Student Bodies
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Student Bodies

The Influence of

STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES in

AMERICAN SOCIETY & MEDICINE

Heather Munro Prescott
Today, almost any college student suffering from seasonal allergies, in need of a flu shot, or interested in contraception takes access to the university health service for granted. Little does he or she know that this now integral part of the university system has a long and fascinating history that stands at the intersection of medicine, education, and adolescent health.

Luckily for us, Heather Munro Prescott explores this important topic in *Student Bodies: The Influence of Student Health Services in American Society and Medicine*. The result of extensive research in university archives throughout the country and informed by the author’s broad expertise in the history of child and adolescent health, this book traces the evolution of university and college health services from the mid–nineteenth century to the present. As Prescott demonstrates, this is a story of how medical advancements and priorities affected young Americans as well as a tale of “bringing outsiders in”—of the increasing diversification of student bodies in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and other forms of social identity.

As Prescott insightfully shows, the concerns and capacities of university health services were shaped by the context and era in which they arose. For example, at the turn of the twentieth century, apprehension over the university admittance of the “weaker sex” was often expressed as admonitions about women’s supposedly frailer physical constitution and the potential...
damage that increased brain activity might have on the female reproductive system. Such gender anxiety in turn affected men, who were expected both to acquire the manly skills of rational thinking and athletic vigor and to avoid the menace of “unnatural” homosocial intimacy. This was the case at white- as well as black-serving universities, such as Tuskegee and Howard, where faculty and administrators were particularly concerned with properly educating young African American men to “uplift the race.”

Later, during the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s, universities frequently became the epicenters of student protest. Clamors for the transformation of many aspects of student life and campus administration, including health services, were heard from Cambridge to Berkeley. Many student activists were incensed by the perceived medical paternalism of campus doctors, and various constituencies, including ethnic minorities, the disabled, and gays and lesbians, demanded representation on university health boards as well as in national groups such as the American College Health Association. This process only intensified with the appearance of AIDS in the 1980s, as many students insisted on HIV testing and “safe sex” education, which eventually became a routine part of life for most young Americans in college.

Anyone who has attended college or university will recognize many of the book’s overarching themes. Indeed, Student Bodies aptly illustrates the adage that the more things change, the more they remain they same. College students long have been understood as a vulnerable group making the delicate transition into adulthood and autonomy. It is striking that more than 150 years ago, the faculty at Amherst College warned parents of the “dangers” particular to “College life,” citing drunkenness, smoking, sexual improprieties, and gambling, among many others, as potential problems. Fast-forward to today, when parents and faculty alike share many of the same concerns about the deleterious impact of binge drinking, unhealthy eating, and drug abuse on college students.

Just as Student Bodies documents how universities and key organizations such as the American College Health Association and the American Social Hygiene Association helped to create the specialized field of college health and mechanisms for prepaid health coverage, the book also emphasizes the critical role of students as historical actors. This message could not be more relevant today, when the percentage of high school graduates enrolled in college or universities is at a historic high of nearly 70 percent. If we care about the generations who will lead this country into the future,
it behooves us to care about access to and the quality of health services at American college and universities. *Student Bodies* illuminates how university health services developed over time to become what they are today; a wide set of stakeholders—students, faculty, administrators, doctors, nurses, educators, and lawmakers—will determine the future role of these services.
Acknowledgments

Numerous institutions and individuals have helped me during the decade I spent researching and writing this book. Generous support from the National Endowment for the Humanities (Grant no. FB 51467-05) and the National Library of Medicine (Grant no. R01 LM 8356-01), in conjunction with sabbatical leaves and Faculty Research Grants provided by Central Connecticut State University, funded the extensive travel to archives and time away from teaching necessary to bring this project to fruition. I am grateful to former Sponsored Programs director Dean Kleinert for helping me with these grant applications. I have also been fortunate to receive travel grants from the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan; the Francis C. Wood Institute of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia; the Rockefeller Archive Center in North Tarrytown, New York; and the Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History at Duke University. The views contained in this book are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of these institutions or agencies.

Numerous archivists and librarians have helped with the research on this project. At Central Connecticut State University, I am especially indebted to the tireless efforts of Interlibrary Loan librarian Kimberly Farrington and her staff for their speed and efficiency in handling my voluminous requests. Radcliffe archivist Jane Knowles, reference head Ellen Shea, and other staff at the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America have provided invaluable assistance throughout this project, beginning when I was an honorary visiting scholar at the library in 1998–99. My first foray into the history of college health was
during my graduate studies at Cornell University, where archivists Gould Colman and Elaine Engst helped me piece together the story of 1903 typhoid epidemic. Other archivists and librarians who have assisted me extensively include Peter Nelson at Amherst College; David Kessler and Baiba Strads at the University of California, Berkeley’s Bancroft Library; Karen Jania, Nancy Bartlett, Brian Williams, and William Wallach at the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; Laura Micham and Kelly Wooten at the Sallie Bingham Center at Duke University; manuscript curator Joellen ElBashir at Howard University’s Moorland-Spingarn Research Center; Stephen Greenberg at the National Library of Medicine; Erwin Levold, Thomas Rosenbaum, and Darwin Stapleton at the Rockefeller Archive Center; Margaret Jessup, assistant curator of the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College; Stanford University archivist Margaret Kimball; David J. Klaasen, Linnea Anderson, Dagmar Getz, Elizabeth Kaplan, and Karen Klinkenberg in the Anderson Library at the University of Minnesota; University of Pennsylvania archivist Nancy Miller; Diane Kaplan and Nancy Lyon at the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University; and Toby Appel, Bumstead Librarian for Medical History, at the Yale Medical Historical Library.

Various college and university health care professionals have offered me insight and advice into the development of their field. I am especially grateful to Duke's retired health service director, William Christmas, for sharing the wealth of information on college health history he has collected over the years and giving me tips on the collections at American College Health Association headquarters in Linthicum, Maryland. I also thank Harvard University Health Services director David S. Rosenthal for helping me gain access to materials in the Harvard Archives. My colleagues in Central Connecticut State University’s Student Health Service, Myra Rosenberg and Bosha Gordon, have also been supportive and shared insights into contemporary issues in student health.


For assistance in researching this book, I thank Cynthia Riccio, who
served as history department graduate assistant during a critical stage of this project. I am also very thankful to the friends and colleagues who have read and commented on this work in progress, including Rima Apple, Nancy Bristow, Janet Golden, Wendy Kline, Susan Lederer, Richard Meckel, Danelle Moon, Ellen More, Elizabeth Toon, Sarah Tracy, and Elizabeth Watkins. I thank Kathleen Jones for sharing with me her unpublished work on college mental hygienists. Special thanks go to Margaret Humphreys and Alexandra Minna Stern for not only offering comments on my work but also allowing me to stay in their homes while conducting archival research.

My colleagues in the history department at Central Connecticut have provided invaluable encouragement, especially during the stressful years when I served as department chair. Briann Greenfield, Katherine Hermes, and Louise Williams were especially supportive. I am also grateful to friends from other departments who have offered insights from different disciplinary perspectives, especially professor of counseling Jane Fried, who commented extensively on the materials on college mental hygiene.

Finally, I thank my family for their love and encouragement. My parents, Dave and Sally Munro, worked at Dartmouth College and Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital, respectively, and were excited to learn more about the history of “Dick’s House” and similar services for students around the country. My sisters, Hope Munro Smith and Sara Munro, have also been enthusiastic about the project and have given suggestions on how to make the book more readable to nonspecialists. Most of all, I thank my husband, Wayne, for enduring my frequent travels to archives as well as my emotional ups and downs as I finished the final manuscript. He reminds me not to take myself too seriously and to appreciate the wonders of life outside academia.

*Acknowledgments*

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