When discussing the University of Illinois one of the many descriptive terms that are mentioned is the word elite. In the 138 years of this University's history there are many students, faculty members, athletes, and department heads that have contributed in forming this elite portrayal of the school. One contributing individual would have to be Laura J. Huelster, a strong woman who seemed to be ahead of her time. In the two years I have spent at this university I have heard her name mentioned a few times but have had no idea why she was so praised and what she did to be put high above other members of the U of I. The idea of researching Huelster as a topic sparked my interest when I had read the article From Corsets to Bloomers—Women in Sport by John Lucas and Ronald Smith. To me choosing a topic for research relating back to the university was not hard and noting the time period in which Huelster carried herself drew me further into the topic. The following essay discusses my research process in gathering general and biographical information about Huelster’s life and her association with the University of Illinois. Some information was gathered from an interview but a majority of the information on Huelster was compiled from newspaper articles, speeches, letters, and essays found in the university archives. Not knowing her personally, this information will summarize and will help to understand Huelster’s accomplishments and what kind of person she was.

One century ago the opening days of Laura J. Huelster could not have predicted her life in the future, nor is it easy to imagine the life she lived one century later. She was born on May 22, 1906 and spent her childhood growing up in Mason City, Iowa (Illiniweek, 1986). Growing up Huelster was always into athletics and played several sports in high school and after graduating her love for physical activity went on strong.
Originally I was under the impression that Huelster had only worked for the U of I but my research had came as a shock when I considered the time frame in which she was participating in sports. In the early 1900s women were limited to what they did and to me it seemed that they were more of a homebody taking care of the children and having dinner ready for their husbands at the end of the day. In the later 1800s and early 1900s sport was seen to have a negative effect on childbirth and sexuality which kept many women from participating (Lucas, & Smith, 1978). In society during this time, both males and females, also felt that the female gender was biologically weaker than the male gender but women used sport to liberate themselves from all these beliefs (Lucas, & Smith, 1978). With these societal views I started asking myself, how much could a female do in the field of physical activity during the first half of the 1900s? Well I guess my ignorance took a clean hit and to my surprise a female of Huelster’s caliber can accomplish a lot in this time.

After Huelster received her public school education in Ashtabula and Cleveland Heights, Ohio she had made the decision along with her parents to attend college at the University of Illinois. Entering the university in 1923 she was planning on being an English
major and was enrolled in Liberal Arts and Sciences. From early in her college career she was always interested in the Women’s Athletic Association (WAA) \(^1\) and their activities, and so as junior she decided to be a Physical Education major and get her minor in English (The News-Gazette, 1950). During the four years she attended the University of Illinois Huelster was active in the WAA and the YMCA where she was elected to the Y cabinet. Aside from this she was the captain of the women’s hockey and basketball teams. She has also played baseball and was the manager for the women’s basketball team her senior year (University of Illinois Physical Education News Urbana, IL, 1982). After reviewing my research to this point I began to realize that Laura Huelster was not the only female being liberated through sports and physical activity, but what sets her apart from all the other women in her field?

Making huge strides for the female gender Huelster graduated from the University of Illinois and decided to continue working in the state. Her first job came the year she graduated in 1927 where she taught physical education and hygiene at Waukegan Township High School. After working in Waukegan for two years Huelster accepted a job at her alma mater as an assistant in the department of Physical Education where began diverging form her fellow female graduates. During her time as a teacher of sports and professional courses at the university she served as the faculty adviser to the Women’s Athletic Association for the freshman professional class in Physical Education for Women. Aside from teaching and working with the WAA, Huelster was a counselor in the Student Counseling Bureau finding time in her busy schedule to further aid

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\(^1\) The purpose of the Women’s Athletic Association was to further athletic interests and activities for women at the University of Illinois. Members were required to pay dues, sign a membership pledge, and complete one sport season in order to vote as a member. At the end of 12 seasons in the WAA an “I” is awarded and in the picture above the “I” belonged to Laura Huelster around the year 1926 (WAA, 1926).
students (Physical Education News, 1956). My respect and admiration for Huelster continued to grow when I learned that during her time here she served on many university committees such as the Student English Committee, Student Affairs Committee, Commencement Committee, and Educational Policy Committee. Huelster was also the chairman of the Soccer Committee of the AAHPER for the National Section on Women’s Athletics, and was the chairman of the AAHPER Section College and University Physical Education for Women (Physical Education News, 1956). Amazingly enough Laura Huelster kept on striving for more and between 1929 and 1966 she had completed her master’s degree from Columbia University and her doctorate from New York University (Carlton, 1996).

During the middle of my research I had come to realize that a majority of the information I was gathering was mostly factual and aside from knowing that she had a passion for physical education and was a hard worker, the information did not tell me what Laura Huelster was like as a person. To try and gain this information I began researching the speeches she had given during her time here at the University of Illinois. One of the most interesting speeches I came across was given in the late 1930s on the topic of “Modified Classes.” The question the she was addressing had been in circulation throughout the department which was, “Should a so-called Modified program be included as part of the whole program of physical education?” Initially I was clueless to what a modified program was until I reached the third page of the speech where I found that there were student in the program that were having a difficult time passing classes. On this topic Huelster believed that “Modified Classes” should be implemented but with guidelines such as the class size should not exceed 15 students and that the course is only
offered to those recommended by a college medical adviser (Huelster, 1935). By making this speech Huelster demonstrated that she has a well thought out opinion on the topic and also that she truly cares for all the students and would like to see them succeed.

Reading through several of her speeches the one that I found to be most interesting and relevant to the time period was given on April 25, 1944. This speech was given at a convention in New York City where the speech concentrated on the V-12 Navy Training Programs that were implemented at the University of Illinois. I found this to be relevant because understanding the historical context in which Huelster lived is important. Trying to put an individual into historical context seemed awkward at first seeing that Huelster lived for many years, but realizing that my concentration is about the ethnography of the University I thought I would discuss the historical context of the time she worked at the University. During this time at the U of I Huelster was employed through WW I and WW II, and in her speech she discusses how the university was affected by the V-12 Navy Training Programs (Huelster, 1944). After doing research I found that the V-12 program had been established at the University in July 1943, to train men ordered by the Bureau of Naval Personnel. Later on March 20, 1945, President Arthur C. Willard the approved establishment of a Naval Reserve Officers' Training Corps (NROTC) program at the University of Illinois. This agreement of the NROTC programs required the University to provide adequate facilities for classrooms, offices, and equipment (Naval ROTC Unit, 1957). These two programs effected the physical education department which required the facilities taken over by the programs such as one large gymnasium, 6 tennis courts, 2 playing fields, and a swimming pool (Huelster, 1944). The V-12 program was ended in June 1946 and the University department
conducting instruction for the NROTC unit was renamed the Department of Naval Science in 1946. It is interesting to see that the two programs were implemented because of WWII and after the war was over in 1945 the programs were then terminated (Naval ROTC Unit, 1957). In Huelster’s speech she recommended that when peace time comes there should be an increase in facilities which should be owned by the university, and an increase in staff to make it possible to evaluate student’s motor function. Again she shows her care for the student body to get a good education by hiring more teachers to make sure the students are properly executing motor function.

As I moved onto researching some of the letters that were regarding Huelster I had come across one written by Louise Freer who was head of the department of Physical Education for Women, replying back to professor SC Staley’s original letter. In 1947 Huelster had received an offer from the University of Minnesota to direct graduate work for women in the department of physical education with a salary of $4800. In the letter Freer had made the comment that it is difficult to find a person in physical education with Huelster’s qualifications. Staley had proposed to Freer a salary increase to $4800 to keep Huelster employed with the
University of Illinois, and after analyzing Huelster’s importance to the university Freer decided to add to the salary to make a total income of $5000 for Huelster beginning September 1, 1947 (Freer, 1947).

The reward of a salary increase was well deserved and Huelster’s hard work through the years was literally paying off, but the larger reward came in the year of 1949 when she was offered the position of the head of the department of Physical Education for Women (University of Illinois Physical Education News Urbana, IL, 1982). Immediately after she received the good news the letters came pouring in from professors all over the country congratulating Huelster on her new position. She received letters from Dorthy Deach at the University of Maryland, Ruth Abernathy at the University of California, Margret Bell at the University of Michigan, and several more in the same year. Huelster’s predecessor as the head of the department was Louise Freer who played a large part in the formation of the women’s department with improvements in facilities, adding new program designs, and training women in physical education. Laura Huelster had big shoes to fill following Freer and she filled them adequately by helping the department grow. In a short seventeen years Huelster increased the faculty and staff from sixteen to fifty individuals and in turn caused for an increase in the number of graduate students (Carlton, 1996). Huelster remained the head of the department of Physical Education for Women up to 1966 when she resigned to concentrate on teaching which was her first love (The News-Sun, 1972). After resigning she decided to leave the University for about five months to teach and conduct research in several different countries with outstanding Kinesiological and physiological “authorities” and laboratories, and also to study the curricula in these diverse countries. Some of the
countries she visited were Holland, Denmark, Norway, South Africa, Australia, Tahiti, and Egypt. When she returned in January she had come back as a teacher but focused most of her attention on graduate students because they were in line to become future teachers (News Letter Release, 1966). Not long after returning from her journey Laura Huelster retired in June of 1972 and spent her time on her hobbies which included swimming, gardening, reading, and attending musical and dance concerts (Illiniweek, 1986).

To gain further insight about the University of Illinois during this time period I turned to Professor Mary Carlton in the department of Kinesiology for an informal interview/conference. Dr. Carlton was a very credible source due to the fact that she had spent and entire year researching the history on the Department of Physical Education in the university archives. In the conference I learned that it was not easy for women’s athletics in the early 1900s because they did not get funding for equipment and transportation, and money was to come out of their own pocket unlike male athletics. Gaining money to play the amount of sports Laura Huelster did is hard to imagine when having to pay for daily and college expenses as well. It was interesting to learn that Huelster was single and had no children, but this can be explained because of the love she had for her job and the lack in time due to all the activities she participated in. During the final piece of the conference Dr. Carlton informed me that Laura Huelster was very strong minded, strong willed and a very intelligent woman. From all the research I conducted I was not one bit surprised in the way Dr. Carlton depicted Laura Huelster.

Standing only at a height of five feet two inches Laura Huelster accomplished more in her lifetime than men and women twice her size. From the day she enrolled for
classes her freshman year at the University of Illinois she was a part of this college for life, and it is difficult to imagine what the Department of Kinesiology would be like today without all that she has done. My research has been fulfilling but it is limited to where there may be much more research conducted on the life of Laura Huelster encompassing the type of work she conducted at the university and the curriculum that she taught.

Huelster was a religious woman and she was a member of the United Church of Christ (congregation) and an interesting suggestion for future research could be gather information on activity she conducted with the church. Another suggestion for future research could be to gather information about why she was never married and died a single woman. Sadly Laura Huelster passed away in 1986 but she did not leave this world without leaving her mark. The University of Illinois will never forget Laura Huelster, and her active life came with active beliefs when she stated, “A day is lost if there isn’t some kind of physical activity in it (Carlton, 1996).”
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