That more Americans were rushing to receive a college education in the 1920s was not greeted with universal rejoicing. Long-time educators did not all feel comfortable with the changing values of the new university, with its new emphasis on practical and scientific education, elective courses, faculty research at the expense of teaching, and large, impersonal campuses. At the nation's most prestigious Eastern colleges, a counterrevolutionary group of faculty and administrators known as the "New Humanists," among them the president of Harvard looked back longingly to the values of gentlemanly leisure, a classical curriculum, and education of the "whole man" which they believed had once characterized their profession. They pressed for curricular and administrative reforms designed to restore the old collegiate flavor they felt was in danger of being lost.1

Accusations also surfaced among the general public, Jewish as well as non-Jewish, that too many unfit young people were crowding campuses and dragging down the level of instruction. In the unforgiving words of writer and editor H.L. Mencken in 1927, "everyone" was sending their children to college rather than those with particular intellectual, technological, or ministerial ambitions. This meant that colleges were now bursting at the seams and that "pedagogical ignoramuses" and "quacks" had to be called in to serve as professors.2 "Today, entrance into a university is a matter merely of age and dollars," remarked one Zeta Beta Tau Wisconsin graduate in 1928, writing in a similar vein. "Everyone goes; it's hardly the thing for a parent even in moderate cir-
cumstances not to insist on a college education for his sometimes utterly unfit progeny.”

“Must Your Son Go to College?”

“Everyone,” in a movement reminiscent of what had happened in nineteenth-century post-Emancipation Europe, included a disproportionate and conspicuous number of American Jews determined to better their position through certification and educational advancement. This was especially the case at schools located in or near New York City, Boston, New Haven, and Providence. There, thousands of student children of immigrant parents could easily save money by living at home and riding the tram or subway to prestigious schools, or live in dormitories and boarding houses knowing that their families were nearby. Officials at such schools reacted not with admiration but with fear as they spoke of a “Jewish invasion” and devised steps to control it.

Their concern, as we have seen, was not without some foundation. By 1920 Hunter College and City College of New York, both free municipal schools, had become 80–90 percent Jewish in their student-makeup. Columbia University’s Jewish student population, fed by the extension of the Broadway IRT subway to its uptown New York campus, reached 40 percent in the 1918 incoming class. Two years later, even after the quiet introductions of limitations, it remained at a considerable 22 percent. The affiliated Seth Low Junior College, which functioned in downtown Brooklyn from 1928 to 1938, was established by the Columbia authorities specifically to channel away from Morningside Heights undesirable students “of foreign parentage” as Russian-born alumnus Isaac Asimov recalled in his memoirs. By the early 1920s, Jews comprised 15 percent of the student population at Syracuse University and, at Princeton, 9 percent. Harvard’s Jewish student enrollment more than doubled in two years, going from 10 to 22 percent between 1920 and 1922. The percentages were even more alarming in the nation’s professional schools.

These statistics met with misgivings from inside and outside the Jewish community. Critics charged that families’ unrealistic and misplaced social ambition, not the near-universal manifestation of intellectual brilliance among their children, was driving so many Jewish students to the universities. Since schools were already overcrowded, and since restrictions against Jews were a fact of life, the nation as a whole might presumably be better served if more Jews eschewed college and
instead applied their energies toward some kind of trade. An example of this attitude was an article entitled “Must Your Son Go to College?” written by A. A. Roback, a professor of psychology at Harvard University, which appeared in the *Jewish Tribune* in 1925. The author (himself Jewish and an accomplished Yiddishist) remarked that at least in previous times, the preponderance of Jews in institutions of higher education was usually the result of the youth’s own craving for learning. Now, however, the main impetus came from the parents. It was they, not their child, who feared that not sending their son to college immediately after completing high school would unjustifiably mark the family as “lower-class” and the son “mentally below par.” Aside from fears for the family’s standing, Dr. Roback continued, “there is the exaggerated notion of a college training as a universal need and the fond hope of seeing their son some day at the top of his profession, which is responsible for many parents scrimping in every possible way so as to make lawyers or doctors of their mediocre children.”

Such hopes, in the psychologist’s opinion, were often a waste of time and as ridiculous as expecting violin lessons to turn every Jewish boy into an “Elman or a Heifetz.” Better to invest the four years and thousands of dollars in some sort of business, he advised, “and a good merchant would be the outcome, instead of the poor lawyer or physician who manages to raise his head financially largely on account of his business ability rather than his professional skill.” His article ended with a call for the increased use of vocational guidance and psychological tests of Jewish youth’s fitness for higher education, including one of the author’s own invention. 9

Presumably some of the *Jewish Tribune*’s mature readers were convinced by these arguments, and might agree that more Jewish sons ought to forget about higher education and go into business instead—especially if they were someone else’s sons. For the most part, however, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Jewish parents refused to surrender. They kept sending their sons, and to a lesser extent their daughters, to college and professional schools in conspicuous numbers.

**New Criteria for Selective Admissions**

Despite the pervasiveness of American antisemitism in some form long before the end of World War I, college admissions officials had lagged behind other segments of society in taking concrete steps to limit the Jewish presence at their schools. The very real need, however, to limit
acceptances to the number of places available served as a convenient framework to fulfill the desire of stopping Jews from swamping a college. This desire was fed by the continuing protests of wealthy alumni benefactors, especially of the elite predominantly Protestant schools. Among other factors, they objected to the idea of sending their offspring to once-beloved institutions now so filled with undesirable business and social contacts and unsuitable potential marriage partners for their own children.

By the early 1920s college officials had caught up with general trends, and formal or informal quotas for Jews and frequently Roman Catholics became a well-entrenched part of the admissions process. It was not necessary for a college to declare a *numerus clausus* openly or to refer to Jews by name in its written policies. Undesirable students could easily be identified and weeded out discreetly by techniques such as personal interviews, required photographs, psychological tests, physical exams, and forms which required the listing of color, church preference, the birthplace of both parents, or the mother’s maiden name. 10

Photographs and personal interviews in which an applicant’s non-Anglo-Saxon appearance might be held against him or her became a point of particular anxiety, as illustrated in “Three Points for Beauty,” a parody of the new admissions standards published in 1927 and written by Zeta Beta Tau’s Arthur D. Schwarz (Columbia ’20). Under the new admissions system, Schwarz informed his readers, studying was no longer the best way to prepare for college. “Not only have the requirements changed,” he declared, “but the entire entrance examination board has been changed from a group of professors to a staff of civil and mechanical engineers with three or four artists thrown in and with an advisory council on the history of races and the Mendelian theory.” 11 The meetings of college entrance boards could now be likened to bathing beauty contests, in which the evaluators measured the shape and size of applicant’s noses and jaws with calipers and arranged classes according to hair and eye color. In keeping with these new requirements, Schwarz continued, he wished to suggest more appropriate procedures to be followed by college applicants.

These new procedures were 1. A complete series of treatments at Elizabeth Arden’s Beauty Parlors: “He should have his hair slicked and if possible made blonde. The odds are still in favor of the Nordic at the universities.” 2. A face lift. 3. The achievement of the necessary height: “He can’t be too short for the Eastern universities. The quotas for coxswains are quickly filled from boys with great ‘drag’ and strangers
under five feet five have little if any chance.” 4. The educationally ambitious young man should choose a Madison Avenue tailor in New York to custom-make his interview clothes and seek out a skilled photographer who excelled in making “synthetic” portraits (i.e., using lights, “mist,” special poses, and various other tricks of the trade to disguise or downplay a subject’s large nose or other stereotypically Jewish facial features and coloring).

Finally, Schwarz concluded, the candidate should pay proper attention to molding his background, religion, and geographical origin to suit the tastes of the individual college. “If your mother was a Wolf,” he wrote, “it may be necessary to change her to a Brady for college entrance purposes, and you may have to make a slight alteration in the name of your religion—to Jewish Lutheran or Catholic Scientist or some such more approved title. You will probably have to be psychoanalyzed, horoscoped, palm-read, fortune-told by gypsy and by cards, and the bumps on your head planed off.” The writer would not be surprised, he concluded, if in the near future youth abandoned attendance at high school altogether as preparation for college in favor of “a complete beauty course, a series of lessons in charm and personality, and a stiff quiz session in where to have one’s parents born and what religion to adopt.” 12

A President’s Influence: The Harvard Affair of 1922–23

It was perhaps no surprise that the officials of Harvard University, having seen their own Jewish enrollment more than double in the first two years of the decade, would take steps in the direction of reducing it in 1922. Methods to do so quietly were already in place at other schools such as Columbia, Syracuse, Princeton and Rutgers. What was a surprise was the candor with which Harvard announced its intentions. An explosion of press coverage and controversy resulted when President A. Lawrence Lowell inadvertently allowed news to leak out that spring that Harvard was considering establishing an overt ten percent quota for Jewish applicants. People had whispered about this topic before but now it hit the front page of the New York Times on June 2, 1922 in the form of a scandal and it did not leave there for the rest of the month.

Lowell had already achieved some notoriety in the American Jewish community for his strong opposition of the appointment to the Supreme Court of Louis D. Brandeis in 1916 and his vice-presidency of the Immigration Restriction League, an organization that was playing
a major role in barring the gates of the U.S. against further mass immigration. Lowell had to be aware that Harvard’s influence and example in the matter of quotas would encourage other schools in the United States to follow his lead. Yet rather than denying it or apologizing for his words, he at first confirmed them and strongly defended his position in public. A quota would reduce race hatred and actually help to prevent antisemitism at Harvard from growing further, he insisted. Besides, as he pointed out to journalists, the proposed figure of ten percent was still more than three times the proportion of Jews in the general population.13

The resulting “Harvard Affair of 1922–1923” became, in the words of one editorial in the Octagonian of Sigma Alpha Mu, “the bomb that shook American colleges.”14 In the case of Harvard not only did the college president’s attitudes become a part of the public record, but that of the Gentile student body as well. When an enterprising professor, Dr. Richard C. Cabot, took advantage of current events by asking his students as part of their final exam in Social Ethics to discuss if “race limitations” on Harvard’s freshman class were justified, almost half the students, all of them Gentile, replied “yes.” They assumed in their explanatory essays that increasing numbers of Jews were the focus of the question. The results became public in an article entitled “Harvard Student Opinion on the Jewish Question” appearing in the September 6, 1922 issue of The Nation. The piece attracted national attention.15

“Harvard should be the natural segregating place of the Anglo-Saxons,” wrote one such student, for “they founded this country and this college. . . . The Jews tend to overrun the college, to spoil it for the native-born Anglo-Saxon young persons for whom it was built and whom it really wants.” The specter of an alumni body that would be unwilling to send its sons to Harvard because its character had been destroyed loomed large. “Imagine having an alumni so strongly Jewish that they could elect their own president and officers! God forbid!” wrote another. Few objected to Jewish students because they were intellectually inferior; on the contrary, it was their tendency toward stellar academic performance and endless studying that helped to make them unpopular. Several accused Jewish students of taking all the scholarships, thus depriving “many worthy men of other races of a chance.” “He does nothing but grind,” complained one Gentile student. “Is it surprising that he should make better grades than those of us who have broader interests?” “They memorize their books!” wrote another student in exasperation, who himself reportedly received one of the lowest grades in the exami-
nation. “Thus they keep the average of scholarship so high that others with a high degree of common sense, but less parrot knowledge, are prevented from attaining a representative grade.”

On this score, at least, Jewish students could object to the criticism, since Harvard was supposed to be an elite academic institution. “To tell a Cohen, whose average on the college board examination was 90, that he cannot enter because there are too many Jews already, while a grade of 68 will pass a Murphy, or one of 62 a Morgan, hardly seems in line with the real interests of the college,” wrote one of the seven Jewish students taking the exam who objected to the idea of a quota. The student was alluding to another well-known technique of colleges wishing to favor the Protestant majority: requiring higher scores from Jewish and Catholic candidates.

More objectionable even than their over-studiousness, however, were the Harvard Jewish students’ social characteristics and alleged lack of athletic prowess. These were serious drawbacks at an Ivy League college, where the intangible social atmosphere and the values imparted to students were considered as important as the acquisition of academic knowledge. “They do not mix. They destroy the unity of the college. They are distasteful to the men who have made Harvard what it is today,” wrote one student. “Jews are an unassimilable race, as dangerous to a college as indigestible food to a man.” “The Jewish race makes ‘Take away’ its motto, rather than ‘Give and take.’ They are governed by selfishness. They care nothing for the friends they make save as future business acquaintances; to them the social side of college life is only so much twaddle,” wrote others. At least one student suggested that Jews follow the example of the Catholics, “who long ago saw the folly of forcing themselves on the American college, and built institutions of their own.” Worst of all, Jewish students were accused of violating the college code by having no loyalty at all to their alma mater: “They go through college as cheaply as possible, and having acquired their education, depart to be heard from no more, not even at the most urgent solicitations of Loan Fund collectors.”

A similar collection of anti-Jewish feelings and stereotypes, ostensibly written by a Christian college student under the pseudonym “Cyrus McGinn Mulqueen,” appeared in the Zeta Beta Tau Quarterly at the height of the Harvard controversy in December 1922 under the blatant title, “Why I Hate Jews.” It is possible that in a fit of sardonic humor the feature was actually written by a Jewish ZBT member. Whatever the source of the article, it faithfully reflected the tone of anti-Jewish
prejudice which was common at the time and which, through the Har­vard controversy, was now being openly debated in the nation's press. It also documents faithfully the collection of impressions and stereotypes Jewish college men of the upper strata were feeling pressure to disprove every day by their own individual behaviors.

"Mulqueen"'s article began by noting that prejudice was a fundamental and universal trait and that recent anti-Jewish reactions, in particular as they centered about "the recent events at Harvard," were a natural response to the overcrowding of Jews in eastern universities to the point that many had become "Semitic institutions, in fact if not in name."17 Gentiles at these institutions were thus unduly exposed to the objectionable character traits of Jews, which the author proceeded to enumerate. Many of these points, it should be noted, were identical to those voiced by Gentile Harvard students in the pages of The Nation. Mulqueen's claims, however, were being published in a Jewish periodical.

Jews, the author went on to charge, cared nothing for their institutions or for college traditions. They were ceaseless grinds, toiling over their books day and night and neglecting friendships and extracurricular activities. Because they were "physically lazy" and lacked "college spirit" they did not go out for teams. They were unsociable, unattractive, unfriendly, hard to get along with, "morose," "sullen," "too serious about themselves," and too clannish to reach out to non-Jews. In civil society, they were the destroyers of governments and inevitably "the leader in many of our radical political movements and labor upheavals." In business they were hard bargainers, "sneaky," "underhanded," and "untrustworthy," using any means short of illegal ones to better their rivals and gain financial success.

The physical appearance of the Jew was also repugnant, "Mulqueen" continued. "The large curved nose; the coarse, curly, black hair; the sallow greasy skin; the stout, phlegmatic body—these make him a very unpleasant sight to look upon," the pseudonymous "Mulqueen" declared. "Besides, he is indifferent as to his bodily cleanliness and his clothes are ill-kept, often dirty, frequently wrinkled, and always lacking in dignity." For those "newly-rich" who had only recently acquired the means to buy good things, "Mulqueen" continued, the selection was dominated by a desire to show off their wealth, rather than to appear as attractive as possible: "Jewels in abundance bedeck the women's earrings; ropes of pearls; diamonds of huge dimensions; rings of large size and generally in large numbers. Diamond-studded combs adorn mi-
lady’s hair, and we almost feel disappointed when we look in vain for anklets and nose-rings.”

In society, the pseudonymous Mulqueen charged, the speech of Jews was unpleasant and “guttural”: “His loud conversation—coarse and critical—and his even louder laugh are jarring to those of us accustomed to an environment of quiet and refinement.” Their table manners were abominable: “they eat crudely with special emphasis on the mere act of eating. Their tables are set with rich foods in vast abundance—a marked contrast to the more simple diet of Christians. They fill up on these rich, highly seasoned foods and exercise so little that they grow fat and lazy.” Only in the area of cultural life could “Mulqueen” find anything positive to say about Jews, and even here he denied that Jews possessed any “true appreciation” of the arts, since they bought paintings and prints and concert tickets more for the sake of “showing off” than out of love for beauty: “The emotions of the Jews are too stilted to allow him to appreciate any but the tragic type of music—music resembling his own mournful melodies,” he wrote. “True, the Jews compose a large percentage of the patrons of concerts. These are refined Jews, the exception that proves the rule. In drama . . . most of their plays display a great deal of wealth but little taste or else are of the girl and music type. The real dramatic gems are beyond the understanding of the Jew.”

The Jews’s biggest mistake, in the author’s opinion, was that they did not allow sufficient time to unlearn their objectionable traits before trying to climb the social and economic ladder. “He tries to push his way into the best society—to buy his way in,” wrote Mulqueen. “In a few years, he hopes to acquire what other families have taken years to attain. . . . Perhaps the grandchildren of the newly-rich immigrant Jew may attain the desired social prestige, but for the present generation it is impossible, and to try to push or buy oneself into society can only bring a storm of criticism upon one’s shoulders.” At the conclusion of this diatribe “Mulqueen” conceded that this writing was not meant to include “all” Jews, and certainly not the “best” ones, but it did fairly represent the “average” Jews, consisting “in actual numbers, of at least 80 per cent of the whole number, and representing in New York perhaps 95 per cent. A group is judged, not by a few outstanding men, but by the rank and file of the great majority.”

The public airing of these types of attitudes in the 1922–1923 academic year raised equally blatant cries of outrage from concerned prominent citizens and the general public. Harvard was turned upside-down that year as the president, the admissions committee, the faculty,
and Massachusetts politicians struggled over the implementation of the college’s admissions policy. The governor of the state appointed a legislative committee to investigate charges that Harvard discrimination against Jews violated state laws assuring all residents equal opportunity in Massachusetts colleges. Harold Riegelman of ZBT was heard to say at one point during the scandal that the university’s actions were hurting Harvard more than they were hurting the Jews. Former Harvard president Charles W. Eliot, under whose sympathetic aegis the first Menorah Society had been founded in 1906, led a vigorous opposition from his position on the Harvard Board of Overseers. Eliot had opposed Lowell’s appointment to replace him as president of Harvard in 1909, and for him the quota controversy was just further evidence of a wide gap between the principles and worldviews of the two men. He and the anti-Lowell forces appeared to have won when in April 1923 the Harvard admissions committee renounced the idea of any discrimination based on race or religion and officially rejected the overt imposition of a ten percent quota.

Any celebration on their part, however, was premature. The admissions committee, in addition to its announcement, also soon put forth a thirty-two-page report supplemented with eighteen pages of charts, graphs, and proposed formulae. This turned out to be an equally effective alternative to a flat Jewish quota. Henceforth the number of students in Harvard’s freshman class would be capped at one thousand. Students would be chosen according to a complex policy of “geographical distribution,” wherein fewer students from the Boston area and more students from beyond the Mississippi would be admitted. Theoretically, the committee argued, a university of national standing ought not to have a student body too lopsided in the direction of any single geographic, religious, ethnic, or racial group. Presumably, the campus atmosphere and the educational experience of all would be enhanced by the chance to interact with students from all across the United States. By 1928, under this system Harvard’s official Jewish enrollment had fallen to precisely ten percent. It did not rise from that level until the retirement of President Lowell in 1933 and the new presidency of James B. Conant, under whose watch the proportion rose gradually back up to twenty-five percent.

Other schools that had not yet taken steps to limit Jewish enrollment and wished to do so, including Yale, took the lesson of Harvard to heart and through the 1920s and 1930s adopted similarly indirect methods that would achieve the desired result without attracting unde-
sirable publicity. These compromises, ironically, were similar in character to those made by the U.S. Congress to achieve the long-sought goal of restricting immigration to the U.S. in 1924. It would have been a violation of deeply-held American principles as well as public relations suicide for American lawmakers to declare openly that they wished to halt immigration from southern and eastern Europe, areas with particularly large concentrations of Jews and Italians. However, the complicated formula, charts and graphs of the National Origins Act, which limited immigration according to a quota system based on the proportion of nationalities in the American population as recorded in the 1890 census, had exactly the same effect.

In time, the bywords "geographical distribution" were widely adopted at other colleges and professional schools as a defensible and acceptable method of limiting Jewish and/or urban enrollment and thus maintaining the prestige and social cohesiveness of a school. Jewish applicants living in major northeast U.S. metropolitan areas could attempt to circumvent the policy by falsely claiming the home addresses of cooperative relatives living in Houston, Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Seattle, or any other city in America where the Jewish population was comparatively smaller and the level of Jewish acculturation to the surroundings presumably higher. However, few students felt comfortable with such subterfuges, and the ruse was too easily discovered to be widely effective.

**The Impact of Anti-Jewish Attitudes on Fraternities**

The techniques and widespread anti-Jewish attitudes so clearly illustrated by the Harvard affair could not help but influence the world of college fraternities. After the institution of "selective admissions," the resulting drop in Jewish enrollment at some colleges had an immediate impact. Without a sufficient number of potential members entering a school, chapters already established might need to close down. Those chapters that were left might be forced to compete more aggressively for fewer students. The worst such damage to a campus Jewish Greek system in the 1920s occurred at Columbia University where the Jewish enrollment fell by half in less than two years. In general, Alpha Epsilon Pi and the younger fraternities, which had arrived on campuses later than the others, were particularly hard hit. For example, in June 1921 the faculty at Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta ruled that the number of Jewish students there did not warrant the existence of three Jewish fraternities and that Alpha Epsilon Pi's Zeta chapter, the last to
be inducted on the campus the previous year, had to go. The fraternity had no choice but to close the chapter. A wave of cutbacks in Jewish enrollment was destined to have a similar impact on Jewish fraternity chapters during the years of the Great Depression.

The leaders of the senior fraternities Phi Epsilon Pi and Pi Lambda Phi had already discovered in the 1910s that unfavorable views of Jews could determine whether a chapter would be allowed on a campus at all. From the late nineteenth century no fraternity could be officially established or recognized on a campus without the permission of the college. This was usually granted only through the agency of the Dean of Men, the Dean of Women, or the college president. Failure to obtain this permission could—and did—result in expulsion from the school. As the Jewish Greek subsystem expanded permission to set up chapters was not always forthcoming, especially in the well-established schools of the northeast where limitations on Jewish enrollment were most likely to be in place. The administrations of Bowdoin, Williams, Amherst, and Wesleyan, for example, never permitted any openly Jewish fraternities to organize on their campuses, despite numerous entreaties. 22

The official reasons given by university officials for nonrecognition of Jewish fraternities were usually that they did not wish to segregate their students along racial, religious, or sectarian lines. This of course ignored the discriminating practices of the Gentile fraternities. The real reasons, as suggested in the correspondence of Jewish leaders and the deliberations of fraternity officials during that time, may have included blatant antisemitism, terror of a Jewish secret society aroused by reading the forged Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion, a desire not to acknowledge to the world the presence of Jewish students on campus, or, if they were already there, a desire not to provide conditions that would encourage any more of them to come. 23

At the December 1927 annual meeting of the National Inter-fraternity Conference (NIC) in New York City, the representative of a Gentile fraternity defended the reluctance of non-Jewish students or administrators to recognize or fully accept chapters of Jewish fraternities in words that were excerpted and passed on to the president of a major American Jewish defense organization. The remarks were considered especially insulting since it was this same annual meeting where Harold Riegelman of Zeta Beta Tau was elected by his peers as the first Jewish man ever to serve as Chairman of the NIC:
In this growth of fraternities there is one very real difficulty which I would like to refer to quite frankly because it is a difficulty to be met and solved. I refer to the chapters of Jewish students, which are multiplying with great rapidity. I feel that I at least can touch upon this delicate topic, because I have very many warm friends who belong to that gifted race. Now, regardless of the merits of the case, or the reason therefore, this feeling of prejudice, what you will, is a fact to be reckoned with. It may be theoretically true that there should be no lack of complete sympathy between the Jewish and other races, and that in an ideal democracy there would not be—that racial and religious distinctions and an age-long alienation would disappear. . . . But it is too much to expect of our students that they shall be immune to the threefold and cumulative effect of racial, religious, and, broadly speaking, social differences that have profoundly moved the masses of men for centuries. No doubt our Hebrew friends realize this and will make allowances for it. We are entitled to ask them to look facts in the face as well as being under obligation to do so ourselves. Things being as they are and not as we would have them, we must find some practical way of mutual adjustment, not always insisting upon attaining the full measure of our ideal. . . . American democracy is evolutionary and is content to take a step at a time. 24

Non-Recognition of Jewish Fraternities at Brown University

One of the longest and certainly the best-known instances of opposition to the establishment of Jewish fraternities occurred at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, whose bylaws in the 1920s still required that its president be a Baptist minister. The number of Jewish students at Bowdoin, Williams, and Amherst then was too small for the lack of Jewish fraternities there to have a major impact. Brown University, by contrast, was located in a major metropolitan area, and student activities and social life at the all-male school were governed by its fraternity system. Yet for almost twenty-five years William Herbert Perry Faunce, president of Brown from 1899 to 1929, forbade the legal establishment of a single chapter of any Jewish fraternity on his campus. That he avoided openly and specifically declaring his intentions only contributed to the problem. It took years for the veiled excuses and discreet manipulations of the president’s office, along with the experiences of isolated generations of teenaged college students and national fraternity leaders, to add up to a clear pattern of discrimination.

Phi Epsilon Pi’s energetic traveling secretary Herman Kline, while traversing New England and upstate New York in January 1916 on an otherwise successful mission to establish new chapters, was as yet blissfully ignorant of the nature of their opponent. He was still full of
optimism, as his letters that year to the fraternity’s national secretary in New York Jesse Acker reveal:

Now Jesse, I want a little quick diplomatic work from you, it must be quick and fine to win the day and I think we can put it over. If we do, Phi Epsilon Pi in New England is assured of a stronghold stronger than Gibraltar. I have a bunch already at Brown—but there’s one drawback. There are already 20 frats at Brown and three years ago the President said that he’d have no new frats. Two years ago Z.B.T. tried to get into Brown but the Prexy sat on it. Now if we can get the Prexy’s permission we’d be the only Jewish non-sectarian frat. At Brown and with 150 Jews to draw from, can you imagine how great we’d be! Now I want you to sit right down and write to the President of Brown, give him a good line about the need of a non-sectarian frat., no Jews can be represented, etc., our ideals, our record etc., and you feel that both we and Brown will be benefited. Use the flowery language tactfully, diplomatically, and freely. Give him a list of our great men—Viereck, Townsend, Otis, Finchberg, etc.; and I think we can slip it over.25

Kline and others refused to believe that Faunce’s ban on new college fraternities had any anti-Jewish sentiment behind it. Ironically, in naming the few non-Jewish alumni of Phi Epsilon Pi, Kline included the name of George Sylvester Viereck (City College ’06), a German American author, publisher, and pro-German propagandist during World War I. Earlier, Viereck had shared cultural values and friendship with the fraternity’s German-Jewish founders at City College. By 1920 however, Viereck would resign in disgust and protest at the Jewish character of his allegedly nonsectarian fraternity. Even worse, in the 1930s he was destined to become a prominent Nazi as well as a secretary and spokesman for the German-American Bund.26 As for Faunce, it became apparent only over a long period to Phi Epsilon Pi and similar groups that it was their Jewishness, and not the thought of more fraternities on campus, which disturbed the Brown University president.

The extant transcript of one of many meetings where representatives of Jewish fraternities at Brown presented their case to the president or his representatives shows the difficulties which Jews encountered and the subtle nature of their opposition. In the spring of 1921 three young alumni—Walter Adler, Herman M. Davis, and Arthur J. Levy—met with Dean Otis E. Randall of the college, in this case a spokesman for President Faunce, to see once again if there was any possibility of establishing a chapter of Phi Epsilon Pi there. The report of the meeting, which included virtually verbatim notes taken down by Arthur J. Levy,
reveals the remarkable skill and unctuously genteel manner in which the Dean deflected the requests of these naïve petitioners. Over a period of several hours, Dean Randall not only managed to hold firm to his claim that Brown simply could not tolerate the presence of any more fraternities, much less sectarian ones; he also tried to convince the petitioners that in fact their main problems were caused by other ill-behaved Jews on campus who did not even deserve to be admitted to Brown:

For several hours there was a full and frank discussion of the fraternity situation at Brown, with the Dean telling us just what his problems were, and with us trying to be as helpful as possible. He declared that the first and dominating policy of the administration was to have no more fraternities, and that if he could have his way, the present nineteen would be reduced by about five.

He volunteered the statement that one of the most pressing problems in connection with the fraternity situation was that Jewish men every bit as fine as any other men on the campus were not invited to join the fraternities with very rare exceptions and that the matter had been troubling him for some years. He said he would do anything that he could to see that the finest type of Jews who come to the college received better consideration at the hands of the fraternal-social structure of the college. 27

In Dean Randall’s view, however, not enough of the “finest type of Jews,” such as the petitioners from Phi Epsilon Pi now before him, were coming to Brown. He thereupon launched into a general criticism of Jewish student behavior on the campus, repeating many of the common anti-Jewish charges of the day. In the process, he managed to place blame on the Jewish students themselves for their lack of acceptance and to make his listeners grateful that they themselves had been privileged to become Brown students at all:

On the other hand he frankly said that there is another type of Jewish men who come to the college, which the entire university would prefer to stay away. He mentioned as reasons, that they came to get everything they could out of the college, without giving anything to it, that they did not enter into the spirit of things at Brown, that they came up to the Hill to study, and left it behind with not a further thought, that they were dirty and unkempt, that they flatly and absolutely lied to the university in applying for scholarships, etc. He said that letters had been received by alumni stating that they would send no more men to Brown unless the enrollment of Jews was kept down.

This last, Dean Randall said, would absolutely not be done in any particular. He said that Brown University was glad to welcome Jews just as it
was glad to welcome everyone, who can come to Brown and enter wholly into the Brown spirit, giving and taking, and measuring up to the high standards of American college life. He mentioned a number of men who had come to Brown, and who had made good on the Hill in the eyes of the administration, and said that more of their type were welcome. He included his hearers in this class, and said that if more of the same kind came to Brown, there would be no present problem . . .

The representatives of Phi Epsilon Pi continued to try the Dean's patience by pointing out that Brown did indeed have at least one sectarian fraternity, Phi Kappa Sigma, a group restricted to Catholic students which had been founded there in 1889 and that Phi Epsilon Pi itself was not truly a sectarian fraternity, since their chapter at Dartmouth actually had one Chinese member. Dean Randall simply replied that the general exclusion of Chinese students from fraternities was regrettable, that the existence of Phi Kappa was equally regrettable, and that if he had been Dean at the time no such sectarian fraternity would ever have been founded, and none ever would as long as he was Dean of the College. Finally Dean Randall, perhaps observing with some anxiety Arthur Levy's detailed scribbling, brought an end to what had been from the beginning a fruitless discussion by once again hinting that the blame for exclusion lay on the Jewish students themselves:

The Dean repeated several times that he wished he could do something to solve the problem whereby some of the really fine, the wanted Jewish men, could be in the fraternity circle, and said he would be ready to do anything to urge the present chapters to aid in this movement, but he said too that the administration made it a point never to interfere in the slightest with the selection of men . . . He finally made the statement that he would even be willing to break his policy of no more fraternities if an organization could be formed general enough to include Jew and non-Jew alike, but which would take only the finest type of Jewish men, men who would measure fully up to the members of the other fraternities at Brown. He stated, however, that he could not be sure the President would agree with this view, and was not sure even whether he could finally agree to it.

The Phi Epsilon Pi representatives finally departed without coming close to achieving their goal, just after giving Dean Randall the assurance he demanded that there was not now nor had there ever been a secret chapter of their Jewish fraternity at Brown University. As the years passed and word about the peculiar situation at Brown spread through the greater American Jewish community, it be-
came apparent that anti-sectarianism and the alleged bad behavior and nonparticipation of Brown's Jewish students were not the main obstacles there. By the late 1920s observers could note that the Jewish student body at Brown was not only large—numbering almost one-fifth of the student body—but also well-represented in campus activities. This active group included varsity football stars (the most famous being Al C. Cornsweet '29, captain of the team), basketball stars, soccer players, swimmers, bandleaders, the president and manager of the orchestra, publication editors, and others in every conceivable activity.28 Ironically, President Faunce, in a rejection letter to Louis S. Lebenthal of Tau Epsilon Phi written in January 1928, invoked this extensive participation as an excuse that Jewish fraternities were not needed at Brown, since Jewish students were obviously so happy and productive without them. To change the status quo would, as he put it, only "kindle the fires of racial antagonism. . . . I do not believe that you and your friends would desire to inject an unwanted fraternity into a community where all is now peaceful and kind feeling prevails."29

By then several Jewish fraternity officials as well as Brown University students and alumni were writing to describe their experiences and to appeal to the American Jewish Committee, a leading Jewish defense organization, and to its prominent president Louis Marshall, to see if something could finally be done. "You may ask," wrote Samuel Klivansky, who had belonged to a sub-rosa Jewish fraternity chapter at Brown in 1918,

why this glorification of such a frail and meaningless institution as the college fraternity. Brown is essentially a fraternity college. Every conceivable activity at Brown is dominated and controlled by the fraternities. A non-fraternity man is a non-entity at Brown. It is a most miserable and disheartening experience for the young Jewish freshman at Brown to find that with the advent of the rushing season, he is shunted into the questionable category of the unwanted, the ignored, the despised—perhaps to be tolerated, but not to be associated with.

The establishment of Jewish fraternities, in his opinion, would in and of itself help Jewish students to achieve more and to refute critics by helping them feel more loyalty to the university. "As it is," Klivansky explained, "the Jewish student at Brown is embittered and sullen while at school because of this galling discrimination, and retains this animus when he graduates."30
Another such letter was received from senior Louis Pomiansky, Class of 1928. In it he vividly described the lot of the Jewish student at Brown and implored the American Jewish Committee to do something about it. "We Jewish men have always wanted our frats," he wrote to Marshall. "The Goy has his and more than enough to satisfy him. And since we are as good or as bad as he is, and since we are an integral part of the university, we have every right to have ours. We have our pathetic Menorah, and to us Jews who want our frats, it is like a decapitated rag doll, without an arm and a leg. . . . And as students, we can do nothing. They will not listen to the idle chatter of babes. But you and your associates have power. You can bring pressure to bear. You can force them to come out in the open somehow, make them lay out all their trumps and spades. We ought to have not one, but several frats here. It is owing us like a long-overdue bill . . ."

In his long and anguished letter, Pomiansky pointed out that the old charges and criticisms Gentiles had for so long made against Jews were now falling by the wayside.

Now, Mr. Marshall, you have in some measure heard my heart throbs as it were, heard what every loyal Jewish man must feel deep, deep down in his heart. They once said that we were vulgar, loud, uncouth, ill-bred. They cannot say that of us now, for even the classic Jew has gone. . . . And after that came the greasy grind era. And that has gone by the board. Here at Brown Jewish men are playing leading parts in both the classroom and the athletic field. Well, what will they say next? . . . I know one thing. Brown is my alma mater. To me she was and still is life. To me she is opportunity, and I owe her much, and I trust I will owe her more with the departing years. For this I will always be grateful. But in another way she has left me cold; she will never, never win my deepest love.

These and other impassioned words of Brown students and alumni had been prompted by the decision of Louis Marshall, after years of scattered reports, that it was time for the American Jewish Committee to take public action. A review of the abovementioned Gentile fraternity president's remarks at the 1927 NIC conference, passed on to him by the national president of the Jewish fraternity Tau Epsilon Phi, was the final straw. Marshall's motivation was apparently not any great affection for the idea of Jewish Greek-letter societies themselves, but rather a sense of injustice that Jewish students as a group should be denied the right to organize them while other groups were not. Privately, as he confessed to the Jewish fraternity president who sought his aid,
Marshall despised the entire institution of college fraternities and saw no value in them whatsoever:

The only phase of the subject which interests me is that of discrimination. To my mind they are an absurd exhibition of infantilism. They involve a criminal waste of time. For grown men to make them the center of thought and activity seems to me to be inexpressibly silly. . . . I am filled with disgust and contempt at the mental attitude exhibited. There is a total lack of a sense of propriety and of moral values. Booze and sex and their concomitants seem to constitute the be-all and end-all of their mental lucubrations. Any movement which would forbid secret fraternities in our colleges and universities would have my whole-hearted support. Personally I think it would be a blessing in disguise if our Jewish students were deprived of this great boon. They could form organizations in which serious work requiring thought and industry could be accomplished.32

Despite these negative views, however, Marshall, a distinguished and accomplished attorney, had become convinced that Jewish rights were being violated at Brown University and that it was the place of his organization to defend them. As he wrote, “From the standpoint of an unjust and unreasonable discrimination, the action of President Faunce stirs my fighting blood.” His response was a long and eloquent letter to President Faunce pleading for the case of Jewish fraternities at Brown. Both this letter and President Faunce’s answer were published in full in several Anglo-Jewish newspapers, in the American Jewish Year Book of 1929–1930, and in excerpts in the Nov. 12, 1928 New York Times, where they were eagerly read by Jewish Brown students and alumni.

In his letter, Marshall wrote of the exclusion that Jewish students suffered on the campus, the unjust segregation that already existed, the vital role that fraternities had come to play in college life, and the harmlessness of Jewish fraternities elsewhere. “The Jews are in a minority,” he wrote, “and as such are placed under a ban. Is it sportsman-like to increase these artificial disadvantages by withholding from them the right of associating among themselves? Are they dimming the light of learning, or muddying the stream of knowledge, or interfering with the flow of goodwill, by seeking a more limited brotherhood because a broader spirit of fraternity is denied them?”33

Once again, the appeal was to no avail. President Faunce wrote back that the establishment of any fraternity along racial or religious lines at Brown was out of the question. To do so would constitute “a confession of failure on the part of the American democracy.” He continued:34
Some of the fraternities undoubtedly have clauses in their constitutions which prevent the admission of any but white Protestants. I trust such narrowness will soon be outgrown. But we can hardly expect the immature minds of American college students to share the broader views which you and I have attained by long experience in living. We must have patience with them and seek to lift them out of all exclusiveness and littleness into the true democracy of emancipated spirits. . . . If some limitations on true democracy still remain among certain fraternities, we can only hope and believe that by the slow processes of education reforms may be achieved which are impossible through revolution.

Open Jewish fraternities never did gain a strong foothold at Brown. A chapter of Pi Lambda Phi, one of the officially and militantly nonsectarian “Jewish” fraternities, was established the next year, in 1929, but only after continued pressure from the American Jewish Committee, major media controversy, threats of prosecution from the fraternity’s officers, and the timely retirement—closely followed by the death—of an ailing President Faunce at the end of that school year. 35

The “Fight Against the Prom” at New York University

Encounters with these and other types of anti-Jewish attitudes could leave deep scars. Under such circumstances it is not difficult to comprehend why some Jewish students might truly be guilty of the charge of Harvard’s students and Brown’s Dean and so many others that they were insufficiently loyal to their schools. After graduation, they truly might not wish to donate a penny back or step foot on the campus ever again. An especially bitter and detailed memoir along these lines, sarcastically entitled “For Love of Alma Mater” was published in the Brandeis Avukah Volume of 1936, a publication of the American Student Zionist Federation. 36 The memoir is notable because the events described took place in New York City, rather than on the campus of an elite New England school. They illustrate well the character of the discrimination faced by Jewish students in the 1920s, as well as the important role that the Gentile Greek system played in it.

Mitchell Salem Fisher, the child of Russian Jewish immigrants and a 1923 graduate of New York University’s uptown campus, served as president of NYU’s Menorah Society, majored in Greek and Latin classics, graduated magna cum laude, and went on to earn both rabbinical ordination and editorship of the Columbia Law Review. Yet, as he himself stated, he could not feel any ardor for the place of his undergraduate education, which had done so much to make these achievements
possible. In writing publicly about his negative experiences, he gave his campus the pseudonym “Da-Da University” and thinly disguised the names of NYU professors and administrators. Nevertheless, a review of NYU’s archives verifies his story in every detail.

Fisher, a champion college debater, began his memoir by recalling his joy when he was chosen as one of the three representatives of NYU to travel to Great Britain to debate at several universities there. However, a few weeks before his departure, rumors began to circulate that he was not to go. “The debating coach, in answer to inquiry, stated that the Oxford University Union had sent Da-Da University a letter saying that since Da-Da was a ‘metropolitan’ university, it should be very careful of the social character of the men sent,” he wrote, “and to my ‘liberal’ university friends, that signified but one thing—Jews!” Fisher had to fight to go in the face of the coach’s attempt to dissuade him and attempts by a faculty committee to have him removed from the team.

More humiliation was in store. Upon his arrival in England, the American Rhodes scholar who headed the Oxford Student Union confirmed that the letter had indeed been referring to Fisher’s probable identity as a Jew. He politely requested Fisher to withdraw as one of the principal speakers, and to confine his participation to remarks from the floor. Once again, the reaction of Fisher’s university fellows was less than sympathetic. Neither fellow team members nor the University’s representative in London considered refusing to debate under those restrictions, and Fisher himself thought the whole matter “too stupid and picayune over which to fuss.” Furthermore, upon the team’s arrival in Oxford, there was mysteriously not enough room to house Fisher at Magdalene or the other colleges where his Gentile companions were staying. Instead, the one Jewish member of the team was lodged at an inn in town, “whose charm measurably compensated for the embarrassment.”

Back at NYU, in his junior year, 1923, Fisher came to realize that because of rigid control wielded by the Gentile fraternities, no Jewish student had ever been able to attend one of the central events of any university’s social life—the Junior Prom. In great anger, he described both the form of the discrimination practiced by the fraternities and the acquiescence to it of NYU’s president and other members of the administration:

Jews might be officers of the junior class, might captain the football team and wade in the gore for alma mater, but established tradition had it that
the sacred portals of the Prom were closed. The manner of our exclusion was simple. The President of the Junior class (always a Gentile fraternity man since Jewish students were subject to an unofficial but rigorous quota) would appoint as Prom committeemen only the representatives of accredited Gentile fraternities. The Prom, therefore, was entirely a Gentile fraternity affair, from which even long-recognized Jewish fraternities were barred. In my own junior year, the Jewish boys did not know when the Prom was to be given. None of us could buy a ticket. The whole floor of the ballroom was divided at the side into fraternity booths, so that if by some freak of chance a bold Semite might actually procure a ticket and venture in, there would be no chairs for his use, he could not go into the booths, and his girl would have to stand up all night! Just a pleasant little system!18

Fisher decided to take to the road of political activism to protest this situation. For the Jewish boys at the University, he wrote, the exclusion represented a “brazen insult,” not so much because they truly wanted to go to the Prom—which they did—but because the discrimination “was an open slap in the faces of every Jewish student and every Jewish alumnus,” with the full cooperation of the University’s administration. Chancellor “Black,” Fisher pointed out, “might coddle Jewish millionaires over a teacup in order to get money; he was Honorary Chairman and regularly led the grand march at the Prom.”39

Fisher began by sending a strong letter of protest to the chancellor, to the deans, and to the NYU daily student newspaper. He stressed that if Gentile fraternities wished to hold an interfraternity ball it was their privilege, but they should not call it “the Prom of the Junior Class.”40 The newspaper’s student editors, on their part, at first refused to print or even to acknowledge receipt of the letter, while the university’s chancellor called Fisher to his home in an attempt to dissuade him verbally from his rebellious course. Only when Fisher refused to back down and threatened to release his letter to the general media did the student editors relent and print it in the March 15, 1923 issue. The resulting publicity exposed Fisher and his backers to expressions of hatred from both faculty and students. Dean “White” of the College of Engineering sought him out for an additional administrative confrontation as he walked through the halls from his classes:

“You’re Mr. Fisher?”
“Yes.”
“What are you trying to do? Start a fight around here?”
“Why, no, Dean, I just wrote what I thought was right and in the interests of the University itself.”

He suggested that I visit at his office. The conversation ran so close to the proverbial, classic conversation with the cultured and yet bigoted Gentile that its occurrence is almost entirely unbelievable.

“You know, Mr. Fisher, my fathers came over here in the Mayflower. They came here for religious freedom. Your people came here to make money.”

I answered that the May Laws of Russia probably had as much to do with my parents’ coming to this country.

“Well, uhduh, there may be exceptions. But most of you Jews come here to make money.”

Members of the Gentile fraternities, not taking his protests lightly, threatened bodily harm, and rumors spread that one group in particular would beat up Fisher and dunk him in the college’s fountain. The assault continued with the sudden appearance of large antisemitic posters plastered on the walls of Fisher’s dormitory and other buildings on and around the campus, declaring “Kosher . . . Strictly Kosher . . . Must not apply here. SCURVY KIKES ARE NOT WANTED at New York University. If they knew their place they would not be here. Make New York University a White Man’s College.” Fisher mobilized the Jewish fraternities and as a group they immediately tore down the posters and organized for self-defense even as the University threatened to punish the perpetrators:

We swarmed over the campus tearing down, pulling down, scratching away the placards. A campus war was threatened. At the noon day chapel, Dean Rawton of the College of Arts excoriated the perpetrators of the libel. The University would expel the men who printed and put those posters up! The University was a great and liberal university! The Associated Press carried his words to all parts of the country. The Yiddish press which flamed with headlines concerning the affair, wrote editorials praising him. The Anglo-Jewish weeklies expressed appreciative satisfaction. The culprits would be expelled! At the mass meeting of the Jewish students which followed chapel, a resolution was passed expressing our confidence in the ability of the university authorities to deal with the situation. We arranged that the Jewish students would not congregate on going to or from classes in order to avoid the physical conflict which seemed inevitable. With good maneuvering and patience, trouble was averted . . .

Two days after the Dean’s chapel address, Fisher received a letter signed by the Ku Klux Klan, warning him “to leave the campus or else
I would meet with bodily inflicted violence.” From that moment on, he recalled, “several Jewish huskies were constantly with me.” Fortunately, the personal threats soon subsided. But the rage remained when detailed detective work by Jewish students revealed the unmistakable identity of the poster’s distributors by tracing the butcher shop where they had obtained the stencil of the Hebrew word for “kosher.” The Jewish students passed on the information, but neither Dean “Rawton” nor any official of the University did anything of any substance and the perpetrators graduated with their class.

Two more years of political work, including the formation of a coalition of Jewish students and Gentile nonfraternity men in order to capture the presidency of the Junior class, were necessary before the fraternities’s control over the Prom was broken. Even then, according to Fisher, many of the customary Gentile patrons and patronesses whose financial contributions were essential to the Prom’s operation refused to extend their aid. The American Jewish Congress, one of the leading American Jewish defense agencies, had to be called in to intervene. Finally, the Prom took place as promised, and Fisher triumphantly described his delayed attendance there:

I invited the “girl” of my college years to come to the Prom. We were among the first couples on the floor, the first Jewish couple at the Prom in its over three-quarters of a century of history! At the end of the dance, we walked over to the booth for the patrons’ committee. Dean Rawton was there. He looked up as I entered. Few alumni ever attend the undergraduate Prom. But the embarrassed expression in his eyes indicated that he knew why I had come. With curious surprise, he surveyed my companion’s Park Avenue fashioned dress and listened to her perfect English speech. We bowed away, and waltzed. . .

In the end Fisher could not help but disown the college he had wanted so badly to love. To express such sentiments was nothing short of treasonous in the 1920s when loyalty to one’s school was an integral part of American collegiate culture. And yet, by 1936 there was an alternative on the horizon. In keeping with the author’s strong Zionist ideology and the appearance of his memoir in a Zionist youth publication, Fisher’s emphatic negation of NYU was coupled with an allusion to another university—the Hebrew University, which had just been built on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem. Speaking perhaps rhetorically and with more than a touch of bitterness, the author declared that only in a homeland of his
own and in a university of his own could he and his people ever hope to find the true happiness and acceptance they longed for:45

I have no alma mater. The love that I had for the campus, its lilacs and chrysanthemums, its shaded walks and the moon riding high over the library . . . both are long dead. Like hundreds of others, I have no college mother. To her Jewish sons she was no alma mater, but a treacherous mother. What she gave us, we achieved by the piling up of index cards, the scribbling of themes, the sheer strength of our intellectual might and the genius of the unyielding labor of many nights. I have but one university. . . . It is on the hills of Scopus.

The two-year battle at New York University to break the control of the Gentile fraternities over one of school's major social events of the year, and the participation of American Jewish defense agencies in the process, illustrates the importance of these events in the lives of the students. It made little sense to claim that young Jewish students had truly equal access to institutions of higher education in New York City or in the U.S. if they could not even dance at their own prom.

Fisher and his associates had the strength to challenge this exclusion, to fight against it for years, and to achieve ultimate victory. If less hardy and more sensitive Jewish youth were exposed to these attitudes, manipulations, and exclusionary practices long enough, however, they might just accept that what their critics said about their people was all true. Blows from the surrounding non-Jewish powers might have been more violent, but they also might have hurt less in days and places where Jews as individuals had fewer hopes of participating in those societies. In the United States of America, where expectations and hopes were so much higher, we can only imagine what psychic scars they were left with for the rest of their lives from campus experiences such as these.