

The Dreaded Beanie

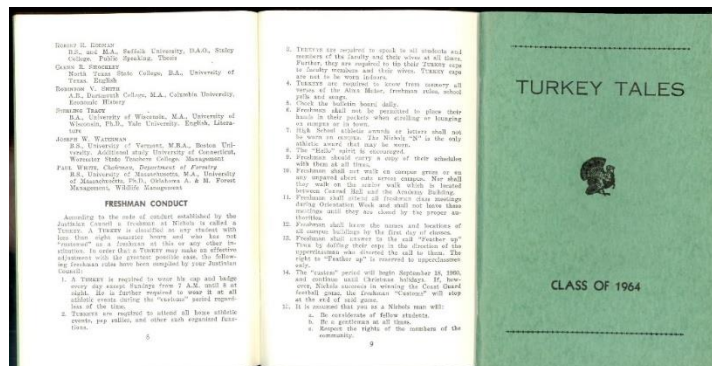
“Although there was a humiliating aspect to the various initiations, random paddling and condescending attitudes of upperclassmen, the hazing was relatively harmless, with the worst being, at most, temporary embarrassment. It served more as a way to keep under-classmen "in their place." No real or lasting physical harm was done, and quite honestly, it was common to most other colleges and universities across the globe at that point in history.”

---Derek DeBank. “Beanies, May Days & Old Ways of the Freshman Haze,” *Guilfordiana*, Guilford College. Blog post. 2014

Remember the “Beanie Baby” fad? Well, for decades many colleges had their own version. Sanctioned by campus administrations, freshman hazing was part of many, if not most, college cultures between the 1920s and early ‘70s. A common feature of this hazing was the wearing of “freshman hats” or “beanies” for part or all of the first semester. To its defenders, it was a means of instilling class and school spirit in the campus newcomers. But it also stemmed from the sometimes haughty nature of upperclassmen who felt morally and intellectually “superior,” if only for having more campus experience.



Practically, beanies served to visually set freshmen apart from their upper class “betters.” At Nichols, rules for the wearing of beanies were set forth in the student handbook (sometimes titled “*Baby Bison*” or “*Turkey Tales*”) issued between the 1930s and ‘60s by the Justinian Council, the college’s student government organization. Typical beanie-related rules, such as those from the 1960 *Handbook*’s code of “Freshman Conduct,” included:



- A TURKEY [as freshmen were sometimes referred to] is required to wear his cap and badge every day except Sundays from 7 A.M. until 8 at night. He is further required to wear it at all athletic events during the “custom” period regardless of the time.
- TURKEYS are required to tip their caps to faculty members and their wives. TURKEY caps are not to be worn indoors.
- Freshman shall answer to the call “Feather Up TURK” by doffing their caps in the direction of the upperclassman who directed the call to them.

Infractions of the rules, including failure to wear one's cap or to properly tip it before an upperclassman, could result in a number of unpleasant consequences devised and meted out by a formal "Tribunal," ranging from a paddling to cutting plots of grass with scissors. The "custom" period varied over time, lasting a semester or a week, or until the end of the homecoming football game if Nichols won.

At Nichols, the wearing of beanies and other antics of Freshman "orientation" were suspended only twice between the early '30s and late '60s and both times were immediately after wars (WWII and Vietnam). Veterans who had been in real battles and faced real bullets were in no mood to subject themselves to degrading abuse at the hands of college kids barely out of their teens. Each time, however, within a few years the tradition reasserted itself.

Freshman hazing finally fell out of fashion with the changing times and mores of the late 1960s and beyond. Campus unity became more important than keeping younger students in line, and larger issues ---the Equal Rights movement, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights struggle, and other collegiate protests against inequality---took center stage. That, coupled with the growing concern over hazing-related deaths and injuries which led to state anti-hazing legislation, brought overt hazing rituals on college campuses to an end. Since 1968, the Nichols *Student Handbook* has explicitly prohibited "hazing of any kind." The death of an American International College student in Springfield due to a fraternity hazing incident led to a bill outlawing all types of hazing at all Massachusetts colleges and high schools. It was signed into law on Nov. 26, 1985, by then-Gov. Michael S. Dukakis.