

# Coeducation and Physical Training at Oberlin College, 1837-1920

Debbie Cottrell

The University of Texas at Austin

To historians of education, Oberlin College is a landmark, the pioneering Ohio institution that refused to conform to more conventional approaches to education and instead sought to create a model community of Christian virtue grounded in social reform in early nineteenth-century America. In this mission of moral action, Oberlin developed a host of characteristics that set it apart from most institutions of higher education, not the least of which was its coeducational admissions policy. To historians of sport, Oberlin is best-known for contributing numerous renowned leaders to the physical education profession—Luther Gulick, Fred Leonard, and Thomas Wood, to name but a few of its earliest p.e. graduates—and for its unusual arrangement of having had a woman—Delphine Hanna—to train many of these male pioneers. Within the context of education and sport, this paper seeks to explain how the coeducational arrangement at Oberlin directly affected its physical training program and how physical training was used in a manner consistent with the school's ongoing purpose. In so doing, this work proposed that the school's initial arrangement as both a coeducational and manual labor institution in the early nineteenth century determined the course of physical training at Oberlin well into the twentieth century and that Delphine Hanna's career at Oberlin was a logical outgrowth of the school's heritage.

Despite suggestions by some scholars that Oberlin's coeducational arrangement provided only an environment for women to serve men, this paper argued that Oberlin's joint educational approach was significant and had a direct influence on the development of physical education at the school. Three elements of the coeducational arrangement contributed to its importance: the perception of it as a successful endeavor, the way it contributed to an ordered yet flexible social system, and the emphasis it included on the health and physical well-being of all of Oberlin's students.

The role of physical training at Oberlin is understood by examining how physical activity fit Oberlin's overall purpose, how physical training evolved and operated at Oberlin throughout the nineteenth century in a way consistent with other aspects of the school, and how and why Delphine Hanna influenced Oberlin's contributions to physical training and education. Hanna's unique role at Oberlin grew largely from the fact that she had no male counterpart at the school when she arrived and because Oberlin, in its environment of flexible coeducation, accepted the idea that its p.e. program would go forward under a woman. Her career in Ohio proved that a school such as Oberlin, by taking women seriously, could make an important contribution to the history of physical education in the United States.