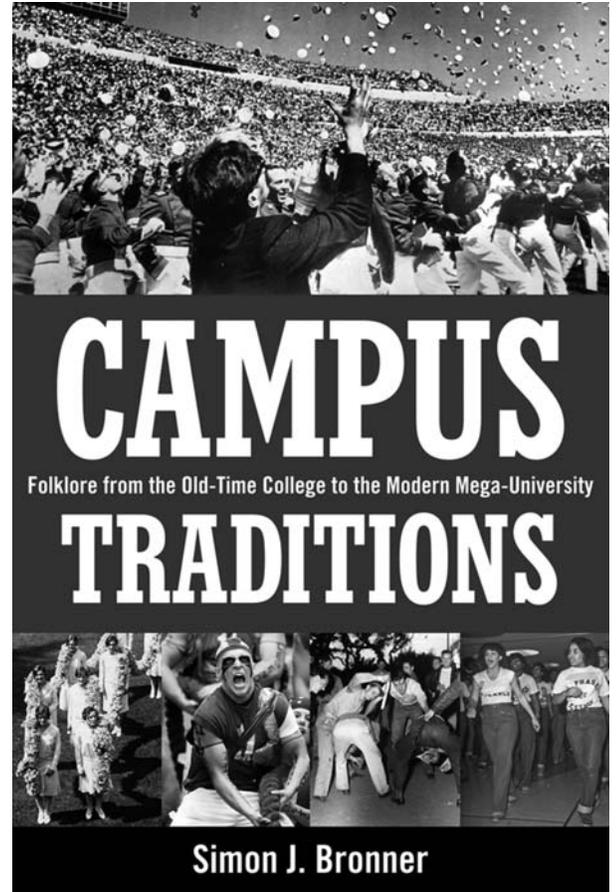


The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress  
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**AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT**

# Campus Traditions:

**Folklore from the  
Old-Time College  
to the Modern  
Mega-University**

presented by  
**Simon J. Bronner,  
Pennsylvania State University**



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# Campus Traditions: Folklore from the Old-Time College to the Modern Mega-University

College campuses inspire activities that some see as dangerous high-jinks and silly shenanigans, but that others consider coming-of-age rites of passage. American college students inhabit a culture with its own slang, stories, humor, beliefs, rituals, and pranks. Simon J. Bronner interprets American campus life, noting that it has been shaped by students while at the same time shaping the values of all who pass through it, especially in light of students' "betwixt and between" status. The archetypes of absent-minded profs, fumbling jocks, and curve-setting dweebs are the stuff of legend and humor, along with the all-nighters, tailgating parties, and initiations that mark campus tradition—and student identities. Undergraduates in their hallowed halls embrace distinctive traditions because the experience of higher education precariously spans childhood and adulthood, parental and societal authority, home and corporation, play and work.

In this presentation based upon his forthcoming book *Campus Traditions*, Bronner focuses on a distinctive collegiate custom that epitomizes the rise, fall, and transformation of campus traditions — the class rush or scrap. Often used to initiate students into campus culture by having competitions between first and second year students, the scrap drew public opprobrium for its violence. The custom evolved into the annual fall spectacle of intercollegiate football and in the twentieth century campuses seeking a return to tradition have adapted the scrap to modern student needs, much to administrative chagrin. Bronner exposes the anxieties that are channeled into cultural practices and discourses revolving around the scrap and explains the return of these customs, and once again controversy.

Bronner traces historical changes in these traditions. The predominant context has shifted

from what he calls the "old-time college," small in size and strong in its sense of community, to mass society's "mega-university," a behemoth that extends beyond any campus to multiple branches and offshoots throughout a state, region, and sometimes the globe. One might assume that the mega-university has dissolved collegiate traditions and displaced the old-time college, but Bronner finds the opposite. Student needs for social belonging in large universities and a fear of losing personal control have given rise to distinctive forms of lore and a striving for retaining the pastoral "campus feel" of the old-time college, but not without challenges wrought by modernization and corporatization in the modern university. The folkloric material students spout, and sprout, in response to these needs is varied but it is tied together by its invocation of tradition and social purpose. Beneath the veil of play, students work through tough issues of their age and environment. They use their lore to suggest ramifications, if not resolution, of these issues for themselves and for their institutions. In the process, campus traditions are keys to the development of American culture.

*The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.*

