

## **Masculinity and Its Impact on the US College Admission System in the Early Twentieth Century**

Since the past, the United States (US) held the concept of masculinity, the qualities or behaviors that are thought to be associated with men. While the expression of masculinity varies depending on the cultures and time periods, some of the characteristics that are regarded as manly include courage, discipline, competitiveness, strengths, and adventurousness (Nagel 245). The preference for the ‘ideal man’ even influenced the college admission systems, where institutions sought students that satisfied the characteristics of the man with masculinity. Given these facts, this research paper aims to investigate the question: “How was the concept of masculinity formed and what was the impact on the college admission system around the early twentieth century in the United States?”. It is hypothesized that American history plays an important role in leading people to support masculinity and to provide preferences for young men with manly characteristics. The relevant historical factors, as well as the specific attributes that the universities looked for and their reasons, will be discussed.

The American historical ideologies of nationalism, militarism, and imperialism are some of the factors that are related to the preference for manliness. These three were interrelated to each other and together formed the notion of manliness. First, nationalism was one of the ideologies that the US supported in the past, in which its aim was to achieve statehood and nationhood (Nagel 247). In the process of state-building, anti-colonial warfare

was common and often involved armed conflicts (247). Thus, nationalism and militarism progressed together. Moreover, nationalism also led to the support for imperialism, where two imperialist projects existed. One was the manifest destiny that advocated for westward expansion and another was the Monroe Doctrine, which justified the expansion of the US influence to the entire western hemisphere (249). These projects were believed to contribute to the progress of the nation, and it was men who were involved in the movements. As wars started to involve the notion of “‘duty’, ‘honor’, ‘patriotism’, ‘a defense of freedom’ and ‘the American way of life’” (259), men with courage, bravery, honor, and perseverance were admired because these traits were crucial to achieving the national goal (Cochran 24, 25). Thus, with a strong belief or focus on nationalism, militarism, and imperialism, it eventually created the idea that men should have those traits in order to defend as well as to expand the nation.

However, the industrial revolution, the empowerment of women and minority groups, and the end of the Civil War threatened men to maintain masculinity. First, the industrial revolution led the US to shift from farming and self-employment to an industrialized society that required fewer physical strengths (Gillam 15). It also led men to go out to work, meaning that young boys were raised primarily by women (15). This led to the fear that males would become soft and feminized, instead of developing the manly characters (15). Moreover, at the end of the nineteenth century, the social position of men was

threatened by the empowerment of women and minority groups. Women began to enter colleges and the workforce, blacks started to move to cities to find work, and people in the minority groups started to call for more rights (10). Men would have perceived these social movements negatively because it was the men that have been contributing to the good of the nation since the past, and the entrance of other groups of people could mean that they would lose the chance to perform such roles or to express masculinity. Furthermore, it was also worried that men were losing manliness after the Civil War, as the closing of the frontier meant fewer opportunities to express valor in the battleground, one of the traits of manliness (Karabel 29). Therefore, these examples suggest that such economic and social changes brought negative impacts on maintaining manliness and people had to find some ways to express masculinity.

One of the ways to demonstrate masculinity was to play sports. The ideal masculine physique and behavior were institutionalized into organizations such as the Olympic movement in 1896 (Nagel 244, 245), and people also started to strengthen boys' physical strengths to prevent them from being feminized (Gillam 16, 17). This led to the expansion of the organized sport, and engagement in aggressive sports also became popular (17). Baseball and football were especially preferred among the upper-class, as they involved both civilized rules and physical strength (17). Moreover, football had a close connection with making a soldier (Karabel 30), as the game defined the patterns of aggressiveness and symbolized

masculinity (Connell 217, 218), as well as providing the opportunity to endure hardness and suffering (Karabel 30). Thus, sports were regarded to form and strengthen manly characteristics. The popularity of sports was clearly seen in the Groton school, for instance, which is one of the boarding schools in the US. It aimed to create manly men that could contribute to creating a great nation, and every student was asked to play football (29, 30). Competing in sports was believed to allow students to develop courage, loyalty, masculine strength, and cooperation, which are some of the main characteristics of masculinity (30). Therefore, it suggests that US society started to form a strong relationship between manliness and sports.

With the growing notion that masculine men are those who can play sports, universities started to prefer admitting boys with high athletic abilities and other manly characters. This phenomenon was clearly seen in the Big Three, which refers to Princeton, Harvard, and Yale University. Princeton, for instance, gave strong preference to applicants that displayed high athletic skills in secondary schools. It regularly listed the number of freshmen students that have participated in varsity football, baseball, or hockey in their high school years (Karabel 297). This annual report indicated that more than 25 percent of the freshmen belonged to the varsity athletes in 1957 (297), supporting the idea that Princeton actively sought students who could play sports. The data matches with the statement given by E. Alden Dunham, the director of the admission who referred a few times in his official

statement on admission that physical energy is the qualities that Yale is seeking in every man admitted to Princeton (318). Harvard also favored candidates with high athletic ability.

Varsity-level athletes, especially in football were rated high and compensated for low academic records (190, 191). This preference for athletes was part of the university's policy which focused on the candidate's physical characteristics (191). One of the criteria on the confidential guidelines given to the Schools and Scholarship Committees was "Health and Athletic Activities", where young men with all-American looks were favored (191). For instance, an applicant from a leading day school who has experienced the position of a leader was accepted even with low academic scores, where he was described as a "large, wholesome, attractive boy" (191). This suggests that Harvard prioritized the experience of a leader and physical appearances over academics, which may have originated from the idea discussed earlier, where men had to have manly characters and traits in order to take the lead in protecting and expanding the nation in the past. Thus, physical appearances, which is tied to athletic ability, were an important criterion to look for a manly applicant who could contribute to the good of the nation in the future. Yale was another university that preferred men with manly traits. In 1928, it established the University Regional Scholarship, in order to admit the ideal Yale man. The criteria were based on three factors and two of them were: "manhood, force of character, and moral leadership" and "physical soundness and vigor as demonstrated by interest in sports and in other ways" (216). These explicitly show that Yale

emphasized the concept of masculinity since “force of character” suggests the power to influence the nation and “physical soundness and vigor” imply the strength needed to protect and to prosper the nation, according to the historical idea mentioned earlier. Thus, these examples in the admission systems of the Big Three clearly suggest that athletic abilities and manly characters were some of the most important elements for the US universities at the time.

The preference for manliness was also reflected in the denial of admitting Jewish applicants. In general, Jews were thought to be lacking in masculinity, which partly referred to having the courage to engage in violence to protect the nation, at the time (Karabel 133). They were described to be bookish, have a weak physique, and show little preference to engage and succeed in sports (133). Part of the reason for this is that Jews lacked military and state, where they have not experienced getting out of the oppression<sup>31</sup>, unlike the US which had won independence from the colonial power. This led Jews to not have the opportunity to engage in manly adventure and to be physically strong, lacking the manly character. The Jews also defined manliness differently from the US, where they emphasized more on learning than physical empowerment (133, 134). Thus, all of these factors led many Jews to be unattractive to some US universities. For instance, Robert Nelson Crowin, the chairman of Yale’s Board of Admission between 1920 and 1933, stated that Jews lacked ““manliness, uprightness, cleanliness, native refinement, etc”” (111), clearly suggesting Jews be deficient

in manly character. With the negative impression on Jews, he decided to put a quota on them to limit its number admitted being below 10 percent of the whole class (112), a big disadvantage for them.

The research results suggest that historical ideologies play a role in forming and supporting masculinity, influencing college admissions. This raises a debatable point that historical events could influence the opportunities available to young adults. In the case of the topic of masculinity, those who did not satisfy the favorable characteristics of men had difficulties in entering some universities, limiting their chances to succeed in higher education and probably in their careers. Even though the movements toward gender equality should have mitigated the issue later on, it is expected that some boys suffered from the admission system at the time. The research also proposes the idea that the idea of masculinity would vary among nations. The American ideologies of nationalism, militarism, and imperialism were introduced as some of the factors influencing the definition of the ideal men, leading to the preference for athletes and other manly characters. However, this also means that countries with different historical backgrounds and cultural values would have different perspectives on manliness. Additionally, while social and economic changes led the US to use sports as a means of expressing masculinity, other countries may have found other methods, again creating differences in the definition of manliness. Thus, it would be

important to understand that the concept of masculinity is not definite but varies depending on the countries and their backgrounds.

In conclusion, it was found that the American historical ideologies contributed to forming the concept of masculinity, eventually leading the US universities to prefer admitting applicants with high athletic abilities and other manly characteristics in the early twentieth century. In precise, the ideologies of nationalism, militarism, and imperialism in the past created the notion that men with traits including courage, bravery, honor, and perseverance to be important in order to defend and progress the nation. However, economic and social changes including the industrial revolution, the growing empowerment of women and the minorities, and the end of the Civil War led to the fear that masculinity would be weakened. Thus, sports became popular as a means to express and strengthen manly characteristics. This was reflected in the college admission system at the time where men with high athletic abilities and attractive physical appearances, as well as manly characters were preferred. It also led to limiting the number of Jews admitted to the class, partly because they lacked masculinity. Therefore, these findings suggest the strong support for manly traits around the early twentieth century in the US and how universities tried to admit potential students who are more likely to bring benefits to the nation in the future.

As the scope for future investigation, the research can be extended by comparing the masculinity between the US and other countries, such as Japan. With different cultures and



historical backgrounds, it is very likely that the two nations had different perceptions of the ideal men and thus, leading to the differences in the admission systems in universities.

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