

Charles W. Eliot: Conflict of Intercollegiate Athletics In Liberal Arts Education

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According to historians of American education, Charles W. Eliot was one of the most influential reformers of higher learning in America. During his forty year tenure as Harvard's president, 1869-1909, Eliot inaugurated a number of reforms that established Harvard as the premier American institution of higher learning. Among his reforms was the establishment of a liberal arts curriculum which served as a model for other colleges and universities.

Eliot's liberal arts ideology favored the cultivation of body but only as a means to preserve health and to provide a diversion from intellectual pursuits. The over indulgence of bodily activity as evidenced in intercollegiate athletics was considered as disruptive to the mission of higher education, and Eliot was strongly opposed to the manner in which intercollegiate athletics was conducted, particularly the professionalism, commercialism, fanaticism, and injurious behavior that accompanied the growth of intercollegiate athletics during the latter part of the 19th century. The purpose of this discussion is to examine Eliot's criticism of intercollegiate athletics and why he deemed athletics as inappropriate in his liberal arts ideology. My discussion will also deal with Eliot's efforts to combat the proliferation of intercollegiate athletics, and examine why he was unable to abolish athletics, even at his own institution.



George Kirsch discussed organized sport in Philadelphia in a session moderated by Alar Lipping.