

Daniel A. Clark
*Creating the College Man: American Mass
 Magazines and Middle-Class Manhood, 1890–1915*

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Daniel A. Clark's *Creating the College Man* is not a social history of manhood and collegiate culture; indeed very few actual college men appear in its pages. Rather, it is a cultural history of several middle-class American magazines that posits them as the answer to an oft-overlooked question: why did college become so popular to the American middle class during the 1920s, particularly after years of being seen as unnecessary for business, at best, and a distracting indulgence, at worst? Historians long ago identified the 1920s as a turning point in accessibility to college, in its appeal to the middle class, and in its connections to business culture, at least for male graduates. But, as Clark points out, the historiography has had less to say about why such an explosion occurred when it did. In Clark's telling, between 1890 and 1915 four magazines popular at the time (*Collier's*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Munsey's*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*) "...actively conjured an ideal, a new normative for the American middle class. They refashioned mainstream notions of 'being' a white middle-class American to include the revamped college as an essential aspect of a reworked narrative of masculine authority" (188). Because they did so *before* college became popular—they did not reflect a reality, but rather presaged a future—these magazines helped to create the boom in college attendance that swept the nation during the 1920s.

This may seem like a tall order for four magazines, and Clark is quick to point out that the magazines alone cannot be responsible for the spike in attendance, but he is clear in his contention that they contributed to it. The four periodicals, part of the nation-wide wave of mass magazines driven by advertising dollars in the 1890s, all had very high circulation and were geared toward a white, male, native-born audience, the very people who might work in corporate business and might have the means to send their children to college. Clark read and coded every issue of these

magazines (two were weeklies, two monthlies) between 1890 and 1915, and his observations—both quantitative and qualitative—constitute the evidence for this study. The book is rich in reflections about these magazines' representations of college curricula and extracurricular life, and the linkages between these and both the newly developing ideals of masculinity and the world of corporate capitalism.

On these last two issues Clark is particularly convincing. He argues, for instance, that colleges constituted the perfect ground to unite older Victorian ideals of manliness, bound up with virtue and wisdom, with the newly emerging standards of masculinity that revolved around aggression and passion. Both came together in one figure, the football-playing scholar, who merged the discourses of civilization and primitivism that defined ideal masculinity for WASP men at the turn of the century. Clark maintains that transformations in these gendered standards are key to understanding how a college education came to be popular. He also argues that long before most men in business actually had a college degree these magazines and their advertisers had been publishing articles, fiction, and ads that either featured or mentioned a college background in describing characters, advocating routes to success, or attempting to sell wares. All of this contributed to making college seem like an appropriate route for parents who contemplated the futures of their sons and hoped for careers in business.

These arguments leave the reader with two questions, one of which Clark answers. First, why would these magazines endorse college as the solution to the changing needs of corporate America? Clark contends that they understood the anxieties of their readers, businessmen who were searching for the next generation's leaders in a corporate structure that now emphasized scientific management and no longer allowed most men to climb their way up to success, as in previous eras. Some of their writers, too, were college presidents eager to promote their institutions. College, with its emphasis upon masculine aggression, teamwork in the extracurriculum, and a broad liberal education, seemed like the perfect solution. This answer is convincing, if conjectural, though no more so than most cultural history necessarily is. The second question: if these magazines account for why college became so popular with young men and their families, how and why did a college education become so acceptable for women that by the 1920s they constituted half of all students? Though he does discuss the representation of women, this is not the focus of Clark's book, but it may well complicate his findings, hinging as they do on the linkage between college, masculinity, and business culture. Future scholars might well put Clark's hypothesis to the test in exploring the uses of mass culture in creating the college woman.