

Sarah Ann Singer (110 385 714)

Library Award for Undergraduate Research Paper

Beyond the Domestic Sphere:

Home Economics and the Education of Women at Maryland State College

Mothering or mathematics? Folding laundry or food science? Educating children or earning a degree? For many nineteenth century women, the roles of a wife and mother and university student seemed incongruous. Doctors, scholars, educators, and politicians engaged in heated, highly publicized debates about the best kind of education for women to receive, and in what kind of environment their education should take place (Cornell University). Home Economics, an applied field of study that illuminated scientific practices within the domestic sphere, was conceived as one of many answers to this question. This paper discusses the history of women's education at Maryland State College (now known as University of Maryland, College Park) within and beyond the field of Home Economics. I investigate the language surrounding Maryland's School of Home Economics and its implications for women students. Home Economics was often thought to be an unscholarly field of study that merely satiated future housewives' curiosity about university education; in this paper, I compare the Home Economics curriculum to that of other traditional scientific disciplines in order to illuminate the true 'science' that encompassed this domestic science.

Three main questions have guided my research about women's education at Maryland State College. What did the Home Economics curriculum encompass at Maryland? How was the kind of education offered reflected in the wording of the Home Economics course curriculum?

Singer 2

How was a Home Economics education both liberating and constraining for women students? I argue that the practical, scientific language connected to women's Home Economics curriculum at Maryland qualifies the applied nature of the field, not unlike engineering, chemistry, or other scientific disciplines studied by male students. These language choices are reflective of support for a 'separate but equal' university education for women that, in effect, is not drastically different from that of men. Evidence from the 1919 Maryland Course Catalogue supports this claim. The course catalogue specifies that, "technical positions are open to men and women trained in various phases of engineering, in plant and animal chemistry, in analysis of soils, fertilizers, and spray materials, and in food and dairy studies," suggesting many career options for both male and female Maryland students (89). In opposition, however, is the description of the School of Home Economics, which was "designed to fit young women to become capable workers and home makers in whatever sphere of life they may enter" merely a few sections later (151). The separation of women's education is a form of disempowerment and reinforces gender inequalities. Although women students took "technical" (151) courses that required laboratory work and could earn a four year Bachelor of Science degree that theoretically held the same quality and weight as degrees earned by men, their industrious efforts were undermined by their sex. Although some felt that Home Economics represents a regression that falls within the bounds of 'the cult of true womanhood,' the 1919 Course Catalogue makes it clear that the scientific prestige of the Home Economics curriculum at Maryland surmounted these faults.

The History of Home Economics at Maryland

The School of Home Economics would not have existed at Maryland State College without the implementation of two key piece of legislation: The Morrill Act of 1862 and the

Smith-Lever Act of 1914. The Morrill Act of 1862 – “An Act Donating Public Lands to the Several States and Territories Which may Provide Colleges for the Benefit of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts” – was the U.S. government’s first official intersection with the American higher education system. In the 1830s, Professor Jonathan Baldwin Turner of Illinois College envisioned the possibility of public institutions to educate the rising industrial class, and he worked with Congressman Justin Morrill and Senator Benjamin Wade to formulate a bill to create such a possibility (Martin 377). Most colleges and universities existing at the time offered an English model of liberal education and were privately funded by donors and churches (378). Maryland Agricultural College, chartered by Charles Benedict Calvert in 1856, was no exception.

When President Lincoln signed Turner’s bill into law in 1862, participating states were allocated federal land on which they could build public universities to “promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life” (Morrill Act). The Maryland state legislature voted to accept the Morrill Act grant in February of 1864, and by February of 1866, the Maryland state legislature took co-ownership of Maryland Agricultural College (UM Timeline). However, despite the theoretical state control of the college, Maryland Agricultural College did not outwardly or immediately transform into the innovative research university that comprises University of Maryland today. Early yearbooks illuminate that Maryland continued to educate only white, male students who were wealthy enough to pay for higher education in the same kinds of agricultural subjects in which they were previously engaged (1919 *Reveille*). It was not until The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 that the college became more inclusive.

The Smith-Lever Act of 1914, one of three legislative decisions related to the Morrill Act, strengthened and expanded upon its goals. The intent of the Smith-Lever Act was to “aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture...with respect to agriculture, home economics, and rural energy.” This information was to be “continued or inaugurated in connection with the...colleges in each state” (The Smith-Lever Act), which included Maryland Agricultural College. Agricultural and other applied courses had been taught through the federally-funded Agricultural Experiment Station, an extension program that catered to farmers, since 1888 (UM Timeline). Agricultural historian David Danbom suggests that college experiment stations were a step towards professionalism for farmers who may not have needed a traditional liberal education but wanted to develop new skills (247). The transition of the Maryland’s short-course, locally-based agricultural programs to academic degree programs taught on its campus can be explained in part by the funding provided by the Smith-Lever Act; it is also imperative to consider how this change reflects a shift in perception of agricultural studies, which began as a basic program meant to supplement the labor of rural farmers and evolved into a scholarly program of study within the liberal arts and sciences. The language of the Smith-Lever Act fuses agriculture and home economics. Establishing a connection between the two implies that home economics is a legitimate science that is academic in nature and similarly worthy of university study; it implicitly invites women into the realm of higher education, to institutions that were not traditionally co-educational. This ambiguous inclusivity was instrumental for women to become students at land-grant colleges like Maryland.

The implementation of the Smith-Lever Act created visible change for Maryland Agricultural College. As a result of the act, the state of Maryland took full control of the college

in 1916 and changed its name to Maryland State College. The first women students were able to enter Maryland that year, but according to the 1919 Maryland yearbook, only one actually did so (*Reveille*100). Alfred F. Woods became president of Maryland in 1917 was determined to supplement the debates surrounding women's education. In a 1917 article for *The Town*, a Baltimore-based women's civic journal, he insisted that the arts, sciences, and humanities are the basis for "special courses for women" that must be created to allow "women to be on equal terms with men" (7). Woods noted that problems regarding the home require the "special consideration" of women and that the study of the home is "vital to the scientific and efficient home manager" (*The Town* 7). This language is reflective of Woods's initiative for home economics education for women, which he considered a "foundation in the solution" to many home and family problems, clarifying that home economics as an academic discipline was integral for giving women authority over these matters, even above that of men with their academic expertise (7). By 1919, ten women students were enrolled at Maryland and took classes in the newly created School of Home Economics (UM Timeline).

Women's Education and Language Politics

The 1919 Maryland Course Catalogue dialogue surrounding women's educational curricula is filled with inconsistencies. The admissions section states that "Women are admitted to all courses and under the same conditions as men" (27), which is overtly egalitarian and much more inclusive than what is required by the Smith-Lever Act. The index even lists "Women, admitted to all courses" (208) as an entry for further clarification. This explicit inclusivity acknowledges past debates over women's education but takes a firm, unyielding stand for equal co-education. The admission section also uses gender neutral terms in its description about

college entry requirements and procedures; individuals applying to the college are referred to as “candidate,” “applicant,” and “student” instead of ‘he’ or ‘she’ (27). The purposeful ambiguity invites both male and female applicants to apply for admission and reinforces the aforementioned claim that women will be judged ‘under the same conditions’ as men. Moreover, the Industrial Chemistry section highlights the opportunities that come from shared courses and co-education. The possibility that, “Technical and education positions are open to men and women trained in various phases of chemical engineering, in plant and animal chemistry, in the analysis of soils, fertilizers, and spray materials, and in food and dairy studies” (89) suggests that women are seen as equally qualified candidates for positions outside of the domestic sphere.

In stark contrast, the 1919 Maryland Course Catalogue qualifies the importance of home economics while marginalizing the women who study it. Home economics is introduced as a “new course of study for our young men and women,” but immediately thereafter the catalogue specifies that “subjects taught in home economics are designed to fit young women” (151). The phrase ‘designed to fit’ insinuates that women require courses that are unique to them, which disqualifies them from taking and succeeding in other, general courses taken by men. Likewise, students are expected to gain “contentment, industry, order, and a womanly feeling of independence and responsibility” from home economics courses. They are not expected to obtain ‘knowledge’ or a comprehensive understanding of a subject like their male counterparts, which minimizes and further subverts women students’ ability to take general courses and to be perceived as equal. “Contentment” and “womanly feeling[s]” are feminized emotions, not practical skills that can be applied to jobs outside of the domestic sphere. However, students in the School of Home Economics employ “the usual equipment of classrooms” and “laboratories” for their studies of a “technical” nature; they earn a Bachelor of Science diploma that

theoretically holds the same meaning for their male classmates (151). The paradox between the supposed belief in co-educational equality and the simultaneous need for domestic education for homemakers is jarring.

Students who desire to become home economics teachers encounter similarly gendered expectations. It is apparent that only women are expected to select a home economics teacher education, as “Students electing home economics education must present evidence of two years’ experience in the home as a house daughter during which time a large share of responsibility in the management of the home was assumed” (100). It is difficult to imagine that a young woman could both attend primary school and take a leadership role in the management of her home to meet college admission standards, and it absolutely impossible to conceive that a young man could act in a comparable role. Further, students of agricultural, industrial, and general teacher education are described using the pronoun ‘he’ and are not required to have gendered life experience prerequisites to qualify for college admission; this is yet another obvious clue that women were expected to pursue domestic education alone.

The Home Economics Curriculum at Maryland

The Home Economics curriculum is portrayed as practical, modern, and scientific at Maryland State College in the 1919 Course Catalogue. The course titles and descriptions carry a technical, industrious tone that is far removed from the feminized goals for women’s domestic education. The Maryland State College School of Home Economics is made up of four departments: Foods and Cookery; Textiles and Clothing; Hygiene and Health; and Institutional and Home Management (1919 course catalogue 151). The need for division among specific fields of study is in itself an argument for the diversity and complexity of the overall curriculum.

The departments of food, clothing and home management seem to be areas specific to mothers and homemakers, but the inclusion of the business-like area of institutional management and medically-inspired area of hygiene and health are suggestive of the career uplift made possible by a college education.

In their freshmen year, home economics students engage in rigorous science courses and do not simply learn the art of cooking and sewing. Home Economics majors, along with mechanical, electrical, and civil engineers, are required to take General Chemistry and Quantitative Analysis and Mathematics (117-120). Although engineers continue to take other higher level mathematics requirements, home economics students challenge their analytical abilities and logic through courses in Composition and Rhetoric; Physical Education; Social and Economic History of the United States; and a world language (French, Spanish or German). In addition, home economics students take classes related to domestic science, including Composition and Design; Freehand Perspective Art; Food Industries; Textiles; Garment Construction; Drafting and Elementary Dress Design; Dressmaking; and Education Guidance (152). These courses seem to apply to a household or private sphere but instead are framed as industrial and serious. Garment “Construction” is a technical term, and the use of “construction” instead of a lighter term emphasizing creativity highlights the scientific approach to something as stereotypically feminine as making clothing. Garment Construction is understandably described as “the making of fundamental stitches” that are “applied” to simple garments (154), which illuminates its modern practicality. “Drafting” and Elementary Dress Design has a similarly official, technical aura about it; it is ambiguously explained as the “drafting, cutting, fitting, [and] designing of patterns” (154) to illuminate its versatility outside of the domestic sphere.

Upon completing their introductory coursework, home economics students advance to

other mandatory classes that required more refined skills and a wider knowledge base. Like pre-medical students, Zoology and Organic Chemistry are required courses for home economics students. Bacteriology is also mandatory for home economics students, just as it is for students in botany, chemistry, and biochemistry. Home economics students also intellectually challenged themselves through Quantitative Analysis; History; Dietetics; English; and Sanitation and Public Health in their second, third, and fourth years at Maryland (152). Other stimulating required courses include Costume Design; Advanced Dressmaking; Home Architecture and Decoration; Household Administration; Problems in Preparation and Service of Food; History of the Family; Education of Women; Drapery and Advanced Technique of Clothing; and more (152). The continuous emphasis on scientific nomenclature connect courses that are traditionally associated with the domestic sphere to modern, scientific, practical issues; Dietetics; Sanitation and Public Health; and Problems in Preparation in Service of Food are three of the most important courses of this type. It is important to consider that wives and mothers in this historical moment constantly dealt with problems regarding food for their families, the wellbeing of their children, and caring for the sick and that these academic courses solidified the significance of their labor.

Conclusion

Today, University of Maryland, College Park has 26, 876 undergraduate students, 47% of whom are women. It boasts a #17 rank among national public universities, and the most popular programs for students include Business, Engineering, Journalism, Architecture, Education, Criminology, Government & Politics, Computer Science and Psychology (University of Maryland Undergraduate Admissions). These statistics are vastly different from when University of Maryland opened its doors to women students in 1916. The Department of Home Economics

no longer exists, and in theory, current academic departments do not overtly discriminate on the basis of gender. It is imperative to acknowledge the work of the first women students in the School of Home Economics who pioneered the university education that women students at Maryland receive today. Debates regarding gender roles continue in public life, and women are pressured to balance familial and academic life. Women's continued courage and resilience will allow them to fight persisting institutional inequalities and to look toward a future alive with potential for learning and scholarly promise.