

History of Women's Graduate Education at Lehigh: Article

Susie Poore

After 4pm on weekdays. On Saturdays when campus was empty. Those were the only times that Bessie Edna Kast, Edna Grace Tatnal, and Mary Alice Schwaninger were allowed on Lehigh's campus to pursue their graduate degrees after they became the first women to enroll in 1918 (1). Why? Because the Lehigh faculty was convinced that preventing them from interacting with male students was the only way to ensure "that the general character of campus life shall not be affected by this innovation" (2). Yes, three women were perceived as threats to an entire university population, and for good reason: they were the beginning of the charge towards a coeducational future. At an institution characterized by its "boys' club" culture, this wasn't taken lightly. Or without pushback.

Schwaninger later described her time at Lehigh as lonesome and figured the male students rarely thought about her, Kast, and Tatnal since their work was so distinctly separated (3). It took her four years to complete her master's because she was also teaching full time. For two of those years, she wasn't sure Lehigh was going to even grant her a degree. Nevertheless, she kept working and produced her thesis, "A Translation of Pliny's Panegyric on Emperor Trajan," in longhand (3). It was an inch thick. Schwaninger, Kast, and Tatnal met for the first time at their commencement ceremony in 1921 and walked away with the first graduate degrees ever conferred to women on a Lehigh stage. By the end of the decade, the proviso that instated the "4 o'clock rule" was revised to as follows: "Women may be admitted as graduate students on the same terms as men, except that registration in courses open to undergraduate shall be subject to special approval of the head of the department concerned" (2). Presumably, there was not enough solid evidence that the presence of women caused harm to campus life.

However, that did not mean that the men at Lehigh welcomed this change—or changed with it. After the Graduate School was established in 1936, women's numbers were slow to grow (4). A 1941 article in the *Brown and White* noted that only 16 women were enrolled for the semester, making a 1:100 ratio for women to men (5). It is also important to note that for the entirety of this published piece, female students were referred to as "girls" while male students were referred to as "men." Exactly 20 years after the first three women received their graduate degrees, and there was still so much more progress to be made. Two years later, the newspaper highlighted chemical engineering graduate student and research assistant Margaret Lams for being the first woman to ever receive a research fellowship at Lehigh (5). One would think that the publishing of this article was a step forward in it of itself. But again, it came back to language. Despite the value in Lams' remarkable feat, the *Brown and White* penned her as "the first of a large number of women scientists to invade the campus" (5, 3). An invader. An unwelcome addition. Suffice it to say, these feeble attempts at underhanded reporting would do little to stop the wave of women heading in Lehigh's direction.

By the 1950s, rumors of coeducation at the undergraduate level were well dispersed, to the degree that a university official put out an anonymous statement indicating his belief that “women already have their feet, if not their heads, in the Lehigh door through the Graduate School and the Summer Sessions” (5, 18). He also stated that he believed the current shortage of “manpower” in academia and the workforce would undeniably be overtaken by “womenpower.” He had no idea just how powerful Lehigh women would become. In 1961, the university adopted a policy to increase emphasis on graduate programs. By 1964, graduate enrollment was up 50 percent, which led to an inevitable increase in the number of women on campus (1). The following year, female enrollment reached 252 students—the highest ever (3). The February 1965 Lehigh Alumni Bulletin centered around these fearless graduate students and their experiences within the university community. Managing editor Robert C. Cole assured his concerned audience that “the women are not increasing at a problem rate” and there was “no ‘woman explosion’ but a flare has gone up” (3, 4). And so the theme of invasion continued.

At the same time, Cole also recognized that “the Lehigh women are qualified, energetic, and independent” (3, 4). The women featured in the article more than speak to this assessment. Nancy Rent was the only woman engineer on campus at the time the Bulletin was published. After receiving a National Science Foundation Fellowship, Rent began her Master’s of Science degree in chemical engineering. She recalled how others reacted to her presence: “Most of the people who ask don’t really believe that you’re interested in studies alone, so you’re put on the defensive...You begin to answer what they wish to hear—that you’re here to get a husband” (3, 4). Gloria Dialectic (then known as Gloria Dussigner), an English PhD candidate on a National Defense Education Act Fellowship, shared the pressures imposed on her by balancing both motherhood and a higher education. Many women are still forced to walk this line today. Zanaida Zita, the only woman in the College of Business Administration at the time, expressed a simple, tired, and weighted sentiment: “Sometimes you do get tired of being stared at only because you are in a skirt” (3, 5-6). Who could blame her?

The 1970s brought graduate women some long overdue reinforcements: undergraduate women. With Lehigh finally becoming a fully coeducational institution in 1971, the cause for women on campus exploded and opened the door for renowned feminists and civil rights activists like Gloria Steinem and Ruby Dee to visit the university (5). Conversations around Affirmative Action also took root. It was one thing to bring women to campus; it was entirely another for Lehigh to actually welcome them. Graduate student Mary Flesher served as the chairwoman of Lehigh’s Affirmative Action subcommittee and drew attention to the difficulties in our society’s patriarchal structure: “A woman has to choose between a life of needing and seeking reform, of manipulating the present system or some complex combination of the two” (5, 3). Women now had a seat at the table, yes, but that did not mean their chairs were the same height, that they had as much elbow room as their male peers, or that their wants were taken into consideration at their

place setting. In 1976, the university's Title IX report concluded that sex discrimination had caused some limited opportunities for students enrolled in the Graduate School (5). Rather than idly accept these findings, Lehigh women decided to do something about it. Change would have to come from the ground up.

The Lehigh Women's Task Force opened membership to students in 1984, with the goals of promoting programs for women and bringing valuable resources to graduate students (5). That same year, Lehigh's first ever LGBTQ+ organization was founded for queer women and men of all academic levels (5). The impetus for improving Lehigh's social climate was there, and it would only grow stronger. By 1985, there were rallies around improving the graduate student experience in general. The *Brown and White* published an opinion piece regarding Lehigh's forthcoming Planning Document. The authors hoped for the "strengthening programs of graduate education and research...[by] developing incentives for expanding faculty research, elevating graduate admission standards and increasing fellowship support for graduate students" (5, 4). What better way to incite more women to pursue higher degrees than by putting forward the best graduate program and resources Lehigh could offer? In this type of environment, conversations around the importance of intersectionality could flourish. Political activist, feminist, professor, and author Angela Davis came to campus on March 30th, 1985, to speak about combatting racism and the significant contributions Black women had made to the fight (5). The 1980s demonstrated that the advancement of Lehigh women could not be defined by one white, U.S., heteronormative narrative; Black, brown, international, and queer voices had just as much to say.

This intersectional development, in part, prompted Lehigh to issue a university wide survey under the Commission on Minorities, Commission on Women in 1990 to assess how well the institution was matching calls for progress (6). The graduate results were damning. A majority of respondents believed the ratio of women and racial minority students was too low in comparison to white, male students. They also believed that racism, sexism, and homophobia were prevalent on campus. It is not surprising, then, that a majority also had not taken any classes that focused on women or racial minorities. However, Lehigh women again would not be deterred. On April 8th, 1991, the Women's Center opened as the inaugural event of Women's Week (5). Graduate student and co-chair of the President's Commission on Women Denise Gurer stated that the Women's Center would help every Lehigh woman manage the challenges they faced at the university and beyond (5). Lehigh held another week-long celebration of women in the form of Women's Empowerment Week in 1996 and graduated to a full month of recognition in 1999 (5). March, also known as Women's History Month, was packed with programming and included a Graduate Student Conference on Women and Gender (5).

Breaking into the new millennium, Lehigh women continued to be the strongest advocates for increased diversity and inclusion on campus. Graduate student Safiya Jafari spoke out about the

importance of inclusive spaces for Black and brown students and worked closely with the Umoja House to ensure it was recognized for its multicultural mission (5). Ajita Rajan, a chemical engineering master's student, organized a graduate women's luncheon through the Women's Center to ensure that her fellow classmates were mobilized to vote in the 2004 Presidential Election (5). Jenn Terfinko and Christina Diggs led the charge for queer women with their involvement in LGBTQ+ Programs and Outreach and education on sexual violence in the LGBTQ+ community, respectively (5). When the Islamic Studies program was established in 2007, graduate student Nayla Raad voiced her support for the program's potential to break down harmful stereotypes (5). The next year, English doctoral students Liz Vogtsberger, Kristina Fennelly, and Colleen Clemons organized Lehigh's inaugural "Feminism in Practice" conference to foster change through dialogue, empowerment, and action (7). This event was a perfect introduction to the newly available graduate certificate in Women's Studies. As the pursuits of these students (and many others not named here) demonstrate, the sphere of influence surrounding graduate women has continually extended so much farther than themselves—and for the betterment of the entire campus community.

Our most recent decade, the 2010s, took their cause beyond the walls of Lehigh and into what came next: being and honoring women in society. In 2010, Lehigh received a \$2.6 million grant from the National Science Foundation in an effort to increase the number of women faculty in science and engineering (5). Known as the ADVANCE program, it hoped to achieve that increase by providing resources for more women to pursue undergraduate and graduate courses of study in STEM (5). The program must have worked to some degree because women's graduate enrollment climbed to 919 four years later (8). In July 2017, doctoral student Heather Simoneau and graduate student Katie Hurlock spearheaded the opening of "Jane Austen and the Rise of Feminism: Women Writers as Agents of Change," an exhibit commemorating the 200th anniversary of Jane Austen's death (5). The exhibit highlighted important feminist themes across a wide range of titles and gave the authors who penned those works the recognition they deserved (5). Nearly 30 years after a majority of graduate students told the Commission on Minorities, Commission on Women that they had never taken a class focused on either group, Linderman Library was proudly home to a five month long celebration of female authors.

Lehigh graduate women have spent the past 100 years fighting for every step they have taken forward and rallying after every shove backwards. What began with Mary Alice Schwaninger, Bessie Edna Kast, and Edna Grace Tatnal in 1921 has evolved into decades worth of independent, intelligent, and courageous women making a name for themselves across every academic discipline and as members of Lehigh's alumni network. Now, as we approach this centennial celebration, we can only wonder what will come next—especially with the advent of Lehigh's Path to Prominence plan. The Brown and White published "An Open Letter to President Simon" in December 2017 that detailed the serious concerns graduate students have about how this initiative will impact graduate education and their already limited space on

campus (5). Although, knowing what prior generations of Lehigh women were capable of, it is doubtful that future generations would go quietly or without protest. When your beginnings lie in being classified as a threat and an invader to a biased and homogeneous environment, you have no choice but to embrace “womenpower” for the marvel that it is and the action it ignites. The 2020s are another new beginning; here’s to seeing what comes next.

Sources:

1. Lehigh Coeducation Timeline
2. A History of Graduate Work at Lehigh
3. LAB 1965
4. Lehigh Course Catalogs
5. The Brown and White
6. Lehigh University, Commission on Minorities, Commission on Women (1990)
7. Lehigh News
8. Office of Institutional Research