THE FIRST DEANS OF WOMEN

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THEM

When women were first admitted to colleges and universities, it was only the first step in their gaining genuine access to an education. The deans of women, hired to help with this strange new group of students, led the way in making campuses truly accessible to women. We can learn a lot from their efforts.

WHEN I TELL anyone that I wrote a book on the history of the first deans of women in coeducational universities, I often get a rather glazed look. "Why?" is the question I sense most are thinking, although they rarely ask. Men and women over fifty may have vague recollections of a dean of women or men on campus when they were undergraduates; most folks under fifty find even the term anachronistic. In the popular imagination deans of women are often stereotyped as either matronly, curmudgeonly chaperones dedicated to scrutinizing boyfriends and conducting bed checks or innocuous mother figures who offer advice on hem length and proper fork choice at formal dinners. So if the term *dean of women* only conjures up enduring images of prudish busybodies or harmless matrons, why is a historical analysis of this position warranted?

By Jana Nidiffer

As I read the history of universities, I wondered what made them bearable for women. What happened after they were admitted? Were they ever made to feel more welcome than I was in the 1970s?

For me the answer has three parts. Most important, the first professional deans of women of the Progressive Era (roughly 1880–1915) accomplished something significant. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, the position of dean of women was occupied by intelligent, well-qualified, and well-educated women who exercised administrative skill and professional leadership to help women on campus. The first professional deans of women accomplished two major goals. First, the deans—and especially a small cadre of their leaders between 1892 and 1918—forged a new professional identity for themselves as the first senior women administrators on coeducational university campuses. Second, and perhaps more important, these well-qualified, well-educated deans improved the material lot and the educational experience of women students. Hiring these deans was the first response of higher education to a new and largely unwelcome student population (women). Appointing administrators to deal with other such new populations is now de rigueur. The practice began with deans and was followed later by administrators to deal with veterans after World War II. Many campuses today have myriad professionals for various subgroups, including students of color and disabled, gay and lesbian, and older students.

My second reason for researching deans stems from my identity as a feminist historian of women. Like many women's historians, my work is about revealing the lives of women in earlier eras who were left out of traditional histories and focusing on the issues, institutions, and attitudes that affected these women's daily lives. Interestingly, one inspiration for my work occurred in an undergraduate literature course. (It was unlikely to come in one of my history courses, where we never studied women!) I was very moved by the ending of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, written in 1872.

At its core the novel is about the common life well lived. Her characters have their share of tragedies and triumphs; but mostly their lives are modest, and they are involved in what Eliot calls "unhistoric acts." Yet by the end of her novel, Eliot helps the reader see the importance of every human life—even if such a life is deemed insignificant by future historians. About the main character of the book, Dorothea Brooke, Eliot said: "Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

Third, my choice to study the deans is related to my own educational background. I attended a coeducational university as a student, as have millions of other women, especially those of us without the resources to attend private women's colleges. Although there are many potential advantages to these single-sex schools, the vast majority of American women since the 1890s have gone to coeducational institutions. Yet the climate of these places was very "chilly" for women (downright cold, actually). As I read more of the history of universities, I wondered what made them bearable for women. What happened after they were admitted? Were they ever made to feel more welcome than I was in the 1970s? Were they ever afforded genuine access? I found out that the first deans of women made a huge difference.

My book about these early deans, *Pioneering Deans of Women: More Than Wise and Pious Matrons*, focuses on Marion Talbot (University of Chicago, 1892–1925), Mary Bidwell Breed (Indiana University, 1901–1906), Ada Comstock (University of Minnesota, 1906–1912), and Lois Mathews (later Lois Rosenberry, University of Wisconsin, 1911–1918). Each of these four women

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made a specific contribution to the evolution of the profession and exemplified a specific strategy for helping women. In addition, each woman was, at times, representative of other deans serving in the same era.

The story began in the 1830s. The first woman administrator ever appointed at a coeducational college was Marianne Parker Dascom of Oberlin College—extraordinary for being both the first coeducational and the first integrated college in the United States. Dascom became the lady principal of the Female Department in 1835. In the 1850s President Horace Mann of Antioch College (another rare example of a coeducational institution) appointed a woman with duties similar to those of Dascom. Dascom and her counterpart at Antioch (whose name has been lost to history) were responsible for taking care of students as their own mothers might and keeping students morally above reproach. By the late 1850s and early 1860s, a few other institutions, especially those in need of funds, such as the newer state schools, began considering the admission of women. If admitted, women were typically allowed only in "normal" (teacher-training) courses or "ladies'" courses (watered-down versions of liberal arts courses, sometimes focusing on the domestic or graceful arts). When the regents of the University of Michigan contemplated admitting women in the 1850s, President Henry Tappan—an opponent of women entering universities—asked President Mann of Antioch what he thought of the idea. Basically, Mann said that coeducation was a dangerous experiment, fraught with peril, but if the president appointed a "wise and pious matron" to look after the "girls," it probably would be OK. Michigan did not begin their "dangerous experiment" until 1870, long after Tappan's departure.

Although the 1870s and 1880s saw a smattering of adult women appointed to look after women students, they were primarily "wise and pious matrons." By this I mean they were often widows, only a scant few had a college education, and their duties were very circumscribed. They held very little authority and were usually outside the formal administrative structure of the institution. This situation changed precipitously in 1892 when Marion Talbot was hired at the brand-new University of Chicago. Talbot represented a different sort of woman in the role. She was highly educated, ambitious, skilled at organizing, and committed to making university education more accessible to women. I see her as the first *professional* dean of women.

Talbot grew up in a well-connected and well-educated household amid the nineteenth-century intelligentsia of Boston. Her father was a doctor and later dean of Boston University's medical school. Her mother, Emily Talbot, was a reformer—a common occupation of educated women in Boston. In 1881 both mother and daughter were dismayed to find that it was difficult for educated women to continue a life of the mind after graduation, so they founded the Association of College Alumnae (ACA), which became the American Association of University Women in 1921. The ACA was very important to Talbot. In it she learned to organize, found out how difficult most women found their college careers, and was introduced to other important and interesting women in the area, including Alice Freeman. Freeman was the first female president of Wellesley College and hired Talbot as a faculty member. President Harper of the University of Chicago offered Freeman (now Mrs. Palmer) the position of dean of women, but she would only leave Boston and her husband for twelve weeks a year. Alice Freeman Palmer therefore insisted that Harper hire Talbot as well. Talbot was virtually the full-time dean from the beginning, but it was official only when Palmer formally resigned.

When Talbot arrived in the "woolly west" (as she referred to Chicago), she found that the college women had been given little consideration by Harper and the other founders of the university. She also found an interesting community of women outside the campus, including Jane Addams and her settlement-worker colleagues and women in various other nascent professions. She began thinking of ways to connect the university women with the working women of Chicago, aware that such an arrangement would be intellectually stimulating for the students and perhaps even help with future employment possibilities. However, her first prob-

lem was finding somewhere to live for the students who literally showed up on her doorstep.

Shortly after Talbot's appointment, nearby Northwestern University hired a dean of women, Martha Foote Crow, who was Talbot's friend from her Wellesley days. By the late 1890s the University of Michigan had hired a dean, Eliza Mosher, who simultaneously served as a physician for women, and the University of Wisconsin had hired an adviser to women, Anne Crosby Emery. Talbot began talking with Crow and discussed what needed to be done for the students and how the deans could go about it. Sometime during these discussions, a plan was hatched to gather all the deans of women they knew at a meeting. Crow and Talbot decided that a key factor in accomplishing their goals was gaining recognition as professionals. They decided to organize.

In 1902 four deans of women met on Northwestern's campus for two days in early November. Talbot and Crow were so heartened by the discussions that they organized a second meeting for 1903. Attendance was a startling eighteen women, most of whom worked as deans and advisers in public institutions in the Midwest. They apparently planned a meeting for 1904 in Ann Arbor, but it never took place. The deans did meet again in 1905 in Chicago. By now they had a name for their group, the Conference of Deans and Advisors of Women in State Universities, and a two-part mission—improving practice and establishing the position of dean as a profession.

Improving practice included long discussions about the needs of women students, and each dean shared her successes and frustrations and learned from the others. Deans had to attend to the physical and safety needs of women before addressing issues of community, intellectual fulfillment, and career intentions. Therefore, under the organizational skills of Mary Bidwell Breed of Indiana University, the conferences of 1903 and 1905 concentrated on housing for women students. Many state universities, including Indiana University, were reluctant, or could not afford, to build female residence halls, and many college-town landlords were at first reluctant to rent to women students. Thus the students often walked great distances, and during the winter they walked in the dark. It is hard to imagine, but important to remember, that these young women were walking in high-top, heeled shoes and that their average outfit took nineteen yards of material and weighed almost twenty-five pounds. In rainy seasons they slogged through mud as their male classmates did, but modesty forbade the women any chance to take off their shoes in public and clean them—for fear that a bit of feminine leg might be revealed. Victorian modesty also prevented them from shedding any garments in hot weather. Some early female physical educators finally persuaded colleges to allow the women to wear costumes with as little as thirteen yards of cloth, mostly flannel, at least while exercising. But in general, the women were often physically uncomfortable and vulnerable to exhaustion and disease. So the deans were searching for ways to ease women's lives while in college. Most lobbied for women's housing, and later many deans also succeeding in opening women's spaces on campus, not unlike contemporary women's centers.

As time passed and landlords realized that women students were actually quieter and neater tenants than men and colleges built residence halls, the deans discussed other issues at the conferences. Providing women with career advice and employment and creating leadership opportunities on campus were important goals. The minutes of the conferences from 1902 through 1919 have survived, and this obvious shift in emphasis, perhaps the most dramatic aspect of the deans' work, is apparent in the resolutions drawn up at the conclusion of each meeting. Although no dean was required to adopt all the resolutions and each dean had personal biases and local circumstances constraining her work, it was clear that they were not only teaching and reassuring each other but also setting standards of practice.

Ada Comstock of the University of Minnesota was particularly effective at creating opportunities for women and created the first women's center, Shevlin Hall. Comstock and most of the other deans also sanctioned the creation of separate women's versions of campus activities, such as a newspaper, literary magazines, humor magazines, debating societies, and student self-government. Once such activities were in place, the deans next turned to creating a profession for themselves.

The first recognized professions in the United States—medicine, law, and theology—were quite hostile, to the point of forbidding women to practice. A powerful reason for the antagonism was the challenge professionalization presented to social notions of gender and place. The opponents of women's higher education stated that a college education prepared one for life in the public domain, as minister, statesman, or another professional. If men were expected to function in the public sphere, then an education was logical. But how could it serve women, who were destined only to work and dwell in the private, domestic sphere of life? A version of the same argument was put forth around the beginning of the twentieth century against women becoming professionals. Yet women entered professions anyway, spurred by the changing times.

Women also had to reconcile other notions embedded in the definition of professionalism—such as being authoritative, competitive, or objective—which were socially constructed as unfeminine.

The Progressive Era was a time of transformation with respect to the relationship between higher education and the larger society. In a nutshell, Progressive reformers were concerned about many problems associated with industrialization and urbanization. Issues such as poverty, crime, disease, ghettoization, and overcrowding are familiar now, but they were just reaching critical levels in American cities in the 1890s. During this same era the potential of science gripped the popular imagination and accounted for much of the popularity of the various world's fairs. Science was grasping the universities as well, and professors felt obligated to be researchers first and teachers second. Many new disciplines were formed, including the core of the modern social sciences—sociology, psychology, economics, and political science. Social sciences were so named because they promised the capacity to solve social problems with scientific rigor. University leaders built large institutions, often by adding professional schools. The prestigious, and therefore male oriented, schools were especially sought after by university leaders anxious for distinction and recognition.

This confluence of forces put higher education in a powerful position. It assumed the role of gatekeeper to the professions and therefore to the middle class. It also became the institution that society looked toward for expertise. In response, presidents and faculty on campus worked with practitioners to improve the professional schools, form professional organizations, and house professional journals. This gatekeeping function of universities had profound classist, racist, and sexist implications, as predominantly white, middle-class men came forth as knowing what was "best" for everyone, and serious challenges to this authority were several decades away.

Slowly a consensus about the qualities of a profession emerged. Professionals have a definable body of knowledge that is based in theory and is unique to their field; they acquire this knowledge through university training and then apply it in practical ways to assist clients. They control who enters the profession, usually through a professional association, by monitoring university admissions or licensing requirements, and entry is based on merit. The professional organization is also charged with regulating its own affairs, typically via the establishment of a code of ethics. In addition, professionals have a lifelong commitment to the profession. The professional-client relationship is based on trust, professionals are separate from amateurs, and they have independence, recognition, and distinction from outside the profession.

For those practicing occupations not yet recognized as professions but aspiring to the designation, an essential step was the recognition that a college or graduate degree was required. Aspirants also employed the authority of science to elevate the prestige of their endeavors. The pioneering cadre of deans of women carved out a niche and set about ensuring that it had all the characteristics of a profession. For women, however, there was an additional bind.

Many of the attributes associated with being a professional were inconsistent with social expectations for women. For example, being a professional thrust practitioners into the political and economic power structure of their communities. Further, the presumption of an unequivocal commitment to one's work conflicted with society's expectations for women as wives and mothers. Sadly, most women struggled with this issue alone, making private decisions without social or institutional supports, and many came to the conclusion that it was not possible to have both a marriage and a career.

Women also had to reconcile other notions embedded in the definition of professionalism—such as being authoritative, competitive, or objective—which were socially constructed as unfeminine. As historian Joyce Antler noted, women actively worked to develop a new model of professional endeavor that gave them the chance to become competent, creative human beings in spheres not defined by gender.

Most women seeking professional careers during the Progressive Era followed one of two paths, each rife with struggle and impediments. Following one path, they entered a male-dominated profession in an established

field, such as medicine or academia (or the feminized subspecialty of those fields, becoming nurses or professors of "women's" subjects). Alternatively, they entered the feminized professions. On the latter path women either took up the older, more traditional fields of teaching or nursing or carved out new feminized fields, such as social work. Establishing a new professional field allowed women to remove themselves from direct competition with male professionals, especially if they took up work, or served clients, typically neglected by men. Yet by concentrating on serving the client, dealing with areas neglected by men, incorporating feminine values, and not seeking authority over issues outside the purview of the field, the feminized professions never attained parity in stature with the older, traditional, male-dominated professions. In these "semiprofessions"—the derogatory name given to many women's fields—most practitioners had limited autonomy, existed in bureaucratic structures, and earned lower wages than male professionals.

The pioneering deans of women were innovators; they carved out a new field of endeavor and served a "client" (women students) largely ignored by male administrators. Lois Mathews led the deans as they strove for a title that connoted administrative authority in their institution (*dean* versus *matron*); standardization in terms of title and duties; university degrees as a requirement of entry; standards of practice; sufficient remuneration so that practitioners were fully employed as deans (ending the practice of depending on volunteers or nontrained women to perform the necessary duties); a knowledge base and expertise that was unique to deans and available to all practitioners; a professional literature; a method of training women aspiring to enter the field; and a professional association.

Four steps were especially critical to the deans' quest for professional recognition: laying an intellectual foundation, initiating collective activity, becoming an expert, and creating a professional literature and association. These four steps were part of five phases in the development the position of dean of women as a profession.

The second phase, which I see as beginning with Talbot's appointment, was the preprofessionalization stage, where the groundwork was laid for subsequent accomplishments. The central feature of the second phase was the recognition by university presidents and residents of university towns that women students had unmet needs. The presidents also recognized that such needs should be met under the direction of an officer of the institution and not by volunteers. The faculty wives and club women who had donated their talents had performed a job that had no definition, expectations, or standards; they thought only in terms of the particular tasks required for a specific time and place. Marion Talbot, however, imagined the broader applicability of a dean's activities and she laid the theoretical groundwork for the new profession.

By 1901, when Mary Bidwell Breed began her career at Indiana University, it had become almost fashionable to have a dean of women. Therefore there were enough practitioners to consider collective activity. The years that Breed spent at Indiana, 1901 to 1906, approximate the duration of the third phase. For deans in this era the tasks were to overcome resistance to women administrators by male faculty or resistance on the part of their "clients" (the women students), who were wary of more supervision. After combating resistance, the deans were able to give attention to the most urgent needs of women. The first group activity on the part of deans occurred during this phase when the Conference of Deans and Advisors of Women in State Universities began biennial meetings in 1903.

The fourth phase (1906–1911) coincided with Ada Comstock's career at the University of Minnesota. This phase was marked by a growing professional maturity among the deans. During this stage the first statistical research project on the work of deans was conducted and distributed. A clearer intellectual rationale for the work of the deans was developed, based on their beliefs about women's nature and their assertion that the most appropriate focus for a dean's expertise was the nature of women's education in a coeducational setting. This intellectual activity saved the profession from remaining at the level of matron. Comstock used this philosophical base to develop programs and policies that attended to the higher needs of students. In addition, deans began publishing in educational journals and making connections to other professional women in education, especially the ACA.

During the final phase, while Lois Mathews was dean at the University of Wisconsin (1911–1918), the more tangible aspects of professionalization emerged. The conferences continued, and a new professional organization, the National Association of Deans of Women, was formed in 1916 and incorporated in 1918. In addition, the first courses on how to be a dean of women were taught at both the University of Wisconsin and Teachers College. And finally, the first book about the profession was published—Mathews's own *The Dean of Women*.

By 1918 the position of dean of women was a profession. The most important lesson I think we can take away from their story is about *genuine* access. Too often the notion of access is equated with admission, but as

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anyone who has labored on the margins of the campus knows, mere admission is not enough. Genuine access means feeling that you are welcome in the entire community and not ignored, demeaned, harmed, treated as a social stereotype, or otherwise made to feel threatened or peripheral. Genuine access means that you are welcome as different and therefore do not need to conform to hegemonic norms.

The early deans made an enormous difference in the lives of the women students. They fought for entrance to facilities, campus jobs, decent housing, women's centers, acknowledgment from faculty, opportunities for leadership and extracurricular activities, scholarships, and an end to making women the butt of most campus humor. The deans left a lasting legacy for the daughters and the granddaughters of their students. But as most contemporary women about campus would acknowledge, the deans' work is not yet finished.

NOTES

Eliot, G. *Middlemarch*. New York: U.S. Book Company, 1872.
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Providing *a* Global Perspective

An Educator's Duty

By Cheryl Achterberg

Creating opportunities for international education is an important challenge in higher education today. Here are some strategies for expanding students' options for learning abroad.

THE SHOCK OF SEPTEMBER 11 is so recent that my fingers still tremble as I write this. Our newspapers are filled with the personal stories of families and victims affected by the terrorist attacks. But there is also a loud cry to better understand the world where such terror could be created and a deep-seated conviction that we as citizens need to do something to rectify the wrongs in the face of this tragedy.

There is a natural human tendency to pull back when we feel attacked, to become more isolated and isolationist. This is the moment, however, when educators should step forward to assist our society in producing the knowledge needed to respond to these recent events. I suggest that international study, travel abroad, and building a global perspective should become central to our educational efforts even though fear may tempt us to sideline them. I humbly offer a variety of strategies that may help us accomplish such a feat.

Why Develop a Global Perspective?

NEW YORK TIMES reporter Thomas Friedman, in his book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree,* describes a Merrill Lynch advertisement with a banner that read, "The World Is 10 Years Old." The advertisement went on to say the world was born when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, implying that the world system changed so radically after that event that it became unrecognizable. The new world system is globalization, which shapes everyone's domestic, international, commercial, and environmental policies.

A key characteristic of globalization is a new international spirit of cooperativeness. The nature (not the