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Liz Rohan
University of Michigan-Dearborn

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Rohan: The Historical Construction of the “College Man” Identity and Wor
THE HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE “COLLEGE MAN” IDENTITY AND WORLD
WAR I ERA ARCHIVE OF A DENISON UNIVERSITY FRATERNITY MAN

LIZ ROHAN, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN–DEARBORN

This article foregrounds a portion of an archive featuring the artifacts of a historical college student, John M. Price, who attended Denison University in Granville, Ohio during and after World War I, who was also a member of Phi Gamma Delta fraternity like his brothers, father and uncles. Price’s interest in writing, as well as reading, was developed in tension with prescribed identities in World War I era collegiate America deemphasizing scholastics. Price’s documents not only provide a historical example of a young man responding to prescribed cultural identities, but also show him struggling to maintain this identity, a struggle that can be food for thought for contemporary college students whose personal values may conflict with the values prescribing their public behavior, and behavior that has historical roots in the era when Price attended college.

The details that Phi Gamma Delta member John Price jotted down in his diary about his activities during a few days as a college student on the Denison University campus in Granville, Ohio during his sophomore year the winter of 1919 show that he was quite a busy young man.

Tuesday, March 4, 1919: Studied Geog Inf. notes this a.m. with Jingles and took quiz. Think I got by. Called Class Meeting after chapel to elect Editor and Manager of Adytum, but they wanted a nominating committee. At supper, Shorney made Seaholes practice cuckooing and Simpson gave a speech on “Will the Chewing Gum on the Bedpost Keep its Flavor Overnight?” Ordered them to have two scheming dates at Beaver field and bring them to the back door at 8:30. Begad, they did! About 9:30, news came in that basketball team licked Wittenberg 29 to 23. All went out in bathrobes, built a bonfire, and snakedanced up around Sem. Great sport. I have a cheer for Mrs. Brumback, and Josh yells, “Shut up, Price!” I fear my reputation is gone now.

Wednesday, March 6, 1919: Had a relapse this morning, and sat around till 10:30, buck-

ing a class and my hour with Ted. Mehl finished his lecture on evolution—very fine indeed. Also led chapel. Meeting of student body to consider disposition of literary societies.

The diary entries from these few days in 1919 are just one peek at a larger archive that Price developed as a lifetime diarist, a portion of which features his four years at Denison University that he arranged to be particularly audience friendly. This archive includes: the transcription of his diary entries, letters he sent and received, artifacts such as tuition bills, notes from the college dean, William Tanner, about his class “bucks,” report cards, and also some of the commentary he made about the events chronicled in his diary when reflecting on them as he arranged this archive¹. Price’s interest in keeping a diary as a young man and later into his life predicted and paralleled his longtime career as an editor at the New York Herald Tribune.

This article is designed as a heuristic for reading part of Price’s archive by describing the historical and cultural context for his processes as a writer and editor of this archive; particularly the portion of the archive that chronicles Price’s last year at Denison during the fall of 1920, and the

¹Note: Link to diary and related documents: <http://ohio5.openrepository.com/ohio5/handle/11282/333701>

winter and spring of 1921. A version of the archival materials discussed in the article can be accessed electronically via the hyperlink in Note 1 at the beginning of this article. The data discussed also foreground the most conflict, as Price struggled to maintain what I call the “college man” identity and began drinking alcohol shortly after it became illegal to do so in Ohio, and the US, and after he ironically turned twenty-one. During his final semester he attempted to establish a legacy for himself as a writer and class leader by founding a literary magazine, the *Flamingo*, under some pressure from his family members after they assumed his class clown antics caused him to lose the opportunity to be editor of the school paper, the *Denisonian*. Despite his madcap activity, he also maintained his habit as a voracious reader, even though he got “smeared” on some tests because he had not studied for them.

This article is also organized to encourage thought about a particular theme, the historical construction of the previously mentioned college man identity as it is represented by Price’s choices and attitudes during his last year of college. This “college man” has contempt for adult or school-sponsored scholastics and spends more time with extra-curricular activities rather than homework. He relies upon natural smarts for scholastic success and denies or hides any preparation he might be making for his future. The construction of this college man identity is a particularly relevant theme for analysis when considering that contemporary college men reportedly still feel pressure to party as much as they can and also claim that outward preparation for the future is not considered masculine in their circles (Edwards & Jones, 2009) just as it wasn’t for John Price nearly 100 years ago, and as I have argued similarly elsewhere (Rohan, 2014). Along with a history lesson about artifacts, attitudes and customs typical to the era, John Price’s diary and related documents will ideally help the reader reflect upon and better think about what it means to be a “college man,” or a member of a college fraternity, in America, historically, ste-

reotypically, and even in their own contemporary experiences. This archive, then, can ideally be used as a teaching tool for contemporary college students so they might consider the conflicts and intersections between their individual aspirations and those constructed for them by the fraternity/sorority culture that they have inherited.

Historian Nicholas Syrett (2009) traces the modern college man who relies on “natural smarts” for his success to the nineteenth-century literary society culture, which glorified students’ success as orators in literacy societies rather than in the otherwise dull adult-directed curriculum that was neither innovative nor student-centered (p. 91). But by the 1920s, the football player had taken over as the college campus hero (Schmidt, 2007), and bookish young men lost their opportunity to shine outside of the classroom as they had previously when using their skills as readers and writers during literacy society contests. Hence, while the admired nineteenth-century college man did have an opportunity to show his smarts outside the classroom, the idealized twentieth-century college hero, the jock, or by extension the party boy, was indifferent to scholastics altogether. Price’s experience, as shared in the details of his archive, can also add a depth of understanding to an otherwise stereotyped identity when seeing that Price was caught in a conflict between pleasing peers, as well as his parents, as he donned the college man identity, exemplified most pointedly via his hazing of pledges, alcohol consumption and class bucking. Price resolved this conflict by satisfying both sides. The literary magazine that Price founded was popular with his peers and was also rubber stamped, with some curmudgeony, by campus adult leaders, particularly from the President of the University, Price’s nemesis, President Clark Chamberlain, whom by convention the students called “Prexy” or “Prex.”

Price’s layered relationship with a particular college, Denison University, and also a particular fraternity, Phi Gamma Delta, might make him exceptional, but his experience was also quintes-

Rohan: The Historical Construction of the “College Man” Identity and Wor

sential. Price came of age as a college student when the modern fraternity and sorority system was growing exponentially, as the number of students was doubling and when attending college was no longer just the aspiration of the elite. Investment in higher education by a range of stakeholders also led the development of college sports programs and new stadiums (Thelin, 2004). Somewhat as a result, by the 1920s images of US college students circulating in articles, advertisements and cartoons portrayed the average college student as a hedonistic, fun loving, hard-drinking party boy pursuing not the life of the mind but the “gentleman’s C” (Fass, 1979; Syrett, 2009; Thelin, 2004).

Although not yet part of a Greek row of houses that would develop at Denison in the coming years, the Greek revival style of Price’s Phi Gamma Delta fraternity house might represent the classic quality of Price’s experience in a white fraternity, an experience that has now become stereotyped and also feasibly branded, packaged, and even normed, by and for young contemporary college students (Fass, 1979). That is, Price’s behavior predicts still popular cultural scripts of “boys-will-be-boys” masculinity made iconic by the 1978 National Lampoon movie, “Animal House,” about a rebellious group of frat boys, the Deltas, living it up and partying down at an east coast college in the early 1960s. One of the movie’s scriptwriters, Chris Miller, has even identified the 1920s as the genesis of the modern college experience when remembering his initial impressions of Dartmouth as he encountered the school for the first time as a freshman in the early 1960s: “It was all very impressive, conjuring up Fitzgeraldian visions of my father’s time here, with flappers, raccoon coats, and silver hip flasks” (2006, p. 53). Arguably, young men steeped in this culture that de-emphasizes academics for the sake of a good party are actually reenacting the rituals invented by John Price and his like-minded young colleagues, meanwhile lacking a historical context for what might be shaping their identity con-

struction as well their behavior. As museum scholars Mark P. Leone and Barbara Little argue (2004), “Afflicted with social amnesia, people forget that their own society has a historical past and therefore falsely conclude that their present reality is ‘natural and inevitable’” (p. 370). At the same time, the reality for students like Price was more complicated when considering Price’s love for reading and writing and also his family’s deep interest and investment in learning and scholarship. Thus, while Price’s experiences, and his method of self-representation through ordinary, every day texts, promote the stereotype of the historical fraternity man, they also challenge this stereotype as well, which can also provide food for thought among contemporary readers. Overall, Price’s texts show how individual lives can both reflect and challenge popular scripts, such as the college man identity, as history simultaneously evolves and repeats itself.

Granville, Ohio was not the only village to encourage Price’s interest in scholarship and writing and its history. Price’s Chicago neighborhood of Morgan Park was a veritable college town. Its bucolic streets nearly mirrored the composition of Granville in its incipient years. When Morgan Park was developed in the late 1800s, it had a Baptist theological seminary, a woman’s college and a private academy for high school students (Andreas, 1884). Granville likewise was developed as a college town, including Granville College which would become Denison, two ladies colleges, and also Doane Academy, a private residential high school affiliated with the university (Utter, 1956). Perhaps Price’s father Enoch’s experience growing up near Granville inspired him to found the Morgan Park High School, before the village became part of Chicago (and likely also because his daughter Lillis could not attend the all-boys Morgan Park Academy that had previously served the community’s need for a secondary school.) The few privileged youth who attended this brand new high school had mothers who belonged to the Morgan Park Woman’s Club with an art and literature department and

a Shakespeare program for young people (Town Talk, 1918). Price's rigorous high school curriculum included Latin when he translated Virgil, Ancient History, English Literature, when he read Byron and Pilgrim's Progress, and also Physics. As continued to be his habit, Price often shirked deadlines for school assignments when a high school student. But in Morgan Park, Price also developed his habit of reading for pleasure, aided by the well-stocked public library where Price visited the magazines looking for articles that interested him, "loaf[ing] away among the books...merely opening one here and there" (J. Price, 1916 diary, January 13). Sometimes, as was his habit at college, he "drew" books that caught his eye, even though as would become the case more and more over his burgeoning adulthood, he didn't finish or hand in homework in time.

Timeless Themes: Legacy

Price's affiliations with his elders who were former Denisonians was literally made concrete for him when he roomed in Talbot Hall his freshman year and discovered some carved graffiti of his name on a window sill, and wrote to his father about its genesis. His father replied:

I imagine you are on the 3rd floor in the southwest corner of Talbot ("New Brick"). My brother Eber and I moved into that room in 1882 and it was occupied continuously by Prices, usually two, until Orlo graduated in 1894. I roomed there six years. There was no frat houses in those days and all students roomed in houses, or in town. (E. J. Price. 1918).

That nearly all of Price's uncles attended Denison was a result of his grandfather's financial acumen. Price's grandfather, Thomas, an apple farmer in nearby Newark, Ohio, who also founded a literacy society, bought a "perpetual scholarship" which Denison, then Granville College, used as a fundraising endeavor in the 1850s. Thomas then used the scholarship to send five of his seven sons to Denison (I. Price, n. date).

Price not only witnessed memorials such as the inscription at Talbot Hall, he perpetuated the tradition of witnessing, remembering and recording life at Denison as an ongoing Price family initiative through his writing home and writing in his diary.

Ironically enough President Chamberlain, or "Prexy," was also a "Phi Gam" and had graduated from the college in 1894. Chamberlain and a handful of other Phi Gams turned faculty, fraters in facultate, were related to a network of involved alums who worked to preserve decorum among Denison Phi Gams, and in the fraternity house. One of Price's self-described "best friends" at Denison, Clarence Coons (or Coonie), who was Price's boss at one point, and also his Physics teacher, was a Phi Gam alum also (J. Price, 1917 diary September 13). These alums, including Price's father Enoch, of course, acted as more or less tolerant watchdogs of the younger Phi Gams antics and called upon their "brothers" to tone it down if the young men lost control or drew too much attention to themselves.

Drinking alcohol in the public spaces of the Phi Gam fraternity house happened during Price's stay in the house, but was frowned upon by some graduated alums including Price's brother Owen. Owen seemed to have come of age a bit before the Jazz Age commenced, and as evidenced by his perhaps prudish attitude about alcohol consumption when learning about a "booze party" in the front room of the fraternity house. As he wrote to Price about this party in a letter: "Don't stand for it, Johnny" (O. N. Price, 1920). Price's parents' surveillance of Price's college life experience through reading his report card also shows how grades have enlisted parents as disciplinary watchdogs of their children's college careers, and particularly before legislation developed to prohibit parents from seeing the grades of their college-aged children without consent (Allmendinger, 1975; Rosentweig, 2002).

Rohan: The Historical Construction of the “College Man” Identity and Wor

Diaries and Social Media

Born in 1899, John Price was destined to live at a crossroad between two centuries. Perhaps as one result his writing processes also straddled the generations. As a male diarist Price was a throwback to the nineteenth-century college man like his father; as a slacker and editor of a literary magazine, he could be compared to his contemporaries F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Concerned with recording “status updates” about his comings and goings in his diary, and in letters to his family members, he could also be at home in our time, the early twentieth-first century, as new media expands opportunities for up-to-the minute self-expression and communication.

Readers might also therefore consider that the contemporary impetus to mediate experience, that is, record ever minute of it via technology, also has a history along with the college man identity. Price’s diary keeping and mediating of experience via text also had historical roots and was deeply steeped in a family tradition of record keeping and text production, considering that Price’s grandfather, Thomas, kept a diary, his father Enoch kept a diary and his uncles kept diaries. Price’s parents’ courtship was fostered via correspondence when the couple wrote to each other while in college. Price’s lack of introspection in his diary is characteristic of nineteenth-century diary keeping, before diary keeping became associated both with women and confession, and into the twentieth century (Cully, 1985). In fact, mass-produced diaries, popular among nineteenth-century businessmen, and used also by women to create records, encouraged “dailiness” (Sinor 2002, p. 6) by design, allowing only one page or less for a diarist’s daily records. Much like blogs in the twenty-first century, nineteenth-century diarists commonly kept “companion” texts to supplement their inevitably sparse diary records, which functioned more like contemporary appointment books (McCarthy, 2000). As Price wrote to his mother in November of 1917: “The only way to get all the

news is to refer to my diary. I’ve been keeping it pretty steadily since I came down, and it proves useful occasionally” (J. M. Price to L. A. Price, 1917). The details that Price shared in his diary entries might add up to a story, but these diary texts were conceivably written so Price could remember what happened to him when writing letters for his family, particularly his mother who was his primary correspondent. He also used his diaries as practical records when, for example, calculating his wins and losses as a poker player, and over the course of about a year.

Much like contemporary Facebook posts and end of the year photo collages, Price’s diaries also helped him to remember later when he re-read entries again. For instance, in 1950, when reflecting on his diary, and its keeping, Price commented on an event that took place on February 16, 1921: “There was a time, back in the 1920s, when I found that upon reading any day’s diary entry I could directly remember the day and its events—that’s when I should have typed out and expanded the diary” (J. Price, 1921 diary). Not an introspective diarist, nor perhaps an introspective person, he was nevertheless a self-conscious diarist. Aware of his texts as significant memorials, he also recognized memories as nebulous snapshots that did not necessarily reflect reality, even when a writer acts as an eyewitness to every day events. Reflecting on a diary entry for Oct. 27, 1917 in “1950” about a Denison football game against Ohio State, Price mused, for example, “Illustrating how memory fails, it has been my ‘recollection’ for years that I was put in at the last minute as a substitute for the last few second of this muddy game with Ohio.” Since the diary entry made it clear that he had not played in this game, he concluded that he “[m]ust have confused it with the Freshman-Sophomore game.” (J. Price, 1921 diary, 1950).

Price’s use of shorthand when describing secret fraternity rituals and pranks against college authorities in his diary also hints at another imagined audience for the diary, fellow fraternity brothers and school authorities. Syrett (2009)

associates secrecy, and secret societies, in tandem with other privileges associated with being a white, male college student, and a fraternity member. Other items in the collection reflect Price's willingness to self-disclose and for the greater purpose of memorial such as the previously mentioned report cards with poor grades, reprimanding letters from the college dean and "doctored" bills exaggerating his room and board costs that he sent to his father when he hoped for more cash for pocket money.

More Tools for Interpreting Price's Experiences: Spirituality and Religion, Activism on Campus, and Dating Customs

As with many other Post-World War I college youth, Price was not interested in religion, and attended church only occasionally, a still tense position at the then Baptist-affiliated Denison, and particularly during the annual "week of prayer" every spring (Chessman, 1957). Price's maternal grandfather had been a minister, and several of his uncles were clergymen, but Price was a self-proclaimed atheist. He even embraced evolution when some of his more religious young colleagues remained skeptics of science. In April of 1919 he even wrote in his diary, "Argued with Duke and Gene about Evolution. They haven't enough sense yet to believe they are descended from monkeys" (J. Price, 1919 diary, April 11).

Price likely saw it coming when in 1922, the year after he graduated, a well-liked Jewish Denison faculty member in Zoology, Sidney Kornhauser, was fired, presumably for his teaching methods and also because he was Jewish (Chessman, 1956), and as friction escalated between the religious and the scientific after the war. Price demonstrated an unselfconscious prejudice against Jewish people he met during his collegiate travels, but he wrote an editorial to the Denison alumni magazine condemning the decision to fire Kornhauser. Price claimed that if the college was to evolve, so to speak, its leadership would need to cut ties with the Baptist church (The future of Denison, 1923). Writers responding to his edi-

torial suggest that Denison alums were not ready for a secular alma mater. Price's advice, though, would predict the university's eventual disaffiliation with its Baptist beginnings in decades to come, and as it expanded the campus, part of the "Greater Denison" plan much talked about before and after World War I.

Bolshevism, a precursor to Communism in Russia, evolved as a term used by Denison students and leaders during Price's career to describe radical and threatening ideas that somehow made it to Granville, and in conflict with Denison students and leaders who were threatened by change, and also in conflict with a backlash against socialism after the war. Price himself was accused of being a "Bolshevik," and mostly for his pranks against Prexy. According to Price, during one of Prexy's typical pedantic speeches, Prexy in fact compared interclass rivalry among Denison students, known as "scrapping," to Bolshevism (J. Price, 1919 diary, May 6,).

But many of Price's professors were progressive from a contemporary standpoint, and encouraged critical thinking about new ideas as college curricula became more secular and as more vocationally-oriented coursework more became popular (Garay, 2007; Levine, 1988; Reuben, 1996). Journalism programs were proliferating in US colleges in the second decade of the century, for example, and a program was developed at Denison during Price's career at the college (Journalism next year, 1919, p. 2;) marked by the arrival of the sophisticated and likely homosexual Professor Dickerson who encouraged critical thinking. In German class Price translated Einstein's theories of relativity. And, one of Price's favorite books that he read for an English class, *The Story of an African Farm*, by the South African writer Olive Schreiner, promotes feminist ideas and its main character questions the existence of God.

On the other hand, Denison leaders and Morgan Park leaders, collectively Baptists, held at the time typical and conservative attitudes about social mores, such as their rules about the mingling

Rohan: The Historical Construction of the “College Man” Identity and Wor

of members of the opposite sex. Customary at colleges across the nation, female college students at Denison had strict curfews when living in the “Sem,” which was Denison’s woman’s campus consisting of a few dorms and classrooms. Even by 1921 young men and women had to “scheme.” A “schemer” was someone who organized a date not authorized by elders and, therefore, Victorian codes of conduct requiring a chaperone, permission from Mrs. Brumback the woman’s dean, or at the very least some adult surveillance (Chessman, 1957), which is probably one reason Price and associates hoped at first to name their literary magazine *The Schemer*. A schemer who got caught risked getting “campused”.

When Price got to Denison, dancing was prohibited while school was in session. When he was in high school in Morgan Park dancing was also discouraged. This rule was likely a reaction to the “dance craze” of the 1910s and 1920s, and a new world in which young people could dictate their own amusements when dance halls, movie theaters, and a bit later the automobile, created space for young people to gather outside of their homes and their parents’ control (Bailey, 1988; Mintz & Kellogg, 1988, Model, 1989). Denison students worked around the ban on dancing by scheduling big parties when school was technically not in session, and before and after breaks. Meanwhile, and illustrative of the inevitable uneven transformation of values during the era, Price had relative freedom in hanging out with and escorting his high school friend, Margaret Heil, to and fro when visiting her at Ohio State and also in Chicago.

Also the custom during the era, young men hampered by the rules that indisposed their female cohorts went elsewhere to find dates and amusement—in town mostly where women were obviously not beholden to “Sem” rules. The interurban, occasionally a car, and at one point a bus, easily took Denison students to nearby Newark, “the city of sin,” seven miles down the road, where Denison rules no longer applied, and away from adult supervision. Furthermore,

there were also more men than women attending Denison University before the war, and before the campus expanded; for example, of the 600 students who attended the college in 1916, 400 were reportedly men and 200 were reportedly women (Denison will enlarge, 1916). After the war when Price accelerated his habits of “loafing” much of his time away smoking cigarettes, going to dances, playing poker with his fraternity brothers at the house, he often attended movies in Newark. Joined by his fraternity brothers, he sometimes prowled Newark’s streets for non-chaperoned women, and with the predictable mixed success. Overall, Price’s relationships with women, which sometimes included some “petting” that Price called “lovin’s,” were rather chaste and if sometimes “scheming” not very far out of bounds. Price somewhat passively went about the business of getting a date and being a date for various school parties and Greek affairs with little admitted passion for any young woman in particular. For whatever reason he also was attracted to women who were unavailable, such as the perpetually-engaged Judy Pursell or the out-of-town and out-of-sight Margaret. His most sexually charged experience happened to take place months before graduation with a much younger girl, who was also “a townie.” Price took up with this young woman when he was on an informal date with a classmate, Thelma, whom he had dated casually over his college career. As he described the encounter, “Loved Thelma a little, then dropped her, and played with the other girl. One of those ornery 16 year-olds---tells dirty stories and allows anything” (J. Price, 1921 diary, May 14). As Syrett notes (2009), it wasn’t unusual for fraternity men to seduce high school girls in this era when consensual sex among young people who were equals was taboo or at the very least not yet the norm (p. 221).

Getting Ready to Read the Diary & Related Documents

As Laurel Ulrich has written about reading a diary: “Opening a diary for the first time is like

walking into a room full of strangers. The reader is advised to enjoy the company without trying to remember every name” (p. 35). Readers of John Price’s diary will likely be more satisfied if following Ulrich’s advice. Readers are also advised to consult an inflation calculator to better understand the relative cost of items and services in John Price’s world, considering, for example, that four dollars in 1921 would be worth fifty-two 2015 dollars. The online introduction to the diary that foregrounds the archive might be of interest, as might for that matter the entire archive which begins with Price’s freshman year in 1917. Yet to get to the heart of Price’s conflict as a “college man,” readers might skip to page 145 of the document, which begins with the first days of Price’s senior year, the fall of 1920. The previous semester Price got some tough news when, as mentioned earlier, he learned that he was not picked to be the editor of the school newspaper, the *Denisonian*. This news also upset his family members, especially his brother Owen who had held the job as editor of this newspaper during his college career at Denison. Owen thought Price had not been picked because he had “fostered the rep that [he was a] ‘heller”” (O. N. Price, 1920). Also mentioned earlier, this loss would indirectly lead Price to found a literary magazine, the *Flamingo*. His editorship of the *Flamingo* allowed him a space on campus where he could be both studious and cool, as his chronic habit of bucking classes caught up with him, and he risked not graduating.

Price’s mostly unselfconscious behavior as a “college man” during this last year of college, which included lots of drinking, hazing of pledges and scheming, might equally horrify, amuse and educate members about a historical period in American culture that is still glorified or just reflected upon nostalgically. When pondering the genesis and development of the college man identity in the early twentieth century, readers might also consider the following contradictions that Price’s behavior might embody during the final days of his college career. He rejected

Victorian mores when it came to religion and, somewhat, relations between the sexes. But he was also a walking and talking museum, his life an ode to the past. Even while performing the scripted identity assigned to him by the greater culture of the time, in this case that of the rebellious fraternity boy unaffected by adult disapproval, Price’s collegiate records, and most importantly his every day writing catalogued for posterity, shows a young man’s profound allegiance to his forefathers and the legacy these forefathers almost literally wrote for him. And even while he took pride in rejecting studiousness and organized religion, his very presence on the Denison’s campus, and the genres he used to document this experience, align him with previous generations of Prices who contributed directly to his success through their interest in education generally and Price’s education specifically. Probably most importantly, or to put it simply, he bucked classes a lot, but he read and wrote a lot, too.

Rohan: The Historical Construction of the “College Man” Identity and Wor

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Author Biography

Liz Rohan is an Associate Professor of Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Her research that reflects her ongoing interests in pedagogy, feminist research methods and America’s progressive era has appeared in journals such as *Rhetoric Review*, *Composition Studies*, *Pedagogy*, *JAEPL*, *Reflections*, *Composition Forum*, *Peitho*, and also in several book chapters.