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

BRIAN M. INGRASSIA

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 (NCAIC); 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 de-emphasize 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. 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. Princeton and Rutgers played America’s first intercollegiate football game in 1869, but the sport

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-


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. 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. 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. 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.”


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

 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.  

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.  

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. 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

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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.


“liberal arts college” and the other half in practical courses.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{17} “Gage Report Discloses Many Important Facts,” (Coe) College Cosmos, 10/21/1921.

\textsuperscript{18} “Coe—A University?” (Coe) College Cosmos, 5/10/1923.

\textsuperscript{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. 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


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 Presbyterians74, no. 3 (Fall 1996), 183–94.


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).
“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 IIAC 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

supported immigration restrictions while continuing to promote Americanization of immigrants already in the country.\textsuperscript{30} He said life was “a serious battle. . . where intellect strikes the death blow to the ape and to the beast”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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


\textsuperscript{31} Wettstone, “Dubuque’s” Stand, 15 (original emphasis).

\textsuperscript{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 Northeast 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).

\textsuperscript{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 de-emphasize 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

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

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. 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.’” 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.” 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

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

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

47. Ingrassia, “Conceptualizing ‘Small-time’ College Athletics.”
part by the Big Ten’s recent recognition that declining ticket sales should prompt colleges to explore “more compact and economical conference setups.” 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. 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. 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). ISTC’s President Orval R. Latham liked the idea of a


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.

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. 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.

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.

For small colleges, though, the New Deal turned out to be a


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.


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.” 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. 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 IIAC 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. 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.

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.” 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.

As higher education shifted, some Americans worked to save what they called the “liberal arts college.” 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. 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; Sleightier 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.


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

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.” Students had to be taught as “individuals rather than as a mass”; a college should not just be “an educational machine.” Burgstahler wanted faculty to be “inspirational” teachers, not just well-respected academics.

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.” 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.” During the NBC broadcast, President


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.


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.

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


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

Americans from “weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable” lives. While universities were fine for specialized training, small colleges built minds and created “social unity.”\textsuperscript{73} Nollen even obliquely criticized his predecessor for allowing “some rather technical material” to become part of Grinnell’s curriculum.\textsuperscript{74} Meanwhile, C. Harve Geiger, Coe’s dean, said colleges could not just teach “salable information,” the way that universities did.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{76}

Historian Julie Reuben has argued that in the interwar period, big universities dropped any pretense of moral education.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{79} In 1937, Buena Vista’s faculty declared it “a standard liberal arts college” instilling a “strong Christian character.”\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{73} Nollen quoted in “Central Graduate Heads Grinnell,” \textit{Central Ray}, 2/12/1932.
\textsuperscript{74} John Scholte Nollen, \textit{Grinnell College} (Iowa City, 1953), 115.
\textsuperscript{75} “Excerpts from Dean Geiger’s Chapel Address,” \textit{Coe College Courier} 34, no. 1 (September 1933), 3.
\textsuperscript{78} “This is a College,” \textit{Central Ray}, 2/12/1932.
\textsuperscript{80} “Aims and Purposes of Buena Vista College,” \textit{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.\footnote{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\footnote{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


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.  

**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. Initial accounts said ISTC would maintain joint membership, but its faculty voted by 1935 to leave the IIAC, which meant ISTC primarily

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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. 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. 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. 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. 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.


88. “Comments by the President,” Wartburg Trumpet, 2/17/1936.
“the general atmosphere and spirit which permeated the college corridors and athletic fields.” 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.

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.

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

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

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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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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,


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.