“Physique as Destiny”: The Significance of The Eugenics Movement to Wellesley’s Posture Program Throughout the Twentieth Century

Across the United States, in various university storage rooms, museum collections, and hidden archives, are stored thousands of black and white photos, each depicting a nude college student. Many are pictured with metal horns protruding from their backs in a line; some have their faces blacked out while others feature identifying tags tied into their hair.¹ These photos were taken throughout the twentieth century at many higher-education institutions, including several Ivy League universities and Seven Sister colleges. Indeed, if you were a student at one of these schools from the 1930s to 1970s, your nude photo may be stored in the Smithsonian alongside the pictures of high-profile figures such as Hillary Clinton, George Bush, and Bob Woodward.² Commonly called “posture photos,” these images were used to record and catalog incoming students’ postures as a part of a larger movement to measure the human body. And while few people are aware of the existence of these photos, even fewer agree on the motives behind them.

Generally, there are two main theories addressing the reasons behind these posture photo programs. The first theory argues that the photos were part of a larger, more sinister eugenics program aimed to pair college-educated men and women together in the hopes of producing

genetically-superior children.³ The second claims that the posture photos were simply a result of the establishment of physical education departments at many universities, alongside the rising obsession with posture as an indicator of character and personality.⁴ While there certainly may have been eugenicists who wished to use the collected posture photos to implement eugenics programs, the nude photos of Wellesley students were not likely taken for this purpose. Despite this fact, it is difficult to say that the college’s posture program had nothing to do with the Eugenics Movement. Even though Wellesley College was not directly involved with government-sanctioned eugenics programs, the college’s actions throughout the twentieth century clearly reflect the same ideas used by prominent eugenicists to create a “genetically-superior race.” Indeed, Wellesley’s posture program was influenced by the ideas driving the Eugenics Movement — that the human race can be improved through institutional-level action, and that physique was directly correlated to an individual’s character and morals.

The American Eugenics Movement

First coined by Sir Francis Galton in 1883, the term eugenics commonly refers to the idea of improving the human race through government-sponsored programs. These programs either encourage the marriage of “genetically-superior” individuals (positive eugenics) or discourage those labeled less desirable from reproducing (negative eugenics).⁵ Although most commonly associated with Nazi Germany’s sterilization and euthanasia program, eugenics has its roots in

³ Rosenbaum, "Ivy League."
many other countries — including the United States. The American Eugenics Movement, although not commonly taught in schools or acknowledged as an important part of American history, has had a significant impact on the perceptions of race, class, and gender in the United States.

In the early 1900s, an influx of immigrants to the United States caused backlash from white American progressives who claimed that increased rates of immigration would “dilute” the gene pool and inhibit societal development. This backlash culminated in the passing of the Immigration Act of 1924, which restricted immigration to the U.S. from many parts of Europe and Asia. Henry Laughlin, a famous American eugenicist and prominent supporter of the Immigration Act, justified the new law by calling immigrants feeble-minded criminals who were “socially inadequate.” While this type of language would be deemed extremely inappropriate and incorrect today, it was widely accepted in the early twentieth century.

In addition to restricting immigration from other parts of the world, many states across America passed laws to legalize the compulsive sterilization of “unfit” individuals. Starting in 1907 with Indiana and extending into over thirty states, sterilization programs eventually led to the forced sterilization of more than 60,000 individuals — many of whom were judged to be “feeble-minded” based on factors including race, class, and intelligence. As these laws were

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9 The Eugenical Aspects of Deportation: Hearings before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization House or Representatives, 70th Cong. 3-4 (1928) (statement of Henry H. Laughlin, Expert Eugenics Agent, Eugenics Record Office).
passed, eugenics continued to spread across the globe, connecting scientists from America, Germany, France, and many other countries.

Contrary to popular belief, German and American eugenicists collaborated closely before the U.S. entered WWII. The Nazi sterilization program — which ended up forcefully sterilizing approximately 350,000 individuals — was wholeheartedly endorsed by multiple major American eugenicists. On the other end, high-ranking Nazi officials admired the strict immigration and sterilization laws passed in the United States. Indeed, during the Nuremberg trials post-WWII, Nazi physician Karl Brandt defended the German euthanasia programme by pointing toward the American Eugenics Movement and citing multiple state-wide sterilization laws.\textsuperscript{11}

The American Eugenics movement revealed a great deal about public perception of race, class, and gender in the twentieth century. While there are countless avenues through which to investigate these concepts within the movement, America’s obsession with posture and the physical form is especially interesting. The next two sections will introduce this movement and explore its relevance to Wellesley and other institutes of higher education throughout the twentieth century.

\textbf{America’s Obsession with Posture}

Within the American Eugenics Movement emerged a smaller but no less enthusiastic movement concerning posture and physique. Beginning in the 1820s and taking off at the start of the twentieth century, posture became a matter of great importance to the general public. Public perception that good posture led to better health morphed into a direct linkage between

\textsuperscript{11} Klautke, “The Germans,” 3.
appearance and character. Craniometry, somatotyping, and anthropometry all emerged as different methods to collect and interpret different body measurements, including posture.12

While eugenicists were emphasizing the need for “better bodies” to improve reproduction and child health, government officials warned against foreigners and defective individuals “polluting” the American race. For instance, in 1929, President Hoover publicly declared that American society could only improve if children were born healthy and strong. As a result, public attention was brought to the issue of “defective” youth — a category that included children with bad posture, mental disabilities, and physical impairments.13 Posture-correcting programs began popping up in schools across the United States in response to the growing obsession with posture and physique.

As the fields of anthropometry and physical education grew more popular, eugenicists flourished as well. The mission of eugenicists and physical educators intersected and overlapped in many areas — experts in both fields wanted to improve the human race by observing physical traits such as posture and physique. Eugenicists and physical educators alike drew conclusions about the interactions between mind and body and implemented programs with those conclusions in mind.14 For example, Francis Galton, a leader of the eugenics movement in Europe, observed that intelligent individuals tended to be taller and heavier than the average person. He went on to take detailed measurements of students’ bodies, studying growth and transformation patterns in youth and connecting them to levels of intelligence.15 His work in anthropometry greatly influenced future eugenicists who made it their mission to prove that physique influenced intelligence and character.

13 Vertinsky, “Physique as Destiny,” 296.
14 Vertinsky, “Physique as Destiny,” 297.
Eugenics in Higher Education

In the late nineteenth century, universities across the United States enthusiastically followed in Galton’s footsteps. By establishing physical education departments and implementing thorough measurement programs, many schools sought to match the public’s rising interest in posture and physique. William H. Sheldon, a prominent anthropologist who developed a new method of somatotyping, used data collected from various physical education departments to research the supposed link between physique and character. Overall, his efforts were aimed at developing a more complete model of the ways he believed the mind and body interact.\textsuperscript{16}

Physical health and wellness have been concerns ever since Wellesley was established in 1870. In an 1876-77 College Bulletin, the college declared:

\begin{quote}
. . . hereafter new students in delicate health will not [be] received . . . The faculty will not be responsible for the health of invalids . . . [Students] must give thoughtful & constant attention to their health if they wish to become successful scholars.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Wellesley, like many other institutions, placed heavy emphasis on health and posture as indicators of better character and mental stability. Dismissing students due to health reasons illustrates the significance the college had placed on physical health. The college’s Department of Hygiene and Physical Education has been offering physical education classes since the college began — today, students are still required to fulfill eight credits of physical education classes in

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\textsuperscript{16} Vertinsky, “Physique as Destiny,” 294.
\textsuperscript{17} Memo for Miss Elliott from the Hygiene recorder, May 10, 1945, History: General, Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA.
\end{flushright}
order to graduate. Additionally, up until the late twentieth century, physical examinations were required for each incoming first-year student. Every year, faculty would take multiple measurements of each student — including height, weight, lung capacity, hip-width, knee height, finger strength, and more. These measurements were recorded and stored at the Department’s office, where students and outside scientists would have access to the data for research purposes.

In addition to the measurements taken, posture photos were collected to improve student posture and physique. After a photo was taken, students were instructed to stand in front of a mirror while faculty pointed out “defects” in their posture. For students who did not have good posture, the college would enroll them in special physical education classes where they would be trained to correct the curvature of their spines. The following excerpt from a Posture program report published in 1954 shows the extent of the program:

All freshman and sophomores who fall below [a C- grade] are urged to enroll in Posture and Body Mechanics . . . if at the end of the 2nd year of indoor work, their posture photograph grade is unsatisfactory . . . they will have an opportunity for another photograph (posture condition).

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19 Letter from Helen F. McMillin to Miss Mabel L. Cummings of the Wellesley Hygiene Department, Jan 8, 1924, Department of Hygiene and Physical Education, Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA.
20 Letter from Katharine F. Welles to Miss Virginia Little, Jan 25, 1932, Department of Hygiene and Physical Education, Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA.
21 Directions for Posture Conference, Fall 1954, Department of Hygiene and Physical Education, Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley MA.
22 Directions for Posture Conference, Oct. 8, 1954, Department of Hygiene and Physical Education, Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA.
Outside of class, students were encouraged to attend posture days where activities such as contests, skits, and dances emphasized the message that proper posture reflected intelligence, desirability, and good character. Posture was soon established as a significant part of a Wellesley student’s college career. A student’s performance in physical education classes determined their ability to graduate, participate in certain activities, and enroll in other classes.23

By the mid-1900s, many colleges in the Northeast ran posture programs similar to the one established at Wellesley. The physical education departments at Harvard, Yale, Vassar, Princeton, and other universities all took nude posture photos of their students and allowed scientists — including William H. Sheldon, a prominent somatologist — to use these photos for their research. As a result, Sheldon worked quite closely with physical educators to analyze and draw conclusions about the data. Indeed, throughout his somatotyping research, Sheldon found that his collaborations with physical educators (many of whom were also eugenicists) were typically very supportive and productive.24

Sheldon’s work with posture photos from various universities is a large point of contention when discussing Wellesley’s posture program. A famous New York Times exposé published in 1995 suggested that many universities established posture programs to create a “superior race” by matching eligible college-educated men and women together based on physique. While there is little proof that this is the case, or that Sheldon used Wellesley posture photos at all, there is still significant evidence supporting the fact that Wellesley sent measurements to other prominent eugenicists.25 Thus, there is no question that Wellesley was actively involved in the Eugenics Movement during the twentieth century. However, it is likely

not the case that Wellesley’s posture program was specifically established to create a
“genetically-superior race,” as originally suggested by the New York Times article.\textsuperscript{26}

Even though Sheldon did not use Wellesley’s posture photos for his research, his use of
photos from other universities is still worth investigating — specifically, the conclusions he drew
from his research. It is interesting to note that Sheldon’s views on physique did not entirely align
with those of the physical educators he worked with. He believed that “physique was indeed
destiny”\textsuperscript{27}; that is, that genetics and a person’s biology completely determine their physique. The
work of physical educators completely rejects that idea — the very existence of
posture-correcting classes suggests that physical educators believe an individual’s character can
be changed through physical adjustments.\textsuperscript{28} Despite this difference, Sheldon continued to work
with educators to collect data, draw conclusions, and publicize his research. However, his
differing beliefs, coupled with his continued enthusiasm for eugenics even following WWII, led
to the eventual dismissal of his work later in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{29}

Wellesley’s Department of Hygiene and Physical Education also collaborated with Dr.
Charles Davenport, an ardent eugenicist and Director of the Eugenics Record Office in Cold
Spring Harbor, New York. In 1928, Dr. Josephine Rathbone, the director of Wellesley’s physical
education department, reached out to Dr. Davenport with a list of measurements taken from
Wellesley students that year. At the time, Wellesley’s physical education department was seeking
guidance from eugenicists to identify the most important physical measurements to use.\textsuperscript{30} This
was not an isolated occurrence — throughout the twentieth century, Wellesley and other colleges
consulted eugenicists for advice concerning their respective physical education departments.

\textsuperscript{26} Rosenbaum, "The Great Ivy League Nude Posture Photo Scandal."
\textsuperscript{27} Vertinsky, “Physique as Destiny,” 300.
\textsuperscript{28} Vertinsky, "Embodying Normalcy," 113-114.
\textsuperscript{29} Vertinsky, “Physique as Destiny,” 308.
\textsuperscript{30} Letter Dr. Josephine Rathbone to Dr. Charles Davenport, Feb 26, 1928, Department of Hygiene and Physical
Education, Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA.
Beyond the physical education department, eugenics infiltrated school curriculums and became a common topic in lectures, guest talks, and conferences. Indeed, many faculty members in universities were eugenicists or supportive of the movement.\textsuperscript{31} For example, below is an excerpt of a guest speaker’s lecture summary that illustrates the nature of the talks given at Wellesley in the earlier half of the twentieth century:

Dr. Jon Alfred Mjoen . . . will give, under the auspices of the departments of Zoology, Botany, and Hygiene, an illustrated lecture upon “Criminality and Genius as Biological Problems, and the Cost to State and Society of the ‘Minus Individuals’”.\textsuperscript{32}

By the mid-twentieth century, the eugenics movement had carved its own space in universities across the United States. The combination of posture programs, measurement collection, and eugenic ideas embedded in each school further emphasized the supposed connection between physique and desirable personality traits. It is evident that eugenics played a significant role in many universities during the mid-twentieth century.

Conclusion

Ultimately, however, the issue of whether or not Wellesley’s posture program was specifically established to pair college-educated men and women together to create a “superior race” is not the most important aspect of the college’s involvement in eugenics. Even though there is evidence to suggest that the program was not created for that purpose, it is undeniable

\textsuperscript{32} Guest Lecture Advertisement, Mar 2, 1927, Department of Hygiene and Physical Education, Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA.
that the same ideas that drove the Eugenics Movement also backed Wellesley’s posture program. The belief that physical appearance is directly correlated with character — coupled with the idea that populations can be changed through the application of those beliefs at an institutional level — was evident in the rationale behind both the Eugenics Movement and the numerous posture programs across the country.

The more significant aspects of the Eugenics Movement are the conclusions that can be drawn about science and scientific research. After analyzing many course catalogs, lecture summaries, and research studies that were published during the movement, it is clear that eugenics was considered a legitimate and reliable field of scientific research at the time. Today, however, eugenics is cast away as a “pseudoscience” — the movement seems so obviously incorrect and morally wrong. However, the use of the term “pseudoscience” has the potential to erase the fact that eugenics was considered cutting-edge science less than a century ago. Acknowledging the legitimacy of eugenics during the twentieth century raises the distinct possibility that some science today could be labeled as “fake science” a century in the future. Distancing ourselves from eugenics by calling it a pseudoscience also disregards the fact that some eugenic ideas and practices are still circulating today. For example, in 2010, almost one hundred-fifty women in California prisons were forcefully sterilized despite laws requiring consent before sterilization procedures. Many states did not repeal sterilization laws until much later in the twentieth century, and the infamous Buck v. Bell ruling that legalized compulsory sterilization in 1927 was cited in rulings as recently as 2001. The idea that eugenics is a horror of the past is simply untrue — and it is dangerous to think otherwise.

33 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Eugenics.”
The concept of pseudosciences also raises the question: is science ever truly objective? Today, many people certainly think that modern science is objective — but people in the 1930s believed the same about eugenics. For instance, seventy years ago, being a minority in the United States was considered undesirable, so race played a significant role in forceful sterilizations. Recently, being disabled is largely seen as undesirable, so scientists are actively searching for ways to edit the human genome and eliminate certain disabilities entirely.

For the above reasons, it is crucial to consider scientific innovation from a moral, holistic perspective. With the onslaught of new technologies surrounding gene editing (such as CRISPR-Cas9), it is more important than ever to be constantly aware of the role ethics plays in science. Sometimes referred to as part of the “modern eugenics movement,” innovative technologies such as CRISPR have the potential to define “desirable” and “undesirable” traits. For instance, it may be possible to cut out undesirable traits using new technologies in the near future, thus creating “designer babies” with only desirable traits.\textsuperscript{36} Although certain uses of this technology could improve quality of life, it is very important to consider the potential consequences of labeling certain traits as undesirable. Thus, conversations about the implications of CRISPR and other modern technologies that have the potential to create a new eugenics movement are crucial.

However, these conversations can only happen once there is increased awareness surrounding America’s history with eugenics. The United States government’s response to the atrocities of the Eugenics Movement post-WWII was sporadic and incomplete — consequently, many Americans remain unaware of the full impact eugenics had on race, gender, and class-related issues occurring today. Even among members of Wellesley’s student body, there is little knowledge about the college’s true role in the eugenics movement or its posture program.

\textsuperscript{36} Rider, “Modern Eugenics in California.”
that lasted for more than fifty years. Students are only truly exposed to Wellesley’s complex history if enrolled in very specific humanities classes. In order to properly address many of the wrongs committed by the college and other higher-education institutions, we must be more willing to discuss the relationship between universities and the Eugenics Movement. Only then can difficult conversations concerning the ethics surrounding modern forms of eugenics occur — and only then can we ensure that the atrocities of the Eugenics Movement do not repeat themselves.
Annotated Bibliography


This source summarized U.S. immigration policy throughout American History. I specifically focused on the section concerning immigration after 1900 and immediately before WWII, when the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 was passed. I was able to connect the passage of the law with rising eugenic sentiments in America at the time.


This source builds upon the data collected from the article published in the same journal 24 years earlier. For the most part, the author of this article agrees with the authors of the older one — Wellesley women were not producing enough children to continue their own lineages. However, the author disagrees with the idea that the existence of colleges for women make it more difficult for women to get married and have children. I mainly used this source to provide context for the general attitude towards eugenics in the early twentieth century.


This source discusses the American Eugenics Movement and points out many of the aspects of the movement that are forgotten today. Specifically, it discusses the Supreme Court Case *Buck v. Bell* and the legacy it left today. I used this source to bring up concerns about a modern eugenics movement in which many of the lessons from the original movement were ignored.
Department of Hygiene and Physical Education Records. Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA.

This collection in Wellesley’s archives provides many primary sources from the early half of the twentieth century, including memos, letters, and measurement charts. Among them, I found correspondence between famous eugenicist Charles Davenport and Wellesley faculty exchanging measurements of Wellesley students for research. These sources cement Wellesley’s involvement in the Eugenics movement and support my argument that the posture photos, although not directly used for eugenics research, were a reflection of the general belief that phenotype (in other words, physical appearance from genetics/environment) were extremely important and could be used to judge a person’s worth.


This Honors thesis written by a Wellesley student in 1996 investigates the posture photos taken in the early twentieth century of Wellesley first years. It draws from multiple sources that I cite, including the NYT article and sources from Wellesley’s archives. She argues that the posture photos were used in an attempt to legitimize the physical education field instead of to further the eugenics movement. Although I do agree with her claim that the posture photos were not sent out specifically to advance eugenic practices, I do believe that the posture photos contributed to a larger mission of measuring and documenting the human body. Ultimately, I think this documentation was motivated by thinking from the eugenics movement — when coupled with other primary sources from that time period, it is clear that eugenics ideas were constantly present.


This source discusses how scientists engaged with research during the eugenics movement. In addition to giving me a general overview of the movement, it showed me how much eugenics was legitimized as a field of study. I used this source to provide more context about the movement as a whole before diving into eugenics in universities.
History: General. Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA.

This collection in the archives provided me with several sources about Wellesley’s requirements for physical fitness in students. It gave me more information about the measurements Wellesley took. I was able to use some sources from this collection to give a better overview of the Department of Hygiene and Physical Education and its role in the eugenics movement.


This source discusses data taken from Wellesley College graduates in 1912, mainly focusing on their marriage status and number of children at the time. Published by researchers from the University of Pittsburgh, the article is obviously written from a eugenicist’s point of view — the authors make the claim that since Wellesley College graduates have abnormally low marriage and birth rates, they are not adequately serving their responsibility to produce offspring as “eugenically superior” women. Although the article was not published by Wellesley researchers, it illuminates the general view at the time that eugenics was an accepted and forward-thinking field of study.


This website gave me an overview of eugenics in all 50 states across America. It also provided general information about how many individuals were sterilized, when the sterilization laws were repealed, and what the impact of each law was at the time. I used this source to give a little background on the movement before delving deeper into Wellesley’s role in the movement.

https://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/tree/54668bd62432860000000001.

This source provided information about how eugenics infiltrated education during the movement. I learned how eugenics worked its way into classes, college lecture halls, and curriculums. In my paper, I used information from this source to show the extent to which eugenics influenced different populations.
Marion Bassette Papers. Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA.

This archive collection contains many sources from the time period collected by Marion Bassette, a Wellesley alum from 1916. Many of the sources are characterized by using extreme language from the Eugenics Movement. Among those sources were conference pamphlets/proceedings, clippings, and birth control-related sources. Although many of these sources were not created by Wellesley faculty or students themselves, they reflect the broader attitude towards eugenics as an accepted scientific field. Thus, they support my argument that Wellesley, as well as other higher education institutions, were deeply entrenched in ideas that fueled the eugenics movement.

*The Eugenical Aspects of Deportation: Hearings before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization House or Representatives. 70th Cong. 3-4 (1928), Statement of Henry H. Laughlin, Expert Eugenics Agent, Eugenics Record Office.*

This source was a statement from Henry Laughlin, a prominent eugenicist in the twentieth century. He was defending the Immigration Act of 1924 that barred many immigrants from Asia and certain parts of Europe. I used this source to illustrate the type of language used at the time to describe eugenic ideas.


This article discusses how the Immigration Act of 1924 affected public perception of immigrants and eugenics as a science. I also learned how the act connects with modern issues surrounding immigration. I used this source to highlight the effects of the Immigration Act.


This source discussed the possibility of a modern eugenics movement with the introduction of new technologies such as CRISPR gene editing that would possibly allow individuals to select “desirable” traits in babies in the future. I used this source to reflect on the lessons learned from the original Eugenics Movement and how they can be applied to today’s America.

https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/eugenics.

This source gave an overview of the international eugenics movement with a focus on Nazi Germany’s euthanasia programme. It also covered the origins of the eugenics movement. I used this source to provide background information in my paper about the start of the movement.


This is a web page from Wellesley’s current website detailing the specifics of Wellesley’s physical education requirement, which has been in place since Wellesley’s founding.


This article discusses the link between the Eugenics Movement in America and college-educated women. In the early twentieth century, eugenicists became increasingly concerned about the low marriage and birth rates of college-educated women compared to the national average. Because college-educated women were deemed superior, eugenicists were worried that their lower rates of birth meant that they weren’t having enough children to maintain the “pure American race.” Several hypotheses were proposed to explain this difference, including that the nature of all-women’s colleges prevented women from meeting and marrying eligible men. This source gives me a better idea of how historically women’s colleges such as Wellesley fit in with the broader eugenic-thinking at the time.


This source discusses William Sheldon’s somatotyping project and includes his usage of posture photos from various universities across the country. It also discussed his methods and studies, and eventually how his research became irrelevant and disregarded after the eugenics movement died down. I used this source to provide a lot of information about
how he used posture photos to make conclusions about physique and its supposed influence on an individual's character.


This source discusses William Sheldon’s somatotyping project, similarly to the previous source. However, this article provides interesting information about how Sheldon’s beliefs concerning physique differed from the beliefs of the physical educators he worked with. I used this source to elaborate on this difference and to analyze the development of somatotyping throughout his career.