

The Football Controversy at Trinity College, 1887–1894.

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This paper examines the football controversy at Trinity College (now Duke University), a small Methodist supported school in central North Carolina, from 1887 to 1894. During these years Trinity's president was John Franklin Crowell, an Ivy League educated Pennsylvanian who introduced scientific football to North Carolina. Crowell had become a football expert while a student at Yale and was a passionate advocate of the game, which he felt developed such positive values as virility, discipline, courage, leadership, and school and community cohesiveness.

Crowell's tenure at Trinity was a stormy one. A progressive educator but abrasive personality, he modernized the curriculum, improved the library, feuded with the faculty, raised and spent more money than any prior Trinity president, and most dramatically successfully promoted a controversial and expensive 1892 move from the rural community of Trinity to the tobacco manufacturing city of Durham. By the early 1890s football was the most visible source of controversy involving Crowell. Critics were concerned about eligibility questions, fierce interschool rivalries, violent play, and the at least occasional use of alcohol by the team. In the fall of 1892 the Western North Carolina Conference of the Methodist Church, one of Trinity's joint owners, called for the abolition of football at Trinity, a demand echoed throughout the next year by the state's leading Methodist paper the Raleigh *Christian Advocate*. Crowell survived one attempt to remove him and even gained formal control of Trinity's athletic program from the school's Board of Trustees. Yet in the fall of 1893 the ever aggressive Crowell exchanged bitter charges with his critics at a stormy Western Conference meeting. His support eroded after years of dispute, Crowell was unable or unwilling to defend football, and resigned the next spring. His replacement, John Kilgo, was no friend of football and abolished intercollegiate contests shortly after his arrival. The Trinity ban was not lifted until 1920.