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A Brief History of Eugenics at Lehigh University

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Professor Lorenzo Servitje

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In 1883 Francis Galton coined the term “eugenics” from the Greek word *eugenes* - meaning well born.¹ eugenics functioned to improve the genetic quality of the gene pool in a human population through selective breeding; “Evolution means an unfolding and hence a process of growth or development, and has come to imply the survival, of only the fit”.² This practice came from the perspective of Western Europeans. Since they viewed the “better” humans as those who were white, healthy, and wealthy, those who differed from these characteristics were discouraged from breeding. They were considered to have undesirable traits that shouldn’t be passed on to other generations, so therefore should be sterilized.³ Karl Ritter, a student from Lehigh University, states “man must stop thinking of himself and think of the race. It is for the best of the race that the unfit should perish. To that end he should take care of them and make it as easy for them to die as possible, but he should absolutely prevent the unfit, mentally and physically, from propagating”.⁴

The American Eugenics Movement surfaced in the early parts of the 20th century as scholars were looking into how eugenics affected the educational program and ways to implement it into the curriculum. This prompted the American Eugenics Society to build committees to populate and spread information to all peoples for them to become knowledgeable about eugenics.⁵ According to Kohlman, “among these committees were the Popular Education Committee tasked with education of the public, and the Formal Education Committee charged with ‘incorporation of eugenics as an integral part of various appropriate courses throughout the school system, in the elementary grades through high school, as well as the encouragement of special courses in colleges and universities.’” During the late 1930s there was a draw to educate

¹ Kohlman, Michael J. 2013. Evangelizing Eugenics: A Brief Historiography of Popular and Formal American Eugenics Education (1908-1948). Vol. 58, No. 4. University of Alberta: Alberta Journal of Educational Research

² Ritter, Karl. Hereditary & Eugenics (1918).

³ Kohlman, Michael J. 2013

⁴ Ritter, Karl. Hereditary & Eugenics (1918).

⁵ Kohlman, Michael J. 2013.

women and younger girls on the topic of eugenics.⁶ This emphasizes the importance of including eugenics within societal public education, and that educators wanted all people to be knowledgeable about this topic, even those typically excluded from private education. Further, it shows how the principles of eugenics impacted the reproductive regulations that US society deems acceptable even today.

The acceptance of eugenics into the American educational curriculum for universities began in 1908, following Indiana's 1907 ruling deeming sterilization legal in cases of disability, minorities, or other disadvantaged populations.⁷ Eugenics was originally incorporated into the education system through biology courses, before being expanded to, and required for, other subjects. Textbooks from 1914 discussed the mention of eugenics and "over 87% of these texts included eugenics as a topic and just over 70% 'recommended eugenics as a genuine science'", which shows the vast inclusion of these ideas into the schooling system.⁸ Between 1907 and 1925, twenty-two states had legalized sterilization, showing how encouraged much of the country was of eugenics as a practice. Thus, from 1914 to 1928, many schools began including eugenics in their biology curricula- especially many Southern and Ivy League schools.⁹ Ultimately, courses involving eugenics continued to be required for more majors, and even started being taught at more universities and K-12 schools.¹⁰

Another aspect of the word "eugenics" within a historical context is its relation to the birth control movement. For context, contraception was made illegal in 1873 when Congress passed the Comstock Act. Then in 1907, Indiana passed the world's first sterilization law which

⁶ Kohlman, Michael J. 2013.

⁷ Laughlin, Harry Hamilton, 1880-1943. The legal status of eugenical sterilization; history and analysis of litigation under the Virginia Sterilization statute, which led to a decision of the Supreme Court of the United States upholding the statute. 1930]. Retrieved from the Digital Public Library of America

⁸ Kohlman, Michael J. 2013.

⁹ Kohlman, Michael J. 2013.

¹⁰ Laughlin, Harry Hamilton, 1880-1943.

disproportionately targeted poor people, disabled people, and people of color.¹¹ Margaret Sanger, a strong advocate for women's reproductive rights, supported the eugenics movement—specifically the sterilization of the mentally unfit. Sanger founded the Birth Control League (Planned Parenthood) in 1921 after visiting poor neighborhoods in New York City. She saw that contraception and birth control education was a need for both poor women and women of color.¹² Sanger wrote a letter to W. E. B. Du Bois inviting him to participate in the National Negro Service Committee to promote birth control in the African American community.¹³ In 1960, the first birth control pill was approved, and by 1965 the landmark *Griswold v. Connecticut* Supreme Court case ruled against the last ban on contraception.¹⁴ The connection between the birth control movement and eugenics is important to history because both movements had overlapping desires of “keeping the springs of heredity pure and undefiled”.¹⁵

Between the 1920s and 1950s, Lehigh followed the crowd of other universities and began to implement the teachings of eugenics within their own courses, particularly in the field of Biology. In 1927, BIOL 9 “Genetics”, was the first class to have any mention of eugenics in its course description.¹⁶ This was most likely a result of the US Supreme Court upholding a VA statute legalizing sterilization of “degenerates” to prevent the existence of “offspring” who would not be “socially adequate citizens”, said to be the “most important legal step in the rise of modern eugenics” which occurred that same year.¹⁷ In the 1930's more and more courses seemed to implement the topic into their curriculum. This included BIOL 8 “Elementary Biology”,¹⁸

¹¹ Good, Hannah. 2021.

¹² Good, Hannah. 2021.

¹³ Letter from Birth Control Federation of America, May 1941.

¹⁴ Good, Hannah. 2021.

¹⁵ Morrow, Prince A. 1912.

¹⁶ Register of Lehigh University (1927-1928). 1926. The last time that this class ever mentioned eugenics in its description was the 1939-1940 academic year.

¹⁷ Laughlin, Harry Hamilton, 1880-1943.

¹⁸ Register of Lehigh University (1931-1932). 1930. The last year this class was mentioned in the course catalogs was for the 1945-1946 academic year.

BIOL 266 “Public Health Administration” (a graduate level course),¹⁹ and BIOL 1 “Biology” (a “requirement for all arts students who do not intend to major in biology”).²⁰ Finally, in the school year of 1938-1939 eugenics got a course in its namesake, BIOL 14 “Genetics and Eugenics”. Its description states “Designed for students who are not majoring in biology. The laws of heredity, modern conception of the gene, natural and artificial mutations, the mechanism of evolution, evolutionary trends of the human race and methods of eugenic betterment”.²¹

Furthermore, while it is crucial to identify the formal choices Lehigh made as an institution to teach eugenics as a necessary practice, it would be misguided to make it seem that eugenics only ever existed in this formal capacity. In fact, it is clear from student publications and other testaments that eugenics was being taught and discussed at Lehigh as soon as 1908, even being the main focus of an undergraduate student thesis.²² A key player in the evolution of eugenics at Lehigh was Dr. R. W. Hall, a longtime professor of biology and founder of Lehigh’s first Pre-Medical Society.²³ Hall was invited to Lehigh by President Drown in 1902 and wanted to reform Lehigh’s biology courses to teach “based on modern methods”.²⁴ Hall was a strong supporter of Dr. Estes’ hygiene courses at Lehigh which led Hall to introduce and teach Sanitary Biology to Lehigh and Moravian students.²⁵ In addition, Hall was a member of the The Eugenics Research Association and attended the International Congress of Eugenics in 1921.²⁶ In 1915, Dr. Hall gave a lecture on “Heredity and Eugenics” to the New Century Club.²⁷ Hall also presented a

¹⁹ Register of Lehigh University (1936-1937). 1935. The last year this class was mentioned in the course catalogs was in the 1956-1957 academic year.

²⁰ Register of Lehigh University (1927-1928). 1926. The last time that this class ever mentioned eugenics in its description was the 1944-1945 academic year.

²¹ Register of Lehigh University (1938-1939). 1937.

²² “Arts and Science Club” *Brown and White*. 1908.

²³ “Robert W. Hall Society to Hear Local Doctor”. *Brown and White*. 1937.

²⁴ Hall, Robert William. *A History of Biology at Lehigh*. 1945.

²⁵ Hall, Robert William. *A History of Biology at Lehigh*. 1945.

²⁶ “International Congress of Eugenics” *Eugenical News*.

²⁷ “Dr. Hall Speaks” *Brown and White*. 1915.

lecture on eugenics to the Arts and Science club in 1918.²⁸ Then, in 1919, according to the Brown and White, Dr. Hall presented a talk on “Eugenics” to the Chinese Students Club.²⁹ However, Dr. Hall was not the only known supporter of eugenics amongst the Lehigh professors at this time. Dr. Neil Carothers, head of the college of business and founder of the department of industrial engineering, gave a lecture in 1933 on supporting “social progress” through systems of marriage and eugenics.³⁰ Dr. Carothers continued his talks on limiting the birthrate of families on relief when presenting “Education as a Significant Promoter of Economic Security for the Race” at a Lehigh Valley Child Helping conference in 1935.³¹ Dr. Hall and Dr. Carothers were men in positions of power at an all white, male institution whose perspectives influenced generations of white men. For example, Karl Ritter, the general sciences student who wrote his undergraduate thesis on “Heredity and Eugenics” in 1918 went on to study “Mental Hygiene” in 1929 and became a high school principal.³²

Throughout the range of when the first eugenic-included course was taught at Lehigh to the first eugenic-titled course, there is a clear audience for those who “needed” eugenics knowledge. Over time, this increasingly popular and influential topic was being targeted to a bigger audience than just those who were planning to get a degree in Biology- as these classes were made easily accessible, or even required, to all students. There were also many “eugenic adjacent” topics being taught, such as hygiene, something that was required of all freshmen to complete.³³ As eugenics began to be something that was greatly talked about all over the world, Lehigh found it very important to make sure that their students were knowledgeable on the topic.

Though there is no way to tell what exactly was being taught to students in these courses, based

²⁸ “Arts and Science Club Meeting.” *Brown and White*. 1915.

²⁹ “Chinese Club Holds Meeting” *Brown and White*. 1919.

³⁰ “Carothers Envisions Attainment Of Ideal Economic Social Order” *Brown and White*. 1933.

³¹ “Economist Speaks” *Brown and White*. 1935.

³² “Class of 1918” *Lehigh Alumni Bulletin* 1938.

³³ Register of Lehigh University (1940-1941). 1939.

on course descriptions one can only imagine it was in favor of genetic betterment as this was the trend at the time. Around the mid 1940s, the time period of WWII, the mention of eugenics was completely removed from all course descriptions and BIOL 14 was eliminated from the course catalog. Between 1951 and 1952 “Genetics and Eugenics” was brought back for a year, for reasons that could not be explained from looking at faculty meeting minutes or any other archives from this year.³⁴ The last time this class was taught was the last time that eugenics was mentioned in a course for a long while at Lehigh.

The next time the topic of eugenics was referenced at Lehigh was in the course description of REL 214 “Conflicts and Conscience II”. Thoughts surrounding eugenics seemed to have flipped as the description now referenced the subject as the “medical genetic-eugenic ethics”.³⁵ Even the course description insinuates that eugenics was no longer a purely positive subject, but more so something that could, and should, be debated. This course only lasted one year at Lehigh before it was removed and there is a large jump to 2013 in which Eugenics is solely taught in a historical sense. Today, students at Lehigh can learn about the negative attributes of the subject in HMS/HIST 118 “History of Modern Medicine”, and REL 015 “Engineering the Impossible”.³⁶ It does not seem to be taught any longer during biology courses as at this point in time, eugenics has no pertinence to biology, aside from in an ethical context. Presently, it is now taught in humanities courses in which the history of eugenics is presented discretely and not something that can be debated for one side or another. At Lehigh, eugenics started out as a necessity for students to know, and is now something that is used as a moral talking point from our not-so-distant history.

³⁴ Register of Lehigh University (1951-1952). 1950.

³⁵ Register of Lehigh University (1973-1975). 1972. This was the only course catalog that had any mention of this course being offered

³⁶ Register of Lehigh University (2013-2014). 2012. Both of these courses are still taught at Lehigh today.

Throughout the 1920s and 30s, several freshman hygiene and “sanitary biology” courses were taught. One of the reasons Dr. Drown appointed Dr. Hall as head of Biology was to ensure that hygiene courses would be taught at the same standard as other reputable universities. Dr. Hall was a strong supporter of Dr. Estes’ hygiene courses at Lehigh, and also introduced and taught Sanitary Biology to Lehigh and Moravian students.³⁷ Although the main focus of these courses was to inform male students about safe sex and preventing the spread of “venereal diseases”, it is reasonable to assume that eugenics may have been taught in these courses. In the *Social Hygiene for Freshman* handbook, a chapter on the Female Reproductive System describes the modern day woman; “Women are not now the husky, well-developed animals that they were before the race surrounded itself with so many luxuries”. The hygiene handbook recommends that men choose the woman “involved in the reproduction of the race” wisely.³⁸ Earlier in the paper, BIOL 266 “Public Health Administration” was discussed as including the term eugenics in its course description. Professor Stanley Thomas, a bacteriologist, taught BIOL 266 from 1937-1957, as well as authored *Social Hygiene for Freshman* in 1936.³⁹ Dr. Thomas advised the Robert W. Hall Premedical Society and became the head of the biology department after Dr. Hall retired.⁴⁰ The students of Lehigh’s Pre-Medical society may have been influenced by the discussions surrounding eugenics at Lehigh and in the upper echelons of society. In 1934, J. E. Tether, president of the Pre-Medical Society, wrote an article for the *Lehigh Review* detailing his perspective on “Keeping the Life Stream Pure”. Tether compares the human race to a stream which “picks up quantities of bacterial filth” from the “Land of Death” which represents “ the defectives of the living human race; those who hereditary diseases, the congenital

³⁷ Hall, Robert William. *A History of Biology at Lehigh*. 1945.

³⁸ Bull, R.C. and Thomas, Stanley, *Social Hygiene for Freshman*. 39-40.

³⁹ Register of Lehigh University (1936-1937). 1935.

⁴⁰ Bull, R.C. and Thomas, Stanley, *Social Hygiene for Freshman*.

feeble-minded”. The student cites Darwin’s Theory of natural selection and the survival of the fittest as support for his argument for the “sterilization of all hereditary defectives”. Tether also claims that birth control is not enough for “the ignorant” and that sterilization through “vasectomies and salpingectomy” would be the most humane way “to be a Nation of good animals”. Throughout Tether’s article there are references to topics of public health, evolution, social welfare, and economics to support his view that eugenics should be applied to American society.⁴¹ Tether may have been influenced by courses such as BIOL14 Genetics and Eugenics and BIOL 266 Public Health Administration which were offered at the time. Beyond the pre-med students at Lehigh, the engineering students were also expected to be well versed in the topics of eugenics. As one student states, “He would be able to speak equally well on Einstein or elephants, eugenics or emulsions”.⁴² The influence of the biology and hygiene courses allowed eugenics to remain pervasive to the student body.

Overall, it is clear that at least in terms of formally teaching eugenics, Lehigh largely followed what the rest of the country, and thus society as a whole, was doing. Lehigh waited until many other schools had begun including eugenics before formally including it themselves, even waiting for it to have become “normalized” in America. This is also clear as around the same time period, there were various exhibitions and pamphlets already going around, even so far as to display “better babies” to laud the practice of eugenics/ sterilization. Furthermore, Lehigh stopped including it during a time in which eugenics was “temporarily squelched” as a result of the Nuremberg codes and other “anti-Nazi backlash”.⁴³ However, it is of the utmost importance to note that there is almost no “context” or “reasoning” from Lehigh’s end in terms of when eugenics was included, to what extent and how it was taught, or even their logic as to why.

⁴¹ Tether, J.E. “Keeping the Life Stream Pure” *The Lehigh Review*. 1934.

⁴² Marks, David “The Lehigh Engineering Curriculum” *The Lehigh Review*. 1928.

⁴³ Kohlman, Michael J. 2013

While it can be inferred based on America's history throughout this time period, no conversations or letters have been found that would explain firsthand why Lehigh faculty did what they did. Thus, there are still gaps in knowledge despite the help of librarians and archivists. Some unanswered questions were: what discussions the professors or committees had together to decide when to get rid of the eugenics classes, discussion of why "hygiene" courses came to be and why they may have replaced eugenics courses, or even why hygienics courses became so prominent. In addition, despite the fact Lehigh may have hidden or destroyed higher-up decisions, and didn't formally teach eugenics at a time, there were still important and prominent Lehigh professors informally discussing eugenics with students, as can be seen through Brown and White article archives and other student publications, as well as lauding the fact these same Professors presented at various external events. Clearly, eugenics has had a complicated, and seemingly hidden, history at Lehigh— despite the fact course catalogs demonstrating eugenics teachings are publicly accessible.

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