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## Hats, Heels, and High Ideals: The Student Dean Program at Syracuse University, 1931- 1960

Thalia M. Mulvihill  
*Syracuse University*

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“WAR IS KIND”

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The Syracuse University Professoriate, 1870–1960: Four  
Grand Masters in the Arts

By David Tatham, Professor of Fine Arts, 5  
Syracuse University

Tatham discusses four great teachers of fine arts at Syracuse University—George Fisk Comfort, Irene Sargent, Ivan Meštrović, and Sawyer Falk—whose careers reflected local manifestations of changes that occurred in the professoriate nationwide at four points in its history.

The Sculpture of Harriet Whitney Frishmuth and New  
York Dance

By Joseph G. Dreiss, Professor of Art History, 29  
Mary Washington College

Dreiss sketches the early career of the sculptor Harriet Whitney Frishmuth, and shows how her best work was influenced by New York dance—especially by a certain lighthearted dancer.

Dialectical Materialism and Proletarian Literature

By Leonard Brown (1904–1960) 41

Introduction: Remembering Leonard Brown

By John W. Crowley, Professor of English,  
Syracuse University

Crowley places Leonard Brown, the legendary Syracuse University English professor, in the context of his times. In the lecture that follows (probably prepared ca. 1937), Brown, with characteristic precision, interprets for a general audience the ideas of Marx and Engels.

The Moment of “Three Women Eating”: Completing  
the Story of *You Have Seen Their Faces*

By Robert L. McDonald, Assistant Professor of English, 61  
Virginia Military Institute

McDonald describes the circumstances in the lives of Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White that led to their professional collaboration in producing *You Have Seen Their Faces*, and how a photograph eased the way.

- The Punctator's World: A Discursion (Part Eight)  
 By Gwen G. Robinson, Former Editor, 75  
*Syracuse University Library Associates Courier*  
 Robinson reviews the progress of punctuation between 1850 and 1900, showing how—amidst the ongoing (but increasingly sophisticated) contest between the demands of the eye and the ear, of grammar and rhetoric—writing in English reached new expressive heights in the work of Pater, Dickinson, and others.
- The First Editions of Stephen Crane's *The Black Riders and Other Lines* and *War Is Kind*  
 By Donald Vanouse, Professor of English, 107  
 The State University of New York at Oswego  
 Vanouse explains how a critical appreciation of two Stephen Crane first editions, which exemplify a synthesis of poetry and book design, can improve our understanding of both the times in which they appeared, and the cultural impact of Crane's verse.
- Stephen Crane at Syracuse University: New Findings  
 By Thomas A. Gullason, Professor of English, 127  
 University of Rhode Island  
 Gullason corrects long-accepted notions about the brief career of Stephen Crane as a Syracuse University student during 1891, and sheds new light on Crane's life during that time.
- Hats, Heels, and High Ideals: The Student Dean Program at Syracuse University, 1931–1960  
 By Thalia M. Mulvihill, Doctoral Candidate, 141  
 Cultural Foundations of Education,  
 Syracuse University  
 Mulvihill tells the story of the Student Dean Program: how it started, what it was all about, and how its impact is still being felt.
- News of the Syracuse University Library and of Library Associates 151  
 Post-Standard Award Citation for Arthur J. Pulos  
 Recent Acquisitions:  
   The William Safire Collection  
   The Smith Poster Archive  
   Additions to the Russel Wright Papers  
   The Odell Cylinder Collection  
   The Alan Rafkin Papers  
 Library Associates Program for 1994–95

# Hats, Heels, and High Ideals: The Student Dean Program at Syracuse University, 1931–1960

BY THALIA M. MULVIHILL

What you are lives on in the lives of your students.<sup>1</sup>

M. Eunice Hilton

THE STUDENT DEAN PROGRAM at Syracuse University was designed to prepare women for personnel positions in higher and secondary education. Between 1931 and 1960 some 800 women went through the program, thence to become deans of women, residence hall directors, and high school guidance counselors. Graduates in later years held more specific titles such as director of activities, director of housing for women, and director of placement. Some became senior vice presidents of students services, directors of institutional research, and at least one became president of a college. These women were known as the “Hilton Elite,” perhaps because Dean M. Eunice Hilton (1899–1975), the prime mover of the Student Dean Program, had such high aspirations for them.<sup>2</sup>

The beginnings of the program coincide with Hilton’s arrival at Syracuse University in 1931 as a graduate student pursuing a doctorate in education. Iva Peters, then dean of women, was developing a new academic program she referred to as Personnel Work for Women. She was not alone. A few other universities, such as

Thalia M. Mulvihill is a doctoral candidate in the Cultural Foundations of Education Program at Syracuse University. She is organizing a book-length study of the graduates of the Student Dean Program.

1. Marion Meyer and other student deans remember that Hilton often recited this aphorism.

2. Hilton was born and raised in Lincoln, Nebraska, attended Cotner College (1917–18), received an A.B. (1922) and a master’s degree (1926) in education from the University of Nebraska, and taught English and history while serving as dean of women at McCook Junior College in Lincoln, Nebraska (1926–31).



Columbia and Indiana, were simultaneously developing such programs. But the one at Syracuse was unique because it combined practical experience with theoretical studies.<sup>3</sup>

It was Eugenie Leonard, the next dean of women, who actually launched the program by turning a need into an opportunity. As a residential university, Syracuse had to provide supervision for the undergraduate students who lived on campus. Prior to 1931, live-in chaperons, female graduate students, looked after the female undergraduates. However, the chaperons often had trouble balancing their supervisory and academic duties. The University decided to draw on its housing budget to offer twelve (later sixteen) assistance-ships each year that would provide free room, board, and tuition to student deans. For these graduate students, supervising the undergraduates was part of their two-year training program in personnel work.<sup>4</sup> Student deans were responsible for orienting the younger women to the University and for helping them with personal, academic, social, and vocational concerns. They also enforced rules about curfews, calling hours, and confining male visitors to public areas of the cottages.

Leonard organized a course called Student Personnel Adminis-

3. For additional information on the development of the program in the early years, see *Syracuse University Student Dean Commemorative Seminar: 60th Anniversary Reunion Student Dean Program, June 27-30, 1991*, 11-12, Syracuse University Archives. Claire M. Olds, a member of the student dean class of 1955, prepared the historical summary of the Student Dean Program included therein.

4. This program was the first to be funded from an institution's housing budget, by which means Syracuse, which lacked a strong endowment, was able to survive financially. The administration of the men's housing system at Syracuse, however, was not attached to an academic program. In 1935 Chancellor Charles Wesley Flint established the Council on Men's Affairs and named Arthur Blair Knapp, an instructor in the Maxwell School, as the head. Knapp developed the Resident Adviser Program, and in 1940 became the first dean of men at Syracuse. Resident advisers were male graduate students selected from a variety of graduate programs. They also were given room, board, and tuition for their work. See Richard Wilson, W. Freeman Galpin, Oscar T. Barck, Jr., *Syracuse University: The Critical Years* (Syracuse University, 1984), 244-47. The author wishes to thank David Tatham, who was dean of men from 1966 to 1971, for information about the dean of men's office.

tration in which the student deans could discuss and solve their problems of practice. By the late thirties other courses were added, such as a Seminar for Advisers of Girls and Deans of Women, Philosophy and Techniques of Student Personnel Work, and Problems in Educational Research. The program would eventually include courses in psychology, counseling, administrative operations, sociology of education, and history of education.

In 1932 Eugenie Leonard invited Eunice Hilton to become assistant dean of women. While maintaining this position, Hilton worked on her doctorate, and in April 1934 she became the first woman to receive a Ph.D. from Syracuse University's School of Education.<sup>5</sup> Leonard encouraged Hilton to remain at Syracuse and become not only the next dean of women and a faculty member, but also director of the Student Dean Program, responsible for making all decisions regarding admissions, curriculum, assistantship placements, and the program's policies and procedures.

Hilton accepted the offer and remained in that position until 1949, assisted, from 1935 on, by Marjorie C. Smith. In 1949 Hilton became dean of the School of Home Economics, although she continued as director of the Student Dean Program until 1959. During her tenure with the program Hilton enlarged the scope of the office of dean of women and brought national recognition to Syracuse University through the Student Dean Program.

The students whom Hilton accepted into the program had to have above average scholastic ability, good health, leadership qualities, an interest in counseling, and an undergraduate degree from an accredited college or university. Many were required to have a personal interview with Dean Hilton herself, an experience many student deans can remember vividly even today. She was

a "role model" of professionalism, with a dramatic flair and superb ability to communicate . . . by gesture, joke, or inflection. She was always direct . . . firm, but kind. She could prod, cajole, dictate or persuade . . . be a loving disciplinar-

5. Hilton's dissertation was entitled "The Dean of Women in the Public Co-ed. Junior College."

ian who always had time for one of her flock needing a helping hand.<sup>6</sup>

The program enrolled women from every state in the country, and some from other countries as well. Most were white, middle-class, and Protestant.<sup>7</sup> According to one former student dean, “The occasional woman of color was more likely to be from another country than from the U.S.”<sup>8</sup> Many had been school teachers. However, all shared a strong interest in the coursework, practical job training—and the graduate stipend that covered their expenses.<sup>9</sup>

Hilton encouraged the student deans to integrate the “Personnel Point of View”—often referred to as the PPV—into all their activities. The PPV was an official statement of philosophy that was issued by the American Council on Education in 1938 and embraced whole-heartedly by Eunice Hilton:

The student personnel point of view encompasses the student as a whole. The concept of education is broadened to include attention to the student’s well-rounded development—physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually, as well as intellectually. The student is thought of as a responsible participant in his own development and not as a passive re-

6. *60th Anniversary Reunion Program*, 3. Margaret Anderson Telian, Bess Templeton Christman, Claire M. Olds, and Jean Crawford collaborated in writing this dedication page.

7. Further details can be found in “Student Dean Questionnaire Summary, 1990–1991,” in the *60th Anniversary Reunion Program*. Barbara Wood Cook, dean of students emerita at Purdue University and a member of the student dean class of 1954, designed an eight-page questionnaire that was mailed to every student dean on the alumnae mailing list compiled by Marion Meyer, chairperson of the Reunion Committee. Cook reported that 297 student deans responded to this questionnaire out of a possible 394, a 75 percent return rate. The questionnaire asked them about their “Home Background,” “Educational Background,” “Syracuse Experience,” “Employment,” and “Personal Data.” Dr. Cook compiled the results and presented a summary of the findings at the “Hats, Heels, and High Ideals” Reunion Luncheon.

8. Barbara Cook, “Student Dean Questionnaire Summary,” 3.

9. *Ibid.*, 5.





M. Eunice Hilton (Syracuse University Archives).

recipient of an imprinted economic, political, or religious doctrine, or vocational skill.<sup>10</sup>

In the tradition of the PPV, Hilton spouted words of wisdom, affectionately referred to by the student deans as “Hiltonisms.”

10. Williamson et al., “The Student Personnel Point of View,” *American Council on Education Studies*, series 6, vol. 13, no. 13 (September 1949), 1.

They were “life’s little instructions,” some adapted from common aphorisms:<sup>11</sup>

Little minds talk about people. Average minds talk about things. Great minds talk about ideas.

Learn to say no!

Be in love out of sight.

Nothing but the best is expected of student deans.

In your professional relationships with men, don’t trade on being a woman; win your point by logic—not wheedling.

When counseling, be personal in manner, but impersonal in interest.

If you are to be collegiate—be one shade smarter and one shade more expensive.

If Student Personnel Work is the Fifth Wheel, that’s fine as long as it’s the Steering Wheel.

There is no either/or for women. It has to be *and*. [That is, women can be more than wives and mothers.]

Perhaps the most popular Hiltonism of all was “hats, heels and high ideals.” Professional women, according to Hilton, should be dressed appropriately in “hats and heels,” and their “high ideals” should be just as visible. Anne Calder Piskor<sup>12</sup> recalled becoming a student dean in 1938:

I was told that even to walk from Vernon Cottage, which is where Newhouse I is, up to the administration building I had to wear a hat, gloves, and carry a purse. And if I had ever gone downtown without them, that would be the sin of sins. I think this was a standard Eunice and Marjorie set because they wanted Student Deans to be a little bit apart.<sup>13</sup>

11. These Hiltonisms and others are printed in the *60th Anniversary Reunion Program*, 25.

12. Anne Calder Piskor was a student dean from 1938 to 1940, then joined the dean of women’s staff until 1945. Her husband, Frank Piskor, was dean of men (1943–53) and vice president of Academic Affairs (1956–69). He later became the president of St. Lawrence University.

13. *Syracuse University: The Critical Years*, 240.

In keeping with the times, student deans were obliged to undertake “women’s tasks,” many of them tedious, such as filing in the dean of women’s office and counting linens for the cottages. They also put on luncheons for various campus groups and for themselves. In the process they received instruction in how best to organize a luncheon, down to the finest details of table setting, making favors and name tags, dressing appropriately, and making introductions.

The luncheons were often full of laughter, and singing on the part of “Hilton’s Chorus”—women who made up new lyrics to familiar songs. To the tune of “Shine Little Glow Worm,” they sang:

We are the girls of Hilton’s chorus;  
Hilton paid ten thousand for us.  
We were chosen as the best,  
From the Social Usage Test. . . .<sup>14</sup>

Such shared experiences forged friendships that would be as important to these women as the courses they took.

In 1943 Hilton collaborated with Marguerite Fisher, a much admired Maxwell School professor,<sup>15</sup> to create a course called Status of Women and Their Responsibilities. This was one of the first such courses in the country; at Syracuse it marked the beginning of a “Women’s Studies” curriculum. The course, which was open to all female graduate students on campus, emphasized that women could work in all fields, not just the traditional fields of nursing, teaching, and homemaking.

There could be no better demonstration of this truth than the dazzling array of guest lecturers who were recruited to speak in class or at gatherings of the student deans. Among them were Eleanor Roosevelt, Lillian Gillbreth, Esther Lloyd-Jones, Ruth Strang, Helen Hays, Margaret Meade, and Clare Booth Luce.

One guest lecturer was Mary Ritter Beard (1876–1958), the no-

14. This was a systematized needs-assessment instrument that was administered to the undergraduates. For examples of songs see *60th Anniversary Reunion Program*, 28. Even after fifty years, the former student deans remembered the songs—perhaps because they spoke to the tensions the women felt while working to build a new profession for themselves on a university campus.

15. Marguerite “Maggie” Fisher was a Maxwell faculty member from 1932 to 1971.

table historian of women.<sup>16</sup> After reviewing Beard's *Woman as Force in History*, Hilton invited her to campus. We know from Beard's published correspondence that she was impressed by the course. She wrote to Wilbur K. Jordan, president of Radcliffe College to tell him about it.<sup>17</sup> To her publisher, a Mr. Cunningham at the Macmillan Company, she mentioned "the trend, started by Hilton and Fisher, for Deans of Women to establish women's history courses." She said, "There are many Deans of Women in colleges, one at the Univ. of Wisconsin for instance, who hope to get courses established on women in history . . ." <sup>18</sup>

The Student Dean Program was a significant part of Syracuse University's history, and an important contributor to the development of professional philosophies and practices of student personnel administration in American universities. However, the program itself, as it was in Eunice Hilton's day, would not survive. The Student Dean Program succumbed to the upheavals of the 1960s, because its very content—the organization and administration of campus life—was in dispute.

16. Mary Beard's husband was the controversial historian Charles Beard (1874–1948), the author of *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913) and co-author, with Mary Beard, of *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927).

17. That letter, of 20 January 1944, is reprinted in Nancy Cott, *A Woman Making History: Mary Beard Through Her Letters* (Yale University Press, 1991), 237.

18. Mary Beard to Mr. Cunningham of the Macmillan Company, 3 July 1945. Reprinted in Cott, *A Woman Making History*, 259. In the same letter to her publisher, Beard comments on her exchange with Chancellor William P. Tolley of Syracuse University regarding *Woman as Force in History*: "The Chancellor of Syracuse has not been convinced yet of my soundness but a course has been given there now for three years on Women in American History and it has been growing in attendance and enthusiasm as the men and women behind it have themselves learned more substance for effective teaching. In my book which you have on hand I have given the data on women philosophers with considerable precision with a view to convincing the Chancellor at Syracuse that women have demonstrated force as philosophers. Philosophy is his specialty but he insisted at an evening meeting at Syracuse last autumn, after my exposition of my general thesis, that women had never done anything in his 'field.' For a similar reason, in other circles, I must be convincing about the history of law, by giving its precise details at length—over a long period of time" (pp. 258–59).

After Hilton left in 1959, Marjorie Smith and Ellen Peterson Fairchild became codirectors of the program until 1963. That year Betty Cosby (a 1949 graduate of the Student Dean Program) became director of what was now called the Graduate Program in Student Personnel. Also in 1963, the program officially became co-educational, and the residency requirement ended. In 1966 Mary Dewey (a 1955 graduate of the Student Dean Program) became director of the new Graduate Program in Personnel. In 1970 the dean of women and dean of men's offices were abolished. The dean of women became vice president for Student Residential Life; the dean of men became dean of Student Services and Activities. In 1973 the program, barely recognizable now, became the Higher Education Program.

The personal and professional accomplishments of the student deans after they completed their graduate study is a resounding tribute to their mentors.<sup>19</sup> Beyond filling a wide variety of personnel roles, the graduates served as military officers during the Second World War in all branches of the military, including the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services). They volunteered their time in the Red Cross, religious organizations, literacy projects, public school organizations, and correctional facilities, and most held leadership positions within these organizations. They chaired political committees and held political offices. They obtained doctoral degrees and honorary degrees. They became authors and artists, business owners and poets, religious leaders and faculty members, wives, mothers, and grandmothers.

The 60th Anniversary Reunion of the Student Dean Program was held in Syracuse from 27 to 30 June 1991. The event drew together over 200 women who had been associated with the program.<sup>20</sup> They came to pay tribute to its founders, and to renew old

19. Here are just a few of the other dean of women staff members who were held in high esteem by women who were student deans between 1936 to 1973: Marjorie C. Smith, Maude Stewart, Margaret Wells, Ruth Haddock, Ellen Fairchild, Betty Cosby, and Mary Evelyn Dewey. All of these women were graduates of the Student Dean Program.

20. The Reunion also included a few of the men who had been admitted to the program in the 1960s. The participants' reminiscences were recorded during in-

friendships.<sup>21</sup> Here are a few of their responses to a questionnaire about the impact of the Student Dean Program on their lives.<sup>22</sup>

Impressed by thoroughness and emphasis on professional standards. I found my first year out as a neophyte Dean of Women in a small liberal arts co-ed. college that nearly every situation which occurred had either been discussed in class or included in our exam questions.

The quality of my classmates and the bonding as a community. . . . Wonderful support of the Student Deans to assist each other. Great friendships made which still exist over the years.

The experience was excellent and had lasting impact on me personally and professionally. My closest friends are a result of the Syracuse University experience.

The emphasis on the PPV was really valuable. . . . Nor will I forget after 30 years—wear girdle, have hair done every week, keep a green plant in your office.

I am forever indebted to the University and the women who were in the Student Dean program for taking me out of the world I was in and placing me on a far larger stage than I had ever known existed.

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interviews—some videotaped, others audiotaped, and still others in “blue books,” those examination booklets that the student deans were, as they said, “all too familiar with!”

21. The relationships that developed among student deans were significant because they represent early examples of a female *graduate* student culture, and they should be studied more fully.

22. Barbara Cook, “Student Dean Questionnaire Summary,” 6–9.

Note: the author wishes to thank Joan N. Burstyn for her continued guidance, and the members of the Student Dean Reunion Steering Committee: Marion Waterman Meyer, Claire M. Olds, Jean Crawford, Kae Emerson Brownell, and Barbara “Woody” Cook for providing her with a personal introduction to the Student Dean Program and its membership.