STUDENT CORRESPONDENCE:
A NEW SOURCE FOR THE HISTORY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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The historiography of American higher education has been generally of very poor quality. With the exception of a few books written by historians, the majority of the published histories of American colleges and universities have been too filiopietistic to be of much use to anyone but the most loyal alumni. Even the best of these studies explored only limited aspects of the college experience. The rise of the university, the decline of the classical curriculum, the emergence of the social sciences as academic disciplines and the struggle for academic freedom all have been addressed by various scholars. One area that was neglected until recently is student life; as late as 1966 almost nothing had been done with the topic.

Between 1968 and 1974, however, a number of scholars completed studies of nineteenth century student life. David B. Potts concentrated on the geographical origins and career choices of students in antebellum Baptist colleges. Marvin E. Gettleman explored the career choices of Knox College graduates during the 1880's. Colin B. Burke showed statistically that college enrollments increased approximately one hundred per cent each decade from 1810 to 1860. Recent articles in the History of Education Quarterly by Roberta Weiss and Sarah H. Gordon focused on the career choices of Bryn Mawr, Wellesley and Smith graduates. The ongoing work of these and other scholars promises an increasing number of books, articles and dissertations in the near future.

Had it not been for the work of these young historians, scholars might have criticized the search for student manuscripts as a futile gesture precipitating sources of only marginal value. The timely publications of David F. Allmendinger have probably done the most to put
such doubts aside. Using numerous student letters and diaries as well as quantitative data, Allmendinger revised the prevailing thesis that American colleges were conservative, tradition-bound institutions that changed very little in the nineteenth century. He showed how an influx of poor students into American colleges between 1800 and 1860 changed the "material condition of collegiate life and the old communal arrangements that had controlled the behavior and intellectual activity of students through most of the colonial period." Allmendinger correctly maintained that there was a revolution in higher education by the middle as well as the end of the nineteenth century. More importantly, he emphasized the value of student letters and diaries for the historian of higher education.

The work of Allmendinger and his colleagues challenges college and university archivists to search their collections for historically valuable but long neglected nineteenth century student correspondence. Such a search took place at Northwestern University as part of the research for a full length history of that institution. The Lewis E. Sims letters, found in the process of the investigation, provide an interesting example of what the diligent archivist is likely to find.

Lewis Elmer Sims was a student at Northwestern intermittently from 1874 until 1877, and by all accounts he lived an ordinary life both before and after his college years. Born in 1855, Sims was the son of a Marshall County, Illinois merchant and received his education privately in Lawn Ridge. Rejecting Milton College in Wisconsin because it was too far from home, he decided to attend Northwestern in Evanston, about 150 miles away. He enrolled in the preparatory department in September, 1874, and stayed until March, 1875. After recovering from a lingering illness, Sims taught school in Marshall County. In March, 1876, he returned to Northwestern as a sophomore and stayed until October of 1877 when illness forced him to leave school a second time.

Sims never returned to Northwestern. He studied law in Peoria and was admitted to the Illinois bar in 1880. He moved west and practiced law in both Nebraska and Colorado. In 1901, he settled on a farm near Hastings, Nebraska and in 1919 received a call to the Presbyterian ministry. He retired from the pulpit in 1929 and settled in San Anselmo, California. Surely Sims led a full life as a teacher, lawyer, farmer, and minister and perhaps his story is a representative example of the mobility of nineteenth-century Americans. If Sims is remembered, however, it will be for his weekly recollections of life at Northwestern rather than his many careers. The fifty-four letters in the collection comprise a vivid portrait of student life in Illinois during the centennial years.
Sims journeyed to Evanston with the same trepidations that confronted many other college students both then and now. Even though he was looking forward to college as a "thrill", Sims was sad to leave the home and the friends he knew so well. The journey itself was exciting. Sixty years later, Sims still remembered the perplexities a young country boy faced in dealing with trains in Chicago. "I took a transfer which read 'At Wells Street Depot,'" he recalled, "and when the driver asked me where I was going I replied 'To Atwells Street' with the accent on the first syllable. Again he asked me where I was going to get off and I made the same reply, 'Atwells Street,' then a man at his side said 'He means at Wells Street,' and then I saw the mistake I had made." With the help of two upper-classmen, Sims found his way to the campus and settled down for the night. The following day he moved into his dormitory room in Dempster Hall.

Sims' adjustment to Northwestern was difficult; like many young men from rural areas, he was poorly prepared for college. "I cannot get into the freshman class as yet," he wrote to his parents with disappointment.

I am studying Virgil, Caesar, and French. I am to look up my Mathematics, and if I can pass the Freshman examinations, so that my Mathematics will be to the Sophomore year, they will admit me into the Freshman class. I guess I can do it, but it will be hard work as their examinations are very severe. I got a little discouraged last week, but I feel better now.

The tenuous nature of his admission came as a shock to Sims. It quickly became clear to him that college life demanded that he use his time efficiently. By early October, Sims had organized his life style sufficiently to describe his daily schedule to his parents:

I generally get up about half past five and commence studying about six. We have breakfast about half past seven. I then study until 8:45 when I go to recite my French, then comes Caesar at 9:45 then Virgil from 10:45 to 11:45. Chapel is at 12:45. We have dinner at quarter past one. I commence to study about 2 o'clock, and at half past five we have supper. After supper we take some exercise. I commence studying again until between nine and half past nine when I go to bed.

But the work was too much for Sims and less than a month later circumstances forced him to drop a course. "I have dropped Virgil," he admitted, "it was too hard for me. I could not pass in it. I thought I would not spend my time on it. As there are no other stu-
dies I could take for the rest of the term, I thought I would get my French and Caesar more perfect and take writing [sic] once a week, one hour each recitation."\(^{10}\) Even this reduced course load proved formidable. "They have the most examining [sic] here," Sims wrote during semester exams, "and they are terrible hard. Folks need not say this is not a good school."\(^{11}\)

The new year did not bring much improvement. In mid January Sims complained about the "terrible long lessons" and the poor quality of the food. "I did not like the grub," he wrote. "They would have pancakes and molasses in the morning and for a change they would have molasses and pancakes at noon and both at night. It came very near making me sick."\(^{12}\) By the beginning of March, the young freshman was very depressed. "I wish I had taken Greek instead of French," he mourned wistfully.

French is not what I expected it was. I expected a person could learn to speak it a little, but he cannot learn only the construction and to read it a little. Greek would give a person's mind more discipline...A student is in one sense a slave to his studies. He leaves his home and has to work hard and anxiously or if he don't he will have to drop out but after all it is a pleasant life.\(^{13}\)

Sims became ill a few weeks later and dropped out of school.

After a year of convalescence and school teaching in Marshall County, he returned to Northwestern. College life had not changed much in Sims' absence and he soon found himself with the same academic problems. Yet he had acquired a little confidence in his year at home and he did not worry as much about his course work. In fact, he was reticent concerning his schedule. "It is a hard matter for me to write very long letters," Sims wrote just after he returned to campus, "for if I tell you what I do one day, the next is the same over again."\(^{14}\) A month later, he described his studies and other interests. "I have only two studies," he mentioned, "but I am behind upon both and it makes me study. I believe that they are worse about giving long lessons than they use to be... The best of [life on campus] is that we live close by the Women's College and we get a chance to see lots of girls going to and from and good looking they are too."\(^{15}\)

Self-confidence was quite evident as young Sims began his sophomore year in the autumn of 1876. "I am well at present and enjoying myself," he wrote. "I am just getting so I can study. At first it was tiresome to sit still so long, but that is gone."\(^{16}\) Sims planned his days carefully and found that he had a real interest in his studies. "We study Shakespeare's plays," he exclaimed, "and they are
nice. We have for elocutions, Longfellow's poems, and they are very
good, I tell you. I never used to like poetry very well, but now I
think it is real nice." As the semester progressed, Sims began to
master his academic life for the first time.

The new sophomore also joined in the whirl of social activities
at the Women's College and quickly discovered that there was an in-
tricacy to meeting members of the opposite sex. He described one
affair to his parents. "On Wednesday night there was a reception at
the Women's College," he wrote,

and I was there to witness the way they manage things and
this is the way. Firstly get acquainted with some ladies
and secondly promenade with her until you or she gets tired
and then go home. As for myself, I got acquainted with a
few ladies but not as many as I would wish for but I did
not do much promenading. I had an introduction to a very
short and thick lady by a young man who said he was going
to introduce me to the shortest one present and I heard
that she was very afraid I would want her to walk with me,
but there was no danger on that score.

Other extra-curricular activities also attracted young Sims.
The centennial year of 1876 was a time of patriotic celebration and
presidential election. The students were keenly interested and their
zeal to participate in politics often reflected itself in prankster-
ism. "We students have lots of fun in the local Republican caucuses,"
chuckled Sims. "Some of the town folks get mad at us but it
makes no difference. The Republicans have met twice to elect a de-
egate to the convention and the students go down and put in one of
their Professors. We did this twice. I tell you the students win
the thing here. When three or four hundred students club together
they do something!" The young men took the election seriously
nevertheless. "The greatest excitement prevails among the boys to
learn the results of the election," wrote Sims.

They are running down to get papers both night and morning.
We had a vacation on election day and I went down to hear
the returns that night. If the United States were like the
Village of Evanston there would have been no danger for the
Republican party. It would have been about five to one Re-
publican. Somebody tried to frighten the boys from voting
but they still voted. I would like to know which way the
election went, at first we gave up all hopes, but we are
now having more faith.

The eventual election of Rutherford B. Hayes must have come as a
relief to Sims and his Republican friends.
Politics accentuated the students' sense of their personal rights and freedoms. Any attempt to abridge those rights was met with protest and occasionally with legal action. Sims described a courtroom scene between a student and his landlord. "We had considerable fun yesterday afternoon," he wrote to his parents in February, 1877.

We attended a lawsuit between one of the boys at Dempster [Hall] named Peters, and the man who has charge of that place. They did not allow anyone to room there except those who boarded there and Peters would not board there but still roomed in the building. So one day he came home from his recitations and found his door broken open and his goods taken into another room and locked up and so Peters sued the man for damages. Peters' lawyers were two law students who went to school here last year and the other side had a regular lawyer and they had a jury of six men. Well, the jury decided that the man should pay $50 and costs. So it was decided that they cannot turn students out of a room unless they gave them thirty days notice.21

Although contacts between the students and the townspeople were often tense, they were mild when compared to the altercations between the students and the faculty. Sims described a series of pranks played on hapless faculty members during winter of 1877. "Our German teacher has been a fizzle," he wrote disgustedly. "She is good as nothing. The boys do make a noise when they recite so she sends them out of class. One day she told one [fellow] to take the front seat. He jumped up and says: 'Where shall I take it to?' and then he left the room."22 A second incident was not only disrespectful, it was also sacrilegious. "Some fire crackers were taken to the chapel and while one of the Professors was praying, the students fired one off. The Faculty found out who he [the culprit] was and suspended him."23 A third incident, a series of pranks mocking the junior class exhibition, exasperated the faculty. The sophomores printed up comical programs, many of which were passed out to the audience. As the first speaker began his oration, his portrait, rigged by a wire to the ceiling, was lowered behind him.24 "There was not much more listening to his oration." wrote Sims. The faculty was furious and this time they expelled the guilty student. Even though many sophomores saw themselves as adults, they were often given over to childish ways.

Sims left Northwestern in the autumn of 1877, but the letters he wrote to his parents reflected his personal growth during those two years in college. From a bewildered, depressed young freshman came a self-confident, socially-involved sophomore. These letters constitute a weekly record of his maturation. Moreover, the Sims letters
provide color to an otherwise drab picture of student life in Illinois in general and at Northwestern in particular. Most importantly, Sims' letters chronicle aspects of college life so often passed over in histories of colleges and universities: the trauma of freshman adjustment, the relations between students and the larger community and the relations between students and faculty.

While student letters are a particularly rich source for the history of higher education, they often are not readily available. In many instances alumni think of their student correspondence as so much foolishness and ultimately they destroy these sources. In the case of prominent graduates, adolescent letters and diaries are usually forgotten as small parts of large manuscript collections and are often located in repositories other than the subject's alma mater. Finally, the intimacy of such records raises questions of confidentiality and access.

Some of these problems concern college and university archivists who have a responsibility to seek out any and all records of the student experience. Clifford K. Shipton was particularly successful in collecting student notes, letters and diaries for the Harvard University Archives. Shipton regularly sent circular letters to graduates of a certain age soliciting their papers. Sometimes the appeal generated immediate replies and the Harvard Archives was soon the beneficiary of a number of new collections of student correspondence. In other instances the circular letters were discovered by the heirs among the papers of the recipients, and Harvard later received these student materials as gifts. In any case, the success of the Harvard circular letters suggests that other institutions would also benefit from such a mailing.

College archivists must also become more conscious of student materials as they prepare their finding aids and their reports for the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. Student correspondence constitutes only a small part of most collections and is of seemingly limited importance when compared with the records of later achievement. Because of this, student correspondence is not always noted in collection descriptions and NUCMC reports. With the increased interest in the history of higher education, college archivists should take care in the future to include some mention of the student material in appropriate collections. Yet the archivist must also balance this activity with a concern for confidentiality and must work for more exact definitions for enforcement of restrictions. The goal must be to "achieve a balance between openness and confidentiality which will further the educational value of the material and will be compatible with the role of the university in a free society."
Student letters and diaries provide a new viewpoint on the history of higher education, especially in the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, correspondence will be less available in documenting the student culture of the twentieth century. The use of the telephone and the increasing popularity of the commuter campus have contributed to the decline in personal letter writing. This fact does not excuse the college archivist from searching for alternate sources. As historian Laurence Veysey noted more than ten years ago, "American universities are going to be extremely interesting institutions in the late twentieth century and not all of the excitement is going to escape being set down on paper." College archivists and historians must work together to make sure that students do not become the silent people in the history of higher education.


6. Information on Sims' life both before and after college can be found in the Sims Letters File, Class of 1879 Records, Series 30/6, Box 2, Northwestern University Archives.

7. Ibid., Sims' memoir, n.d.

8. Ibid., Sims to his parents, September 20, 1874.

9. Ibid., October 4, 1874.

10. Ibid., November 1, 1874.

11. Ibid., December 13, 1874.

12. Ibid., January 17, 1875.

13. Ibid., March 7, 1875.

14. Ibid., March 14, 1876.

15. Ibid., April 9, 1876.

16. Ibid., October 18, 1876.

17. Ibid., October 22, 1876.

18. Ibid., October 8, 1876.

19. Ibid., October 15, 1876.

20. Ibid., November 12, 1876.

21. Ibid., February 17, 1877.

22. Ibid., March 11, 1877

23. Ibid.

