

Iowa's Brave Model for Women's Education

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ALTHOUGH A NUMBER OF EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS WERE to spring from Iowa's pioneer soil, textbooks in America's educational history are inclined to underline its most significant original: the institution established at Iowa City was the first state university to consider that "people" included that slight majority of the population identified as females.¹

According to the State University of Iowa catalog of 1856, the initial class contained 124 students, of which eighty-three were males and forty-one females. Four out of five of these earliest enrollees were registered either in the Normal (elementary teacher training) or Preparatory (pre-college) departments.² The need for "fresh" common school (elementary) teachers had initially prompted the state's very first General Assembly to demand that teacher training should be built into the curriculum of the newly created State University.

Two years after the institution opened its doors to students of both sexes, its Board of Trustees contemplated closing it down for lack of funds. The same body wished to exclude females from the institution, but once the dust of vigorous prairie debate had settled, the Normal and Prep departments alone remained open, due in part to the fact that a substantial number of females were already in attendance. Furthermore, the resolution to exclude females was never honored.

¹Harry G. Good and James D. Teller, "Colleges for the People," Chapter X in *A History of American Education*, New York: Macmillan 1973 (3rd edition).

²J. L. Pickard, "Historical Sketch of the University of Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* (Iowa City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1899), 31.

That girls were admitted to the Normal Department at the age of twelve, and boys at the age of fourteen, attests to the desperation of common school authorities in acquiring reliable teachers. Early trainees were accorded free tuition at the University, but were committed to teach for two years within the state of Iowa. Students in teacher preparation were marked not only by their fragile size and age but by the fact that each carried, as prerequisite to admission, one slate, one pencil, a notebook, a dictionary and an atlas.³

Although other midwestern state colleges and universities were reluctant to accept females into their curricula, the State University of Iowa was courageous in its policy of coeducation. Admitting women co-equal with men during the mid-nineteenth century was considered more reckless than courageous, more an interesting experiment than a practice to be adopted with confidence.

In order to judge the impact of Iowa's policy regarding women students, the common attitude toward women's higher education at the mid-point of the nineteenth century needs to be understood. At that time women were generally thought to be too frail to survive the mental rigors of college. While men's minds were said to be adaptable and strong enough to master Greek, it was thought women were certain to collapse under such classical strains, and few were permitted to taste the challenge of that respectable subject. Physicians were declaring that women who survived college would certainly reduce their capacity to bear children, and furthermore any children born of an educated mother were bound to possess defective genes. To counteract the alleged physical debilitation in college women, they were provided physical education facilities years before men were accorded equivalent amenities.⁴

According to current mores, young women who abandoned the shelter of domestic environs for outlandish exposure to col-

³Albert B. Hood, "A Brief History of the College of Education of the University of Iowa," Mimeographed, 1968, 3.

⁴Mabel Newcomer, *A Century of Higher Education for American Women*. (New York: Harper and Bros., 1959), 73.

lege were certain to fall prey to the evils of smoking and card playing, of lowering their necklines beyond the point of discretion, and of reading *The Police Gazette*. As more than one advertisement of that period advised: "For further particulars, inquire of your doctor."⁵ Thus parents who packed their daughters off to Iowa City were considered either reckless or endowed with uncommon courage. At any rate, establishing a state university with a built-in encouragement for females to attend was looked upon as an inventive undertaking only to be condoned in a lawless frontier area lacking tradition and precedent, and desperate for reliable teachers.

In fact, the State University of Iowa would have had to close in the mid-1860s if it had not been for women students. Despite their varied national backgrounds, middle westerners were ardently loyal to the United States. They stood ready to answer the call for service in the Civil War. At the very moment when states contiguous to Iowa were struggling to prove that their respective state universities were justified, the male students were leaving to fight in the war. Certainly, women should be allowed to occupy the vacated benches, at least until the war was over and the men returned. Here, at least temporarily, were bodies to fill enrollment statistics and appease legislators, as well as their constituents.

Other state universities admitted women during the Civil War. The University of Wisconsin admitted its first women in 1863, allowing them from the start to take regular courses if they so elected.⁶ By the end of that academic year the enrollment of women had risen almost to match that of men. Despite this wartime enrollment achievement at Madison, President Chadbourne never completely reconciled himself to coeducation, and by 1867 (after the crisis of war enrollments had subsided), he had segregated the girls on a separate Madison campus.⁷ Courses in this coordinate college were to be vaguely dif-

⁵M. S. Cheney, "Will Nature Eliminate the College Woman?" *Publications of Collegiate Alumnae Magazine*, (January 1905), 143.

⁶Merle Curti and Vernon Cardensen, *The University of Wisconsin: A History, 1848-1925*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1949), I, 201.

⁷Newcomer, *A Century of Higher Education for American Women*, 13.

ferent from those for men, and were to concentrate on the training of young women aspiring to teach in the state's common schools. In contradiction to this presidential manifesto, the state's legislature, which reflected public sentiment, had specified in 1866 that all departments of the University should be open to women. Individual faculty members, at their own discretion, continued to admit women to their classes. That women seemed to fill only classroom seats not already occupied by males is evidenced by the fact that some Wisconsin professors admitted women to classes only if there were seats remaining for them.

This was a situation hardly peculiar to Wisconsin. Almost thirty years earlier Oberlin (in Ohio) had been first to try women in its all-male classes, specifying it was merely filling empty chairs not occupied by men. This exercise in filling corners was to be perpetuated, as other colleges, starting with Antioch, admitted women—yet no effort was made in these institutions to alter the course content to accommodate them.

At Wisconsin in 1869, six women had completed requirements for the bachelor's degree and were to be accorded that "male" degree. At first, President Chadbourne protested such an assignment, declaring that he would never "be guilty of the absurdity of calling young women bachelors," yet he capitulated when one of his own university scholars pointed out to him that an obscure definition of *bachelor* in Webster's dictionary was "a young, unmarried woman." When Chadbourne left the presidency of the University of Wisconsin in 1871, his successor determined that the duplication of courses necessary for maintaining a separate women's college was too inefficient and expensive. The coordinate college was abandoned, and from 1871 onward Wisconsin, as a state institution of higher learning, was to remain completely coeducational.

There were to be even more hesitations over the acceptance of women in other state universities concentrated in the Middle West. Michigan's reservations were reflected in an early action to establish a "female department" in the original 1837 charter of the university, but the regents there had failed to appropriate

monies for this.⁸ Continuing demands for the admission of women there were successful only in 1870 after the resignation of President Tappan who had unalterably opposed the "contamination" of his institution by coeds. Women's cause there was also helped by the raising of \$100,000 to assure the inclusion of women at the university.

The year 1870 seems to be a watershed in the history of women's educational history, for in that year the restive University of Missouri left its door barely ajar for women to squeak through. President Read, in that year, appeared to favor the "experiment," yet uttered misgivings. Women there were first admitted exclusively to the Normal Department, and after some proof that they seemed to fit the regular academic scene at Missouri, President Read prudently conceded that,

Finding that the young women at 'the Normal' did no matter of harm, we very cautiously admitted them to some of the recitations and lectures in the University building itself, providing always they were to be marched in good order, with at least two teachers, one in front and the other in the rear of the column as guards.⁹

It appears that since Missouri's female students, under these restrictive conditions, were not causing a sensational stir in the University, the next step was to admit them to chapel services. Again they were guarded by wardens as they entered and exited the sacred ground, and they sat apart from the men, not allowed to utter a sound nor shuffle a foot during the service. Ultimately they were allowed to "lift their voices in prayer" with the men. Thus gradually, and with a record of good behavior, women were granted all the privileges of the University.

A similar halting process of accepting women coequal with men on college campuses has been documented in the histories of other midwestern state institutions of tertiary level. Universities, by definition, provided the environment for research and experimentation, and it was in this sober atmosphere that in-

⁸Elizabeth M. Farrand, *History of the University of Michigan*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1885), 201.

⁹D. Read, "Historical Sketch of the University of Missouri," *Historical Sketches of State Universities*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of Education, 1883), 41.

clusion of women was scrutinized. The state schools which were experimenting with the acceptance of women students by the year 1870 can be listed in order of their admitting women: Iowa, Wisconsin, Kansas, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri and Michigan. California, the eighth state to accept women by that date, is the only one beyond the boundaries of the Midwest.

A century ago, eastern seaboard schools, with their imported traditions and private endowments from alumni, were in no position to become coeducational.¹⁰ Thus Brown, Columbia, and Harvard were to establish separate campuses for women, and the remarkable female leaders who founded private colleges for women—Vassar and Mount Holyoke, Wellesley and Smith, Bryn Mawr and Wells (the farthest west), struggled to match the stability of more mature men's schools. Indeed, few of these at the start deigned to label themselves colleges. By now most of these women's schools have celebrated their centennials and published their own accounts of difficulties, biases and embarrassments in launching such fragile frigates on a masculine, chauvinist sea.¹¹ It is hardly germane here to compare their histories with those of institutions in the Middle West.

Few problems were encountered at Iowa beyond the initial enrollment of women; and generally the other midwestern states which kept an eye on Iowa went through similar steps of easing women into university life. Below is a partial listing of the innovations in the curriculum of The University of Iowa.

In the year 1861, unisexual debating societies (literary and scientific clubs) were established on campus, with two of them established for males and two counterparts for females. Shortly thereafter a tunnel was built between adjacent campus buildings for use by females only, in order to protect

¹⁰Frederick Rudolph, "The Education of Women," Chapter XV in *The American College and University, A History*, (New York: Knopf), 319-320.

¹¹For examples see G. Meltzer, *The Beginnings of Elmira*, (Elmira, N.Y., 1941); F. Converse, *Wellesley College, A Chronicle*, (Wellesley, Mass., 1939); L. C. Seelye, *The Early History of Smith College, 1871-1910*, (Boston, Mass., 1923); A. C. Cole, *A Hundred Years of Mount Holyoke College*, (New Haven, Conn., 1940); Mabel Newcomer, *A Century of Higher Education for American Women*.

what was proclaimed their "delicate frames" against the winter blasts of Iowa.

Nurses' training was adopted at the University when the Sisters of Mercy transferred their services, complete with doctor, from Davenport to Iowa City. Before the turn of the century, women were admitted fully to all courses in arts and letters, and the moral character of young ladies, as well as of men, was assured as the Y.W.C.A. and Y.M.C.A. branches opened in the University's Close Hall. In 1872 Iowa appointed its first Dean of Women who was to be responsible for the "hygiene and health" of female students. Shortly thereafter men were assigned their own Dean of Men, mainly in order to reduce delinquency. Two curricular inclusions involving women are worthy of note. Home economics entered the Liberal Arts offering in 1913, and the following year, Professor Benjamin Shambaugh, already recognized as an international leader among political scientists, initiated a course in the political and legal status of women.¹²

The "clean state" pioneer Midwest environment in which educational policies developed had few traditions to be honored—and universities adjusted their programs without having to glance backward. Changes accommodating young women came rapidly to the state schools and these were concentrated mainly in the fifty years preceding the First World War.

There is always the danger of oversimplification in a brief account such as this, yet it can be said with assurance that of the seven midwestern states that recognized the place of females in higher education over a century ago, only three—Iowa, Kansas, and Minnesota—have experienced no interruptions in the admission of women. Of these three, Iowa can take some pride in having platted the markers for this breakthrough in education at the university level.

¹²Bruce E. Mahan, "University of Iowa," *The Palimpsest*, LII, 2 (February 1971). The listing here of University of Iowa adoptions related to women has been drawn from Mahan's article. See particularly page 46 through page 71.

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