Education for the Race: The History of Euthenics and Eugenics at Vassar College

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Abstract

What happened to higher education when eugenics swept the nation? This paper answers this question through a case study of Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, one of the first women's colleges in the United States. It reveals how Vassar's unique euthenics program, established in 1924, advanced eugenic political goals that were deliberately supported by administrators, faculty, students, alumnae, and prominent eugenicist figures such as Margaret Sanger and Charles Davenport. This paper explores the important role of academia between the late-19th and mid-20th centuries, demonstrating how the College was used to legitimize eugenics as a field of study and to train eugenics researchers. While examining student exploitation and objectification, along with pronatalist and antinatalist rhetoric, this paper contextualizes eugenics at Vassar within the broader Hudson Valley and national eugenics movements. Archival materials, including College newspaper columns and articles from the *Eugenics Review*, *Journal of Heredity*, *Birth Control Review*, and others, are closely analyzed to provide a primary-source-driven analysis of Vassar's eugenic history. Finally, the romanticization of Vassar's past is challenged with a call for increased institutional accountability.

Keywords: Vassar College, euthenics, eugenics, eugenics record office, revisionist history

Introduction

I was walking through Vassar College's Blodgett Hall archway when I noticed, for the first time, the word "euthenics." The word was inscribed on a plaque dedicated to Ellen H. S. Richards, Vassar class of 1870, who coined the term and pioneered its eventual implementation as a field of study at Vassar

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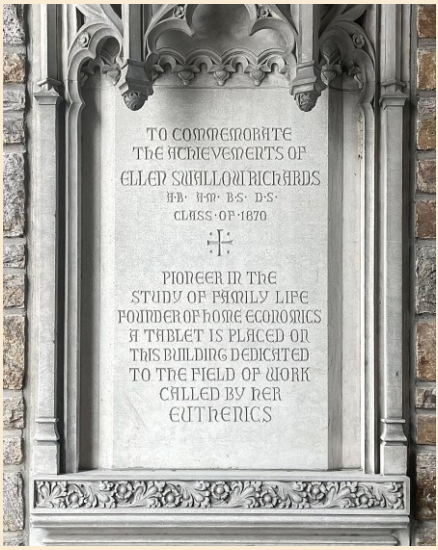
Figure 1
Blodgett Hall Euthenics Plaque



Note. Photograph by the author.

(Figure 1). Ignorant of what the unfamiliar word meant, I only recognized its similarity to the word "eugenics." "But it must not actually be similar," I thought. "Surely, there wouldn't be a plaque commemorating that."

A few months later, over winter break, I was bored and streaming YouTube. I clicked on a video about the history of eugenics titled "The Eugenics Crusade" from PBS' *American Experience* documentary series (Ferrari, 2018). In under two hours, Vassar was mentioned twice. "Why?" When I googled "Vassar eugenics" in search of answers, "euthenics" was the first word I saw. It was then that I realized that the plaque I had encountered months earlier may have had something to do, really, with eugenics. This paper is a culmination of my research since that Google search.

I discovered that between the late-19th and mid-20th centuries, Vassar was a site for legitimizing eugenic ideology, not just through intellectual discourse but also through embodied practice. The College's support–exercised within and beyond its ostensibly progressive euthenics program–rendered emerging eugenic objectives feasible, revealing the power of academia to advance major political change. Today, when the political position of elite academic institutions continues to be challenged, recognizing the legacy of such involvements is a step toward accountability for how the ivory tower constructs and may help deconstruct systems of oppression.

Ongoing institutional complicity is sustained, in part, by innocuous language. Unfamiliar terms such as "euthenics" mask the relevance of historical practices and their equivalence with today's familiar terms, obscuring red flags in archival records. Yet, the obfuscated distinction between euthenics and

eugenics is hardly new. For example, $75,000 of support for the Vassar Summer Institute of Euthenics would be mistakenly referred to as a "eugenic fund" in a 1926 volume of the *Journal of Heredity* ("News and Notes," 1926, p. 110). Later, the institute itself was misidentified as the "Institute of Eugenics" in a 1941 volume of the *Eugenics Review* (Grant Duff, 1941, p. 22). As this paper reveals, these mistakes reflect not only the typographical similarity between eugenics and euthenics but also their ideological congruence. The division between the two fields is, at best, ambiguous and, at worst, entirely untenable.

The first section of this paper reviews the broader American eugenics movement as context for the analysis. The second section explains the connection between eugenics and euthenics, as it was presented in discourse at Vassar. The third section expands upon the College's endorsement of eugenics, specifically as it relates to the work of Margaret Sanger. The fourth section reports on the presence of eugenics in Vassar's classrooms, including how students were taught eugenics and how eugenics permitted the routine objectification of their bodies. The fifth section explores the career pipeline that encouraged Vassar alumnae to conduct nationwide eugenics research. The sixth section highlights the impact of eugenics on the reproductive independence of Vassar students. Finally, the seventh section demands increased institutional acknowledgment and collective awareness of Vassar's eugenic history.

The American Eugenics Movement

The term eugenics was coined in 1883 by English statistician, demographer, and anthropologist Francis Galton, half-cousin of Charles Darwin (NHGRI, 2022). The term first appeared in Galton's 1883 *Inquiries into Human Faculties and its Development,* where, inspired by the Darwinian theory of natural selection, he defined it as the

> Science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which, especially in the case of man, takes cognisance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable. (Galton, 2004, p. 17; Ferrari, 2018)

Inquiries into Human Faculties and its Development, along with several of Galton's

supporting works, created the basis for the eugenic ideology that soon took hold in the United States as a popular movement, led primarily by Harvard-educated biologist Charles Davenport (Ferrari, 2018). After meeting for dinner with Galton on a scientific pilgrimage, Davenport returned to the United States in 1902 with a mission to conduct experimental–rather than merely observational–research on selective heredity for the first time (Ferrari, 2018). By the following year, he had set up shop at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory on Long Island, New York, where he would later found the Eugenics Record Office (ERO). Through both organizations, Davenport eventually produced immense amounts of eugenics research, for which he has become notorious as "the most influential and powerful eugenicist and propagandist for eugenics in the United States" (University of Missouri Libraries, n.d., para. 1).

Quickly, scholarly groups coalesced around developing the new pseudoscience of eugenics; the Eugenics Education Society (later renamed the Eugenics Society, Galton Institute, and now the Adelphi Genetics Forum) was founded in Britain in 1907, and began publishing its quarterly journal, *The Eugenics Review*, in 1909 until 1968 (Hodson, 1968; Wellcome Society, n.d.). In the U.S., the quarterly *Breeders' Magazine* (now *Journal of Heredity*) was first released in 1910 in Washington D.C., with its early issues publishing extensively on the proliferation of eugenic thought in academia and among the public (Cornell University Library Digital Collections, n.d.). Such publications came alive during International Eugenics Congresses held in 1912, 1921, and 1932, which drew in hundreds of scholars from North America, South America, and Europe (Hoff, 2021).

Beyond its scholarly uptake, eugenics gained traction as a popular movement. As historian and author of *Long Island and the Legacy of Eugenics: Station of Intolerance* Mark Torres highlights, "Eugenics was not a fringe, small, marginalized movement. It was what I call the 'rage of the age'" (Long Beach Public Library, 2025, 9:05). As Torres continues, eugenics was taught in almost 300 American colleges, embraced in medical and religious practice alike, and supported by former presidents Herbert Hoover and Theodore Roosevelt (Long Beach Public Library, 2025). Starting in 1908, "better babies" contests were held at state fairs across the country, where parents entered their babies to be ranked like livestock for their eugenical fitness (Ferrari, 2018). Beyond such almost humorous events, eugenics had a disastrous political impact. Eugenics inspired

and validated legislation on forced sterilization and institutionalization, on immigration and so-called "miscegenation" control, and even policies on housing and education segregation, many of which remain calcified in American politics today (Lee, 2019; Pietila, 2010). The pseudoscience has also been used to validate mass atrocities, including the Nazi Holocaust and the Rwandan and Namibian genocides (Longman, 2001; Onishi, 2016; Vidnes, 2009).

The Connection between Eugenics and Euthenics at Vassar

To fully understand the relationship between eugenics and euthenics requires an examination of the very foundation of euthenics. Euthenics is a term coined originally by Vassar alumnae Ellen Richards, defined broadly as the science of improving human living conditions (Richards, 1910). The euthenics program was established at Vassar in 1924 by Minnie Cumnock Blodgett, Vassar class of 1884 (after whom the former euthenics building is named), Julia Clifford Lathrop, Vassar class of 1880, and Henry Noble MacCracken, then president of the College (Daniels, 1994; Figure 2). Richards was already deceased by the time of its official implementation (L. M., 2005a).

Figure 2
Dedication of Blodgett Hall, 1929

Note. Minnie Cumnock Blodgett and President MacCracken at the dedication. Source: Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library.

The connection between euthenics and eugenics took the College stage during the very first year of the euthenics program at Vassar, 1924 (Daniels, 1994). In October, Roswell Johnson, creator of the eugenics program at the University of Pittsburgh and assistant to Charles Davenport, delivered a lecture at Vassar titled "The Relation Between Euthenics and Eugenics" ("Lecture notes," 1924). In his lecture, delivered "under the auspices of the Ellen Richards' endowment fund," Johnson framed the connection by stating: "Eugenics… deals with race improvement through heredity

whereas Euthenics deals with race improvement through environment" ("Lecture notes," 1924, p. 3). In short, whereas eugenics was "hygiene for the future generations… euthenics is hygiene for the present generation" (Richards, 1910, p. 1). The two fields, Johnson described, were compatible in the overarching goal of "race improvement," and, by going "hand in hand," as Ellen Richards asserted, "it will inevitably create a better race of men" ("Lecture notes," 1924, p. 3).

Lecture notes published in the *Vassar Miscellany News*, however, also alluded to the gruesome price that would soon be paid in the name of this vocation: "The production of the very inferior should be prohibited in order to create Euthenically and Eugenically a better civilization" (p. 3). From the start, it was explicit that taking on so-called race improvement necessitated the eradication of an "other," and both euthenics and eugenics were implicated. Remarks from then President MacCracken were soon also published in the *Vassar Miscellany News*:

> The lecture of Professor Johnson on the subject of euthenics and eugenics was of very great interest to me; and coming, as it did, from an acknowledged authority in the field of eugenics, I was particularly impressed with the spirit of good will and generosity which this scientist showed toward workers in a related field. (MacCracken, 1924, p. 2)

He continued by emphasizing the necessity of Vassar to strengthen its academic program in euthenics for eugenic goals to be achieved.

> The educative process, which is a part of euthenics, must precede the establishment of eugenics as a scientific basis of life. Not ideally nor philosophically, but practically, euthenics must pave the way for the adoption of eugenics… In this sense, then, euthenics may be said to be the base and origin of eugenics. (MacCracken, 1924, p. 2)

The explicit sentiment that it was Vassar's educative responsibility to support eugenic goals was not, at the time, new to the College. Years prior, the exact sentiment had been expressed by Elizabeth Thelberg, professor of physiology and hygiene, in a 1913 lecture titled "On Eugenics" (J. M. G., 1913, p. 752). Notably, this was over a decade before the establishment of euthenics at the College. A student contributor to the *Vassar Miscellany News*, in her notes on the lecture, stated that "All education should have as its ultimate object–not the

comparatively narrow and selfish aim of self-development but the eugenic aim of race improvement. The individual perishes but the race survives" (J. M. G., 1913, p. 753). The student later quoted the conclusion of Thelberg's "well attended" lecture, which included a series of recommendations to students:

> Be alive to the subject… Obtain and read pamphlets and proceedings of the Eugenic and allied societies. After you get out of College become members, and interested members, of your best Eugenic local societies… Ascertain the eugenic or anti-eugenic conditions of your local industries, and of those in which your money is invested… Uphold the single standard of morality and the eugenic marriage… Guard your own personal life with high racial ends in view. (J. M. G., 1913, p. 753)

In addition to urging students to adopt a wholly eugenic lifestyle, Thelberg also explained to the Faculty Club the hope to improve educational methods with respect to eugenics, spreading her pedagogical philosophy around the College ("College news," 1913a). Years later, as euthenics gained a curricular foothold, Thelberg spoke before Vassar's Conference on Euthenics on "Saving the Race from Mental Defectives," as reported by the *Poughkeepsie Eagle-News* (1925).

The eugenic aims of Vassar that emerged preceding and alongside euthenics endured for decades. In 1939, former President MacCracken wrote, "The time is ripe for a eugenic group to give the educator a eugenic philosophy which can, without obtruding itself, permeate all aspects of education" (MacCracken, 1939, p. 416). The euthenics program effectively enabled this permeation. Conceived as an *alternative* to a formal eugenics program, it was explicitly designed to accelerate eugenic objectives. According to an Alumnae Department report, Ellen Richards' last effort working with college-educated women was to encourage the formation of "a committee on Euthenics *rather than on Eugenics*, claiming 'that improved environment would… bring quicker results in race development'" (Barus, 1912, p. 115; emphasis added by author).

Reproduction and Margaret Sanger

On August 5, 1926, Margaret Sanger, founder of the American Birth Control League (ABCL) and Planned Parenthood, delivered the keynote address to the first annual Vassar College Summer Institute of Euthenics, a

graduate program intended to supplement undergraduate offerings in euthenics (E. M. S., 2007; Ferrari, 2018). The address "marked the official arrival of the birth control movement in the Hudson Valley," a movement that was, at the time, defined largely by the eugenic desire to systematically control reproduction (Rosen, 2009, p. 193). Titled "The Function of Sterilization" (1926), Sanger's address argued for the sterilization of people deemed unfit along the lines of real or suspected (dis)ability, class, race, and ethnicity. That this was the Institute of Euthenics' *first* keynote underscores the extent to which the program was deeply influenced by and supportive of eugenics from the outset.

Sanger began with an appreciation for recent federal immigration restrictions such as the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924, which set discriminatory quotas for international arrivals. "But," she argued,

> While we close our gates to the so-called 'undesirables' from other countries, we make no attempt to discourage or cut down the rapid multiplication of the unfit and undesirable at home… These types are being multiplied with breakneck rapidity and increasing far out of proportion to the normal and intelligent classes… The American public is taxed, heavily taxed, to maintain an increasing race of morons, which threatens the very foundations of our civilization… It now remains for the United States government to set a sensible example to the world by offering a bonus or yearly pension to all obviously unfit parents who allow themselves to be sterilized by harmless and scientific means. In this way the moron and the diseased would have no posterity to inherit their unhappy condition. The number of the feeble-minded would decrease and a heavy burden would be lifted from the shoulders of the fit. ("The Function of," 1926, p. 299)

The speech was reprinted in full in the *Birth Control Review*, reported in the *Poughkeepsie Eagle-News*, and even made the front page of the *Poughkeepsie Evening Star* (Rosen, 2009). Speaking at Vassar, however, was not just a path toward media publicity but a strategic effort to gain an academic license for her cause. Vassar's support for eugenics would soon create a pipeline for students to produce research that supported the proliferation of sterilization and immigration laws. Sanger's political vision required Vassar's support, and the euthenics program was a fitting entryway. As Marist University historian Robyn Rosen (2009) explained, eugenicists used academic "concerns to help

them legitimize their cause. The evidence that it was working can be found in Sanger's invitation to speak at the Vassar Institute… No longer morally suspect, embarrassing, or prurient, at least in the halls of academe," Sanger's mission had gained campus credibility (p. 194). "Just being asked by the Vassar College institute coordinators to speak," Rosen adds, "was a victory" (p. 195).

The relationship between Sanger and the College continued. Just two months after her keynote, Sanger hosted a speech by James F. Cooper, then medical director of the Clinical Research Department at the ABCL at her nearby home in Fishkill, New York ("News notes," 1926). Among the 30 invited guests were several Vassar faculty members and students. Years later, Sanger's ABCL hosted the 1934 Conference on Birth Control at Vassar ("Conference on Birth Control," 1934). Among the event speakers was Henry Pratt Fairchild, former president of both the Population Association and the American Eugenics Society. One student noted the conference in the *Vassar Miscellany News*, reiterating the eugenic rhetoric of the birth control movement:

> Unfortunately up to this time birth control has been exercised by the upper classes more extensively than the classes that are less well equipped to bear socially useful children. This must be reversed… It would help eliminate wars and many other social evils. ("We must control," 1934, p. 5)

Beyond her direct influence on Vassar students, the growth of Sanger's ABCL supported events that platformed other eugenicists, further shaping the College's academic discourse. In 1932, a similar event, to which Vassar students were invited, was hosted at Wesleyan College ("Symposium at Wesleyan," 1932). Sanger was the lead speaker, and the concluding address was delivered by Clarence G. Campbell, then president of the Eugenics Research Association.

Eugenic Classrooms

In comparison to College events, the limited documentation of curricula renders it particularly challenging to understand the routine presence of eugenics in Vassar's classrooms. Tracking this history is further complicated by the fact that because Vassar had no eugenics department, the subject was woven into coursework through other departments, sometimes in sly ways to attract more students. For example, at the 1937 Conference on Education and Eugenics,

MacCracken "described a popular eugenics course *marketed* to students simply as 'marriage and the family'" (Baker, 2014, p. 300; emphasis added by author). By title alone, the eugenic underpinnings of the class were obscured, revealing this "marketing" as strategic. The overall level of transparency about the College's eugenic teachings remains unclear.

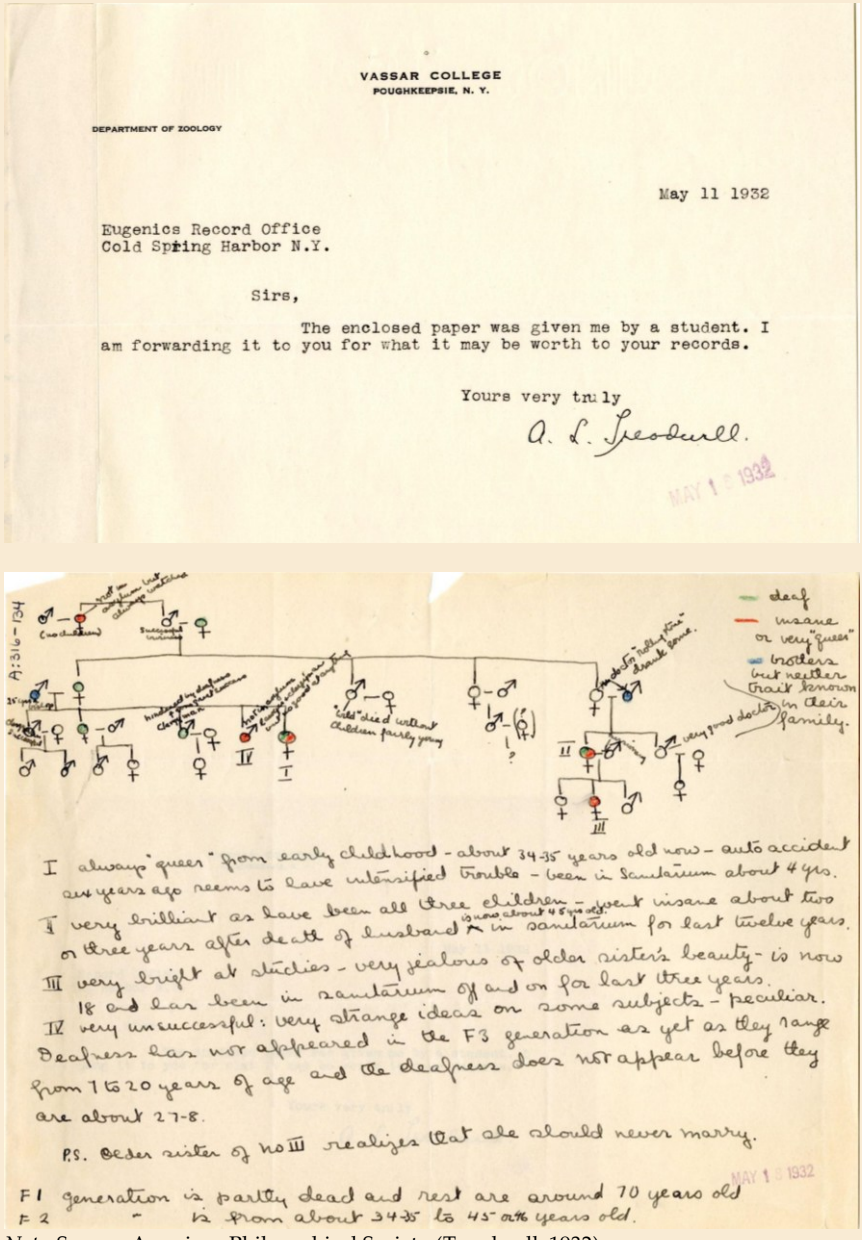
In 1919, Charles Davenport was invited by Professor Aaron Treadwell to deliver an open lecture to his class in Heredity ("Calendar," 1919). Treadwell was a professor of Biology and Zoology. The Vassar Encyclopedia describes him as a "progressive teacher" and "modernizing force on campus" in a profile that celebrates his affiliations with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, American Museum of Natural History, and New York Zoological Society, never mind his membership to the Eugenics Society (C. B. C., 2005a, paras. 1, 6; "Heads of two departments," 1937).

One month before Davenport's lecture to his class, Treadwell delivered a lecture of his own. Though it was ostensibly, as per its title, a lecture on *Biology*, it left a student notetaker with distinctly eugenic takeaways: "The students of eugenics are hoping, in years to come, to be able to control the race, for its strengthening and perfecting" (J. C., 1911, p. 630). Further, his Heredity course itself, despite its similarly innocuous title, was described in subtext as "a study of heredity… and results of recent investigations and their application to Eugenics" (Leonard et al., 2020, para. 23). It is hardly surprising, then, that Treadwell would invite Davenport to the Heredity class to lecture on the work of the ERO. More than a one-off academic exchange, this lecture exemplifies a significant relationship between Vassar and the ERO that continued for years to come. Indeed, as Figure 3 attests, Treadwell (1932) sent the Office a letter in 1932 containing a "student pedigree of deafness and insanity" that he thought might be worthy for its recordkeeping.

Beyond the classroom, several texts on eugenics even appeared on Vassar's summer reading lists. Davenport's *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (1911) made the list for several years and was also donated as a gift to the library in 1913 ("College news," 1913b; "Book lists," 1913; "Book lists," 1914; "Summer reading," 1915). By the mid-1940s, the book was regarded as a notable resource for forced sterilization legislation in the United States as well as Nazi race policies (Vidnes, 2009).

Figure 3

Letter Sent from Aaron Treadwell to the ERO Containing Student Work



VASSAR COLLEGE
POUGHKEEPSIE, N. Y.

DEPARTMENT OF ZOOLOGY

May 11 1932

Eugenics Record Office
Cold Spring Harbor N.Y.

Sirs,

The enclosed paper was given me by a student. I am forwarding it to you for what it may be worth to your records.

Yours very truly

A. L. Treadwell.

MAY 1 0 1932

deaf
insane or very "queer"
brothers but neither trait known in their family.

I always "queer" from early childhood - about 34-35 years old now - auto accident six years ago seems to have intensified trouble - been in sanitarium about 4 yrs.
II very brilliant as have been all three children - went insane about two or three years after death of husband is now about 45 yrs old in sanitarium for last twelve years.
III very bright at studies - very jealous of older sister's beauty - is now 18 and has been in sanitarium off and on for last three years.
IV very unsuccessful: very strange ideas on some subjects - peculiar.
Deafness has not appeared in the F3 generation as yet as they range from 7 to 20 years of age and the deafness does not appear before they are about 27-8.

P.S. Older sister of No III realizes that she should never marry.

F1 generation is partly dead and rest are around 70 years old
F2 " is from about 34-35 to 45-50 years old.

MAY 1 0 1932

Note. Source: American Philosophical Society (Treadwell, 1932).

While summer reading and classes such as Heredity were elective, eugenic ideology was incorporated into compulsory coursework. One example is Freshman Hygiene, a mandatory course for all first-year students until 1934 ("Compulsory courses," 1934). As late as 1939, Professor Kate Frankenthal delivered an open lecture on eugenics to the Freshman Hygiene class ("College calendar," 1939). Even after Freshman Hygiene was made optional, it was effectively replaced with another mandatory freshman class called Fundamentals, colloquially known as "Fundies" (Reisman, 1995, p. 6). This class would later become notorious in the Ivy League (and Seven Sisters) nude posture photo scandal, which gained significant media attention during the 1990s. While the exact year is unclear, the Vassar Encyclopedia reports that nude photos were taken as early as the 1920s (C. B. C., 2005b). By the time Fundies came around, nude photos, taken in masses in the Kenyon Hall gymnasium, were a routine element of the freshman-year experience (Reisman, 1995).

The nude posture photo scandal exploded when it was reported that students at Yale University (Vassar's then brother school) had stolen and sold the photos "for a healthy profit as soft-core pornography" (Belden-Adams, 2022, p. 11). "$100 for a pack of hot prospects at Vassar?" a Yale alum recounts. "Maybe grade the beauties and non-beauties 'ABC' and charge accordingly" (p. 11). Yet, while the photo-selling scandal was disparaging and objectifying enough, it overshadowed the equally insidious use of the photos to support Davenport's eugenic work. As historian of photography Kris Belden-Adams (2022) describes,

> The images were reported to the college's state government and to the [ERO]... [which] helped the ERO create a set of aspirant pre-World War II 'norms' by which students (and society as a whole) were measured and scrutinized: that of the New England, WASP/Protestant-descended gentry. It also helped identify students with physical disabilities, who were deemed incompatible with the eugenics movement's goal of 'good breeding', while encouraging young women (eugenics' primarily mute actors) to have children to drown out the genes of '[t]he morally worst, the most deformed.' (Lavater, 1878, as cited in Belden-Adams, 2022, pp. 17–18)

While the record of the ERO's use of these photos is limited, Vassar students at the time already suspected the association. According to a 1995 *Vassar Miscellany*

News reporter, theories had spread "that the pictures were not exactly kosher, that there was a sinister hidden agenda on the part of certain scientists to discover which students should breed and which should be kept from reproducing, based on their physical characteristics" (Reisman, 1995, p. 6). More specific allegations also emerged that eugenicist William H. Sheldon had collected Vassar's nude photos as material for the *Atlas of Woman* (C. B. C., 2005b). The book was intended as a sister volume to his *Atlas of Men*, a pseudoscientific somatotyping of male bodies (Vertinsky, 2007). However, Sheldon's collection of female nude photos was seized and burned in 1950, and the *Atlas of Woman* was never released (C. B. C., 2005b). The College administration denied the allegation that Vassar photos were among his collection and insisted that the photos have had "only one purpose throughout their existence: to assess students' postures" (C. B. C., 2005b, para. 10).

To be sure, if eugenic suspicions are true, Vassar would be among many institutions during the period to use photos for such purposes. As Rachel Somerstein, Professor of Journalism at SUNY New Paltz explained, "Such was a typical use of photography at the time, as a tool to visualize 'normal' and 'abnormal,'" and to categorize people into hierarchies (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, as cited in Somerstein, 2024, p. 84). While Somerstein was referring specifically to nude photos taken of women post-sterilization, the theme may ring true for Vassar's use of nude photos in its institutional context.

Notably, nude photos were not the only bodily data Vassar freshmen were forced to submit to the College. According to a 1934 description of the *Health Guide for Vassar Students*, a booklet provided to the class,

> The hygiene-conscious Freshman will give information as well as receive it. In return for learning the secrets of the epitrochlear gland and the three great plexuses, she will surrender such valuable knowledge as the height-weight ratio of her familial background, the amount of ice cream she consumes daily, and the length of time she spends just doing nothing. ("Health booklet," 1934, p. 4)

The tone suggests it was a privilege to be treated like a lab rat. And still, there was more to the data collection. In 1963, the *Vassar Miscellany News* reported that starting in 1936, freshman chest and hip measurements were also collected, and that, starting in 1905, even lung capacity had been evaluated; the Vassar Encyclopedia states that bodily measurements date as far back as 1884 (C. B. C.,

2005b; Messerly, 1963). Exactly what these data were used for is unknown. It is reasonable to question, however, whether they were used as supplemental material analyzed in conjunction with nude photos to contextualize physical observations and potentially increase their value to external eugenics researchers. If this were happening without disclosure and informed consent, it raises serious ethical concerns about Vassar's treatment of its own students. In summation, not only did Vassar's classes promote lessons in eugenics, they also may have taken advantage of students' bodies to practice eugenics. Further, the use of Vassar students to support eugenics extended beyond freshman year, and even beyond graduation into students' careers.

Eugenic Careers

One of the most nefarious results of this period at Vassar was its success in producing active eugenicist field workers and scholars. Charles Davenport and his ERO were primary facilitators for these post-Vassar career trajectories. The pipeline between Vassar and the ERO was formed in the ERO's early days. Davenport established the ERO in 1910 with the goal of gathering "enormous quantities of human hereditary data [and] recording them in a central bureau of study" for the first time (Kelves, 1985, as cited in Hubbard, 1985, p. 569). For necessary assistance, Davenport promptly "recruited a staff of young graduates" from Vassar, along with several other Seven Sisters and Ivy League institutions (p. 569). These fieldworkers were responsible for conducting interviews and collecting physical data "on vast numbers of so-called mental and social defectives" that would soon become the "backbone of U.S. eugenics" and legislation on sterilization and immigration control (p. 569).

Most early ERO staff "took their new jobs very seriously, striving to produce top quality research" (Bix, 1997, p. 645). In hopes of making a significant professional impact, the field workers sought more formal organization than Davenport originally afforded them. Vassar alumnae Ruth Lawton, class of 1910, eventually "told Davenport that they felt 'the need of some means of keeping in touch with each other's work'" (as cited in Bix, 1997, p. 645). In compliance, Davenport introduced regular field worker meetings and annual conferences, which increased efficiency and facilitated methodological

refinement. As field workers became more organized, eugenics gained more power (Bix, 1997; Figure 4).

Figure 4
Second Eugenics Fieldworker's Conference, 1913

Note. Source: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Archives, New York.

By 1923, approximately 200 field workers had been trained at the ERO to collect data nationally (Davenport, 1923). At times, field workers were even delegated to assist with research conducted by fellow Vassar alumnae. For example, when Katherine Bement Davis, class of 1892, was researching "the genetic basis of criminal behavior," Davenport supplied her with ERO field workers to collect data on the lineages of inmates with disabilities (L. L., 2021).

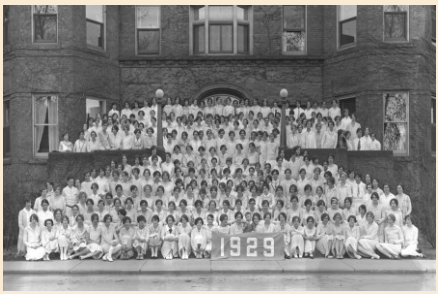
However, not all Vassar alumnae who engaged in eugenics research worked for Davenport's ERO or relied on its support for data collection. The zeal for eugenics research had inspired even solo projects. For example, Lucien Howe, class of 1882, "celebrated the 50th anniversary of her graduation" by independently conducting eugenics research on 39 of her fellow Vassar alumnae ("Vassar '82," 1933, para. 1). According to a 1933 publication of the study in the *Eugenical News*, Howe's primary research questions included: "What sort of antecedents had they? What racial stock?… Whom did they marry? How many children did they produce? And so forth" ("Vassar '82," 1933, para. 1). She concluded that "Eugenically it is clear that the class of '82 were made out of good hereditary stuff" but that they unfortunately had not "perpetuated their own numbers or talents" via reproduction (para. 2).

More Vassar Girls

A chief purpose of the eugenics mission was not only to study and sterilize populations deemed "inferior" (antinatalism) but to encourage reproduction among "superior" populations (pronatalism) to methodically shift demographics in purportedly favorable directions. Alumnae of Vassar as well

as of other elite women's colleges were regarded, generally, as women who should be reproducing prolifically (Figure 5). "Since college graduates represented the best the 'American race' had to offer," as geneticist Charles Vigue declared, they were expected to "not only maintain the purity and character of the race but to improve it" (1987, p. 52). In the early 20th century, when these expectations were not met, women's alma maters were held responsible.

Figure 5
Freshman Portrait of the Vassar Class of 1929 Taken in 1926



Note. Source: Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library.

A 1915 publication in the *Journal of Heredity* titled "Education and Race Suicide" revealed that Vassar alumnae in the classes of 1867–1892 married only at a proportion of 53%, and, on average, had only one child (Sprague, 1915). This data included the class of 1882 about which Lucien Howe had indeed soon reached the same conclusion: Vassar girls were not reproducing enough.

To eugenicists, this posed a significant problem to solve. As a piece co-written by Roswell Johnson explained, "The extraordinary inadequacy of the reproductivity of these college graduates can hardly be taken too seriously. These women are… from a eugenic point of view, clearly of superior quality" (Johnson & Stutzmann, 1915, p. 251). The piece posits that excessive limitations on students' social lives and lack of coeducation (not changed at Vassar until 1969) were to blame for the low birth rates. Essentially, women's colleges were failing to facilitate sex.

The authors also postulated the failure of colleges to instill in alumnae the desire to become homemakers (Johnson & Stutzmann, 1915). "Instead of education for motherhood," eugenicist Samuel J. Holmes later agreed, "the fine young ladies attending these excellent institutions are being educated for race suicide and career" (1928, p. iv). The euthenics program, then, may be regarded in part as a rehabilitative project in response to low birth rates, called by the *Harvard Graduates' Magazine* "the most pathetic spectacle of all" (Phillips, 1916, as cited in "Harvard and Yale," 1916, p. 569). As a *New York Times* article

reported, "Vassar Girls" were to begin "to study home-making as a career" through the "new course in euthenics," said to "adjust women to meet the needs of today" (Feld, 1926, p. 220). Those needs were mothers and homemakers, women whose express purpose was to raise a eugenic generation.

The Fate of Euthenics at Vassar

While this paper has explored a time when eugenics was accepted on Vassar's campus, it would be remiss to ignore the significant progress that has been made in revising curricular offerings, enacting nondiscrimination policies aimed at fostering an increasingly inclusive campus environment, and selecting faculty members and speakers reflective of this progress. It is safe to say that Sanger's 1926 speech would not make Vassar's cut today.

The *Vassar Miscellany News*, which has been referenced extensively throughout this paper, did not fail to document the turn of the tide. To start, Sanger's legacy was taken up in the periodical by a class of 1993 history major (Steinberg, 1992). The contributor, Alex Steinberg, stated, "This year at Vassar College… rapt audiences adorning Sanger quotation T-shirts welcomed two lecturers on Sanger's life" (p. 6). Steinberg continued by interrogating Sanger's eugenic perspective, arguing that "Only when students de-romanticize their approach to studying Margaret Sanger will they come properly, soberly, and faithfully to reassess her historical legacy" (p. 6). This is a clear call for revisionist history.

Eugenics was taken up once more in the *Vassar Miscellany News* in 1999, when an "academic couple" posted an advertisement searching for egg donors ("Advertisements," 1999, p. 7). Their laundry list of criteria was "Caucasian, dark-hair and complexion, over 5'7", even-featured face, minimum SATs 1300, lean/athletic build, excellent health/skin/eyesight" (p. 7). In the next week's paper, a student contributor critically responded to the posting:

> It bothers me that the couple's search goes far beyond simply looking for a woman whose physical traits are similar to those of the future mother… They want their child to meet societal standards of perfection. I cannot help but think of eugenics and Adolph Hitler's desire to further the Aryan race. (Rosen, 1999, p. 14)

While the campus discourse has changed over the years, inviting these critical

perspectives, it is questionable that the *Vassar Miscellany News* ran the egg donor advertisement to begin with. The practice continued until the aughts, with the last posting still seeking so-called "good genes" ("Advertisements," 2003, p. 4).

Many Vassar students have become alive to the horrors of the global eugenics project, following national trends. Widespread open acceptance of eugenics declined in the States during the Second World War as "the Nazi holocaust gave eugenics a bad name" (Hartmann, 2017, p. 188; Taylor, 2016). This shift is curious given that Nazi race policies were "based in part" on American data conducted through the ERO, which closed down in 1939, as if distancing itself from the very ideology it helped construct (Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, n.d.; Hartmann, 2017, p. 188). Vassar lectures and events supportive of eugenics gradually faded away, and the Summer Institute of Euthenics was renamed the Summer Institute for Family and Childcare Services in Wartime in 1942, though it later resumed its previous title before it was finally discontinued in 1959, much too late (Daniels, 1994).

As for the school year program, euthenics only remained a viable academic major for roughly a decade following its 1924 beginning, and its only lasting component was child study, which remained a major until 1965 when it was absorbed into the psychology and education departments (Cruz, 2002; Daniels, 1994). Several factors contributed to the termination of euthenics. To start, the program was already rejected by some faculty members during meetings regarding its initial implementation; indeed, it only ever "squeaked through the faculty vote by a narrow margin" (Daniels, 1994, para. 27). Faculty opponents believed the program to be "vague," "not scholarly," and a threat "to return women to domesticity, and again shut women's doors to the outside world, which had only just been pried open" (para. 25).

Early criticism was echoed by Margaret Floy Washburn, one of several faculty members who refused to move to larger, newer laboratory spaces in Blodgett Hall in opposition to their association with euthenics. Washburn, who resented MacCracken for his embrace of euthenics, once stated, "You are driving women back into the home, from the slavery of which education has helped us escape, Dr. MacCracken" (Daniels, 1994, para. 28). Moreover, as a 2002 *Vassar Miscellany News* article reported, in the early 1930s, two-thirds of departments that intended to collaborate with euthenics opted out in hopes of distancing themselves from patriarchal tradition (Cruz, 2002). Along with

faculty rejection, euthenics courses were unpopular among students, and it became increasingly clear that the academic program "did not jell into the initial mold planned" (Daniels, 1994, para. 35).

Reckoning with Institutional Amnesia

Recent discourse on Vassar's eugenic history has been sparse and narrow in scope. Importantly, there has been no institutional address of the history of eugenics at Vassar. The eugenic engagements of former President MacCracken along with several prominent faculty members and alumnae have been excluded from their profiles on Vassar's Encyclopedia website. MacCracken, in particular, has been revered as a "modernizing force" who "successfully guided Vassar into a modern era of enfranchised women and new global perspectives" (L. M., 2005b, paras. 1, 7). To be sure, these descriptions are not altogether untrue, but it is biased to offer these praises without acknowledging MacCracken's belief that a "eugenic philosophy" should "permeate all aspects of education" or the role of his presidency in supporting eugenics research that helped justify global disaster (MacCracken, 1939, p. 416).

Critical pieces of the history summarized here have been documented in two *Vassar Miscellany News* articles: one written by a class of 2005 alumnae in 2023, and the other by a student in 2020 (Lawson, 2023; Leonard et al., 2020). The 2020 article was met with criticism in the comments section; one comment reads, concisely, "Euthenics and eugenics are two different things" (Taylor, 2020). The Vassar community, it seems, does not understand the connection.

The link between eugenics and euthenics has even been taken up almost jokingly. In an article titled "Euthenics: It's not What you Think," one 2015 author describes the eventual failure of euthenics, remarking, "It didn't help that some even confused it [euthenics] with the racist 'eugenics' movement" (O., 2015, para. 2). In the same year, another author remarked that "Euthenics, *of course*, is not to be confused with eugenics" (Museum of Motherhood, 2015, para. 4; emphasis added by author). While they do acknowledge that eugenics "seems to have reared its ugly head within the walls of Vassar College, too," they reference only an isolated event–nude photographs–ignoring the well-documented institutional endorsement of a national eugenics mission, much of which was directly upheld by the euthenics program (para. 4).

Similarly, Vassar's Encyclopedia published an adaptation of a 1994 book chapter titled "The disappointing first thrust of euthenics," which makes no mention of the simultaneous thrust of eugenics that the institution deliberately supported for decades (Daniels). The article speaks romantically of a grossly misrepresented euthenics program entirely divorced from its eugenic orientation. By hosting this misrepresentation, Vassar continues to ignore the scope and impact of euthenics, as well as its utter incompatibility with the College's current mission. The failure of euthenics to survive as a permanent program should be remembered not as a disappointment but as a necessary step towards important institutional progress. And with that, the symbolic function of the plaque in the Blodgett Hall archway should be reconsidered.

Vassar has already begun problematizing its legacy through the Inclusive History initiative, launched in 2023. This public history initiative seeks to unearth the College's past "with respect to justice, equity, and fairness" (Vassar College, n.d., para. 1). Inclusive History has already published projects on slavery, blackface, and Founder's Day, among others, and invites students to submit their own research. Eugenics and euthenics should be embraced by the initiative. By interrogating Vassar's endorsement of eugenics and the position of elite academic institutions within the eugenic framework, we can imagine a fundamentally transformative vision of what education in the service of "the race" really is. We can complicate our understanding of what these institutions represent in American society and ultimately realize a more egalitarian function of higher education in departure from eugenic thinking.

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