

## IMMIGRANT STUDENTS IN AMERICAN COLLEGES (1900–1945)

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As early twentieth century Americans vigorously debated U.S. immigration policy and immigrants' impact on the nation and its culture, leaders of American colleges and universities discussed among themselves the impact of immigrant students and students of immigrant parentage on the nation's expanding higher education system. Although the development of ethnic and religious quotas in private elite institutions has been well documented, historians have paid relatively little attention to the way faculty and administrators at urban public institutions viewed students from immigrant families and their educational needs. This paper will show that professors and administrators in urban institutions, especially those that received public funding, expressed intense anxiety about students from immigrant homes.

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The Dillingham Commission, a bipartisan congressional committee which studied U.S. immigration, expressed grave concerns in its 1910 report about the “new” immigration from southern and eastern Europe. The commission released five volumes of data on the children of immigrants in schools. Although most of this data examined students in primary and secondary schools, a portion of the report considered students in higher education. The commission gathered data from sixty three institutions, all located in cities, which collectively enrolled 32,728 students. Of these, 8,304 (25%) were native-born of foreign-born fathers, and 3,366 (10%) were foreign born. (The report did not present data on native-born children of foreign-born mothers.) Of the foreign-born students, the largest groups (in size order) were Hebrew, Canadian, English, Irish and Italian. Of the students of foreign-born fathers, the largest groups were Germans, Irish, Hebrew and Canadian.<sup>1</sup> So clearly, by the early twentieth century students from immigrant families had a substantial presence in colleges and universities located in cities.

Most U.S. colleges of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century sought to build character and spiritual values in young men through a classical curriculum offered on an isolated campus, mostly in rural settings. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, most undergraduates liberal arts colleges remained committed to student character development.<sup>2</sup> Even as American higher education underwent dramatic change with the rise of the elective system, the increase in professional/vocational programs, and the emergence of graduate research universities, many higher education leaders still subscribed to the idea that a college education should ideally be offered in a small town or rural area. David Starr Jordan, the founding president of Stanford University, wrote in 1903 that while professional schools could be located in a city, “a college should be in a town so small that college interests overshadow all others.”<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, educators expressed even greater concern about commuter students, many of whom came from immigrant families. As higher education expanded in the first part of the twentieth century, many cities established or expanded “municipal universities,” institutions funded by city government and attended by students from the local community. In 1928, Frederick Robinson, president of one of the largest municipal colleges, City College of New York, told fellow members of the Association of Urban Universities that commuter students “do

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<sup>1</sup> *The Children of Immigrants in Schools*, Vol. I, Government Printing Office, Washington 1911, pp. 155–164.

<sup>2</sup> F. Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1965, chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> D.S. Jordan, *The Voice of the Scholar*, Paul Elder and Company, San Francisco 1903, chapter 5.

not enter into a student life dominated night and day by other students,” and therefore miss the advantages of “spiritual transplanting.” While away from college, he argued “their older associations and habits compete more powerfully with ... academic influences.”<sup>4</sup>

Educators who believed deeply in the importance of a discrete residential campus were especially concerned about students who commuted from immigrant homes. In 1916, William Foster, President of Reed College, wrote in *Harper's Magazine* that “one might conclude, from the studiousness of boys at the City College of New York, that large, free, urban universities are the usual resorts of serious-minded youth. Such a conclusion would ignore the racial factor, more important in this instance than any other.”<sup>5</sup> In 1933, Frank McCloskey, Assistant Dean at New York University, reported that “when one considers that [students from immigrant homes] return for a good portion of every twenty-four hours to environments, if not directly antagonistic, at least not conducive to progress... their... achievements during a four year course are often astounding.”<sup>6</sup> And a legislative report on public higher education in New York City, published in 1944, noted that only 17% of the fathers and 22% of the mothers of freshmen who entered City College of New York were born in the United States. It concluded that “City College students must often be torn between European and American standards, between codes and customs of their parents and those of their own group.”<sup>7</sup>

Higher education faculty and administrators complained in particular about immigrant students' lack of social refinement. Kenneth Mason, Dean of Freshmen at Brown University, expressed concern in 1927 that his institution “in common with other institutions located in a like environment, has in her student body too large a proportion of socially undesirable students.” Emphatically denying that he was “Jew-baiting,” he expressed grave concern about “the influx of alien blood into what was not so long ago a homogenous group of students prevailingly Baptist and Anglo-Saxon.”<sup>8</sup> This view of immigrant students was not confined to private institutions like Brown or Reed. Officials at municipal colleges and state universities shared this assessment. In the 1930s, Hunter College Dean

<sup>4</sup> Association of Urban Universities, *Proceedings*, 1928 (Hereafter cited as AUU Proceedings).

<sup>5</sup> W.T. Foster, “Should Students Study?”, *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 133, (1916), p. 612. The article was included also in Foster's 1917 book of the same title, published by Harper and Brothers.

<sup>6</sup> AUU *Proceedings*, 1933, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in N. Glazer, ‘City College,’ in D. Reisman, V. A. Stadtman, eds, *Transformation: Seventeen Institutions Under Pressure*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1973, pp. 79–80.

<sup>8</sup> AUU *Proceedings*, 1927, pp. 76–77.

Hannah Egan set up a program of compulsory “Dean’s Hour Courses” to teach students proper attire, personal appearance, hygiene and behavior. Egan explained that her goal was to teach students “to be at ease, serving, conversing, meeting people.” In his autobiography, George Shuster, who became president of Hunter in 1939, explained that when he assumed the leadership of the college “a large number of the girls who came to Hunter had absorbed a variety of prejudices from home environments, displayed only the rudiments of good manners,[and] spoke English atrociously.” He described these women, mostly daughters of Jewish immigrants, as “raucous, gawky, and afflicted with acne, halitosis, and deplorable hair-dos” and displaying “only the rudiments of good manners.” Hunter must teach them to “become socially and morally the kind of women who are deserving of a Hunter degree” he asserted. This meant teaching them “a sense of honor and public service” and inculcating “charm and courtesy.”<sup>9</sup>

One largely commuter institution, The University of Pittsburgh, took unusual steps to address what faculty saw as the deficiencies of students from immigrant backgrounds who attended in large numbers. In his annual report to the trustees in 1926, Chancellor John Bowman wrote that some students came “from localities which hold to the language and traditions of another country,” thereby limiting their capacity “to get the viewpoint and attitude which make up our national traditions.” The university sought, he continued, “through a thorough education to assimilate such students, but starting as we do from our own Anglo-Saxon character, we find difficulty in arriving quite upon common ground with students of other inheritance.” Many faculty shared this view. A modern language professor, for example, said the problem of educating students from immigrant families was “not with the training of the mind, but in social refinement.” A business faculty member said that immigrant students “showed abnormal sensitivity, even an inferiority complex. And an engineering professor stated that “There are two groups of engineers – those whom I take home to dinner and those whom I leave in the ditch, and I say to my class, ‘it’s up to you’” The dean of students, Ruth Crawford Mitchell, explained that “students of old world inheritances face not only a scholastic disadvantage but often a disadvantage in personality development which is the direct result of undue sensitiveness about their foreign backgrounds.” After World War I, the university took an unusual approach in addressing this situation. It decided to create sixteen nationality rooms in a major new building, named “The Cathedral of Learning”, each one containing artifacts and art work from a country with

<sup>9</sup> G.H. Shuster, *The Ground I Walked On*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, p. 104; K. Kroo Grunfield, ‘Purpose and Ambiguity: The Feminine World of Hunter College,’ EdD dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1991, pp. 205–207, 217–218.

a large immigrant population in Pittsburgh. In 1942, Bowman declared that the rooms “had exceeded all expectations ... They make for good will and good manners.”<sup>10</sup>

Jewish students constituted a large portion of the enrollment of students from immigrant families in many urban and commuter institutions. “Hebrews” constituted the largest nationality group in the Dillingham Commission’s 1911 study of foreign-born students in colleges and universities. In New York City, which had by far the largest Jewish population in the U.S., municipal colleges like Hunter, City, and Brooklyn College had overwhelmingly Jewish enrollment, as did many of the city’s private universities. In academic year 1918/19, 79% of students at City College, 48% at NYU, 39% at Hunter College, 30% at Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, and 21% at Columbia University were Jewish. Even Fordham University, a Jesuit institution, had a 23% Jewish enrollment.<sup>11</sup> Many educators who complained about immigrant students’ lack of refinement were actually talking about Jewish students, even if they did not explicitly say so. University of Pittsburgh dean Ruth Crawford Mitchell, however, specifically identified Jewish students’ shortcomings. In 1933, she wrote that “self-control, objectivity, sportsmanship, integrity are qualities practically unknown among those Jewish types who for countless generations in spite of pogroms and prejudice have conducted all matters of business among the Slavonic Peasants of Poland, Slovakia, Carpatho-Russia and the Ukraine.”<sup>12</sup>

In the post-world War II era Jews would constitute an ever larger portion of college faculty. But in the pre-war period, very few Jews held faculty positions. A 1927 survey of the religious affiliation of 4,718 state university faculty found that 24% identified as Methodist Episcopal, 23% Presbyterian, 12% Baptist, 8% Congregational, 6.7% Disciples, 3.5% Lutheran and 5.6% Roman Catholic. Only thirty four faculty, less than 1%, identified themselves as Jewish.<sup>13</sup> In that same year, another report stated that “With very few exceptions, the Jewish university professor in America is non-existent.” City College had four Jewish

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in H. Wechsler, ‘One-Third of a Campus: Ruth Crawford Mitchell and Second-Generation Americans at the University of Pittsburgh,’ *History of Education Quarterly* 48, 1 (February 2008), pp. 97–98, 103, 119–122; AUU *Proceedings*, 1944, p. 15; See also University of Pittsburgh brochure, *Training to Win, Inside the Cathedral of Learning*.

<sup>11</sup> M. Graham Synnott, *The Half-Opened Door: Discrimination and Admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, 1900–1970*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CN 1979, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Wechsler, ‘One-Third of a Campus...,’ p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> O.D. Foster, ‘Religious Census in State Universities, Colleges and Normal Schools in the United States, 1926–1927,’ *Christian Education* 19 (June 1927), pp. 536–556.

faculty, and, NYU's downtown Washington Square College, with a 93% Jewish enrollment, had no Jewish faculty at all.<sup>14</sup>

The gap between faculty and Jewish students at public and municipal universities, reflected a deep divide between the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of students and their professors. But Jewish students also attended more prestigious private universities in considerable numbers. In 1916, Jews constituted about three percent of American college students. By 1937, their number had grown to over 9% of a vastly expanded total enrollment.<sup>15</sup> Concerned that their institutions were being overrun by Jews and that a large Jewish enrollment would drive away Anglo-Protestant students, many institutions established quotas or devised new selection criteria to limit the number of Jews who could enroll. Beginning in 1910, Columbia University leaders took many steps to limit Jewish enrollment. These included efforts to recruit and give scholarships to students from outside New York City, requiring students to submit information about their social backgrounds and career goals, and relying substantially on newly developed "intelligence tests." Columbia officials expressed concern not so much about Jews in general but about Jews from eastern European immigrant families.<sup>16</sup> Columbia College Dean Frederick Keppel in 1910 complained about "ill-prepared and uncultured Jews" who were "trying to obtain a cheap College degree by transferring ... from the City College." President Nicholas Murray Butler said that the quality of Columbia students declined greatly after American entrance into World War I because the student body consisted of "foreign born children and children of those but recently arrived in America." He explained that that "The boys of old American stock, even many of them under draft age, have sought opportunity for military or other public service and have no time to go to college."<sup>17</sup> Harvard and Yale, among others, used similar methods to reduce Jewish student enrollment.<sup>18</sup>

Even NYU, with its overwhelmingly Jewish student body at Washington Square, established a Jewish quota for its more selective residential campus at University Heights in the Bronx, opened in 1885 to attract elite students who would not enroll in the downtown campus. After World War I, the university established a Jewish student quota. In 1919, University Heights Dean Archibald

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<sup>14</sup> L.S. Feuer, 'The Stages in the Social History of Jewish Professors in American Colleges and Universities,' *American Jewish History*, Vol. 71, No 4, June 1982, p. 455.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 456.

<sup>16</sup> H.S. Wechsler, *The Qualified Student: A History of Selective College Admission in America*, John Wiley, New York 1977, chapter 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>18</sup> M.G. Synnott, *The Half-Opened Door...*, p. 16.

Bouton explained a few years later “we were ... threatened with nothing less than the immediate disintegration of our college body as it was then constituted at University Heights...” The Heights campus’s “chief problems center in students of Russian, Polish and Central European parentage, most of them the sons of immigrants in the first generation.”<sup>19</sup>

In response to the spread of quotas, some American Jews advocated establishment of a Jewish university, not unlike the many Catholic universities in large cities that educated people of Irish, Polish, Italian and many other ancestries. A prominent rabbi, Louis I. Newman, in 1923 edited a book on the subject, with various arguments for and against this idea. Newman, an advocate of a Jewish university, expressed concern that hostility to Jewish students might cause the government of New York City to drastically cut funding for City College or to shut it down completely. Interestingly, he argued that “If the Jewish University were situated in a New York suburb, within commuting distance, we would be able to furnish in time proper dormitory accommodations, sufficient leisure for extra-curricular activities to develop physique and personality, and the environment suitable for bona-fide college training.” Embracing much of the criticism of urban and commuter institutions, and the importance of character building, he expressed the view that “Our present metropolitan colleges savor too much of the factory and too little of the university.” Writing in opposition to a Jewish university, Ohio State University president W.O. Thompson, a Protestant minister, stated that he recognized “that the Jewish race declines to assimilate with other races,” and therefore Jews should attend public institutions where they could “embrace the common American ideals.”<sup>20</sup>

In short, in the years before the end of World War II, faculty and staff at many American universities embraced the widely held view that immigrants from southern and eastern Europe represented a threat to Anglo-America and entered college with great personal deficiencies. Many believed that these deficiencies could be reduced by proper education on a discrete residential campus, but not if the students returned daily to their immigrant family homes. The deficiencies also could not be addressed in residential colleges that admitted too many Jewish students, because if Jews enrolled in large numbers, they would cling to each other. Even more importantly, they argued, Jews’ substantial presence on campus would undermine the traditional role of colleges in shaping the nation’s future leaders in accord with longstanding Anglo-Saxon values.

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in H. Broun, George Britt, *Christians Only: A Study in Prejudice*, Vanguard Press, New York 1931, p. 108.

<sup>20</sup> L.I. Newman, ed, *A Jewish University in America*, Bloch Publishing Company, New York 1923, pp. 9–20, 27, 53–84.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the attitudes of faculty and university leaders toward students from southern and eastern European families changed dramatically. So did the composition of the faculty, as more and more people from immigrant backgrounds, especially Jews, earned PhDs. But as the civil rights movement pushed successfully for open enrollment programs and special admissions for African-American and Hispanic students, a new generation of faculty, many of them Jewish or of other immigrant nationalities, focused on the poor academic preparation of some minority students, and expressed concerns about the negative influence of ghetto neighborhoods and families headed by single mothers. Clearly American higher educators' views of urban students had changed, but anxiety about students' social backgrounds, especially in urban commuter institutions, continued.