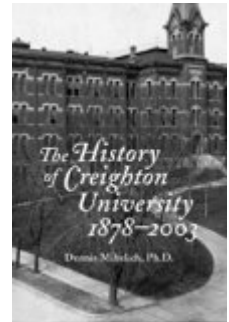


Dennis N. Mihelich. *The History of Creighton University, 1878-2003.* Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2006. xiv + 528 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-881871-48-4.



Reviewed by Gerald McKeivitt

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Of the twenty-eight colleges and universities in the United States claiming an affiliation with the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), Omaha's Creighton University has long stood apart as one of the few institutions without a published history. With the appearance of this account of the institution's evolution that deficiency has finally been corrected. Authored by Creighton historian Dennis N. Mihelich, the volume was commissioned for the university's 125th anniversary celebration.

The central thesis of the book is that Creighton matured from a small school for immigrant Catholics, run according to European norms, to a diverse, comprehensive university that is fully assimilated into the American educational mainstream. There is much that is familiar in this evolution. As the author reminds his readers, the chief features of Creighton's development paralleled the growth of other Jesuit institutions in the United States. Although at first glance this uniformity might seem off-putting, the abundant points of comparison are, in fact, richly informative. Sameness was partly a consequence of the

fact that all of the order's colleges and universities were, until the mid-twentieth century, subject to centralized control by the Society of Jesus. In addition, every Catholic school in the United States faced similar challenges in its early history, such as limited resources, religious prejudice, reliance on foreign-born faculty, and an immigrant student clientele with limited educational aspirations.

Creighton, like most of its sister institutions, began as a preparatory school and high school. Founded in 1878, it did not grant its first degrees until 1892. With the notable exception of the faculty of its professional schools, the university's teaching staff was for decades limited to clerics. As late as 1912, the sole lay person on the undergraduate college faculty was an athletic instructor. Its course of studies and code of discipline adhered to a European model. Pressed by provincials and superiors general to implement the traditional Jesuit curriculum centered on classical literary training, Creighton struggled to conform to the expectations of overseers abroad while accommodating the educational needs of its Ameri-

can clientele. With the introduction of the non-classical bachelor of science degree in 1911, the university began to inch closer to the American educational mainstream. Thus, as the author explains, the history of Creighton stands as a case study of how Jesuit higher education evolved into an American hybrid (p. 121). It reveals a process whereby an immigrant or foreign institution Americanizes while retaining distinctive features of the old-world culture (p. 125).

This is not to say that Creighton was like every other Jesuit establishment. There were some features that distinguished this Midwestern school from its twenty-seven sister institutions. While most of the early Jesuit colleges in America had lay supporters, few boasted benefactors as consistently generous as Creighton's founding clan. Irish Catholic immigrants, the Creightons of Omaha, aided the institution over many decades. A bequest from Mary Lucretia Wareham Creighton, the widow of Edward C. Creighton, led to the school's founding and naming. In co-founder John A. Creighton, the school possessed a single benefactor who underwrote every project undertaken by the institution into the early twentieth century (p. 98). The family championed the founding of medical and dental schools, for example; and thanks to the founders' endowment, Creighton charged no tuition and only minimal fees until 1924.

Unlike other Jesuit schools that focused primarily on undergraduate training in the humanities, Creighton offered graduate and professional training from its earliest decades. While most Jesuit institutions specialized in single-sex education far into the twentieth century, Creighton also pioneered in the education of women. As a consequence of having acquired a pre-existing medical school, it enrolled the first female of any U.S. Jesuit school in 1900. Despite objections from the Jesuit superior general in Rome, women began enrolling in Creighton's summer school in 1913 and in the regular program shortly thereafter.

The university commenced its greatest strides toward Americanization in the early twentieth century. Criticized at home for its highly structured curriculum and chided by religious superiors abroad for the low quality of its programs, Creighton's leadership made determined efforts to improve. According to the author, "to remain viable, it had to assimilate, to become American" (p. 444). Transformation was achieved primarily by conforming the school's European educational tradition to mainstream American norms. Alexander Burrowes, one of Creighton's Jesuit overseers, bluntly stated the case for change in 1915: "As we cannot set the standard, we shall have to follow" (p. 121). And follow they did. Determined to win accreditation for its various schools, the university strove to professionalize its faculty, improve finances, control its athletic programs, and adapt its curricula to American standards. Although burdened with unfulfilled dreams during much of this process, success was attained, albeit slowly (p. 134).

For decades aloof from the community that surrounded it, Creighton achieved greater integration into its urban and regional setting after World War II. By 1960, its impact on the professional life of its locale was significant. According to one survey, 73 percent of the dentists in the Omaha area, 58 percent of pharmacists, 47 percent of certified public accountants, 45 percent each of lawyers and physicians were graduates of the university's professional schools (p. 292). With academic maturation and growth came increased competition for state and federal funds and a desire to free the institution from clerical oversight. Accordingly, in 1968 the university reorganized its governance by establishing a lay majority on its board of directors. Although decision-makers claimed this change would in no way alter its basic tenets (p. 310), Creighton, joined the rising tide of Jesuit-affiliated colleges and universities that embraced greater laicization and secularization in the decades that followed.

This is a thorough history that leaves no detail unexplored. Consequently, some minor particulars about building construction, changes in personnel, or athletics will appeal primarily to friends and alumni of the university. However, Mihelich consistently places significant shifts in the local story within the larger context of American higher education. Moreover, his chronicle is credible because it avoids some of the pitfalls to which institutional histories are often fatally prone, including a dependence upon the promotional and public relations jargon that characterizes many college chronicles. By contrast, this history is both informative and gracefully written. Moreover, the author, a professional historian, takes a critical approach to his subject, sharing with his readership both institutional failures and successes. Thoroughly researched, the book draws on the latest secondary sources on American higher education. Although the central Jesuit archives in Rome is not cited in the bibliography, all essential American depositories, including the rich archives of the Jesuit Missouri Province in St. Louis, have been thoroughly mined for data relevant to the Creighton story. In sum, this volume fills a significant lacuna in the growing scholarship about American Catholic higher education.

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