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Jana Nidiffer

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

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From Matron to Maven: A New Role and New Professional Identity for Deans of Women, 1892 to 1916

Jana Nidiffer, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Abstract

Presidents of mid-nineteenth century coeducational colleges hired dormitory matrons as chaperones or disciplinarians. This arrangement was replaced by a new type of woman administrator—dean of women. The deans were highly trained, ambitious women not content with such a limited role. The careers and strategies of four women who were instrumental in transforming the position of dean of women into a profession are examined. This small cadre of women, working in midwestern institutions, developed an expansive vision for their position: Marion Talbot, University of Chicago, 1892 to 1925; Mary Bidwell Breed, Indiana University, 1901 to 1906; Ada Louise Comstock, University of Minnesota, 1906 to 1912; and Lois Kimball Mathews, University of Wisconsin, 1911 to 1918.

The term “dean of women” often conjures up one of two enduring stereotypes: either that of a matronly, curmudgeonly chaperone or an innocuous mother figure (Phillips, 1919, p. 3). Yet neither of these two characterizations, despite their persistence in the popular imagination, is wholly accurate. During the Progressive Era, it became instead a position “in which intelligent, well-qualified, well-educated women could exercise administrative skills and professional leadership and exert a unifying influence on behalf of women” (Treichler, 1985, p. 24). These well-qualified, well-educated deans did help improve the material lot of women students, especially at midwestern state universities. But most importantly, the deans—at least a small cadre of leaders between the years 1892 and 1916—forged a new professional identity for themselves as the first senior women administrators on coeducational university campuses. Their effort to create a profession for women—its initial success and what is seen as the eventual reversal of fortune—reveals typical difficulties faced by professional women in the early twentieth century.

The position of dean of women also played an interesting historical role by being the first systemic, administrative response in higher education to cope with a new, and essentially unwelcome, population. There was one brief period when the College of William and Mary hired a “Master of the Indian School,” to look after the few Native American students, but by 1721, the Indian School had faded away and it was not emulated at other Colonial colleges (Morpurgo, 1976, pp. 67-69). The position of dean of women, on the other hand, was replicated widely.

Early History of Deans of Women

The position of dean of women was born in the ante-bellum liberal arts colleges of the midwest; it came of age in midwestern universities in the early twentieth century. Oberlin College opened its doors to women in 1833, an era in which propriety required the close supervision of unmarried young women in proximity to young men. The president and faculty quickly recognized such “problems which demanded the presence and supervision of an older woman” (Holmes, 1939, p. 109). The first woman to serve in this position at Oberlin was Marianne Parker Dascom with the title “Lady Principal of the Female Department” (Kehr, 1938, p. 6). The 1835 description of the Female Department in the college catalog indicated both Oberlin’s desire to appease trepidation regarding coeducation and the scope of Mrs. Dascom’s duties:

Young ladies of good minds, unblemished morals, and respectable attainments are received into this department and placed under the supervision of a judicious lady, whose duty it is to correct their habits and mould the female character. They attend recitations with young gentlemen in all the departments. Their rooms are entirely separate from those of the other sex, and no calls or visits in the respective apartments are at all permitted (Oberlin, 1835, p. 24).

Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio was also coeducational from its opening in 1854. President Horace Mann acknowledged that “[t]he advantages of joint education are very great. The dangers are terrible.” Mann insisted on a boarding house for the young women. He stated, “I should deprecate exceedingly turning them out in the streets for meals” (Holmes, 1939, p. 6-7). The boarding house required a female supervisor.

When members of the Board of Regents of the University of Michigan were contemplating coeducation for their institution in 1858, they solicited opinions from educational experts of the day including Mann and Charles Grandison Finney, president of Oberlin. Finney replied that the results at Oberlin were “satisfactory and admirable” and offered the Board the following advice for ensuring success: “You will need a wise and pious matron with such lady assistants as to keep up supervision…” (emphasis added, Holmes, 1939, p. 7). Despite the positive outcome reported by Finney, Michi-
gan remained single-sex for another twelve years until eco-

nomic pressures by tax-payers forced the university to open its doors to women in 1870.

The experiences of Oberlin and Antioch illustrated two

important themes in the earliest history of deans of women. First, the "Lady Principal" was hired as a direct response to prevailing concerns regarding coeducation. Second, her duties were limited to supervision of living arrangements and the moral guardianship of the women students. After the Civil War, coeducation became more prevalent and so did the number of residential colleges employing lady principals, matrons, or preceptors who supervised the women's housing. Swarthmore College was typical and engaged a "judicious matron" in 1872. By 1880, this practice was more common than not in the liberal arts colleges of the midwest (McCrath, 1936).

The pattern of hiring deans of women at midwestern universities was different, however, and it did not begin until the 1890s. The primary reason why many universities failed to employ a "wise and pious matron" from the outset was because the young state universities had not made provision for on-campus housing for women or men due to lack of resources. The women students were expected to lodge with family members or in local rooming houses. Without a specific dormitory, house, or female college to supervise, university presidents felt little imperative to hire a female administrator. For example, Indiana University experimented briefly with the position when Sarah Parke Morrison, IU's first female graduate in 1869, was hired to be a social advisor to students. Without supervised housing, middle-class parents and families who lived long distances from the campuses and sometimes community members as well, agitated for the creation of a "wise and pious matron" in 1872. By 1880, this practice was more common (Rothenberger, 1942).

In the late 1880s and early 1890s circumstances changed, leading to the appointment of women administrators. At a few universities, women students, their parents, and sometimes community members as well, agitated for the university to offer some living arrangements for the women students. Without supervised housing, middle-class parents and families who lived long distances from the campuses expressed reluctance to send daughters to college (Gordon, 1990). If boarding houses, residence halls, or sorority houses were created, an administrator was needed.

There were other catalysts, however, beyond the need to monitor s dormitory. As the 1890s progressed, faculty members on several campuses, with or without special residence halls for women, grew increasingly concerned about the extra-curricular activities of students. At the same time, faculty reluctance to handle such matters was intensifying. The growing demand for research productivity placed new pressures on faculty and created an unwillingness on their part to spend vast amounts of time on administrative details or student supervision. Nor would a president interested in research results want a faculty so engaged (Vesey, 1969).

It was interesting that the administrative response to excesses in student behavior, which included class "rushes" and violence in athletics, was a dean of women, when it was generally acknowledged that it was male students who exhibited the most troublesome behavior. Such reactions suggest that presidents were responding equally to a resurgence of anti-coeducation sentiment at the turn of the century and to the consequent uneasiness felt on many campuses (Rosenberg, 1988).

The battle for coeducation was long and acrimonious. It has been compared by historian Patricia Palmeri (1987) to the abolition debate in terms of the intensity of emotions on both sides of the issue and the numbers of white middle class men and women involved. The high degree of negative feelings toward women on campuses created an environment that ranged from inhospitable to openly hostile. Therefore, administrators at coeducational universities in the 1890s were obligated to worry about the "woman problem." One response was hiring a dean of women. A pioneer in this regard was William Rainey Harper of the University of Chicago. Harper's dream was to make Chicago a Western Yale and the generosity of John D. Rockefeller gave him the resources to lure prestigious eastern academics to the shores of Lake Michigan (Gordon, 1990).

Harper was determined to fashion a great university quickly by hiring proven administrators and established scholars. Harper was not an enthusiast for coeducation, but the charter of the university demanded it. In keeping with his desire to hire the most talented faculty that he could and the social expectation that college women needed supervision, Harper offered Alice Freeman Palmer, the President of Wellesley College, the position of professor of history and dean of women for the university.

Palmer was reluctant to turn down an opportunity to become a female professor in a coeducational institution, for there were precious few such offers in 1892. She agreed, however, upon two conditions. Because her Harvard professor husband, George Herbert Palmer, was unwilling to leave Cambridge, Alice Palmer said she would only work in Chicago for twelve years. She also demanded that Marion Talbot, also a professor at Wellesley, be appointed as her deputy. Because of Palmer's schedule, Talbot was, in effect, the dean of women at Chicago (Fitzpatrick, 1989).

From Matron to Maven

With Talbot's appointment in 1892, the position of dean of women began to change. By 1916, the year in which the National Association of Deans of Women (NADW) was founded, a small cadre of women from midwestern institutions had transformed the position into a profession. This article examines the careers of four such women and the strategies they employed. Each woman made a specific contribution to the evolution of the profession. In addition, each woman was, at times, representative of other deans serving in the same era. The four women are: Marion Talbot, University of Chicago, 1892 - 1925; Mary Bidwell Breed, Indiana University, 1901 - 1906; Ada Comstock, University of Minne-
Wisconsin, 1911 - 1918. The process they went through to establish a profession is similar to that of myriad other professions that were established in the early twentieth century. Identified are four steps that were especially salient to the deans: laying an intellectual foundation; initiating collective activity; becoming an expert; and creating a professional literature and association.

Laying the Intellectual Foundation

Marion Talbot was a bright and ambitious young woman whose family was part of the Boston intelligentsia—Julia Ward Howe and Louisa May Alcott were in her social milieu. Her father, Israel Tisdale Talbot, was passionate about health reform and the first dean of Boston University's medical school. In 1881, along with her mother, Emily Talbot, Marion founded the Association of Collegiate Alumnae (ACA), the forerunner of the American Association of University Women (Fitzpatrick, 1989). It was the most important organization for college-educated women during the era, dedicated to assisting women graduates in finding employment and intellectual opportunities in adult life.

Talbot’s concern for the post-college fate of educated women was transformed at Chicago. She became devoted to making sure that the women students enjoyed the full advantages of the university while on campus. She understood the anti-coeducation sentiment that prevailed, and she, like Breed, Comstock, and Mathews, wanted to change the university and make it a more hospitable environment for women. Talbot articulated a purpose for women’s education that she believed would both lay the intellectual foundations for the profession of deans and minimize resistance to coeducation. She subscribed to several strains of late nineteenth century thought regarding intelligence and sex role definition which were challenging conventional assumptions about the place of women in education and society. In terms of her efforts to professionalize deans, two of her beliefs were particularly relevant (Rosenberg, 1982).

First, she believed in a modernist notion about the inherent rationality of all human beings which implied that women were as capable of intellectual thought as men. As she stated unequivocally in her book, *The Education of Women*, "women have proved their ability to enter every realm of knowledge. They must have the right to do it. ... Unhampered by traditions of sex, women will naturally and without comment seek the intellectual goal which they think good and fit" (1910, p. 22). Yet, Talbot never completely let go of all the vestiges of Victorian notions of propriety and separate spheres, other than intellectual, so the second component of her belief was that women were unique from men and required an environment that was special or distinct. Her beliefs in the benefits of a separate women’s community placed Talbot firmly within the tradition of late nineteenth century feminists who adopted what Estelle Freedman (1979) referred to as "separatism as a strategy." The women “preferred to retain membership in a separate female sphere, one which they did not believe to be inferior to men’s sphere and one in which women could be free to create their own forms of personal, social, and political relationships” (Freedman, 1979, p. 514). Creating essentially a separate-but-equal social life for women, as historian Joyce Antler has noted, often reinforced the sexual status-quo by making the separate spheres seem immutable, and, perhaps, this actually limited the choices for women. Yet, the creation of a discrete “social structure... was a positive response to the pervasive sexism on campus” (Antler, 1987, pp. 98-99). If any of the four deans engaged the merits of this debate, they left no written record. It was clear from their actions, however, that they followed the separatism strategy common to women prior to World War I and created a distinct women’s community on campus.

Talbot was attacked by those opponents of coeducation who argued that women should be in separate classrooms as well. But Talbot firmly stated that mixed classrooms were the only way to insure equivalent educational opportunities and that the needed “special” environment was for the out-of-classroom lives of women. Thus, Talbot acted as an intellectual bridge between the older view that feminine uniqueness implied intellectual limitations—“true womanhood”—and the belief that women were as rational as men, but still distinct—“new womanhood” (Freedman, 1974; Rosenberg, 1982). By asserting that women were academically capable in any field and the need for unique circumstances applied only to the social realm, she secured for women a safe place within the university, maintained propriety, and yet kept all avenues of mental exploration open. Her view laid the foundation for the professional work of deans.

Initiating Collective Activity

Talbot took the next step in professionalization and communicated her beliefs with other deans of women. She published widely in various education journals, especially in the *Journal of the ACA*, but most importantly she initiated the first collective activity of deans by organizing the first professional conference. She decided to invite several women from other midwestern colleges and universities for a two-day conference in November of 1903.

Eighteen women, including the young chemistry professor and dean of women at nearby Indiana University—Mary Bidwell Breed—arrived in Chicago in the autumn of 1903 (Minutes of the Conference, 1903; Potter, 1927, p. 212-216). All the deans represented institutions in the midwest (except the dean of the college of Barnard) so it was not surprising that the meeting’s official title was the Conference of Deans of Women of the Middle West. Ten of the women were from private institutions while eight represented state universities. Twelve of the women held faculty appointments in addition to their work as deans.

Not surprisingly, the first substantive issue addressed was housing—the most pressing student need that deans faced. But they discussed a few other topics as well including the helpfulness of the League of Women and the YWCA.
"Ways of Influencing Young Women: the effectiveness of "at-homes" with the dean, and self-government versus di­
trect government (Minutes of the Conference, 1903, p.9). The deans then voted to meet two years hence and passed a series of resolutions summing up the collective opinion of the group. Mary Bidwell Breed was then elected president of the 1905 meeting.

Some time in the two years intervening between the first and second meeting, a decision was made to limit the membership of the group to deans of women in state universities, except for founder Marion Talbot who represented a private institution. No record exists of who made the decision or why, but when the deans met in Chicago in Decem­
ber of 1905, the gathering was convened as the first meeting of "The Conference of Deans and Advisors of Women in State Universities." With the exception of Lucy Sprague from the University of California, all participants were from midwestern institutions. The early leadership of the new pro­fession was securely in the hands of women working in the midwestern, public sector (Breed Correspondence, 1901 -

One interesting development at the 1905 meeting, how­ever, was that the deans went beyond deliberations of the basic needs of students. The first resolution passed was on ways of making a community of women on campus which they believed was "absolutely necessary" (Potter, 1927, p. 217). Deans of women were probably unique on their cam­puses in understanding the complexity involved in achiev­ing what would now be termed "full access." Typically, male administrators believed that admission to the institution was all that women needed. Deans, however, recognized that while the immediate concerns of housing, adequate meals, rest, and good health were necessary, the higher needs of women such as intellectual parity, career aspirations, leadership op­portunities, and a sense of community must also be addressed. In this vein, the deans also discussed levels of scholarship and the place of domestic science in the curriculum, and were in almost unanimous agreement that the classroom should not be segregated by gender (Minutes of the Conference, 1905).

The biennial conferences not only aided the individual women in the course of their daily jobs by recommending standards of practice, but they were also a mechanism for communication among one another. Most importantly, how­ever, they helped shape an identity for the new profession. A conference illustrated that the number of practitioners was growing, that they had an articulated purpose and a field of expertise, and it placed deans of women within the tradition of all other university administrators of the era who were also forming professional organizations and developing profes­sional identities.

Resistance to their presence and their work was a sig­nificant obstacle faced by deans on the state university cam­puses. Although Breed held a Ph.D. from Bryn Mawr and a record of scholarly accomplishment which included study in a prestigious German university laboratory, her problem of acceptance was illustrative. When she took up residence in Bloomington in the fall of 1901, she met with resentment from both students and faculty. President Swain, who recruited her, believed deans were desirable. He was impressed with both her Eastern "sense of decorum" and her manner which was "strict enough to enforce her code of gentle-womanly behavior" (Clark, 1970, p. 1: 320). The fact that she wanted a woman who combined scholarly accomplishment with gentle­womanly grace was again consistent with the prevailing notions of qualifications for the position. But several male fac­ulty members expressed resistance to the idea of a dean of women—not because of her potential effect on students—but because they objected to having a woman with any ad­ministrative authority at any level on campus. By the time of Breed's appointment, only three other women had ever been employed by the university; the female contributors to the university had been professor's wives and town women (Rothenburger, 1942; Clark, 1970).

Breed also met resistance from students who believed a dean was an affront to their integrity or feared possible limitations on their newly found freedom (Rosenberg, 1988, p. 118). Gertrude Martin who later became a dean herself, recalled her undergraduate days at the University of Michi­gan when they learned of Marion Talbot at nearby Univer­sity of Chicago. "We resented that Chicago Dean of Women was an unanswerable criticism of the conduct of college women in general. We were very certain we needed no disciplining" (Martin, 1911, p. 66).

Evidence left by students including letters and diaries suggests that deans on many campuses were successful in reversing resentment and converting it to a respect that sometimes verged on reverence (Haddock, 1952; Antler, 1987; Fitzpatrick, 1989; Eisenmann, 1991; Stephens, 1992). Breed's strategy to win over opponents was rather straightforward to a modern reader, but it was new at the time—she expanded her role beyond discipline, involved students in policies and program decisions, and advocated for women in ways that made tangible differences in their lives. For example, she se­cured membership in the ACA so that Indiana students were eligible for certain scholarships.

Such high regard should not obscure the fact that deans and female students were not always of one mind. There were components of a generation gap and elements of a disciplinarian/disciplined relationship. There were also class tensions at times between the largely private-school edu­cated deans and state university students. The deans—Tal­bot, Breed, Comstock, and Mathews—each came from upper middle class backgrounds, most had powerful fathers, and all had been, before becoming a dean, associated with an elite private institution. One of Comstock's close friends and colleagues, Lucy Sprague of Berkeley who also came from a privileged background, was more vocal on this issue than other deans. At times, she expressed her uncomfortableness with the rough-hewn nature of the state university women students (Antler, 1987).
Students and deans shared many political objectives, especially in reform-oriented areas, but many women students were pro-suffrage and thought the deans maddeningly silent on this issue. Students agitated for more freedom in male-female socialization which also caused a split between the two generations of women. Deans thought students were too frivolous; students thought deans were old-fashioned, perhaps sexually unfulfilled or even "deviant" (Gordon, 1990, Mathews, 1915). But overall, female students had very few adult female role models on coeducational campuses between 1900 and 1920 and even fewer advocates.

Becoming an Expert

The next phase of professionalization called for the development of expertise: deans became experts in women's education in coeducational settings. This phase, roughly from 1905-1912, was marked by a growing professional maturity among the deans. Deans regularly published in educational journals, made connections to other professional women in education (especially the ACA), and became more "scientific," using techniques and language associated with scientific research. In 1911, Dean Gertude Martin of Cornell conducted and distributed the first statistical research project on the work of deans. This intellectual activity, Lucy Sprague Mathews, 1915). But overall, female students had very few adult female role models on coeducational campuses between 1900 and 1920 and even fewer advocates.

Comstock's initiatives were dedicated to addressing the higher needs of women such as a sense of community, leadership roles, employment, and intellectual opportunities. As far as students were concerned, this was the strategy working counterparts (Comstock, 1910).

A student's need to finance her education, find suitable employment, and develop career aspirations was as important to Comstock as building a dormitory. She wanted to "fit" women for a greater variety of gainful occupations (Johnson, 1910, p. 195). In 1909, it was estimated that the average student needed between $350 and $450 to attend the university (Johnson, 1910, p. 195). Comstock conducted research and found that fifteen percent of women students were at least partially self-supporting (compared with sixty-four percent of the men). On average, the women earned $191 while their male classmates earned $306 per year on the job. The women worked in very female-oriented occupations including housekeeping, child care, office clerking, tutoring, and other secretarial work. Comstock believed that low salaries obligated women to work longer hours and she observed that the women often suffered from overwork and exhaustion. She also discovered that despite the hardship, the self-supporting women did as well academically as their non-working counterparts (Comstock, 1910).

Comstock took it upon herself to oversee the employment of women, making sure that it was safe and fairly paid. She once said that "this aspect of the work of my office is of very great interest to me. It brings me in contact with many girls whom I am especially glad to know" (Comstock, 1908, p. 4). She used Shevlin Hall as a clearing house for job listings, making sure that it was safe and fairly paid. She then used her expertise as the basis for the campus programs she initiated.

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Creating a Professional Literature and Professional Association

Successfully initiating programs such as those created by Comstock and insuring that women had full intellectual participation in the campus became the raison d'être of the young profession of dean of women. Some deans, however, believed that their work on behalf of students and their own sense of self-esteem would be enhanced and legitimated if the overall status of the position was elevated. Lois Mathews at the University of Wisconsin from 1911 to 1918, was of such a mind. She believed that deans of women should also be members of the faculty and have more of the attributes normally associated with a profession—including a professional literature and formal training for aspirants.

Mathews was a protégé of Frederick Jackson Turner and the first women to pass Harvard's Ph.D. examination in history—although her degree was from the Radcliffe graduate school, a bureaucratic anomaly created to award doctorates to women because Harvard would not. She was an assistant professor of history at Vassar and an associate professor at Wellesley College before moving to Wisconsin.

In her long and occasionally heated negotiations with Charles Van Hise, president of the university, she held out for the title of dean (rather than advisor as he suggested) and the rank of associate professor. She argued that an associate professorship carried more weight with students and faculty and contributed to the dignity of her office. She also noted that she might only spend a few years in administration and might choose to resume a full-time academic career, in which case she would need the rank of associate professor to secure her own future. When explaining why she did not relent, she said, "If I were to undertake so great and serious a task as the deanship of women in the University of Wisconsin, it seemed to me it would be my first duty to make it in stature what it is in opportunity; and at the same time to try to make it an example to other universities in that regard" (Van Hise Correspondence).

Mathews' scholarly potential and productivity prior to entering Wisconsin was considerable—she published articles and wrote a very important book in 1909, The Expansion of New England, that had its last printing in 1962; her career as an historian was quite disappointing after she was made dean. Although she continued to teach, she did not contribute much after 1912 to the field of history. Unfortunately, Mathews' experience was very typical. All four women in this study were trained as faculty members and all four found their scholarly progress impeded by the exigencies of administrative positions.

Mathews was very dedicated to her new profession and brought to it the same intellectual vigor that she had applied earlier to history. While dean, she had numerous public speaking engagements, published several articles, and spoke frequently at ACA and the biennial deans' conferences. She invited aspiring deans to visit her on the Madison campus to learn about the job. She organized a statewide conference for all women deans in Wisconsin, including those from small colleges and normal schools. In the summer of 1915 she taught a course in "College Administration for Women," which was the first of its kind taught in a public university and was offered concurrently with the first courses taught on the subject at Teachers College (The Daily Cardinal, 1915, 1916).

Her most lasting contribution, however, was her 1915 book, The Dean of Women, the first book ever written on the profession that eventually became known as student affairs. A second book on the subject was not written until 1926 (Merrill and Bragdon). Mathews held a particular vision for the profession. She wanted to be "more than a wise and pious matron." She believed deans should be scholars, experts on women's education, and general advocates for women who expanded the social, vocational, and intellectual opportunities available to them. This book represented the collective wisdom of Mathews and her like-minded peers on issues ranging from teaching to supervision in the dormitories to how to organize an office. With all the pieces in place by 1916, the position had the vestiges of a profession.

Reversal of Fortune

The new profession of dean of women opened up the possibility of administrative careers on coeducational campuses. Because of the direct relationship between the number of women students at an institution and the presence of women in the faculty or administration, women's colleges traditionally offered a few opportunities, but prospects at coeducational universities were scarce, especially before 1920 (Clifford, 1989). Coeducational institutions, therefore, held tremendous promise for women who sought professional careers in universities, but who lived in the Midwest or other regions of the country where single-sex education was less common. Therefore, deans acted as the "entering wedge" in coeducational institutions (Rossiter, 1982, p. 2). As the first and often the only female administrators who either held a broad range of responsibilities or the sufficient rank needed in the institution to initiate policy proposals, "they had the most consistent effect in bringing more women into the professional community" (Clifford, 1989, p. 13). They also succeeded in making the position of dean de rigueur. Although women's needs were hardly an institutional priority, the vast majority of all types of coeducational institutions had a dean after 1920.

One cautionary note on the effect of the position of dean on professional women is in order, however. Like other women in nascent professions, the pioneering deans struggled and strategized to secure professional status, overcome resistance, secure acceptance, and gain recognition. Yet, attaining the position was somewhat of a two-edged sword, perhaps analogous to the experience of academic women who sought appointments within home economics. Like home economics, being a dean provided women with...
opportunities for professional work, but it also contributed to the ghettoizing of women into administrative roles that became essentially student affairs positions and, consequently, undervalued by the academy. In addition, many of the early deans (those hired in the first years of this century) were women with credentials which should have earned them faculty posts. These highly trained “teaching deans” combined teaching and administration and held faculty rank, but their administrative duties inhibited scholarly advancement. One can only speculate on how many women reluctantly settled for a combined administrative/academic post because they were not offered a purely academic job.

It was this trend toward an exclusively administrative post, away from teaching and in the direction of student affairs, that can be labeled (albeit rather dramatically) in the reversal of fortune: Talbot, Breed, Comstock, and Mathews worked in large universities and simultaneously held faculty positions. However, deans of women were also hired in other types of institutions such as smaller colleges and normal schools. Deans in these environments (and in some universities) began to question the need for dual faculty appointments—they chose instead to emphasize the counseling, guidance, and regulatory nature of their work. A few women with this point of view were studying for a master’s degree at Teachers College in the summer of 1916 when they formed the National Association for Deans of Women (NADW)—which eventually became the professional organization for all deans. However, the NADW placed very little emphasis on the importance of faculty rank to the position of dean.

Lois Mathews’ vision of deans as scholars lost out to the newer vision of the profession which was shared by the newly created office of dean of men (Catton, 1956). As student affairs practitioners, they suffered a lack of prestige within the academy. Therefore, in terms of the administrative influence of deans of women, the era examined, 1892 to 1916, represented a high point. Later decades saw it further reduced in stature when former deans of women, who had once reported directly to the president, subsequently became assistants who reported to male deans of students (Greenleaf, 1968). It is intriguing to speculate on whether the strategy of separating themselves from the faculty, deans were isolated from any important power base within the academy.

Is there a place in a modern coeducational university for a dean of women? It is currently the case that many of the functions historically performed by deans of women such as housing, career advising, discipline, and health care are executed by various student affairs professionals of both genders. But to assume that such functions were the sine qua non of the work of the pioneers such as Talbot, Breed, Comstock, and Mathews is to ignore the historical evidence. What drove the pioneering deans to create a new model for the role was a desire to address inequities in coeducational environments, attend to the intellectual development of women students, and move beyond providing basic needs and discipline.

There is still a need to help women combat the effects of sexism, achieve intellectual parity, and find a community on campus. If the work of a dean, in the tradition of the pioneers, is needed, perhaps it is being accomplished today by professionals such as the heads of women’s studies programs or the directors of women’s centers. So, while a person with the title of dean may not be needed, someone with her agenda most assuredly is.

1. "At homes" were small gatherings in the dean's office or home. The conversation, accompanied by tea and refreshments, was guided by the dean for the purpose of discussing policies or problems.

2. Several archival and published sources were consulted to establish the fact that no written record of this decision seems to exist, including: the papers and published works of Mary Bidwell Breed (Indiana University) and Marion Talbot (University of Chicago); the archives of the National Association of Deans of Women (currently the National Association of Women in Education) including the minutes of the dean’s conferences; other histories of specific deans of women, the position of dean, or the NADW. (See the bibliography for: Catton, B., 1956; Haddock, R., 1952; Holmers, L., 1939; Martin, G. S., 1891; Mathews, L. K., 1915; Merrill, R. A., and H. D. Bragdon, 1926; Phillips, K. S. M., 1919; Potter, M. R., 1927; and Rothenberger, K., 1942.)

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