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"My Ambition is to Weigh 150 Pounds"
College Women's Attitudes Toward Their Bodies, 1875-1930
By Margaret A. Lowe

In the late nineteenth-century a vociferous societal debate accompanied women's admission into the halls of higher education. Although only a fraction of the female population, women had begun to enroll in institutions of higher learning in significant numbers. A reflection of broad changes in American society, by 1900, the New Woman had not only entered colleges and universities but demanded the vote, organized national political movements, worked in settlement houses, and in unprecedented numbers opted not to marry. Directly challenging traditional gender definitions, white and black middle-class women's expanded social role sparked myriad disputes about the meaning and character of proper womanhood. Both advocates and opponents of women's education struggled to reconcile traditional notions of femininity with the new portrait of womanhood that students and educated women presented. By the 1920s, however, attending college had become commonplace; "the thing to do" for middle-class women. No longer pioneers, female students attended colleges the country. Reflecting the roaring twenties' sensibility, they relished both new vocational opportunities for women and also all the fun and fads of modern campus life.

Through this transition, perceptions of the female body — its purpose, appearance, and health — stood at the center of the national debate about women's place in academic institutions. School administrators, social commentators, physicians, and students debated women's entry into higher education in terms of its impact on femininity and the female body. Intrigued by this ubiquitous theme, I wondered: In the midst of these debates, how did college women feel about their bodies and what might their experiences tell us about college women today? To find out, I began to read Smith College women's letters and diaries. Much to my delight, I quickly discovered that they left copious detailed comments about fashion, food, athletics, health, and appearance. From there, I decided to expand my research to include a coeducational institution (Cornell University) and African American students (Spelman College). Unfortunately, we have far fewer written records for Spelman students and for black women in general. But not wanting to leave this population out, I managed to piece together enough historical material to still tell their story though the student "voice" is much quieter. In the end, after many years of research, I have written a social and cultural history, Student Bodies: College Women and Body Image, 1875-1930 (Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming 2001) that illustrates among other things the central importance of college women in defining and shaping modern notions of body image — notions that continue today.

At the heart of the early debates over white women's entry into higher education lay opposing views about the projected impact of higher education on the female body. Supporters strove to prove that higher education would not damage female health. Critics, on the other hand, predicted ruin. Social critics and medical professionals argued that "mental work" would debilitate the female reproductive system. The most famous attack came from Dr. Edward Clarke, a retired Harvard medical professor, who was especially concerned that women were beginning to agitate for admission into his beloved medical school. In his book, Sex in Education, written in 1873, Clark conceded "that a girl could study and learn," but, he warned, "she could not do all this and retain uninjured health, and a future..."
secure from neuralgia, uterine disease, hysteria, and other derangements of the nervous system."

Though the femininity of the students at all three colleges was challenged, African American women faced a different problem: many believed that they did not yet possess femininity. In the midst of pseudo-scientific assertions that labeled them racially inferior, Spelman students had to demonstrate that African Americans were indeed womanly. In the late nineteenth-century evolutionary science fitted African-American bodies into new visual classifications of inferiority based on facial angles and physiognomic measurements. Africans were said to be closer to the ape and thus inferior. While such theories dated back to the antebellum period, the rise of the social science movement, and as historian Robert Wiebe would say, "the search for order" amidst rapid social change in the late nineteenth century, gave such ideas added potency.

Ultimately, however, it was the health and reproductive capacity of white, native, middle and upper-class women that critics wanted to preserve. As early as 1885, studies began to demonstrate that for the majority of college women, white and black, their health either improved or stayed the same while at college. By 1910, college women had proved they could withstand the rigors of academic life; while many critics still bemoaned female education, they could no longer base their criticisms on projected health failures.

How did college women accomplish this? Most notably, they answered back. They reassured parents and friends in personal correspondence, wrote "letters to the editor," published detailed empirical studies, and most importantly not only survived but thrived in the academic environment. But students also used their bodies to prove social critics wrong. While they did this in a variety of ways, their gestures regarding food and body size stand out. From about the 1880s until the 1910s, white college girls "proved their health" by displaying hearty appetites and gaining weight while black students showcased moral health and perfect dining decorum. After World War I, new fashion codes superceded health. As a result, white women began to diet but, pointing to the racial dimensions of this new trend, black women did not. To take a brief look at this transformation is to begin to grasp the history of the female body image in twentieth-century American life.

Today weight gain alarms us. It is an indisputable sign of, among other deplorable things, ill health. For white college women at the turn of the twentieth century, an exact opposite paradigm ruled. Weight gain represented a healthy adjustment to college life. By gaining flesh, students countered notions that they were frail and sickly. Losing weight was troublesome. It was perceived as a symptom of some of the most common female illnesses: neurasthenia, hysteria and consumption. To certify their health, students and administrators detailed what the students ate, the state of their appetites, and how much they weighed.

The letters of Smith student Charlotte Wilkinson, class of 1894 illustrate this mentality perfectly. She wrote to her mother in February 1892, and stated somewhat cheekily, "It is my ambition to weigh 150 pounds." Charlotte clearly understood that weight gain reassured her mother. In her closing remarks of a letter written in April of that year she wrote, "Now I must stop, dearest Mamma, with a heart full of love from your devoted and healthy daughter, Char." Then she added, "I put in healthy because I know you want me to be that, next to being good, as I am very well now, as I was all winter term. I weigh 135 1/2 pounds."

In June of that year, she used weight gain once more to substantiate her health. For most college women, campus activities or the "life" as they called it offered constant pleasures and temptations. Parents and administrators worried that students would become devitalized and ill. Charlotte countered with the most common and effective form of reassurance at her disposal. "I have never had so much going on in my life as this last month" she wrote. But don't be afraid that I shall get tired out for I am bouncingly well. I weighed 137 pounds the other day." She was slowly creeping toward her goal of 150.

While college officials clearly encouraged weight gain and relied on statistics of such to demonstrate student health, they did not foresee the myriad food rituals that students would develop. At Smith College and Cornell University the students were given free rein. Granted permission to gain weight, they went about the business of eating.
Above: As this photograph of the Spelman Class of 1892 shows, the students embodied the very image of late Victorian femininity in dress and posture. Their dress and pose is quite similar to the group photo (bottom) of students who resided in Hatfield House at Smith College in 1888.

Although some historians have argued that "bird-like," Victorian appetites followed women into the late nineteenth century, women at all three colleges displayed no such tendencies. They displayed little of the shame, fear, or battles of will in regard to their appetite, that earlier Victorian women did, or that many young women do today.

Smith students created the most lavish eating rituals. Having a "spread" was the most common. Spreads were small, informal food parties organized by students to share a food-box sent from home, celebrate a birthday, or mark a school event. A photo of Helen Lambert and Bertha Allen (page 6) was titled "A Memorial of exams, essays, metrical travelations and the like." In their night clothes, Helen and Bertha celebrated the end of exams with festive food. Similar to Smith students, Cornell women enjoyed spreads and praised college food. Students saved photographs of festive spreads in their scrapbooks and recounted spreads consisting of pears, ginger snaps, chocolate cream, and lemon and ginger soda. In an alphabet rhyme, one female student wrote, "S stands, too, for spreads, to which our friends we write./Of pickles and crackers, and rare-bit not trite." Students found in every occasion a reason to eat. Robust appetites, encouraged to ward off illness, allowed students to indulge, with only a too full stomach as retribution.

At Cornell and Spelman, however, eating was more complicated. Because Cornell had not yet built dormitories for men, male students and faculty were allowed to take their meals at the women's dormitory, and the presence of men at the dining table created anxiety for some female students. Unlike Smith and Spelman women who enjoyed the protection of the single-sex environment during meal times, Cornell women encountered men.

In her letters home, Cornell co-ed Jessie Boulton expressed some of the anxiety this unbalance could cause in regard to dining. In January, 1880, she lamented, "I am just in about as deep trouble as I was last term in regard to our eating table. I moved away from Mr. Kent but who should come but three new gentlemen, filling our table completely, and making six gentlemen to four ladies..." A few days later she wrote again. "It is a source of misery to all of us girls,...I ate scarcely anything at dinner yesterday...I am just tired of eating with gentlemen at every meal; I think they all might go. I believe in coeducation but I get tired of co-eating."

Unfortunately she never specified what prevented her from eating. But in a letter to her father, she revealed part of her distress. She felt inadequate to the task of socializing with men; she fumbled in conversations about literature, philosophy and politics. She may also have feared not getting enough food, since Cornell women competed with men for their portions at the table.

Cornell historian Morris Bishop recounted that the men took more than their share. In the 1870s, the dining hall manager had to "propose restricting the men to two-thirds of the accommodations." Yet Boulton and her classmates did not express anxiety about displaying their appetites in front of men. Cornell women attributed their anxiety not to the supposed sexually symbolic meanings attached to women's appetites but rather to the social pressures of interacting with young men while eating. Health codes which encouraged hearty eating still applied, even in the presence of men. Later in the month, Jessie Bouton, reassured her sister that her "table was much better...so Mamma need not be alarmed about my health."

In contrast, Spelman administrators, guided by Baptist doctrine, advocated moral health. Moral health required orderly restraint, hard work, purity, and cleanliness not sensual or physical excess. Spelman's founders, well aware of racist stereotypes that caricatured African American women as crude, gluttonous, depraved, and promiscuous, attempted to counter such portrayals by commanding refined deportment around food. For example, unlike Cornell and Smith students, Spelman students were not allowed to receive food boxes from home. To foster a sisterly spirit and womanly decorum, Spelman administrators wanted the students to have equal and school controlled provisions.

To gain social respect at Spelman, students needed to develop good man-
To gain social respect at Spelman, students needed to develop good manners. An 1886 article in the Spelman Messenger, entitled "A Visit to the Spelman Dining Room," demonstrated the positive results of the administration's efforts. After reciting scripture before the meal, the writer reported, "then began the music of knives and forks, and we could only wonder, that four hundred of these instruments should make so little discord. By eight o'clock, the dining room was tidied, the tables laid out for dinner, dishes washed, and every girl out of the kitchen." Spelman's missionary spirit, its desire to mold ladylike character, and to train the students to "uplift" their race hemmed in the students food pleasures.

By the mid-1920s, however, a different set of concerns began to dominate women's relationship to food and their bodies. In striking contrast to previous generations of students, dieting to lose weight had infiltrated white college students' daily lives. At Spelman College there is little evidence that the students dieted at all.

A diary entry by Smith student, Dorothy Dushkin in 1922 revealed the conflicted feelings dieting could evoke. She reported her classmates' constant preoccupation with dieting but also struggled with it herself. She reported: "Resolved once more to cut down my diet. Betty & Fran's chief topic of conversation is dieting. It is extremely wearisome especially since they are both slender. I shall try once again to exert my will power. I'm not going to say a word about it. I'm not going to foolishly cut meals and starve on certain days & relax on others as they do - but attend all meals & refrain from eating between meals."

Reducing, along with its attendant battles of the will, had become a familiar symbol of student adjustment to college life. Although the prevalence of dieting among the students is difficult to determine, in the post-World War I college environment, it clearly emerged as a tool utilized by white college women to shape their appearance. Weight gain no longer symbolized health; instead it suggested disorder, weakened will-power, and the potential loss of feminine appeal.

How do we interpret "dieting" among Smith and Cornell students in the 1920s? Why did it emerge when it did? And what impact did it have on young women's attitudes towards their bodies? And why didn't Spelman students also diet? These are complicated questions without clear-cut answers. But I would argue that dieting among white women emerged within a complex web of social and cultural factors that coalesced in the 1920s. I will briefly summarize two: new standards of health which stressed scientific nutrition and fashion ideals which emphasized slenderness.

The flapper image certainly encouraged women to diet, since losing pounds would allow the students to better emulate the flapper's idealized, slender physique. In addition, excess pounds were not easily hidden behind flapper fashions. Clothing revealed bare arms, necks, backs and calves. And while women stepped out of the corset, only to step into rubberized girdles and often severe braziers, they still felt a need to re-shape their bodies, rather than their clothing. Until around 1910, it was expected that a dressmaker would alter even ready-made clothing in order to create a proper fit. By the mid-1920s, the emphasis had shifted, as students were encouraged to mold their bodies to fit into standardized styles. Dieting provided an obvious means to "alter" the body. In some ways, dieting replaced the dressmaker. The body itself had become the locus of change.

Perhaps more importantly, white college women evidently internalized and adopted the new scientific nutrition information that was widely circulated in the 1920s. Retailers, physicians and advice columnists had popularized new nutrition tenets formulated by food scientists earlier in the century. Dr. Wilbur Atwater, a chemist, had "discovered" the calorie in the late nineteenth century which spawned the widely held belief that the human body required and burned food calories as fuel, much like a machine. Food was increasingly scrutinized for its nutritional and caloric value. In the 1920s, closely monitoring one's food in-take was a sign of health. At the same time, fat and gaining weight became signs of ill-health.

Much of this information was disseminated by Cornell University's nationally renowned home economics department. Cornell women integrated new nutrition research into their daily routines as it was being formulated by their faculty and graduate students. While not all students wanted to lose weight, most incorporated the new science.

For example, in the Foods I final examination given in 1927, students were asked "What is the most important thing you have learned in nutrition which applies to your own health condition?" Students such as Jean Warren reported, "I have learned how to plan meals for the overweight person. I learned that to reduce correctly you must know what you are doing and how to do it." Placed within the larger cultural context, newer nutrition principles laid the foundation for what would become a dominant motif for American women in the twentieth century: an expectation to command and internalize scientific principles in order to gain health and beauty for oneself and one's family.
middle-class status in mainstream American culture, students could have employed dieting as one more strategy to demonstrate assimilation and affluence. On the other hand, if slenderness did not hold the same cultural and psychological capital it did for white women, it is unlikely African American women dieted in large numbers in the 1920s.

For African American women, hair and skin were of greater concern than slenderness. African American women, immersed in the early twentieth century beauty culture, used cosmetics, hair products, and skin treatments in abundance. This does not mean they were not concerned about the shape of their bodies. In contrast to white standards of youthful beauty, a more curvacious, robust figure was often celebrated in African American culture. In addition, African and African American southern food customs still favored hearty meals laden with rich, heavy, spicy food.

Furthermore, though Spelman students were instructed to follow middle-class ideals, most were not middle-class women. And dieting reflects affluence. Without abundant food, Spelman students could not have afforded the luxury of food refusal that dieting entailed. Nineteenth-century connections between robust bodies, fat, health and prosperity that had faded for white middle-class Americans by the 1920s, may have remained potent symbols for African Americans still on the economic margin.

Clearly, popular debates about student health, femininity and women’s education in combination with large cultural and social changes in the early twentieth century shaped college women’s attitudes towards their bodies. During this period, college women expressed both intense bodily pleasures and also anxieties. For Smith and Cornell women, their pre-War students’ voluptuous enjoyment of food stands in sharp contrast to the tension and anxiety that twenties’ students expressed. For Spelman women, the nation’s preoccupation with race pressured them to counter racist stereotypes with irrefutable proof that they were ladies. Yet, in the 1920s, they did not diet, suggesting that African American and white women had different conceptions of ideal body shape and size. For both black and white women, racial constructions were mapped upon the body.

Much has been written about women and body image in recent years, particularly in regard to white college women’s supposedly problematic relationship to food. While sociologists, literary scholars, and psychologists have “weighed in,” few historians have commented. I hope that this case study of young college women at three historically distinctive institutions adds to the discussion.

Finally, I would like to also suggest that though both white and black college women proved they were healthy and thus could remain at college by the 1910s, central questions about gender, education and their identities were answered with pronouncements about their bodies. Despite significant social progress, their bodies still garnered tremendous attention, and responses to women’s bodies were powerful enough to determine women’s fates. While women had quieted social critics and won medical approval, the purpose and meaning of women’s education remained unsettled well into the 1970s.

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