

Sports for the Liberal Arts: Reimagining Iowa's Small Colleges, 1921–1939

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IN 1925, Karl F. Wettstone, president of the University of Dubuque, tried to abolish intercollegiate athletics at his college, while also seeking, unsuccessfully, to convince other college leaders in Iowa and the nation to do the same. Wettstone's crusade, albeit a failed one, signaled the beginning of a larger transformation in Iowa's liberal arts colleges and their relation to sport. By the end of the 1930s, the state's smaller colleges experienced a period of realignment in athletic conference membership that demonstrated a repurposing, not a rejection, of college sports. Grinnell College left the Missouri Valley Conference (MVC) to join the Midwest Athletic Conference; Iowa State Teachers College (ISTC, present-day University of Northern Iowa) left the Iowa Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (IIAC) to join the North Central Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (NCIAC); and Wartburg College took ISTC's place in the IIAC. At first glance, this reshuffling may seem like a mundane case of a few colleges choosing to play football or basketball against different schools. Yet closer examination shows that Iowa's colleges were at the forefront of interwar

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critiques of athletics, cultural debates regarding the meaning of tradition versus modernity, and transformations in the essence of higher education.

Historian Brad Austin has rightly argued that American universities did not substantially deemphasize sport in the 1930s, despite many calls to do so. In fact, commercialization rose as universities used sport to create publicity and community in a time of economic hardship. The corrupt monarch often called King Football was not dethroned.² What happened in universities, though, is just part of the story. Small colleges, meanwhile, reimagined their roles in response to modernity, the Great Depression, and the New Deal. As they did so, some criticized recent trends: academic specialization, fragmentation of knowledge, state-funded (secular) education, and athletic commercialization. For them, big-time sports represented the problems of modern education. Dubuque may have briefly tried to abolish intercollegiate athletics, but others appropriated it. Iowa's small colleges were among those institutions, especially in the Midwest, that pioneered the idea that college activities had to fulfill pedagogical rather than commercial purposes. Such colleges desired only to compete against those that similarly prioritized athletics and upheld the primacy of an institutional type increasingly called the liberal arts college.

Rise of Intercollegiate Sports and Athletic Conferences

American college athletics originated within the rise of what historian Frederick Rudolph called the "extracurriculum," a collection of activities that students created during the mid-1800s to supplement classroom lessons.³ Princeton and Rutgers played America's first intercollegiate football game in 1869, but the sport

2. Brad Austin, *Democratic Sports: Men's and Women's College Athletics during the Great Depression* (Fayetteville, AR, 2015), 173–201. On discourses regarding 1930s college sports and athletic corruption, see Michael Oriard, *King Football: Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio and Newsreels, Movies and Magazines, the Weekly and the Daily Press* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001).

3. Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (1962; Athens, GA, 1990), 136–56.

took twenty years to get to Iowa. The first game west of the Mississippi River was contested between the State University of Iowa (more commonly known today as the University of Iowa) and Iowa (Grinnell) College in 1889.⁴ The sport grew in the 1890s, and with its rising popularity came problems and reforms. Injuries, scandals, and corruption circa 1905 led to the creation of the precursor to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which initially served as an advisory body that created new rules, including a legalized forward pass. Reformers sought to make football safer for athletes, purer for universities, and more entertaining for spectators. The rise of regulatory agencies, athletic departments, professional coaches, and reinforced-concrete stadiums effectively made sport a permanent part of campus life; meanwhile, the press made it an essential element of American culture. As women's intercollegiate and interscholastic athletics were suppressed by educators who claimed to protect the bodies, minds, morals, and femininity of young women, men's athletics grew even bigger in the 1920s, at a time when radio disseminated games and helped create athletic celebrities.⁵ Not all institutions embraced the new, postwar order of athletic commercialization.

One vehicle for reform was the athletic conference, an association of institutions, located within a particular geographical region, sharing comparable academic and athletic aims. Even before the NCAA's founding, controversies regarding eligibility and pay-

4. Chuck Schoffner, "100 Years of Grinnell Football Began with Victory over Iowa," *Los Angeles Times*, 9/3/1989.

5. John Sayle Watterson, *College Football: History, Spectacle, Controversy* (Baltimore, 2000); Brian M. Ingrassia, *The Rise of Gridiron University: Higher Education's Uneasy Alliance with Big-Time Football* (Lawrence, KS, 2012); Michael Oriard, *King Football*, and *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993); Daniel A. Clark, *Creating the College Man: American Mass Magazines and Middle-Class Manhood* (Madison, WI, 2010), 88, 93–94; Paula S. Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York, 1977), 238; Ronald A. Smith, *Play-by-Play: Radio, Television, and Big-Time College Sport* (Baltimore, 2001). For more on women's intercollegiate and interscholastic athletics, which have a distinct history beyond the scope of this study, see Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport* (1994; Cambridge, MA, 1995), 55–82; Robert Pruter, *The Rise of American High School Sports and the Search for Control, 1880–1930* (Syracuse, NY, 2013), 244–48.

for-play led to the formation of the Intercollegiate Conference of Faculty Representatives, also known as the Big Nine or (after 1917) the Big Ten; the University of Iowa joined this conference in 1899. Meanwhile, other circuits formed. In 1908, several Great Plains schools created the Missouri Valley Conference; later, Drake University and Grinnell joined.⁶ Additional conferences arose during the postwar athletic boom. In 1921, six colleges—including Coe and Cornell, along with colleges in Illinois, Minnesota, and Wisconsin—formed a Midwest Athletic Conference; several additional institutions in Wisconsin and Illinois later joined.⁷ This group existed alongside other regional conferences and still operates as the Midwest Collegiate Athletic Conference.

By the early 1920s, some Iowa colleges tried to rein sport in. Drake's President Daniel W. Morehouse said colleges should hold a "sane, sensible attitude" regarding athletics.⁸ Sixteen schools in Iowa planned to form a conference including colleges not already belonging to the Big Ten or MVC. Athletes had to be full-time students in liberal arts courses; students in "commercial courses," including "bookkeeping and typewriting," would not be eligible. Athletes had to take "twelve hours' work in a regular or special course of college grade." Transfer students had to establish a one-year "residence" before competing. Clearly, the conference was strict on eligibility, but its rules on professionalism were a bit looser. Students could compete as long as they had not played as professionals within their respective collegiate sports, or if they had only played on non-league-affiliated "town or semi-pro teams."⁹

6. On the Big Ten, see Winton U. Solberg, *Creating the Big Ten: Courage, Corruption, and Commercialization* (Urbana, IL, 2018). A case study of a small-college conference is Ronald A. Smith, "From Normal School to State University: A History of the Wisconsin State University Conference" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Wisconsin, 1969).

7. "Mid-West Conference Organized in 1922 by 7 Colleges," *Grinnell Scarlet and Black*, 12/3/1938.

8. Quoted in "Eight Athletic Associations with 60 Schools as Members Now Exist in Sixth District," *Des Moines Tribune*, 12/28/1922.

9. "Iowa Conference Have Track Meet Here, May 13th," *College Eye*, 4/19/1922; "Iowa Athletic Conference Formed," *Buena Vista Tack*, 4/18/1922 (quotations).

In late 1922, representatives met in Des Moines to refine the scope of this association, later known as the IIAC. Members were Buena Vista, Central, Columbia (Loras), Des Moines, Ellsworth, Iowa Wesleyan, Luther, Parsons, (William) Penn, Simpson, St. Ambrose, Upper Iowa, and Western Union (Westmar). They hammered out agreements about officials and eligibility, and discussed jersey numbering—a practice already introduced elsewhere in the 1910s and meant to cut down on improper substitutions or rules infractions.¹⁰ The following year, the IIAC named Hubert Utterback, a Des Moines judge, as its commissioner. Utterback's role was similar to that of other recently installed commissioners, including Major League Baseball's Kenesaw Mountain Landis and the Big Ten's John L. Griffith.¹¹ By late 1923, Columbia College had departed the loop, but in the meantime, Morningside and Iowa State Teachers College joined, bringing the total membership to fourteen.¹²

State-level athletic conferences formed at a time when education was in flux. Midwestern states such as Iowa saw a proliferation of denominational colleges in the 1800s, after migrants streamed in from Europe or the eastern United States. Methodists, Catholics, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Quakers, Baptists, and the Disciples of Christ established colleges. In the meantime, Iowa founded a public university (1847), agricultural college (1858), and teachers college (1876).¹³ The state's population grew from fewer than 200,000 people in 1850 to over 1.6 million in 1880 and more than 2.2 million in 1910. During World War I, an infusion of federal funding, especially for the Student Army Training

10. "State Conference to Hold Meeting Here Today," *Des Moines Register*, 12/8/1922; "New Circuit Will Stage Cage Tourney," *Des Moines Register*, 12/10/1922. On jersey numbers, see Ingrassia, *Rise of Gridiron University*, 122–23.

11. "Judge Utterback is Named Commissioner of Iowa Conference," *Des Moines Tribune*, 3/24/1923. On commissioners, see Matthew Lindaman, *Fit for America: Major John L. Griffith and the Quest for Athletics and Fitness* (Syracuse, NY, 2018); G. Edward White, *Creating the National Pastime: Baseball Transforms Itself, 1903–1953* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), 104–15.

12. "Iowa Conference Schools to Hold Meeting Friday," *Des Moines Tribune*, 12/12/1923.

13. Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Iowa City, 1996), 125–31.

Corps (SATC), led to significant growth in higher education, particularly at state institutions. SATC chapters formed at nineteen Iowa educational institutions. Some colleges even fielded SATC football teams, which in a few cases spurred a college's postwar return to the sport after a prewar hiatus. Luther College, for example, resumed football after hosting an SATC team during the war.¹⁴

Football's martial spirit also prompted new athletic facilities. Many universities built stadia either explicitly styled as war memorials or generally intended to promote physical development among men who might one day be soldiers. For instance, in Iowa City, state-of-the-art Iowa (Kinnick) Stadium, initially seating 42,500, was dedicated in a homecoming game against the University of Illinois on October 19, 1929—just five days before the stock market crash. The half-million-dollar facility, with brick facade and drainage tile, replaced muddy Iowa Field, which only had permanent seating for 16,000. Historians argue that such stadia, ostensibly built to control collegiate sports, also served as venues for commercialized athletics.¹⁵

Enrollment grew in the interwar period as higher education, according to scholar David Levine, “moved into the mainstream of American economic, social, and cultural life.” Colleges and universities felt compelled to reassess curricula, student bodies, and societal roles.¹⁶ Smaller colleges faced a dilemma: how would they accommodate postwar growth? Coe, for instance, enrolled about 1,500 students in 1921, with roughly one-half (761) in its

14. On SATC, see Carol S. Gruber, *Mars and Minerva: World War I and the Uses of the Higher Learning in America* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1975), 213–52. On Luther's postwar return to football, see “Luther Football History Outlined,” (*Luther College Chips*, 11/25/1931. For a list of Iowa SATC chapters, see *The Students Army Training Corps: Descriptive Circular*, 2nd ed. (Corrected to 10/14/1918), 13. On the University of Iowa's chapter, see David McCartney, “Old Gold: US and SUI Enter World War I,” *Iowa Now*, 12/12/2012.

15. Ingrassia, *Rise of Gridiron University*, 138–70; Raymond Schmidt, *Shaping College Football: The Transformation of an American Sport, 1919–1930* (Syracuse, NY, 2007), 51–52; “New Stadium at Iowa City,” *Des Moines Register*, 10/10/1929; “Kinnick Stadium,” *Hawkeye Sports*, accessed 2/15/21, <https://hawkeyesports.com/kinnick-stadium/>.

16. David O. Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration, 1915–1940* (Ithaca, NY, 1986), 17–18.

"liberal arts college" and the other half in practical courses.¹⁷ Although some thought Coe would become a university, others opposed such a transformation. A student editorial said the college did not have enough resources, especially endowment funds, to compete with big state institutions. Coe would be a "third rank" university; trying to become one would be institutional "suicide." Coe's destiny was "away from the university and along the road of a liberal arts college." "Let our goal be the development of the highest type of this sort of institution: a Dartmouth or a Bowdoin, rather than a Columbia or Chicago."¹⁸ The writer's choice of role models and foils was telling. A century earlier, Dartmouth had rejected university status and won a Supreme Court case reinforcing private control, and Bowdoin was still a small college in the 1920s. Meanwhile, Columbia was a big university in America's biggest city, and Chicago had not yet jettisoned big-time athletics, as it would right before World War II.¹⁹ Coe students were already using the small-college rhetoric that became essential within 1930s discussions over higher education and athletics.

Colleges in Iowa and elsewhere grew concerned with the commercialization heralded by big stadia and radio broadcasts. In perhaps the most famous case, University of Illinois halfback Harold "Red" Grange became the first well-known player to leave college early to join the new National Football League (NFL, founded in 1920). After signing with the Chicago Bears in 1925, Grange gained fame and wealth via gridiron victories and product endorsements, while also earning the ire of those who staunchly defended amateurism. Just a few years later, in May 1929, the Big Ten suspended the University of Iowa after discovering it had improperly subsidized players through a clandestine slush fund. As historian Raymond Schmidt noted, alumni funded

17. "Gage Report Discloses Many Important Facts," (Coe) *College Cosmos*, 10/21/1921.

18. "Coe—A University?" (Coe) *College Cosmos*, 5/10/1923.

19. On *Dartmouth College v. Woodward*, see Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815* (New York, 2009), 465; on Chicago, see Robin Lester, *Stagg's University: The Rise, Decline, and Fall of Big-Time Football at Chicago* (Urbana, IL, 1995); on Great Books, see Mary Ann Dzuback, *Robert M. Hutchins: Portrait of an Educator* (Chicago, 1991), 100–08.

sinecures for players and paid tuition via loans that were never paid back. Iowa's suspension was lifted by early 1930, but eleven Hawkeye football players remained ineligible.²⁰ Scandals like the one in Iowa City only accelerated the growing push to clean up college athletics.

Crusade against Commercialization, 1925–1932

Even before news of the slush fund broke, some small colleges realized sports' problems. In May 1925, five months before Grange signed his NFL contract, Presbyterian-affiliated University of Dubuque announced it was ceasing intercollegiate athletics; the next month its trustees approved the action. The institution had introduced football in the 1910s. At the same time, it was drifting away from its denominational roots and becoming a more secular college focused on a mission of Americanizing immigrants. To reestablish its German Presbyterian identity and reject trappings of modernity, in 1924 the board hired a youthful Karl Wettstone as its new president. Wettstone had arrived in America as an immigrant (then named Karl Wettstein) in 1909, enrolled at the university (then called the Dubuque German College and Seminary), quickly learned English, and became a face of the Americanization program. He even helped start a football team in the 1910s, at a time when talented black athlete Sol Butler turned Dubuque into an athletic powerhouse. By 1925, though, thirty-year-old Wettstone saw sport as a virtual arms race that damaged small, religiously affiliated colleges. He grew concerned when he witnessed local businessmen so "anxious to have a winning football team" that they subsidized athletes—who seemed, in turn, to think gridiron performance was all that mattered. One player even threatened to transfer if he was not given special treatment; Wettstone let him go.²¹ Dubuque's leader saw the

20. John M. Carroll, *Red Grange and the Rise of Modern Football* (Urbana, IL, 1999), esp. 97–118; Schmidt, *Shaping College Football*, 72–76, 181–88. On the NFL's early years, see Richard C. Crepeau, *NFL Football: A History of America's New National Pastime* (Urbana, IL, 2014).

21. Karl F. Wettstone to Joseph L. Mihelic, 5/2/1973, 25–26 (quotation), Box 32, Dr. Karl F. Wettstone Collection, University of Dubuque Archives, Dubuque, IA. On Wettstone's background and presidency, see James R. Rohrer, "German

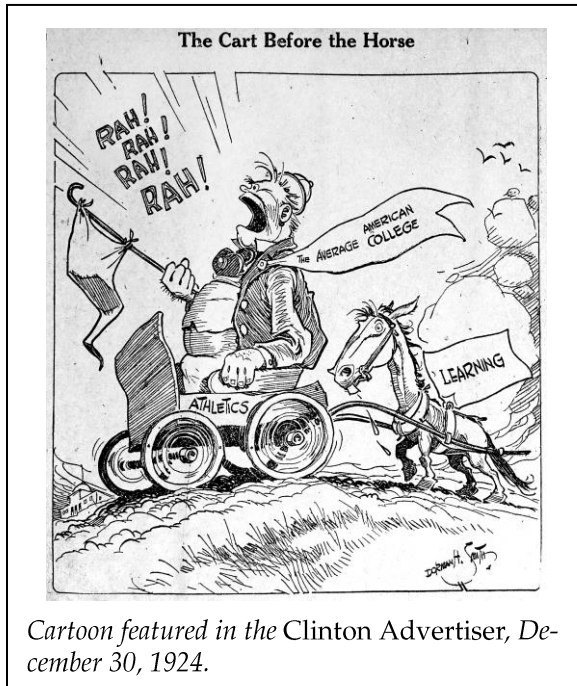
problem as systemic: colleges attempted “to outdo each other by offering scholarships to athletes” and paid “coaches and athletic directors. . . three or four times the salary of the heads of other departments.” Prospective athletes did not even inquire about the quality of education—they just asked how much they would be paid to play.²²

Dubuque’s controversial decision was covered in major newspapers and periodicals, and Wettstone outlined his reasons in an article originally published in the *Dubuque Christian American* and then printed as a pamphlet titled “*Dubuque’s*” *Stand against Commercialized Athletics*. The thirty-page jeremiad began with a political cartoon from the *Clinton Advertiser* showing a cart labeled “Athletics” carrying a youth (“The Average American College”) shouting “Rah! Rah! Rah! Rah!” and pulling an exhausted horse labeled “Learning.”²³ Wettstone was nostalgic for a time when sports allowed (male) students to build body, mind, and morals. But now athletics had taken over. Who was to blame? It was “state universities, which have for some time now taken the leadership in the field of education from our denominational colleges, and therefore have wielded a large influence in all matters pertaining to administrative, educational and athletic policies of the smaller schools of the land.” Wettstone claimed most college leaders felt their institutions were “sinning against the youth of the land by tolerating such a condition of things.” The right thing to do was to replace big-time, commercialized sports with

Presbyterians or Christian Americans? Intercollegiate Sports and the Identity Crisis at the University of Dubuque, 1902–1927,” *American Presbyterians* 74, no. 3 (Fall 1996), 183–94.

22. “Dubuque Head Bars Athletic Contests,” *New York Times*, 5/31/1925 (quotations); “Dubuque U. To Drop Athletics; Coaches’ High Pay is Blamed,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 5/31/1925; “Dubuque Board O.K.’s President’s Ban on Sports,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 6/4/1925.

23. Dr. Karl Frederick Wettstone, “*Dubuque’s*” *Stand against Commercialized Athletics* (Dubuque, 1925). Wettstone quoted and responded to *New York Herald Tribune*, *The Nation*, *Dallas Journal*, *Waterloo (IA) Tribune*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Presbyterian Banner*, *Presbyterian Messenger*, *Winterset (IA) Madisonian*, (Dubuque) *Telegraph-Herald*, *Sioux Falls Press*, and *American Educational Digest*. See also Rohrer, “German Presbyterians or Christian Americans,” 192.



intramurals. Dubuque would “follow the line of principle and refuse to compromise with the world.”²⁴

Wettstone invited the heads of Iowa’s colleges to Dubuque to discuss athletics. Not all, though, took a strong stance against sports. Cornell’s President Harlan Updegraff said he did not think his institution had a problem. Coe’s President Harry Morehouse Gage pronounced the meeting unnecessary, since established athletic conferences were working to resolve issues.²⁵ Wettstone reiterated his critique, while stressing that he did not want to end sports altogether. He cherished his own years playing football at Dubuque and nostalgically claimed athletics had once built “a wonderful school spirit”; he supported “clean” and

24. Wettstone, “Dubuque’s” *Stand*, 6, 8 (first quotation), 16 (second quotation), 28–29, 30 (third quotation).

25. “Asks Conference on Iowa Athletics,” *New York Times*, 7/26/1925; “Dr. Wettstone Calls Athletic Rules Parley,” *Des Moines Register*, 7/25/1925.

"uncommercialized" athletics. But Christian schools had to ban sport, or eliminate its "evils." They should pay coaches less than professors, while ending recruiting, "athletic scholarships," and alumni interference. Wettstone said even though leaders such as the University of Iowa's Walter Jessup claimed conferences had things under control, they knew corruption lay just below the surface.²⁶

Many Americans discussed Wettstone's action. An informal, *Chicago Tribune* man-on-the-street poll indicated (somewhat ambivalent) agreement with his stance on sport.²⁷ And some college leaders were sympathetic, even if they did not share his indignation. Iowa Wesleyan's Ulysses S. Smith complimented Dubuque's president for telling "terrific truths" about sports. Even if Coe's Gage thought Wettstone's proposed meeting unnecessary, he was "glad to join hands" to reduce athletic "evils." John Scholte Nollen, Grinnell's dean, said his college was "in harmony with the general purpose" of Wettstone's critique; they should keep discussing the matter. "Continued agitation may eventually produce results." Other college leaders, including some outside of Iowa, also wrote letters of support.²⁸ Nevertheless, there was pushback. In 1926, the IAC defended sport, while the Iowa Association of College Presidents called Wettstone's charges murky. Some leaders (including Gage and Nollen) thought their institutions' "general relationship between athletics and scholarship" was "satisfactory and commendable." Athletic conferences were a "dominating force for good sportsmanship and better athletics."²⁹

Wettstone's crusade was part of a critique of modernity, represented most famously by the 1925 Scopes Trial. In the same speeches where he lambasted sport, Wettstone condemned the idea of human beings descending from primates. He also

26. "Are College Athletics Commercialized," *Des Moines Register*, 8/16/1925.

27. "The Inquiring Reporter," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 6/7/1925.

28. Quoted in "Many Support Wettstone in Athletic War," *Des Moines Register*, 8/4/1925. Wettstone discusses the correspondence in "*Dubuque's*" *Stand*, 24-27.

29. "Football Foe Renews Fire on Athletics," *Des Moines Register*, 2/22/1926; "Condemn View of Wettstone on Athletics," *Des Moines Register*, 2/28/1926 (quotation).

supported immigration restrictions while continuing to promote Americanization of immigrants already in the country.³⁰ He said life was “*a serious battle. . . where intellect strikes the death blow to the ape and to the beast*”³¹ and lamented that athletic recruiting enticed colleges to attract too broad a range of students. It was not right, implied Wettstone, for a Protestant to play for an “Irish Catholic school” or an African American to play for a “German team.” Although Wettstone’s concerns largely stemmed from the University of Dubuque’s Americanization program and its attempts to reestablish ethnic and denominational connections, his rhetoric echoed anti-Catholic and racist sentiments common in the Midwest at the time, especially among Ku Klux Klan supporters.³²

The gridiron, in other words, seemed to be a virtual Tower of Babel, and some critics wanted to tear down the ungodly edifice. In 1927, Wettstone delivered a speech at a Presbyterian College Union (PCU) meeting in Chicago, in which he said athletics destroyed education and morals. In a “changing world,” denominational colleges had to stress “brain over brawn.”³³ It was not so easy, though, to slay athletics. In June, Wettstone resigned from Dubuque, reportedly due to poor health, but he then immediately assumed leadership of the University of Omaha, where he again encountered trouble. In 1928, Omaha students hanged him in

30. Michael Lienesch, *In the Beginning: Fundamentalism, the Scopes Trial, and the Making of the Antievolution Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007); T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago, 1981). On Wettstone’s views of evolution, see “Many Support Wettstone in Athletic War,” *Des Moines Register*, 8/4/1925; on his immigration views, see “Football Foe Renews Fire on Athletics,” *Des Moines Register*, 2/22/1926, and Wettstone, “A Sound Solution of the Immigration Problem,” Box 32, Dr. Karl F. Wettstone Collection, University of Dubuque Archives, Dubuque, IA.

31. Wettstone, “*Dubuque’s*” *Stand*, 15 (original emphasis).

32. Wettstone, “*Dubuque’s*” *Stand*, 12 (quotations); Rohrer, “German Presbyterians or Christian Americans,” 192. On the Klan’s appeal in Iowa, see Robert Neymeyer, “The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s in the Midwest and West: A Review Essay,” *Annals of Iowa* 51, no. 6 (Fall 1992), 625–33; Dorothy Schwieder, “A Farmer and the Ku Klux Klan in Northwest Iowa,” *Annals of Iowa* 61, no. 3 (Summer 2002), 286–320. On the Klan’s widespread popularity and influence, see Felix Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s* (Chicago, 2017).

33. “College Prexy Flails Sport Influences,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1/13/1927.

effigy after a controversy regarding athletics; he soon resigned. By July of that year, Dubuque resumed intercollegiate athletics; its new leaders believed sport was necessary for institutional growth.³⁴ Although it was becoming evident that colleges could not eliminate sports, some soon realized they might deemphasize the extracurricular activity and claim it as part of their educational missions.

Even as Wettstone left Iowa, other leaders leveled similar critiques. At the 1927 annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges (AAC), held in Chicago the same week as Wettstone's PCU speech, Grinnell's John Nollen spoke about fourteen athletic "evils." He took a page straight from Wettstone's anti-commercialization playbook, stressing gambling, scouting, and "publicity." Nollen (a former AAC president) criticized alumni and students for desiring ever-victorious teams, and claimed coaches merely developed "gladiators." Colleges built athletic facilities "out of all proportion to the general academic equipment." Games devolved into "a contest of wits between two rival coaches pulling the strings from the bench." Colleges had turned sport from "wholesome recreation to an exhausting form of labor that interferes seriously with the participants' educational development." The situation was problematic, said Nollen, because cultivation of mind and body were intertwined. Educators could not train "the minds of boys and girls while leaving their bodies and their social relations and their most absorbing interests on the other side of the fence." (Although most of Iowa's higher education institutions were coeducational in the 1920s, intercollegiate athletics were almost exclusively reserved for men.) Colleges should promote "unity of life" by "organizing the scattered material of our

34. "Wettstone Quits Dubuque Presidency," *New York Times*, 6/28/1927; "Dr. Wettstone Quits as Head of Dubuque U.," *Des Moines Register*, 6/28/1927; "Dr. Wettstone is Elected Head of Omaha College," *Des Moines Register*, 7/22/1927; "Omaha U. Head Hung in Effigy," *Des Moines Register*, 2/29/1928; "Resume Sports at Dubuque U.," *Des Moines Register*, 7/15/1928; "College Resumes Sports Policy When Student Body Dwindles," *Washington Post*, 7/15/1928. During Wettstone's brief presidency of the University of Omaha, he "reorganize[d] the College of Liberal Arts according to the standards of the North Central Association"; see U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Education, *The History of the Municipal University in the United States*, R.H. Eckelberry, Bulletin 1932, no. 2 (Washington, D.C., 1932), 160.

complex civilization." Sport had to be part of a coherent "academic program" providing "athletic training" for all—not for exhibiting "stunts in a stadium."³⁵

Even as they thundered against sports, some college leaders quietly took up the issue of commercialization in a way that became influential. In September 1925, the *Los Angeles Times* reported a group of fifteen college leaders—including Dubuque's Wettstone and Iowa Wesleyan's Smith—sought one or more major foundations to scrutinize athletics.³⁶ In later years, Wettstone recalled how he and others conveyed their concerns to the New York-based Carnegie Foundation, which then "launched an effort to 'clean up college athletics.'"³⁷ Wettstone may have embellished his role in spurring the investigation, but the timing seems about right.

Scholar John Thelin wrote that the Carnegie Foundation started its investigation in early 1926 and published "Bulletin Number Twenty-three," *American College Athletics*, on October 24, 1929, so-called Black Thursday of the stock market crash. The influential Carnegie Report, penned by a team led by Howard Savage, may not have been closely read by all who cited it, but it did convince many Americans that collegiate sport was overly commercialized. It said: "Commercialism in college athletics must be diminished and college sport must rise to a point where it is esteemed primarily and sincerely for the opportunities it affords to mature youth under responsibility, to exercise at once the body and the mind, and to foster habits both of bodily health and of those high qualities of character which, until they are revealed in action, we accept on faith."³⁸ Sport was only good, in other words, if it was primarily educational. Newspapers summarizing the report's fourteen points were reminiscent of Nollen's and Wettstone's

35. James O'Donnell Bennett, "College Prexies List 14 Points of Athletic Evils," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1/15/1927.

36. "Small College Presidents Demand Huge Investigation of Professional Athletics," *Los Angeles Times*, 9/20/1925.

37. Wettstone to Mihelic, 5/2/1973, University of Dubuque Archives, Dubuque, IA.

38. John R. Thelin, *Games Colleges Play: Scandal and Reform in Intercollegiate Athletics* (Baltimore, 1994), 23, 26–27 (quotation).

critiques (as well as, at least superficially, Woodrow Wilson's 1918 blueprint for the postwar world). The report also showed several Iowa institutions, including Coe, Drake, Des Moines, and Iowa, were guilty of subsidizing athletes. Athletic interests in Iowa City were "jubilant" because the report showed the Hawkeye slush fund scandal was nothing unusual; the findings seemed to augur the University of Iowa's eventual return to the Big Ten.³⁹

As important as the Carnegie Foundation was in setting the tone of 1930s debates, it was just one regulatory body investigating athletics. Another, the AAC, discussed the Carnegie Report at its 1930 meeting in Washington, D.C. The group's Commission on College Athletics, which counted Coe's Gage among its members, claimed the report only "moderately" articulated athletic problems; in reality the situation was probably even worse. According to the *Washington Post*, the AAC said colleges had to decide whether athletics should be conducted on an "amateur basis" and "represent wholesome sport," or if sport would "be subsidized and semiprofessional." The commission asked each AAC member to examine rigorously "its own athletic conditions" and "emphasize intellectual and cultural aims as being of first importance." Furthermore, colleges should convey such sentiments to their respective athletic conferences.⁴⁰

Regional accrediting bodies also investigated athletics. Even before 1929, the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools (NCA) formed a Committee on Physical Education and Athletics to carry out an investigation. The committee, led by Ohio State University examiner Bland L. Stradley, included Harry Gage as a member. NCA's inquiry picked up steam in the early 1930s and issued its so-called Stradley Report, which stressed the need to stop commercialization: "In contrast with the professional view of athletics as gainful occupations, the colleges, the North Central Association, and the intercollegiate conferences must stand unmistakably for athletics as recreational and

39. "Carnegie Charges in Brief," "Iowa's Return to Conference is Predicted after Carnegie Charges against Big Ten" (quotation), and "Where Colleges Subsidized Their Athletes," *Des Moines Tribune*, 10/24/1929.

40. "College Group Will Consider Carnegie Data," *Washington Post*, 1/16/1930.

educational activities."⁴¹ NCA pressure prompted some (but not all) conferences in the Midwest to crack down on corruption. While the Big Ten continued to prioritize autonomy and chafe at NCA investigations, the Illinois Intercollegiate Athletic Conference ("Little Nineteen") reconfigured its practices to conform to association regulations and applied for NCA membership in 1932.⁴²

Iowa's smaller colleges also got in line with NCA policies. Gage, a former NCA president who headed an association board that reviewed colleges facing discipline regarding athletics, stressed the NCA rule mandating that coaches had to be faculty who answered to administrators rather than local boosters. He also criticized the Big Ten for trying to undermine the NCA.⁴³ The association's concern about athletics was apparent by early 1931, when Stradley Committee investigator William H. Husband visited Luther College. An economics professor at Ohio Wesleyan University, Husband assured students he came "not to hunt for existing evils, but rather to talk over the prevailing conditions and make a report to the association in the form of a survey." Echoing themes that soon emerged in the Stradley Report, Husband told Luther students: "Athletics are a vital part of student life and deserve hearty support, but there is danger of placing too much stress on them." He worried a college might pay young men to play sports, which was poor preparation for life after college. An athlete who took pay for play, said Husband, would "turn out to be a 'bum.'"⁴⁴ Alumni and students may not have agreed with Husband's bleak assessment, but it reflected

41. "Report of the Committee of Physical Education and Athletics," *North Central Association Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (July 1933), 57.

42. Brian M. Ingrassia, "Conceptualizing 'Small-time' College Athletics: The Fracture of the 'Little Nineteen' Conference in the 1930s," *Journal of Sport History* 47, no. 3 (Fall 2020), 191–209; Lindaman, *Fit for America*, 124–25.

43. "North Central Board Reviews College Sports," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 4/21/1933; "Report of the Committee," *North Central Association Quarterly*, 26; Solberg, *Creating the Big Ten*, 204; Lindaman, *Fit for America*, 125.

44. "Athletic Program Is Commended by N.C.A. Inspector," (*Luther*) *College Chips*, 1/18/1931 (quotations); "Report of the Committee," *North Central Association Quarterly*, 26. Another Stradley Committee investigator was J.R. Sage of Iowa State College (Ames).

the attitude of accreditation agencies like NCA and, perhaps, a growing number of small-college faculty. The IIAC recognized the need to please the agency; it applied for membership and was admitted to the NCA in March 1932.⁴⁵

Freshman Rule and Athletic Purity, 1931–1933

In the wake of the Carnegie Report and during the NCA investigation, some colleges, especially in the Midwest, tried to curtail commercialism by forming conferences comprised of accredited institutions that barred first-year students (“freshmen”) from intercollegiate competition. The Big Ten first implemented the so-called freshman rule after the 1905–06 football crisis that led to the formation of the NCAA, but many small colleges did not adopt it, since doing so would have limited the number of potential players.⁴⁶ In the 1930s, as colleges grew concerned about athletic commercialization and academic integrity, the rule became a way to signify purity. This scenario was certainly the case in Illinois, where ten institutions formed a compact athletic conference entirely of private colleges prohibiting freshman competition and athletic subsidies.⁴⁷

By late 1931, rumors swirled around Iowa that six or seven colleges would form a new conference; likely members were Coe, Cornell, Grinnell, ISTC, Luther, Morningside, and Simpson. Five colleges (all but Luther and Simpson) already observed the freshman rule. Paul Bender, head of ISTC men’s physical education, endorsed the new conference. He reportedly thought the IIAC had too many members, with some using unethical tactics to win. In December, representatives of five institutions met in Chicago to discuss the potential new loop.⁴⁸ The meeting was inspired in

45. “North Central Suspends Penn,” *Des Moines Register*, 3/17/1932.

46. Ronald A. Smith, *Pay for Play: A History of Big-Time College Athletic Reform* (Urbana, IL, 2011), 197.

47. Ingrassia, “Conceptualizing ‘Small-time’ College Athletics.”

48. “New Conference is Rumored with Six Colleges Mentioned,” (*Luther*) *College Chips*, 11/25/1931; “Proposed Conference of Six Colleges Finds Favor at State Teacher,” *College Eye*, 11/30/1931; “Representatives at Chicago Meeting Favor Formation of New Conference,” (*Luther*) *College Chips*, 12/9/1931.

part by the Big Ten's recent recognition that declining ticket sales should prompt colleges to explore "more compact and economical conference setups."⁴⁹ Some sources indicated Grinnell might also join the conference, but Grinnell students claimed their college was not considering it. They thought ISTC would *not* be included, since it was a "state institution," while other proposed members were private colleges.⁵⁰ In the meantime, Grinnell remained the smallest member of the Missouri Valley Conference, which was then rebuilding after six public institutions—Iowa State, Kansas, Kansas State, Missouri, Nebraska, and Oklahoma—departed in 1928. The MVC expanded by adding institutions in Indianapolis, Omaha, and St. Louis.⁵¹ Grinnell, perhaps put off by MVC's big-time aspirations, may have at least toyed with the idea of joining a smaller conference in 1931.

The Depression reached its nadir in 1932, hitting Iowa's agricultural economy hard, and colleges dealt with austerity budgets. A meeting about the potential conference was held in Cedar Falls in February, and later that month representatives from seven colleges (including Drake and Grinnell) met at Marshalltown's Hotel Tallcorn. ISTC students said the new circuit could be "a strong. . . conference with high standards of eligibility and a strict code of athletic ethics and control which will curtail such evils as proselyting and recruiting athletes." It would also be more "compact" than the IIAC, since all potential members were located within a roughly one-hundred-mile radius. The smaller footprint meant cheaper travel and lodging; it might also foster "local rivalry," which could, in turn, mean more ticket sales. A new rules committee that was formed at the meeting included George W. Bryant (Coe), M.E. Hutchinson (Cornell), and H.E. Rath (ISTC).⁵² ISTC's President Orval R. Latham liked the idea of a

49. "Seven State Schools Eye New Circuit," *Des Moines Register*, 3/1/1932 (quotation). On the Big Ten meeting, see "Big Ten Adopts Economy Policy," *New York Times*, 12/5/1931; "Big Ten in Confab on Athletics," *Los Angeles Times*, 12/4/1931.

50. "Short-Cut Sports," (*Grinnell*) *Scarlet and Black*, 1/20/1932.

51. "Welcome Butler," (*Grinnell*) *Scarlet and Black*, 1/6/1932.

52. "Panther Tales," *College Eye*, 1/29/1932; "Seven Schools to Meet Monday on New Sports Loop," *Waterloo Daily Courier*, 2/24/1932; "Rath, Bender Represent

new conference. The current IIAC was problematic because most members did not follow the freshman rule. A smaller conference of freshman-rule institutions would be better, said Latham, in part because athletes would miss fewer classes if they did not have to travel so far for competition.⁵³

Despite early optimism that the conference might be up and running in the fall, by April 1932 it was clear the circuit would not begin operating soon. One problem, it seems, was that even though ISTC supported the freshman rule, its teams were too good. Several potential members apparently objected to ISTC's membership because its teams were noticeably improving and growing "too strong." Perhaps an even bigger problem was that ISTC, unlike the other colleges, was a state-funded institution.⁵⁴ As the *Waterloo Daily Courier* put it, ISTC had "many advantages over privately endowed schools in the matter of equipment." As the economic crisis grew worse, ISTC's male enrollment was increasing every semester. Some small colleges resented ISTC's higher "drawing power" compared to non-state-subsidized colleges that had to make do with "shabby athletic equipment." The *Waterloo* newspaper said such fears were unfounded, but still suggested ISTC leave the IIAC and operate independently.⁵⁵

There may have been a grain of truth to fears ISTC was outstripping smaller colleges. State support of higher education increased in the 1920s and 1930s; in the New Deal era, state funds sometimes meant better athletic facilities for public institutions.⁵⁶ For small colleges, though, the New Deal turned out to be a

T.C. at Loop Meeting," *College Eye*, 3/7/1932 (quotations). On the Depression's impact on Iowa, see Schwieder, *Iowa*, 255. On Bryant, including his role in founding the Midwest Conference, see "George W. Bryant," Coe College (web-site), accessed 3/3/2020, http://www.public.coe.edu/historyweb/faculty_bryant_george_w.htm.

53. O.R. Latham to George A. Works, 5/24/1933, O.R. Latham Papers, 2.03.01, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA.

54. Untitled, *Coe College Courier*, 4/1/1932; "Panther Tales," *College Eye*, 2/5/1932 (quotation).

55. E.R.M. Jr., "As the Sports Editor Sees It," *Waterloo Daily Courier*, 1/6/1932.

56. Austin, *Democratic Sports*, 25–30.

double whammy: government subsidies for higher education funneled funds and students to public institutions while tax hikes limited monetary gifts to private colleges. One of Iowa's most anti-New Deal college leaders was Coe's Harry Gage, who argued that increased taxation reduced donors' ability to underwrite higher education. More generally, he feared "government controls" led to "loss of individual liberty."⁵⁷ Historians Lawrence Glickman and Sarah Igo have shown how conservatives in the 1930s criticized the New Deal, seeing it as quelling a mythical spirit of "free enterprise," or adding unnecessary layers of government bureaucracy.⁵⁸ Small-college leaders appear to have echoed this backlash, and perhaps this was why a new Iowa athletic conference was not created. Instead, ISTC would depart the IAC by 1935, thus leaving that conference with only private-college members.

Iowa's Embrace of "Liberal Arts" in the 1930s

The Great Depression had a big impact on small colleges, which felt financially and existentially threatened as enrollments declined and budgets shrank. In 1930, Buena Vista was on the brink of collapse and nearly became a junior college branch of Coe. Instead the Storm Lake community raised several thousand dollars to save the college as a four-year institution, albeit one located on a precarious financial basis.⁵⁹ In 1931, around the time that the *Des Moines Register* observed that the economic downturn had led some colleges to abandon liberal arts curricula in favor of practical courses, Luther relaxed language requirements and slightly reduced the number of credits required for graduation.

57. Philip Kinsley, "Classroom One of Holy Places, Coe Head Avers," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 7/20/1938; Reginald K. Watters, "A Venture of Faith: Harry Morehouse Gage and the Gage Years at Coe," 7 (quotation), Coe College (website), accessed 12/18/2020, http://www.public.coe.edu/historyweb/historyes_pdf/A%20Venture%20of%20Faith_Watters.pdf.

58. Lawrence B. Glickman, *Free Enterprise: An American History* (New Haven, CT, 2019); Sarah E. Igo, *The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy in Modern America* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 65–68.

59. William H. Cumberland, *The History of Buena Vista College* (Ames, 1966), 106–12.

President Oscar Olson even advocated for admitting women, thinking coeducation was the best way to boost enrollment and build the alumni base. Olson's coeducation proposal turned out to be unpopular, and he resigned in 1932. The world was changing, and some small colleges did not like the implications. One Luther student cheekily predicted recent innovations were the first step down a slippery slope to a world without lectures, in which colleges merely offered correspondence courses. He even foretold that by 1950, Sears & Roebuck would buy out Luther and other "Educational Services."⁶⁰ Actual innovations may have seemed nearly as extreme. In 1931, Cornell announced its NCA-approved plan to enroll promising students who had only completed three years of high school.⁶¹

As higher education shifted, some Americans worked to save what they called the "liberal arts college."⁶² Although the concept of the *liberal arts* dates to the medieval era, the idea of a *liberal arts college* is newer. From the late 1800s until about 1915—the year the AAC was founded—the term was typically applied to a body within a university, not an independent college.⁶³ Usage noticeably shifted after World War I, when some educators promoted colleges as communities of learning that provided a corrective to university lecture courses. Alexander Meiklejohn, for one, touted "new liberal education" that prioritized "insight or intelligence" rather than mere "knowledge" or vocational training. After failing to implement his reforms at Amherst College, Meiklejohn started the University of Wisconsin's Experimental College in 1927. Two years later, Robert Maynard Hutchins became president of the

60. "Liberal Arts," *Des Moines Register*, 11/6/1931; "Sweeping Changes Made in Curriculum," (*Luther*) *College Chips*, 9/30/1931; Sleighter Hand, "Mooditations," (*Luther*) *College Chips*, 10/7/1931 (quotation); "Co-education for Luther Discussed at Alumni Meeting," (*Luther*) *College Chips*, 10/21/1931; "Olson Resigns Presidency of Luther College," (*Luther*) *College Chips*, 1/13/1932.

61. "Iowa College Seeks Youth of Extra Talents," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 4/9/1931.

62. Agnes Arney, "Presbyterian Schools Report," *Des Moines Register*, 10/16/1930.

63. Ingrassia, "Conceptualizing 'Small-time' College Athletics," 198–99. On AAC, see Mark H. Curtis, "Crisis and Opportunity: The Founding of the Association of American Colleges," *Liberal Education* 100, no. 4 (Fall 2014); Curtis's article was originally published in 1988.

University of Chicago and implemented a new curriculum based on so-called Great Books. Some colleges also scaled back athletics. Chicago terminated its football program in 1939, while Swarthmore College stopped playing big-time sports and transformed itself into a liberal arts institution. The University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, withdrew from the Southeastern Conference (SEC) in 1940; its president saw athletic spectacle as incompatible with a small college's educational mission.⁶⁴

The reimagining of liberal arts colleges got a boost at the beginning of the decade. In January 1930, a group of small-college presidents convened at the AAC meeting in Washington, D.C.—the same meeting that endorsed the Carnegie Report—to form the Liberal Arts College Movement. A fifteen-member committee led by Albert Ward, president of Western Maryland College, headed LACM. Other members included Harry Gage and Cornell College's Herbert J. Burgstahler. Two months later, representatives of 280 colleges attended a Chicago conference at which Ward announced plans to raise \$500 million in endowment for five hundred colleges. (This ambitious goal was soon reduced to \$200 million.) LACM did not directly raise funds; rather, it publicized the plight of small colleges and assisted them in canvassing. According to Ward, the wealthiest one hundred of America's top four hundred private colleges possessed 81 percent of aggregate endowment funds; the other three hundred had only 19 percent, averaging just over \$500,000 each (\$840 per student). At a point when the stock market crash had not yet become a full-fledged economic crisis, Ward thought total small-college enrollment would rise in the 1930s, from one million students to 1.5 million, in part because he believed state universities and larger private universities had already reached capacity.

It seemed important to save liberal arts colleges because they provided an education surpassing mere knowledge. Burgstahler, for his part, said too many students graduated with an overly

64. Alexander Meiklejohn, *The Experimental College* (New York, 1932), xv, xvi (quotations); Lester, *Stagg's University*, 164–86; Jim Watkins, "The Fall of Sewanee from 'Big-Time' College Football," *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics* 12 (2019), 114–32.

specialized, “lop-sided education.” Cornell’s new curriculum—inspired by recent innovations introduced by Hutchins at Chicago—provided the “right collegiate environment in the field of recreational and social relationships.”⁶⁵ Students had to be taught as “individuals rather than as a mass”; a college should not just be “an educational machine.”⁶⁶ Burgstahler wanted faculty to be “inspirational” teachers, not just well-respected academics.⁶⁷

Ward solicited support from Iowa native and current U.S. President Herbert Hoover, who agreed small colleges were “irreplaceable,” yet acknowledged they were losing in “competition” against “great universities.” The nation, said the conservative Republican, needed colleges to instill “character” and give students “rounded cultural equipment.”⁶⁸ In November 1931—at the same time Iowa colleges discussed the formation of a compact athletic conference of freshman-rule institutions—the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) hosted a Saturday evening radio show sponsored by LACM. The “coast-to-coast radio rally” included messages from Hoover and others. Student newspapers advertised the show. Cornell’s paper noted that before the national program was broadcast on Des Moines’s WHO-WOC, Waterloo’s WMT would air President Burgstahler’s speech, “What the Liberal Arts College Does for Society.”⁶⁹ During the NBC broadcast, President

65. “Seek \$500,000,000 for 500 Colleges,” *New York Times*, 3/19/1930; “Seek \$200,000,000 for College Plan,” *New York Times*, 12/7/1930 (quotations); Albert Norman Ward, “Spread of College Facilities is Sought,” *New York Times*, 8/30/1931.

66. “Finds a Demand for Mediocrity,” *Des Moines Register*, 11/14/1930 (quotation); “Invite Students to Informal Tea; To Discuss Cooperative College,” *Cornellian*, 3/5/1935.

67. Robert Burlingame, “Cornell College’s ‘New Deal’ Brings Her Fame,” *Des Moines Register*, 10/15/1933.

68. Herbert Hoover to Albert N. Ward, 3/19/1930, in *The State Papers and Other Public Writings of Herbert Hoover*, ed. William Starr Myers (Garden City, NY, 1934), I: 221.

69. “Coe To Share in National Broadcast Nov. 14 in Behalf of Liberal Arts College Movement,” *Coe College Courier*, 10/1/1931; “‘Liberal Arts’ Radio Tomorrow Night,” *Central Ray*, 11/14/1931 (quotation); “President Asks Aid for Small Colleges,” *New York Times*, 11/15/1931; “Liberal Arts Courses Commended By Speakers,” *Central Ray*, 11/20/1931; “Will Broadcast Cornell Program Saturday Night,” *Cornellian*, 11/13/1931.

Hoover said he was happy to support non-state-funded “liberal arts” colleges. While modern universities provided specialized education, small colleges were “vital” to American life because they stressed “personal contacts” between students and instructors.⁷⁰ Hoover’s comments echoed themes of antimodern localism common in the 1920s. Instead of a few big universities, Americans should have a larger number of small colleges, located close to students and “in circumstances fitted to the needs of each community and its people.” Not long after the radio broadcast, Hoover even met with LACM representatives.⁷¹

Not all educators, though, agreed that small colleges should be preserved. Six weeks after the NBC broadcast, Carnegie Foundation President Henry Suzzallo and Columbia University President Nicholas Murray Butler predicted a different future for higher education. Suzzallo observed junior colleges were becoming entrenched in the Midwest and elsewhere, and he thought they would take over the first two years of higher education. When that happened, Americans would no longer need four-year colleges—only junior colleges and universities. Any small college that did not adapt would die. Butler’s vision was more moderate. He thought most four-year colleges could not maintain high standards and stay in business, so they should affiliate with larger universities. As historian Daniel Rodgers has noted, 1931 was the year Americans realized the Depression was not a short-term problem, so they considered dramatic policy responses. Something similar was clearly happening in higher education.⁷²

Neither Suzzallo’s nor Butler’s vision appealed to small colleges, which were starting to see nearly unbridgeable distinctions between private and public institutions. In his 1932 inaugural address, Grinnell’s president John Nollen said liberal arts colleges were the best means of preventing national decline and saving

70. Herbert Hoover, “Radio Address, 11/14/1931,” in *State Papers [...] of Herbert Hoover*, II: 35–36.

71. “Hoover Radio Talk is College Tribute,” *Washington Post*, 11/15/1931 (quotation); “President Sits with Liberal Arts Group,” *Cornellian*, 12/11/1931.

72. “Future of College Provokes a Debate,” *New York Times*, 12/27/1931; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 414.

Americans from “weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable” lives. While universities were fine for specialized training, small colleges built minds and created “social unity.”⁷³ Nollen even obliquely criticized his predecessor for allowing “some rather technical material” to become part of Grinnell’s curriculum.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, C. Harve Geiger, Coe’s dean, said colleges could not just teach “salable information,” the way that universities did.⁷⁵ In 1935, Harry Gage (who had been elected LACM president in 1932) proclaimed that in a volatile economic and social climate, students needed “a college course grounded on the Christian, historical, and classical foundations of our civilization, reflecting the conditions of the present social order and providing opportunity for creative self-expression.” Such courses established a foundation for lifelong learning.⁷⁶

Historian Julie Reuben has argued that in the interwar period, big universities dropped any pretense of moral education.⁷⁷ Folks at small colleges picked up on this shift, and they saw their institutions as resisting the trend. Central College students feared “elements of large scale education” had entered their school via well-intentioned instructors who tried “to modernize the teaching system.”⁷⁸ Central’s 1934 valedictorian cited both Hoover and Roman orator Cicero when she noted with alarm the new trend of the “tax supported junior college” replacing the Christian, “four year liberal arts college.”⁷⁹ In 1937, Buena Vista’s faculty declared it “a standard liberal arts college” instilling a “strong Christian character.”⁸⁰

73. Nollen quoted in “Central Graduate Heads Grinnell,” *Central Ray*, 2/12/1932.

74. John Scholte Nollen, *Grinnell College* (Iowa City, 1953), 115.

75. “Excerpts from Dean Geiger’s Chapel Address,” *Coe College Courier* 34, no. 1 (September 1933), 3.

76. Pres. H.M. Gage, “Our Liberal Arts College,” *Coe College Courier* 35, no. 5 (January 1935), 1–2 (quotations); “Coe President Chosen Head of Liberal Arts College Movement,” *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette and Republican*, 1/29/1932.

77. Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Modernity* (Chicago, 1996), 236–37.

78. “This is a College,” *Central Ray*, 2/12/1932.

79. “A Summary of the Valedictory,” *Central Ray*, 5/18/1934.

80. “Aims and Purposes of Buena Vista College,” *Buena Vista Tack*, 2/22/1937.

The 1930s liberal arts revival also embodied a backlash against secular, state-subsidized education. In 1937–38, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a series by feature writer Philip Kinsley spotlighting the Midwest's small liberal arts colleges. Kinsley's articles—five of which focused on Iowa institutions—portrayed private colleges as bulwarks protecting religion and democracy from modernity and godless, bureaucratic rationalization. In one piece, Kinsley said Cornell College boasted a curriculum that fostered “an understanding of the human body and mind, human institutions, aesthetic expressions which interpret and enrich life, activities necessary to health, and the fundamental alms, beliefs and philosophes which direct the course of life.” In his article on Coe, Kinsley cited Gage's critiques of expanding state power, especially his assertion that government should stay out of churches and schools.⁸¹ Meanwhile, some colleges embraced small enrollments as a point of pride, rather than a weakness. Cornell capped its student body at six hundred students in 1934. Burgstahler said colleges should reject the idea that higher education was about gaining money-making skills—no matter what the larger universities said.⁸²

For small colleges, sport had to serve the right purposes. In an early 1930s NCA report, Coe's Harry Gage claimed those who wanted to abolish athletics did not understand what sports could do for students. To end sports would effectively mean to end a commitment to educating young men and women. Gage struck an ambivalent tone about modern education, though, when he compared colleges to factories and students to machines: institutions of higher education were judged by the quality of the “machinery” they produced. Many aspects of modern life, including education, were being “standardized, conventionalized, and

81. Philip Kinsley, “Iowa's Cornell College Clings to Tried Ideals,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 7/27/1937 (quotation); “Classroom One of Holy Places, Coe Head Avers,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 7/20/1938. See also Kinsley's *Tribune* pieces on Loras, Morningside, and Grinnell: “Columbia High in U.S. Liberal College Ranks,” 7/21/1938; “Social Science Key to Courses at Morningside,” 7/23/1938; “New American Life Fostered at Grinnell,” 8/1/1937.

82. Rev. John Evans, “Educators See New Chance for Small College,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 12/13/1934.

mechanized." Yet standardization, he said, was not necessarily the best way to produce quality college graduates. Likewise, there was not only one way to run an athletic program: "No elaboration of organization for control of athletics is any substitute for incorporation of the physical education and athletic programs in the whole plan of education that is directed toward and measured by the excellence of its product." The caliber of a college's graduates—a direct result of its whole educational program—was more important than following standardized rules or regulations set by other institutions.⁸³

Conference Realignment, 1934–1939

As the 1930s wore on, small colleges claimed they offered a different kind of learning than big universities—and sport meant something different to them, too. Even though they did not want to eliminate sports, small colleges did not want universities telling them how to run either athletic or academic programs. As a result, it grew more difficult to house multiple kinds of institutions within the same conferences. In 1931, it had seemed to be a real possibility that a more compact athletic conference including ISTC might form, but within a few years that idea was no longer feasible. In late 1934, ISTC sent delegates to the annual meeting of the North Central Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (NCIAC). ISTC, along with the University of Omaha (which became a public municipal institution in 1930), was invited to join NCIAC, which then had five members: Morningside College and four state institutions in the Dakotas. Omaha's and ISTC's memberships were conditional on gaining NCA accreditation.⁸⁴ Initial accounts said ISTC would maintain joint membership, but its faculty voted by 1935 to leave the IAC, which meant ISTC primarily

83. H.M. Gage, "Report of the Committee on Athletics" (March 1932), 13–15; Box 2, "Administration—Office of the President—Gage, Harry Morehouse, 1920–1941," George T. Henry College Archives, Coe College, Cedar Rapids, IA.

84. "North Central Intercollegiate Athletic Conference; Annual Meeting, Chicago, Illinois; December 6–7, 1934," Athletic Board Files, 18.01.04, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA.

played opponents with comparable athletic ambitions.⁸⁵ The new conference affiliation represented the work of several years in which the teachers college built athletics “to the same high plane occupied by the school’s academic standards.”⁸⁶ In essence, ISTC had become a different kind of institution than the small private colleges in the IIAC.

Soon, a liberal arts college took ISTC’s place in the IIAC. Wartburg College started in Michigan in the 1850s, but it moved around Illinois and Iowa until finally settling in Waverly in 1935, when it merged with two other schools and went from a two-year junior college to a four-year school. In 1936, the permanently relocated college worked to gain accreditation from state, regional, and national bodies. Like their counterparts at other small colleges, Wartburg students stressed their institution’s identity as a “liberal arts college, offering varied curricula in the humanities, social and natural sciences, assuring the necessary broad cultural training.” The faculty possessed “Christian ideals,” their dedication enhanced by a 10:1 student-faculty ratio.⁸⁷ President Edward Braulick said the age “of the one-sided specialist” was drawing to a close and yielding to the era of the liberal arts.⁸⁸ Students saw Wartburg as a “family.” They also saw extracurricular activities, including sport, as part of education. A full college life entailed

85. “Tutors Seen in North Central Sports Circuit,” *Des Moines Register*, 12/6/1934; Sec Taylor, “Crimson Boss Seeking Coach from Big Ten,” *Des Moines Register*, 12/8/1934; “Faculty to Vote on Shortening Summer Session,” *College Eye*, 10/25/1935; “Panthers Tangle with Omaha U. Monday,” *College Eye*, 2/15/1935; “Teachers College Joins North Central Conference,” *The (ISTC) Alumnus* 19, no. 1 (January 1935), 12; “For Consideration at the Faculty Meeting, October 21, 1935,” 07.01.01, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA.

86. “North Central—What It Means—What It Is,” ISTC Football Program (versus South Dakota State), 11/23/1935, 3; 18.01.05, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA.

87. Bert McGrane, “Iowa League Picks Taylor as New Head,” *Des Moines Register*, 12/12/1936; “Accreditation of Wartburg Thought Sure,” *Wartburg Trumpet*, 2/3/1936; “Wartburg is Fully Accredited: Iowa Board Approves All College Work,” *Wartburg Trumpet*, 5/4/1936; “School Applies for N. Central Accreditation,” *Wartburg Trumpet*, 12/21/1936; “Wartburg and Your Future,” *Wartburg Trumpet*, 5/4/1936 (quotation).

88. “Comments by the President,” *Wartburg Trumpet*, 2/17/1936.

"the general atmosphere and spirit which permeated the college corridors and athletic fields."⁸⁹ For a liberal arts college, classes were important, but so too were (non-commercialized) sports.

Wartburg had formerly belonged to the Tri-State Conference, with schools in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Wartburg students liked the idea of joining the IIAC, in part, because travel would be easier and less expensive. In the Tri-State circuit, Wartburg's nearest opponent was the Wisconsin Mining Trades School at Platteville, 135 miles away, while the farthest was Mission House (Lakeland University), 350 miles away, near Sheboygan. But if Wartburg joined the IIAC, all of its opponents except one (Western Union in Le Mars) would be closer than Platteville. Because IIAC schools were more tightly clustered, they could play several games in one trip, thus saving money on hotels and meals.⁹⁰ Wartburg now fit all the criteria to join the IIAC: it was a four-year institution in Iowa; it sponsored football, basketball, and one spring sport; it had clear eligibility rules; and its coaches were faculty members—just as the NCA and the Carnegie Foundation recommended. Another criterion went unmentioned: it was a private college. Once Wartburg gained conference approval, it merely had to pay a \$15 annual membership fee. The conference finally extended membership later that year. Wartburg's first IIAC match was a basketball game at Upper Iowa in December 1936.⁹¹

At the same time as the IIAC shakeup, Grinnell moved to a conference of smaller schools. In 1936, the student newspaper's sports editor, Wells Barnett, asked what was wrong with Grinnell's football team. His answer was *nothing but the competition*. The college had high academic "standards," but it did not have enough money to compete with universities for players on "the

89. E.B. and E.H., "What Makes a College," *Wartburg Trumpet*, 9/21/1936.

90. "Shall Wartburg Join the Iowa Conference," *Wartburg Trumpet*, 3/2/1936 (quotation); "Knight Flashes," *Wartburg Trumpet*, 3/2/1936.

91. "Steps Taken To Join Iowa Conference," *Wartburg Trumpet*, 3/16/1936; "Iowa Sportsmen Postpone Wartburg's Request," *Wartburg Trumpet*, 5/18/1936; "Wartburg Seeks Membership in Iowa Conference," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 12/10/1936; "Wartburg College of Waverly Added to Iowa Conference," *The (Davenport) Daily Times*, 12/12/1936; "Wartburg Joins Iowa Conference: Knights Drop out of Tri-State Athletic Loop," *Wartburg Trumpet*, 12/21/1936.

open market." He argued that Grinnell should stop scheduling big-time programs and instead schedule colleges with modest athletic ambitions: **"For the good of our pride and the reputation of the school, it would be a good idea for Grinnell to get out of the Missouri Valley Conference."**⁹² Barnett's suggestion, which echoed Nollen's critiques of commercialism a decade earlier, was not exactly a popular one. Grinnell students, including some football players, signed a petition requesting to stay in the MVC. Sec Taylor, an alumnus and *Des Moines Register* sportswriter, outlined several reasons why Grinnell should *not* leave the conference.⁹³ One compelling short-term reason for maintaining MVC membership was that the college had already committed to a significant athletic budget; if it joined a smaller, in-state conference, games would not yield enough revenue to keep sports afloat. Grinnell certainly had its athletic boosters. One football player hoped the college would leave the MVC—but only to join the Big Ten. Meanwhile, students at Drake, a fellow MVC member, urged Grinnell to stay.⁹⁴

The debate continued. By 1937, more students thought switching conferences made sense; Grinnell would have to "subsidize" athletes to win in the MVC.⁹⁵ The faculty athletic committee decided to withdraw from the conference, effective June 1, 1939. Grinnell economics professor Earl Strong, who also served as a conference official, announced the decision at the MVC's meeting in Kansas City. Grinnell was smaller than other MVC schools, it was not winning football games, and its rural location meant it could not offer large guarantees.⁹⁶ The withdrawal petition sounded familiar: Grinnell could only compete by launching "a

92. Wells Barnett, "Random Sport Shots," *Grinnell Scarlet and Black*, 11/18/1936 (boldface in original).

93. "Stay in Loop, Students Say," *Des Moines Register*, 11/21/1936; Sec Taylor, "Sittin' In with the Athletes," *Des Moines Register*, 11/20/1936.

94. "Grinnell Editor Discusses Case," *Des Moines Register*, 11/22/1936; "Drake's Paper Urges Grinnell to Stay in Loop," *Des Moines Tribune*, 11/25/1936.

95. "Grinnell Sport Leaders Divided in Opinion over Valley Withdrawal," *Des Moines Tribune*, 12/6/1937.

96. "Grinnell Quits as Member of Missouri Valley," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 12/4/1937.

great campaign of recruiting and subsidizing," which it was "unwilling" to do. Furthermore, travel in the geographically expansive MVC simply cost too much.⁹⁷ For most of 1938, Grinnell's athletic future was up in the air, but in December it attended the Midwest Athletic Conference's annual meeting and joined that group, effective the following September.⁹⁸ Grinnell students saw the new affiliation as affirming a "sane athletic policy": athletics were a key part of education, not a commercial spectacle. Grinnell could now play (and win) against colleges with similar ideas about education and sport.⁹⁹ As of 2020, Grinnell remains part of the Midwest Collegiate Athletic Conference, now comprised of ten liberal arts colleges in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin.

Conclusion: A Distinctive Type of College Sports

Historians are right to stress increased athletic commercialization after the 1929 Carnegie Report and the subsequent handwringing about intercollegiate sports—as long as they maintain a narrow focus on larger universities. Careful analysis of liberal arts colleges in places like Iowa illuminates a rather different story. As it became harder for small, privately endowed and religiously affiliated colleges to survive the Depression, most chose a path diverging from the one taken by universities, teachers colleges, and junior colleges. Private colleges rejected big-time athletics without rejecting sport. This decision was a practical one as well as a philosophical one, insofar as small-time athletics necessitated less travel and thus cost less than big-time athletics. While most small colleges in Iowa did not end intercollegiate competition,

97. Earl D. Strong (Chairman, Faculty Committee on Athletics), "Petition for Withdrawal from Missouri Valley," (quotation), and "Grinnell Drops from Conference," *Grinnell Scarlet and Black*, 12/4/1937; Bert McGrane, "Grinnell Drops from Valley Loop," *Des Moines Register*, 12/4/1937. See also "Grinnell Quits Conference," *New York Times*, 12/5/1937.

98. "Midwest Votes Grinnell Place in Conference," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 12/4/1938; "Pioneers Join Midwest Sept. 1," *Des Moines Register*, 12/4/1938; Nollen, *Grinnell College*, 175–76.

99. Clark A. Smith, "Pioneers Remain in Valley until June," *Grinnell Scarlet and Black*, 12/3/1938; "A Re-Birth of Prestige," *Grinnell Scarlet and Black*, 12/3/1938 (quotation).

having learned from Wettstone's failed mid-1920s crusade, many *did* consciously stress identities as "liberal arts" institutions that saw sport as an educational tool to create well-rounded students who would be able to navigate the perilous and shifting terrain of modernity. Conference realignment ensued. By crafting a type of sport suitable for the liberal arts, Iowa's small colleges reimagined their identities for the changing landscape of modern American society and higher education.