

Letter from Columbia College Dean Herbert Hawkes*
to Professor E. B. Wilson**, June 9, 1922

My Dear Professor Wilson

The recent newspaper controversy in regard to jews is about as sensible as most newspaper controversies. Of course the Harvard people made a terrible break in making the kind of an announcement that they did. I understand that President Lowell is directly responsible for the difficulty.

The only reason that I have been very careful not to get into print in regard to the matter is because this is one of the questions concerning which no one will believe what you say unless it happens to coincide with their own race prejudice. The Nation contained a characteristically unfair editorial the other day but everyone knows that the Nation neither has the capacity nor the tradition nor the will to speak the truth. As far as I am concerned and as far as our Department of Admissions is concerned, the facts are these. I have no desire whatever to eliminate the Jew from Columbia College. Situated as we are in New York we ought to furnish the very best education we can to a good many of them and as a matter of fact the cream of the Jews constitutes a very fine body of people in my opinion. I believe that we ought to carry at least 15% of Jews and I do not think that 20% is excessive for Columbia College.

It is true that during the administration of our mental test the percentage of Jews has been cut down but this is not due at all to the fact that they are Jews. All our cards are on the table right side up for anyone who wants to look at them and has a right to do so. Of course I would not let a person like the representative of the Nation see anything at all for I would know that they are liars by instinct and Training and would misinterpret everything that they saw. But the fact is that we have nothing to hide or to keep quiet about in regard to the whole matter except for the impossibility of being believed when telling the truth in a matter of this kind.

What we have been trying to do is to eliminate the low grade boy. We had 1200 applications for admission last fall and could accommodate only 550. This meant that

somebody had to lose out. We have not eliminated boys because they were Jews and do not propose to do so. We have honestly attempted to eliminate the lowest grade of applicant and it turns out that a good many of the low grade men are New York City Jews. It is a fact that boys of foreign parentage who have no background in many cases attempt to educate themselves beyond their intelligence. Their accomplishment is well over 100% of their ability on account of tremendous energy and ambition. I do not believe however that a College would do well to admit too many men of low mentality who have ambition but not brains. At any rate this is the principle on which we are going.

I wish that you would tell me what Columbia people have stated that our Intelligence Examinations are intended to discriminate against the Jew and are judged with that idea in mind. It is very easy to say a thing of this kind and it is an absolute perversion of the truth and does not do justice to the honesty and decency of the people who are trying to administer these tests.

I have said nothing in this letter you need to regard as so confidential as to destroy the possibility of identifying it. The only reason I would not say to anyone what I have said to you is that a certain kind of person seems to like to assume that we are trying to put something over on the Jews regardless of what we may say about it.

Cordially yours,

H. E. Hawkes

P.S. On reading this letter I think that there is one additional remark I ought to make. When a man is responsible for the development of an institution involving as it does traditions and a heritage which may have required decades to develop. It is certain that he bears a very heavy responsibility to his institution and to the community. He has no right to take steps that will destroy the value of the institution. For instance, if a thousand men from France should present themselves to Columbia College for admission and were better qualified to pass our entrance examinations than young men from our normal clientele. I should feel that some steps ought to be taken so that it would be impossible to admit them all. It would so modify the work that we are trying to accomplish and that in a short time the work of 150 years would largely be undone. The same kind of remark may be made with

regard to Jews, colored people, and other groups which are more or less distinctive. We ought to be glad to have as many of each kind as in our judgment the institution can stand but to say that there should be no limit to the number of men of a given type who may present themselves to College, seems to me a surrender on the part of the administration of one of the most important responsibilities that we bear.

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