"Our People Excel in the Love of Education": Northwestern Classical Academy, Iowa, 1882-1928

Douglas Firth Anderson
Northwestern College - Orange City, firth@nwciowa.edu

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Abstract

This article examines the organization and growth of Northwestern Classical Academy as a stand-alone Christian school in Orange City, Iowa. Founded in 1882, it was an institution that helped fulfill the northwest Iowa Dutch-American colonists’ aspirations for a community where, in words of Henry Hospers, "they might live under the shadow of the Church and School [kerk en school]." The Academy, a private preparatory school at the secondary level, was intended to be "an Institution of learning for the promotion of Science and Literature in harmony with, and Religion as expressed in, the Doctrinal Standards of the Reformed Church in America.” By 1894, its first permanent building was opened (originally Academy Hall, now Zwemer Hall). The founding and growth of the Academy is illustrated in this article not only by archival photographs but also by attention to leaders such as founder Henry Hospers and Principals James F. Zwemer and Thomas Welmers. Furthermore, analysis of graduates such as B.D. Dykstra, Hendrina Hospers, Jeane Noordhoff, James Muilenburg, and Jacob Heemstra help unpack some of the life and legacy of early Northwestern. After World War I, Northwestern was stable enough to expand. In 1924, a second permanent building joined Academy Hall on campus, and in 1928 the Academy became, in effect, a feeder school to a new Northwestern Junior College. (In 1960-1961, the Academy ended and Northwestern became a full four-year college, still self-identifying as a Christian institution affiliated with the Reformed Church in America.)

About the Author

Dr. Doug Anderson specializes in the history of the American West and American religious history. He earned a doctorate in the latter subject and spent a year studying at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming.

He is co-author of Pilgrim Progression: The Protestant Experience in California, and his articles and book reviews have been published in Western Historical Quarterly, Religion and American Culture, and Fides et Historia, as well as in encyclopedias of the Great Plains and American West.

He has also teamed with other religion scholars on a comprehensive and comparative study of the impact regions have on religion's role in American public life, which resulted in eight geographically based books.

In 2014, Dr. Anderson co-authored a history of Orange City, Iowa, the town where Northwestern College is located. Part of the "Images of America" series by Arcadia Publishing, Orange City traces the development of the town from its founding in 1869 through the present. The 2017 publication California Dreaming: Society and Culture in the Golden State included a chapter on Bay Area Protestants in the Progressive Era by Dr. Anderson.

Currently, Dr. Anderson is working on an institutional history of Northwestern College.

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“Our People Excel in the Love of Education”:

Northwestern Classical Academy, Iowa, 1882-1928

by Douglas Firth Anderson, Ph.D.

B.D. Dykstra emigrated from Friesland with his family in 1882. He was the valedictorian of Northwestern Classical Academy (NWCA) in Orange City in 1892. He later confessed himself “a born student. Knowledge was the hunger and thirst of my life.”1 At the time of his graduation, he characterized his three years there as “the joyous, jolly Academy days.”2

A thread of jollity persisted into the beginning of the next century. Northwestern Principal Philip Soulen quoted the Rev. Rollin Lynde Hartt in 1901: “All Scotland may be put in five words: Scott, Burns, heather, whisky and religion. In Iowa you pack the thing tighter. Three nouns are enough: corn, cow, hog.” Principal Soulen didn’t leave things there, though. He noted that “the Iowa Hollander” did not allow “smiling fields and fat porkers … to exclude the claims of the intellect and the soul.”3

1 B.D. Dykstra, My Apologia, typescript, p. 23, Box 1, B.D. Dykstra Papers, Northwestern College Archives.
3 Catalogue of the Northwestern Classical Academy, 1901-1902 (Orange City, IA: De Volksvriend Press, 1902), 6.
Neither joy and jollity nor corn, cow, and hog precluded the serious claims of the intellect and the soul at Northwestern Classical Academy. Spanning four levels that corresponded to grades nine through twelve, and coeducational from its beginnings, the school was “classical” in more than one sense. It not only offered a classical curriculum, it also was “to be under the care of, and subject to, the supervision of the Classis of Iowa of the Reformed Church in America” (RCA). The purpose of Northwestern was to be “an Institution of learning for the promotion of Science and Literature in harmony with, and Religion as expressed in, the Doctrinal Standards of the Reformed Church in America.”

In the nineteenth century, academies were not to be laughed at in the United States. By mid-century, widespread literacy and burgeoning public “common schools” were aspects of American society that natives and visitors alike thought remarkable. However, a common school education, which typically went no further than eighth grade, did not adequately prepare students for college work. This was not a problem for the majority of Americans before 1900; few attended colleges until well into the twentieth century. Yet even before professionalization made higher education more desirable, those who did want more than an eighth-grade education turned to academies.

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4 Constitution and By-Laws of the Board of Trustees of the Northwestern Classical Academy, as Adopted July 19, 1881, and as Subsequently Amended ([Orange City, IA: n.p., 1882]), n.p., https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/northwesternacademydocuments/3/. The quotations are from the Constitution, Articles III and II. The explicit ties of Northwestern to the RCA remain today.

The academy was “the prevailing institution of higher schooling in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America” according to historians Kim Tolley and Nancy Beadie.  

Academies were an adaptation for an American nation of British Latin grammar schools and “public” (actually private) boarding schools. The United Kingdom’s schools prepared students for higher education within long-standing traditions of an aristocratic class system and an established church; in the U.S., schooling was shaped not only by informal elites and religious establishments but also increasingly by a populist culture and a market-driven society. Before public high schools became significant in the U.S. at the end of the nineteenth century, it was private academies that provided secondary-level education for college. Academies also trained many school teachers before a college degree became necessary.

Religious groups (Catholic and Jewish as well as Protestant) arguably sustained most American academies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Religion, though, was not the only motive for creating academies. Segregation by sex and/or race could also be a factor.

There were academies exclusively for boys and also for girls, such as Phillips Exeter Academy (1781; boys only until 1970) and Litchfield Female Academy (1792). There were also academies for young people of color, particularly Native Americans and African Americans, such as Moore’s Indian Charity School (1755, which eventually became Dartmouth College) and

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Tuskegee Normal School for Colored Teachers (1881, which eventually became Tuskegee University). Many academies were unable to maintain long-term support, especially as public high schools proliferated. Nevertheless, private academies still exist, although usually called high schools now. Locally, for example, on April 25, 1923, Northwestern Academy’s debate team defeated Western Academy’s team twice—once in Orange City, and again in Hull.9 Western Academy is today’s Western Christian High School.

Northwestern Classical Academy, created on July 19, 1882, would have been organized earlier if the Dutch colonists of Orange City had not had to focus their attention on battling grasshoppers and also a national economic depression soon after settling in 1870.10 The school arose out of the faith and aspirations of the Dutch colonists who settled Orange City and the surrounding region. Colonists from Pella, Iowa, established Orange City in 1870. They were largely a generation removed from the 1847 colonists who had left the Netherlands’ Hervormde Kerk (Reformed Church) in De Afscheiding (the Secession) and immigrated to the American Midwest. Henry Hospers (1830-1901), the generally acknowledged leader of the new colony from 1870 until his death,

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10 On the history of Orange City, see Doug Anderson, Tim Schlak, Greta Grond, and Sarah Kaltenbach, Orange City (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2014).
articulated a guiding vision for the Dutch settlers: to make a place where “they might live under the shadow of the Church and School [kerk en school].”

Church and school would, they believed, be central in sustaining religious and other traditions. Along with obtaining more affordable land, Hoppers and the Orange City colonists were seeking to counter secularizing and modernizing trends, not only in the Netherlands, which many of them had emigrated from, but in the United States as well. For the northwest Iowa Dutch settlers, Reformed churches, schools, and piety provided a trinity of institutional, intellectual, and affective anchors for a project of cultural maintenance. Linked to their ethnic territoriality in and around Orange City, this cultural maintenance could be characterized as a progressive provincialism. It was provincialism in that it was a religious, agricultural, and

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small-town set of traditions and sensibilities that was conservative and place-based. Yet it was progressive in that the community was not seeking to merely reproduce a remembered Netherlands, but rather to selectively adapt to “progress.”

By the time the Academy was formally organized, Orange City had become the county seat of Sioux County, and First Reformed Church was not only organized but had its own building. Henry Hospers had been central for both developments. In county affairs, he had become the leader of the board of supervisors. In church affairs, he had helped found First Reformed Church. As a young man in Pella, Hospers had broken religiously with the colony’s leader, the Rev. Hendrik Scholte. Hospers and many other Pella colonists rejected Scholte’s congregational and premillennial tendencies. Instead, they looked to the Rev. Albertus Van Raalte, the leader of the Holland, Michigan colony of 1847, who encouraged Dutch colonists to affiliate with what became in 1867 the RCA. First Reformed Church, organized in 1871, called the Rev. Seine Bolks, a protégé of Van Raalte; he arrived as the congregation’s first pastor the following year.

Despite the challenges to the Dutch settlers in Sioux County in the 1870s, they held on to the vision of establishing a school to complement church. Besides the theological commitments

15 Bolks was 58 years old when he came to Orange City. On Bolks, see Earl William Kennedy, *A Commentary on the Minutes of the Classis of Holland, 1848-1876: A Detailed Record of Persons and Issues, Civil and Religious, in the Dutch Colony of Holland, Michigan* (Holland, MI: Van Raalte Press, 2018), 78.

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informing the vision of *kerk en school*, there were also important cultural sensibilities involved. For one thing, both the 1847 colonies of Pella and Holland had academies—and the Orange City colonists were not prepared to fall behind the Midwestern “mother colonies” educationally.¹⁶ For another thing, there was a putative national tradition to emulate. In a 1916 address, Academy alumnus and lawyer Anthony Te Paske (1889) reminded the RCA Particular Synod of Iowa of a bit of Dutch history:

> We of our ancestry came from “Brave Little Holland”. We know something of her history. We know that when the invading Spaniard was stopped at the gates of Leyden and that when finally, after untold suffering and super-human endurance, Alva was foiled, William of Holland asked that famous city what it would take as a reward. You know the answer: not unlike that of young Solomon of old. They asked not for the spoils of war, or wealth, or honor, or the arsenals for future conflicts; but they requested a university. Long will you turn the pages of history for another incident like that. Blind, indeed, must one be, if he has not seen that our people excel in the love of education.¹⁷

In 1882, Henry Hospers led in finally adding school to church in Orange City. When the new colony was planned, there was agreement in the colony association that a fifth of the proceeds from town lot sales would be set aside for an academy—and Hospers was president of the Orange City townsite company.¹⁸ Hospers, the Rev. Bolks, and seven other men drew up the Constitution (Articles of Incorporation) and By-Laws for the Northwestern Classical Academy

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¹⁶ Pella’s Central “University” began its preparatory department in 1854; Holland’s academy (under several names) started in 1851. Lori Witt, “Re: question: Central Academy?” e-mail reply to Doug Anderson, January 25, 2019; Geoffrey Reynolds, “Re: question: Holland Academy,” e-mail reply to Doug Anderson, January 22, 2019.


¹⁸ The rest of this paragraph, unless otherwise noted, is based on Jacob Van der Zee, *The Hollanders of Iowa* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1912), 280-282 and Nelson Nieuwenhuis, “Henry Hospers: The People’s Friend” (Iowa City: published by the author, mimeograph, 1978), [https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/henryhospersbiography/1/](https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/henryhospersbiography/1/), 101-103.
on July 19; on Aug. 1, the group formally began gathering financial pledges. Hospers donated town land and pledged $500—more than anyone else.¹⁹ The Rev. Bolks, retired from pastoring due to his health, became the Academy board’s president, while Hospers became the board’s treasurer.

Unofficial private tutoring of a few students by Jacob Van Zanten, the principal of the Orange City public school, began as early as 1881; later, Van Zanten was aided by two ministers who were also Northwestern trustees. When official teaching at the Academy started in September 1883, 25 students divided into three levels were enrolled by the end of the second week. The students and the one instructor met in the First Reformed Church’s consistory room and in the local public school. In January 1884, Principal the Rev. John A. De Spelder took office, and soon thereafter a two-story frame building was erected on Northwestern’s property. This "Pioneer School" served as the Academy’s only structure until 1886, when an abandoned skating rink in

¹⁹ Charter subscription list, 1882, Northwestern Classical Academy Collection, Box 1, Northwestern College Archives (hereafter NWCA Collection), https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/northwesternacademydocuments/1/. Hospers “sold” two pieces of land in the Southern Addition, the first in 1883 (Block 35 for $1, recorded in 1884) and the second in 1886 (Lot 12 in Block 42 for $125); Village Deed C, pp. 311, 628, Sioux County Recorder records. Probably the land was in fulfillment of the land sales proceeds to be set aside for an academy. There are no further surviving records to clarify this. All monies collected for the academy were to be deposited in Hospers’ Orange City Bank, opened in 1880.

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Orange City was purchased and remodeled (officially named Academy Hall but nicknamed the Rink and also Noah’s Ark).20

By 1887-1888, the basic Academy curriculum was well in place. A chapel service began each class day, and each week there was a Heidelberg Catechism class. The Classical Course of Study or curriculum included Latin (four years), Greek (three years), Dutch (four years), English (four years), history (four years), mathematics (four years), geography (two years), physiology (four years), bookkeeping (three years), astronomy (one year), and physics (one year).21 By 1890, Scientific (or Modern) and Normal (or Education) Courses of Study were added.

Also by 1890, there was a new principal: the Rev. James F. Zwemer. He and his family moved into the Principal’s House. On the Academy campus, this building was the old Pioneer School, remodeled after the purchase of Academy Hall in downtown Orange City.22 Bringing a new energy to the school (which probably informed B.D. Dykstra’s “joyous, jolly Academy days” phrase), Zwemer launched The Classic in 1891. Published until 1906, The Classic was a monthly subscription periodical edited by the Academy students.23 In

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23 For digitized copies of the NWCA Classic, see https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/northwesternclassics/index.html. The Classic as a title was revived in 1928 for use by the administration of Northwestern Junior College and

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addition to student valedictories, salutatories, and other graduation addresses such as Dykstra’s in 1892, it featured student essays and commentary. The topics ranged from “Our First Woman President” and “The New Woman” to “The Choice of a Profession,” “A Christian Training Essential to Good Citizenship,” “Piet’s Adventure,” “Learning to Ride a Bicycle,” “Do Animals Think?,” “Life on the Farm,” “Should We Restrict Immigration?,” “Opium Dreams,” and “The Ku-Klux Klan”.

While The Classic was an important pedagogical and intellectual development for the school, the construction of a new Academy Hall on school property was Zwemer’s most visible and material accomplishment. Fundraising for the new building was well underway in 1892, but the national economic depression of 1893 delayed the project. Designed by Pella-born architect George Pass in a Richardsonian Romanesque style, the brick-and-stone hall was dedicated on November 23, 1894 with ceremonies that included processions from the old Academy Hall to First Reformed Church and then south to the new building with its hexagonal.

The total cost of the structure was some $16,000.24 On a stone to the west of the top of the main Academy (NWJC); see https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/classic-bulletin/ and https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/classic-magazine/.


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entrance stairway was inscribed “Deus est lux”—God is light. Philip Soulen, Latin professor in fall 1894, probably suggested the inscription, since he used it in an Academy seal once he was Principal in 1901. The new Academy Hall contained the classrooms, chapel, library, and offices of Northwestern for 30 years. In 1924, when Science Hall was added to the campus, the Academy’s Board of Trustees officially renamed Academy Hall as Zwemer Hall.26

The new Academy Hall, a monumental building anchoring the south end of Orange City’s main street, also served to symbolically anchor Northwestern itself as a sustainable educational institution. Not that the Academy did not have its challenges. Before Zwemer left in 1898 there was an Orange City public high school.27 In 1908, Academy Principal John F.

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26 Minutes, April 14, 1924, Board of Trustees, Northwestern Classical Academy, 1910-1927 ledger, 191, Board of Trustees Minutes, Box 1, Northwestern College Collection (NWC), Northwestern College Archives. Probably this was to honor Principal Zwemer in particular, but the board minutes do not specify that the renaming was for him; it may have been left ambiguous to also give a nod of recognition to the Zwemer family, by then famous in RCA circles, not least for James’ younger brother Samuel M., a founder of the denomination’s “Arabia mission” and a missionary statesman and author. On the Zwemer family, see Kennedy, A Commentary on the Minutes of the Classis of Holland, 764-766, 1568.
27 A new Orange City public school building was opened in 1893. The first notice of a high school graduating class was 1894. See Sioux County Herald (Orange City), February 22, 1893 and June 24, 1894. A high school addition came in 1915; Alton Democrat, June 5, 1915. The 1890s was when public education in Iowa was more formally organized than before; see Keach Johnson, “Elementary and Secondary Education in Iowa, 1890-1900: A Time of
Heemstra noted in his report to the board, “This is the age of high-schools [sic] … . To a considerable extent … they are our rivals.” A few years later, Principal Thomas Welmers expressed an ambivalence about the Academy versus public high schools. On the one hand, the Academy cultivated religious commitment and academic rigor. “In so far as they lend themselves to it,” Welmers said to the board in 1912, “we strive to relate all branches [of knowledge] to Christian truth … .” Responding to student and perhaps parental concerns, in 1917 Welmers dismissed “the objection that it is too hard here”; the Academy would, he declared, “maintain as high a degree of scholarship as the material … will allow.” “We are in this institution,” he
continued, “endeavoring to inculcate a love for the classics which we believe affords the best preparation for head, hand, and heart.” On the other hand, he acknowledged that public schooling (along with social trends) had its allures which were difficult to counter. Too many Academy students were not prepared for academic rigor due to what Welmers in 1915 assessed as “a lack of seriousness borne [sic] of and fostered by luxurious living.” Further, he admitted ruefully in 1916, “In the immediate future denominational academies will face a hard struggle. This is apparent when we consider the large, beautiful, and well equipped high schools that are being erected everywhere, also in this vicinity.”

28 Principal’s Reports to the Board of Trustees, 1908, Heemstra, [4]; 1912, Welmers, [1]; 1917, Welmers, 2, 7; 1915, Welmers, [2]; 1916, Welmers, 3, NWCA Collection.

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Athletics, too, seemed double-edged. Baseball, basketball, and football were popular with early twentieth-century students. As early as 1904, The Classic noted that an Academy team beat the Orange City High School team in baseball.29 Academy Hall, though, had no gymnasium. “Tho [sic] a gymnasium is in many respects a desirable thing and for some reasons I would urge to attempt to get one, yet it would not, as some seem to think, be a panacea for all evils of the school” grumbled Principal Welmers to the board in 1915.30 Not only where and when to practice and play games, but also who could play, had to be decided.31 Despite Welmers’ frustrations about a gymnasium, there was an Academy girls’ as well as boys’ basketball team during his

30 Principal’s Reports, 1915, Welmers, 4.
31 For example, at their April 18, 1913 meeting the Academy Faculty decided that an “80% average” was the minimum “required for all who enter contests with teams outside of this institution.” Faculty Minutes, Northwestern Classical Academy, 1894-1919 ledger, 137, Faculty, Box 2, NWC, Northwestern College Archives.
tenure. Northwestern basketball was played in the town hall until Science Hall was opened in 1924. By 1921, in addition to two basketball teams there were also a football team, a baseball team, and track and tennis teams. Basketball, though, dominated the sports coverage in *The Monitor*, the student newspaper from 1922-1925.

Athletics, however, were not the only extracurricular activities at the Academy. After morning chapel and classes, followed by afternoon study (either in Academy Hall or at home), activities came after 4:00 p.m. Literary-debating clubs went back to the 1880s. The Philomathean Society, begun in 1896, grew so large that it had to be split in 1914 into the Chrestomathean and the Alethean Societies. The Halcyon Club was not a literary society but rather an all-male boarding house during the week; on weekends, Halcyon Club members and most other students went home. Music and religious activities engaged many students. By the 1926-1927 academic year, Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A. groups and a Boys’ Glee Club and Girls’ Glee Club were flourishing along with the literary-debating societies.

What sort of students attended Northwestern? Glimpses come from various sources, but usually little more than that. Four graduates can give us some sense of Academy life and legacy:

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33 *Cullings 1921* ([Orange City, Northwestern Classical Academy, 1921]), 78-91, [https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/yearbooks/45/](https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/yearbooks/45/). *Cullings* was something of a cross between a yearbook and a literary magazine; it appeared for only two years.

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B.D. Dykstra (1871-1955; class of 1892), Hendrina Hoppers (1880-1968; class of 1897), Jeane Noordhoff (1882-1970; class of 1898), and James Muilenburg (1896-1974; class of 1914).  

Dykstra, Hoppers, and Noordhoff were graduates during the Zwemer years, when the Academy was young. With no substantive competition from public high schools, it was an institutional youth that seemed to foster exuberance and expectancy—at least enough so for Dykstra’s characterization of it as the “joyous, jolly Academy days.” For valedictorian Dykstra, the core of the joy seemed to be faith-informed learning. Hendrina Hoppers, third in her class, delivered “The History of the Class of ’97”; in it, she provided a couple hints of some of the school’s jollity. In the new Academy Hall, according to Hoppers, there was a “‘Corner of Wickedness,’ where some of the class would frequently be found, devising some sly prank … .” Further, two groups emerged in her class: the Greeks and the Germans. Besides the Greeks being more numerous than the Germans, though, she did not specify what distinguished the groups.  

Jeane Noordhoff wrote the 1898 Class Song, set to music by Academy Professor Soulen. The chorus infused with Gilded Age sentiment the bonds formed among class members over four years:

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38 Classic, 6:9 (June 1897), 5, https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/northwesternclassics/27/.

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Dykstra, Hospers, and Noordhoff highlight some important things about the school’s students and its impact. Northwestern was co-educational: Dykstra was valedictorian of his class; Hospers was third in her class; Noordhoff, as noted, wrote her class’s song. The Academy drew from its region: Dykstra’s home was Sioux Center; Hospers’ was Orange City; Noordhoff’s was Alton. Northwestern appealed most to those of Dutch ethnicity: Dykstra, as previously noted, emigrated with his parents from Friesland; Hospers was the youngest child of Netherlands-born Henry Hospers; Noordhoff’s parents emigrated from Gronigen in 1871. Not least, through course content and Reformed piety the Academy prepared many students to become ministers, missionaries, and school teachers.

Dykstra went on to Hope College. Before entering Western Theological Seminary in 1897, he taught in a country school for over a year. Ordained in 1900, Dykstra studied ancient Near Eastern languages for one year at Yale (1901-1902), but lack of funds prevented his continuing. For ten years he combined pastoring at Platte Reformed Church and teaching and administering Harrison Christian Academy, both in South Dakota. Married in 1909 and with a growing family, he served as the Dakota Classis missionary, traveling to organize, supply, and encourage small congregations over a wide region 1913-1919. Because he opposed war in general and the Great War in particular, no congregation would call him. He returned to the

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39 Program, 14th Annual Commencement of Northwestern Classical Academy, June 16, 1898, Noordhoff Family Papers.

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Harrison Academy for a second time, then took up the editorship of *De Volksvriend* in Orange City from 1928-1934. He left that post at least in part because he was not supportive of the New Deal. Except for returning to *De Volksvriend* for its final years (1949-1951), Dykstra made a living by self-publishing and peddling his own writings—sermons, essays, hymns, poems—most in Dutch or Frisian. He would travel by train to Dutch settlements throughout the U.S. West and then get around by bicycle, being a guest preacher and lecturing and doing readings.

Hospers, like Dykstra, taught school. She remained, though, at the common school level in the Orange City area until after both her parents had died. Then in 1907, with her Academy diploma and a year of study at Oberlin College (1899-1900), she became a missionary for the Women’s Board of Domestic Missions of the RCA. From 1907 to 1913, she was Superintendent of the RCA Apache Mission (school and orphanage) at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. In 1913, after the death of Geronimo (Hospers knew him) and the release of the Chiricahuas from their prisoner-of-war status, she traveled with the majority of Chiricahuas who elected to move to the Mescaleros on their New Mexico reservation. Upon the invitation of the Mescalero agency trader who intended to become an ordained RCA minister, Hospers moved in 1914 to become the chief field worker of a new
RCA mission to the Jicarilla Apaches in Dulce, New Mexico. She worked with the Jicarillas for 32 years before retiring to Albuquerque.

Noordhoff followed Hospers closely, in three ways. First, she was only a year behind Hospers’ class. Second, after graduation she became a teacher, first in Sioux County, then in Platte, South Dakota. Between 1909 and 1911, she completed a Normal diploma from Huron College, Huron, South Dakota. Third, like Hospers, she finally became a missionary, although overseas rather than within the U.S. In 1911, Noordhoff was sent to Japan by the Women’s Board of Foreign Missions of the RCA. Following two years of learning Japanese, she taught in RCA girls’ academies: Sturges Girls’ School initially in Nagasaki and then relocated to Shimonoseki (1913-1922), Ferris Seminary in Yokohama (1922-1931), and Keisen Girls’ School, Tokyo (1931-1934). Moreover, she engaged in “general Christian work” in Nagasaki and Shimabara for some 11 years. She was still on summer vacation on September 1, 1923 when Ferris Seminary, all Yokohama, and over half of Tokyo were destroyed by the Great Kanto earthquake, fire, and tsunami.40 Forced to leave Japan in 1941, she retired; however,

she returned often to Japan for visits. Her nephew, M. Samuel Noordhoff, (1927-2018; Northwestern Junior College class of 1945) continued the family’s Asian mission work as a leading surgeon and hospital administrator in Taiwan.

James Muilenburg, the fourth Academy graduate for our focus, while a generation younger than Dykstra, Hapers, and Noordhoff, illustrates many of the same things as they do. He was a grandnephew of Hubert Muilenburg, a member of the first survey party from Pella in 1869.41 He was, in short, ethnically Dutch and from his family’s farm near Orange City. He also became a teacher. Here, though, some differences need noting. Muilenburg was a student during the Welmers years. By then, Northwestern was facing serious competition with a growing Orange City public high school. Also, these were the years in between The Classic and Cullings and The Monitor; there is little to go on for student life then.42

Yet Welmers himself remembered Muilenburg. In 1926, Welmers was Registrar of Hope College. In a letter that year to Anthony Te Paske, Welmers reflected on Northwestern:

I believe it would be difficult to find another institution of learning that has in proportion to its size produced more men and women that have become leaders in almost every profession and calling. … [S]omehow the Academy got into their flesh and bone. … Somehow the boys and girls from the Academy can be depended upon, and consequently are even while students given places of honor. Not every graduate becomes a leading scholar, but they all for the most part give evidence of character which spells success.43

42 James Muilenburg was neither valedictorian nor salutatorian; he was allowed, though, to deliver the class "prophecy". Faculty Minutes, February 23, 1914 meeting, 1894-1919 ledger, 142. For some gleanings of Academy life at the time, see Kennedy, “Northwestern Classical Academy,” 8-9.
43 Thomas E. Welmers to Anthony Te Paske, April 10, 1926, in President Jacob Heemstra Papers, Box 4, Northwestern College Archives.
After these comments, Welmers mentioned Muilenburg. By then Muilenburg was finishing his Ph.D. at Yale. Before Yale, he gained his B.A. at Hope College. Religiously, though, he was moving away from the confessional conservatism of the RCA in Orange City. After Hope, he completed a masters at the University of Nebraska. He was ordained a minister in what became the United Church of Christ. In the fall of 1926, he was ready to begin years of teaching religion, Old Testament, and ancient Near East languages, first at Mt. Holyoke College (1926-1932), then the University of Maine (1932-1936), the Pacific School of Religion (1936-1945), Union Theological Seminary (1945-1963), and both the San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union (1963-1971). Along the way, for a year he was Director of the American School of Oriental Research, Jerusalem, and one of the team of translators who worked on the Revised Standard Version Old Testament. He was an exponent of what he called “rhetorical criticism” of the Bible. Although an expert on the Book of Jeremiah, he never managed to publish a commentary on it. While he went beyond where any of his Academy teachers and northwest Iowa Reformed ministers were prepared to go in biblical criticism, he retained a deep-seated religious commitment which must have had some rootage in the Academy and regional Reformed piety. The novelist Frederick Buechner, a student of his at Union Seminary, remembered this about Muilenburg: “With his body stiff, his knees bent, his arms scarecrowed far to either side, he never merely taught the Old Testament but *was* the Old
Testament.” Buechner continued, “‘Every morning when you wake up,’ he used to say, ‘before you reaffirm your faith in the majesty of a loving God, before you say I believe for another day, read the Daily News with its record of the latest crimes and tragedies of mankind and then see if you can honestly say it again.’” He was, said Buechner, “A fool … for Christ”; “His prayers, he once told me, were mostly blubbering, and you felt that he prayed endlessly.”

Dykstra, Hospers, Noordhoff, and Muilenburg are of course only four of many other Academy graduates. Together, though, they flesh out in their lives important elements of Northwestern’s early years and suggest some of its impact as an educational institution: seeking to anchor graduates in Reformed piety and fostering vocational paths into ministry, missions, and education.

Another Academy alumnus helped bring about a major turn in Northwestern’s story: Jacob Heemstra (1888-1958). Heemstra’s family farmed near Orange City. He was part of the Northwestern class of 1906. After completing a bachelor’s degree at Hope in 1910, he returned

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to northwest Iowa and served a year as Sioux Center’s superintendent of schools. Heemstra then attended Princeton Theological Seminary for a year while also taking courses at Princeton University. He completed his seminary education at Western Theological Seminary in 1914. From 1914-1918 he served as pastor of Trinity Reformed Church, Chicago. During his pastorate, he also took courses at the University of Chicago. With his experience in public education, his theological education, and his coursework at Princeton and Chicago, Heemstra then spent ten years (1918-1928) teaching Bible, education, and psychology courses as a faculty member and also serving as the registrar at Central College, Pella.45

Then he returned home, in more than one sense. In 1928, he became President of Northwestern Junior College and Academy (NWJC). The Academy continued on after 1928, but largely as a feeder to the college. The junior college in turn would become a four-year college in 1960-1961; that same academic year saw the last graduating class of the Academy.

The goal of creating a college was not new in 1928. As early as 1907-1908 a college first-year set of courses was offered, but there were only three enrolled students.46 After the First World War, support for Northwestern—financial and otherwise—stabilized enough to add another building on campus. Science Hall opened in 1924, with classrooms, a music room, a

45 On Heemstra, see Biographical folder, Jacob Heemstra Papers, Northwestern College Archives.
46 Principal’s Reports, 1908, Heemstra, [1, 3].
laboratory, society rooms, and athletic locker rooms on the first floor and an auditorium and
gymnasium on the second floor.47 Two years later, the Northwestern Board approved adding a
junior college program.48

Northwestern Classical Academy’s solo years ended in 1928. The “joyous, jolly
Academy days” were arguably over. Thereafter, it was Northwestern Junior College and
Academy. Nevertheless, the Academy had set a pattern, lighting a way for students to journey on

1924&bdd=1920&d=0101192312312017&fn=the_monitor_usa_iowa_orange_city_19240513_english_1&df=21&d
=30&cid=2776.
48 Minutes, June 30, 1926, Board, NWCA, 1910-1927 ledger, 221.

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in what Anthony Te Paske had characterized as the Dutch tradition of “the love of education” while remaining rooted in Reformed piety and confessionialism. In turn, the religiously-informed educational road marked by the school meshed well with larger cultural trends, easing the way for the Dutch settlers of northwest Iowa and the greater region to the north and west to accommodate to American society and culture.

“Deus est lux” was the phrase engraved on the then-new Academy Hall in 1894, and in 1932 it became the masthead motto on the Northwestern student newspaper launched in 1928. Given that President Heemstra was an Academy alum and given the motto, it is not surprising that the newspaper Heemstra helped the students start was named The Beacon.49

49 The Beacon is still the Northwestern College student newspaper. Issues are online at http://northwestern.advantage-preservation.com/.

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Appendices

Table I
NWCA Principals, 1884-1928\(^{50}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Rev. John A. De Spelder</td>
<td>1884-1888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rev. James F. Zwemer</td>
<td>1890-1898</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rev. Matthew Kolyn</td>
<td>1898-1901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip Soulen</td>
<td>1901-1906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rev. John F. Heemstra</td>
<td>1906-1910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Welmers</td>
<td>1910-1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerrit Timmer</td>
<td>1921-1925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rev. John D. Dykstra</td>
<td>1925-1928</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{50}\) Hubers, “A History of the Northwestern Classical Academy,” 94.
Table II
NWCA Enrollment & Graduation, 1882-1928

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Enrolled in NWCA</th>
<th>Graduated NWCA</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Enrolled in NWCA</th>
<th>Graduated NWCA</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1882-3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1905-6</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>1883-4</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1906-7</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>1884-5</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1907-8</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>1885-6</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1908-9</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>1886-7</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1909-10</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Not available</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1910-1</td>
<td>77</td>
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<tr>
<td>1888-9</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1911-2</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>1889-90</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1912-3</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>1890-1</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1913-4</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>1914-5</td>
<td>73</td>
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<td>1915-6</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>1893-4</td>
<td>Not available</td>
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<td>1916-7</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>1894-5</td>
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<td>1917-8</td>
<td>86</td>
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<td>77</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1918-9</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>1896-7</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>1919-20</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>1897-8</td>
<td>Not available</td>
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<td>1920-1</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>1898-9</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1921-2</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>1899-1900</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1922-3</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900-1</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1923-4</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901-2</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1924-5</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902-3</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1925-6</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>1903-4</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1926-7</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904-5</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1927-8</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

51 Ibid., 88.
**Table III**  
*NWCA Alumni/ae 1885-1921 in Selected Careers or Professions*\(^5\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career or Profession</th>
<th>Total Students</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education (teachers, professors, administrators)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion (clergy, missionaries)</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine (physicians, dentists, pharmacists, veterinarians)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baccalaureate students, 1915-1921</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^5\) *Catalogue of the Northwestern Classical Academy, 1921-1922* (Orange City, IA: n.p., [1921]), 33-43,  
[https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/northwesternacademydocuments/5/](https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/northwesternacademydocuments/5/).

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