophysical body serves as a central figure in the "symbolic system whereby members communicate to each other. . ." a host of cultural values, aspirations, beliefs and anxieties (pp. 15-25).

Athletes literally *embodied* ideologies of discipline, control, courage, “sand,” power, and efficient organization *in action*. Through his actions on the field of combat, it was assumed, a man’s real *character* would be revealed, and his “manliness” displayed and reinforced. By the end of the nineteenth century, “the deed” has taken precedence over “the word”-especially when these were “mere words” and not the *agonstic* words of “real men.”