The Milwaukee-Downer Woman

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Preface

A liberal education consists in the acquisition and the refinement of standards of values—all sorts of values—physical, intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual. . . . It does not depend upon materialistic measures of success or failure. . . . The values inhere in the educational experience itself, and that experience is both the test and the perfect justification of the process.

—Henry M. Wriston, President, Lawrence College, Appleton, Wisconsin, 1937

Liberal education, President Wriston wrote in his volume of essays, The Nature of a Liberal College, is a profound experience that occurs within an individual, organically changing the structure of his life and thought, affecting personality development, and leaving him permanently different. Wriston’s conception of the nature of liberal arts education, as well as his wholehearted commitment to it, was shared by other institutions, contemporaries of Lawrence, among which was a small independent college for women in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Milwaukee-Downer College.

Part of Lawrence’s recent history is, in fact, part of Milwaukee-Downer’s history as well. In 1964 a consolidation of Milwaukee-Downer with Lawrence was effected, uniting two institutions with a common commitment to developing students’ minds through liberal arts curricula and shaping their characters through support of non-materialistic value systems. The ways in which Lawrence’s rich liberal arts heritage has been enhanced by this union can only be fully appreciated through knowledge of the particular liberal arts heritage Milwaukee-Downer brought to it. It is this heritage, embodied in the history of Milwaukee-Downer, that is the subject of the present work.

While the main focus of this monograph is on the period 1895-1921, when Milwaukee-Downer was founded and firmly established under President Ellen Sabin, the college’s story is continued until the consolidation with Lawrence in 1964. The main theme is that the “Milwaukee-Downer Woman” is really the unintended consequence of the Milwaukee-Downer education. That is to say, even though the college’s rhetoric subscribed to the notion of women confining their interests and activities to areas within a “women’s sphere,” there were other factors at the college that worked against students actually accepting this. Important among these were the role models provided by a faculty and staff of very independent women and the very nature of liberal arts education itself, which encouraged independence of mind.
To support this argument, the character of Milwaukee-Downer is first established as firmly within the mold of the small liberal arts college, in contrast to the burgeoning "utilitarian" university of the early 20th century. Even though Milwaukee-Downer appeared to offer programs designed to prepare students for "careers," the real motivation was to prepare women to serve society through intelligent performance of women's roles. This remained true even when the college acquiesced in an actual expansion of the "women's sphere" itself.

The expansion of "women's sphere," brought about by the needs of early 20th century American society outside the college's gates, may have been one factor explaining the growth of independence among Milwaukee-Downer women. But certain factors within the institution during this period were important, too. These internal factors actually pulled in different directions: The daily life of the college was governed by strict rules and regulations that sought to stifle independence among students; the rituals and traditions of the college simultaneously kept students in line while encouraging them to see themselves as growing into increasingly responsible roles; the personnel at the college, strong models of independence, influenced students' development in that direction.

The Milwaukee-Downer story of the 1930s and 1940s, under President Lucia Briggs, sees the further growth of independence among students as related both to the personal development of the college's leader herself and to conditions brought about first by the Great Depression and then by the Second World War. Under President John B. Johnson, in the 1950s and early 1960s, the actual character of the school changed, such that the rhetoric of "women's sphere" was finally dropped and women's independence was openly and frankly encouraged.

This monograph on Milwaukee-Downer history is based upon the author's doctoral dissertation, "Milwaukee-Downer College: A Study in the History of Women and the History of Higher Education in America, 1851-1964" (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1991). Since the consolidation with Lawrence College in 1964, Milwaukee-Downer alumnae have had the university's consistent support in keeping alive the legacy of Milwaukee-Downer College. In no way is this better exemplified than in the publication by Lawrence of the present volume, as part of the celebration of the Lawrence University Sesquicentennial.

—Lynne H. Kleinman, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, February 1997
Milwaukee-Downer College developed and reached maturity under the aegis of its first president, Ellen Sabin, in the period from 1895, when it was created by the merger of Milwaukee College in Milwaukee and Downer College of Fox Lake, Wisconsin, to 1921, when President Sabin retired. Milwaukee-Downer was a liberal arts college, sharing with its counterparts in the East and Midwest the goal of developing well-rounded students whose minds were trained to think and whose character would make them natural leaders of society. These goals differentiated the liberal arts colleges from the major universities and land grant colleges of that same period, which were moving away from liberal arts and the broad development of character, toward a “utilitarianism” aimed at narrower, vocational goals. The utilitarian college and university were, indeed, frankly committed to preparing students for “careers,” by teaching specific skills for specific remunerative positions. By contrast, while the Milwaukee-Downer curriculum did offer programs in areas such as domestic science and occupational therapy, this never reflected an institutional goal primarily focused on preparing women for “careers” through which to earn a living. The goal, instead, was the improvement of society, both through women’s efficient, scientific homemaking and intervention to alleviate social problems generated by the ravages of war and industry. This was a goal shared in common by the small liberal arts colleges of that day.

Milwaukee-Downer as a liberal arts institution: its mission
A closer look at the Milwaukee-Downer mission allows us to better appreciate the depth of the kinship that existed between this school and other women’s—as well as men’s and coeducational—liberal arts institutions. From the earliest days of Milwaukee-Downer, up to and even beyond the end of her administration, President Ellen Sabin maintained that the education that develops mental power alone is “profitless,” that, to be complete, education must also exert moral and religious influences aimed at development of the entire personality. Sabin consistently held that “training that does not result in a positively good character is a dead failure.” There existed so-called “educated” people, she warned, who, disappointingly, were not trustworthy or truthful or conscientious or unselfish, whose large knowledge of books might coexist “with selfish and unloving hearts and undeveloped consciences.” These convictions moved Sabin to make the follow-
ing impassioned statement to her students in Chapel:

My dear girls, with all my heart I desire your highest good. Your progress in knowledge and culture, your development in high and aesthetic interests will be nothing if there is not in your hearts the deep motive of love of right, and the noble, prevailing purpose that as far as in you lies [the power] you will strive, you will renew your effort with every failure to be right, true, pure, loving. May God bless every effort and help us to grow into a true and firm Christian character.

For Ellen Sabin, the chief goal of education was clearly the building of Christian character in each student. And, in seeing its mission as character-building, Milwaukee-Downer College was not unique among smaller institutions of higher education in late 19th and early 20th century America. Many of the small New England liberal arts colleges for men, for example, also shared this goal, often expressing it as a desire to achieve “well-roundedness” in the members of their student bodies. “Start with the postulate that man is intellect alone,” warned Cyrus Foss, president of Wesleyan University, in 1881, “and your scheme of education must be radically defective and vicious. Man is body, intellect, heart, will, conscience, and spirit.” The ideal was to produce the “Whole Man,” thoroughly educated in traditional culture and thoroughly imbued with Christian spirit. The college could not legitimately limit itself to training men’s minds only; it also had to commit itself to the development of men’s character. A similar view of liberal arts education was later echoed in small coeducational colleges of the Midwest. Lawrence College President Henry M. Wriston, for example, defined liberal education as consisting in the “acquisition and the refinement of standards of values—all sorts of values—physical, intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual.”

To what end would this education be directed? As originally conceived, the small New England liberal arts colleges for men were evangelical institutions that aimed to produce pious Christians, dedicated to religious service. Gradually, in the latter 19th century, their mission became the production not of Christians, but of “Christian gentlemen,” men of character, who would occupy positions of civic leadership, firmly committed to the service of society. By the turn of the century, this commitment to social service was being expressed by college men through involvement in social reform, under the banner of Progressivism. In short, evangelical religion had been replaced, as the chief concern of the small liberal arts college, by a greater concern for service to society through participation in public life.

This shift from evangelism to social service to accomplish the building of character could be discerned, as well, in some of the Eastern institutions for the higher education of women. Mount Holyoke, for example, had, in its early days in the 1830s, been steeped in the evangelism of its founder, Mary Lyon. Above all, her goal had been to strengthen the religious conviction of students who counted themselves as Christians and to achieve the conversion of students who did not. By the time Mary Woolley became president of Mount Holyoke in 1901, the concept of education for women at this school, while still containing a strong religious component aimed at the achievement of Christian piety, had shifted to emphasize the importance of service to society. The mission of education was not just to impart the values of civilized, Christian living; it also was to facilitate a sympathetic and mature understanding of national and international problems. Mount Holyoke women were encouraged to seek placement in situations in which they could be of most service to the world, in which they could make the world a happier place.

In much the same manner as its Eastern counterparts, Milwaukee-Downer College gradually shifted its educational mission from simply imparting to students the values of civilized, Christian living to heightening their awareness of general social problems. The former approach, focused on instilling Christian values, had been set within the relatively narrow context of the family and the home and had been well exemplified in the education offered by both of Milwaukee-Downer’s predecessor institutions. Milwaukee College had educated young women to take the roles of homemakers and teachers and to shape the family and the home according to highest standards of Christian morality. Downer College had frankly viewed itself as a “handmaid” of religion, its primary responsibilities being the education of women to serve in the roles of Christian wives and mothers and the training of women for possible service as Christian missionaries. Of the two institutions, Downer had been by far the more overtly committed to the strengthening and perpetuation of Christianity, and the combined institution, Milwaukee-Downer College, under the direct influence of Ellen Sabin, herself a former president of Downer College, became heir to the Downer commitment. Sabin was a consistent advocate of the Christian concept of “right conduct,” always seeing it as a critical factor in character-building. Over time, during her administration, the concept of “right conduct” became increasingly associated with service to society, Sabin viewing such service as the obligation of every college-educated individual. In her own words, “Society looks to our colleges and universities for trained men and
women who shall hold right and just views and fill responsible positions of trust and leadership.” College-educated women could perform service to society, outside the confines of the home, specifically through contributions to current literature, through work in the field of home economics, and through informed philanthropic work. Milwaukee-Downer women did indeed become involved in the work of such burgeoning social settlements as the University Settlement and the Jewish Settlement in Milwaukee. In essence, the school remained Christian and continued to adhere to the goal of character-building; what changed was its willingness to allow the influence of students and graduates to extend increasingly to the wider society outside.

**Milwaukee-Downer as a liberal arts institution: its curriculum**

There was a significant difference between the educational goals of the small liberal arts colleges in the latter 19th and early 20th centuries and the goals of the dominant institutions of higher education, the universities, during this period. By contrast to the college ideal of “well-roundedness” and to the college’s devotion to producing the “Whole Man” of fine character, the burgeoning university sought to adapt itself to the processes of rapid industrialization and urbanization taking place in the general society and thus emphasized vocational and professional training to produce individuals capable of achieving material success.

The essence of the difference between the college and university lay in their respective curricular preferences. The college, on the one hand, favored the use of a fixed curriculum in which courses in classics and mathematics and in subjects like Mental Physiology, Natural Theology, Political Economy, Constitutional Law, and Moral Philosophy trained the mind to think. The university, on the other hand, favored flexibility in the curriculum, increasingly instituting it by way of an “elective” system that included not only the classics and mathematics but potentially any and every subject of interest to the mind. The effect of the university approach was a departure from the college’s goal of broadly training the mind for unspecified future applications to a narrower training, selected by the student according to personal tastes, aimed at the acquisition of specific practical skills. A “utilitarianism” came to characterize the American university, wherein the university stepped away from learning and culture as it existed in the college to produce practical men who were both acquainted with the problems of “real life” and equipped to grapple with them.

Because university education abandoned broad culture in favor of encouraging the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills to earn a living, and because this was perceived as blatant materialism, it engendered the scorn of the colleges. Nowhere was this attitude more apparent than in the rhetoric of Milwaukee-Downer President Ellen Sabin, whose remarks frequently distinguished between education that was “useful” and education that was merely “utilitarian.” The former term referred to those applications of formal knowledge that enriched daily life, as when principles of chemistry, for example, were employed to improve the understanding and practice of cookery. The latter term, by contrast, referred to schooling that was promoted simply on the basis that it “pays,” that it was directed solely toward earning a livelihood. In 1904 she complained to a Fox Lake, Wisconsin, audience that

... unless any subject can justify itself as directly improving one’s chances in earning a livelihood, it is denounced as a “fad” and dropped. ... The argument that a certain method or study enriches life, increases the power to enjoy or appreciate reaches but a few. The successful argument is not will this make better, nobler human beings, but will this make one’s chances better in the struggle for existence.

She felt that development of moral human beings would not result from education that only stressed utility. The object of education, Sabin insisted, should be to proceed beyond vocational training and achieve complete self-realization. If this objective prevailed, she was certain that man would still make a living but that would be “a means of life, not its end.”

Not only did this viewpoint match that of the small New England liberal arts colleges, it also matched that of other small colleges in Milwaukee-Downer’s home state of Wisconsin, as was clearly evidenced by Milwaukee-Downer’s membership in a group known as Wisconsin Colleges Associated. This was an organization of private Christian colleges in Wisconsin, all of which, with the single exception of Milwaukee-Downer, were either men’s or coeducational institutions. Along with Milwaukee-Downer, the members included Beloit, Northland, Ripon, Milton, Campion, Carroll, and Lawrence Colleges and Marquette University. As was true of their New England counterparts, these colleges explicitly distinguished themselves from schools having purely vocational motivation:

... it may be said that the colleges of our group represent almost entirely that type of education which is known as a purely college type ... which stands for broad culture and sound training, for citizenship and service, without ... speedy emolument.
As was true of their New England counterparts, these colleges made the tacit assumption that it was the classical curriculum that facilitated their ability both to train the mind to think (to achieve "mental discipline") and to develop Christian character and devotion to public service. Thus, the presidents of the member institutions looked askance at what they considered the tendency of education to depart from the classical curriculum, thereby decreasing the possibilities for training appropriate individuals to become scholars, writers, and college professors. They proposed setting themselves the task of seeking out promising students and urging them to "prepare themselves for the greatest usefulness and the broadest service, rather than for purely utilitarian pursuits, stimulated by the desire merely to gain a livelihood." Here, as in Sabin's own rhetoric, the concept of "usefulness" was defined in terms of broad service to society, while "utilitarianism" was linked to the narrower pursuit of making a living. Education, it was felt, could only be truly "useful" if it facilitated societal improvement through the application of Christian principles to social, economic, and industrial life.

**Does introduction of electives into the curriculum signal change in Milwaukee-Downer's mission?**

While the ultimate educational goals of these small liberal arts institutions did not change, the record indicates that they nevertheless gradually introduced electives into the curriculum. This was, indeed, a trend to which Milwaukee-Downer was no exception.

In the Milwaukee-Downer catalogue for 1900-1901, President Sabin announced the introduction into the curriculum of the "Group System." Daniel Coit Gilman had introduced this system at Johns Hopkins University in 1876 as a compromise between the fixed liberal arts curriculum, on the one hand, and the curriculum of completely free electives, on the other. At Milwaukee-Downer, as at Hopkins, it involved election by the student of a prescribed combination of studies, starting with two "major courses," representing at least eighteen hours of work in each of two fields, such as Greek and Latin; German and French; chemistry and biology; English literature or history and either German, Greek, or Latin; science and either Latin, German, or French. In addition, each group had a more or less common set of "group electives," which included mathematics, language, science, philosophy, and history. Finally, each group provided for a specified number of credits in "free electives," which might be chosen from such specialized subject areas as History of Philosophy, Pedagogy, Harmony, History of Art, Art Work in Studio, and supplementary courses in Greek, Latin, French, German, mathematics, science, English literature, and history. The degree ultimately awarded varied according to the character of the major studies included in the group chosen.

It is significant that Ellen Sabin chose to follow the plan of electives instituted by President Gilman at Johns Hopkins rather than, say, that of President Charles Eliot at Harvard. The latter, which emerged as a plan of totally free electives, offered no guidance to the student in the form of a set or sets of required courses for the degree. Instead, the elective system at Harvard functioned according to the belief that the best education was one that gave students practice in making wise choices. As Eliot intended, it allowed students the freedom both to choose courses that were directed at narrow vocational or professional goals and to avoid courses that at other institutions were deemed indispensable to liberal education. By contrast, Gilman's plan, while allowing students at Hopkins to keep "career" objectives in mind, really insisted that they follow some version of a broad program of studies that could serve as a foundation for subsequent advanced and professional training. The undergraduate curriculum at Hopkins did not provide vocational or professional training, per se. Nor did the curriculum at Milwaukee-Downer under Ellen Sabin, as was made clear in the catalogue statement of 1900-1901, introducing the group system of electives into the school:

"The aim of the Group System, as here outlined, is to secure broad culture rather than early specialization, offering in the selected major studies a firm central interest in studies pursued for two years in definite lines and also furnishing a basis for the most successful specialization after the completion of the college course, if such further study is desired."

To Sabin, securing "broad culture" meant proceeding beyond formal classical studies and developing in students a variety of interests and sympathies as well as awareness of different points of view. "Those of fine culture," she wrote, "have reverence, sympathy, outgoing love" that manifested itself in a broad spirit of service to society. Clearly, this represented a restatement by Sabin of what she believed to be the highest goal of undergraduate education: to train not only the mind but also the conscience, such that character would be built and devotion to social service would be inculcated. "Specialization," on the other hand, suggested to Sabin a "narrow, specific end and aim," which, if it were to be pursued at all, was more appropriately done after college, when proper foundations were already in place. She would thus have agreed heartily with President Gilman's assessment of what
made a college a success; his words, indeed, could have been her own:

I believe that the merit of a college consists in what it does for the character of the students. If they are taught fidelity and accuracy; if they learn to appreciate the value of authority as well as the privileges of freedom; if their wills are trained to overcome difficulty; if their social, intellectual, and religious natures are developed; if the love of knowledge is quickened, then the college is a success.

Both Gilman and Sabin saw the mission of the college as the building of character; for them, “specialization,” that pursuit of narrow vocational goals that later would be referred to as “career” training, was not the aim of undergraduate education.

**Home economics at Milwaukee-Downer: implications for women’s role**

It is instructive of President Ellen Sabin’s attitude about women’s role in society that her statement about “specialization” after college, quoted earlier, said only that it might be done “if such further study is desired.” This could hardly have been construed as encouragement for, much less advocacy of, professional training for women. Indeed, Sabin would very likely have been subject to the same criticism that many of the Eastern women’s colleges came under in the early 20th century, to the effect that their focus on general culture and achievement of well-roundedness did not allow students the opportunity to intelligently explore vocational possibilities. Yet, Sabin did introduce into the Milwaukee-Downer curriculum a course of study in domestic science that appeared to include a definite vocational aspect.

Beginning in 1901, a Department of Home Economics went into operation at the school that, while offering lessons to college and seminary students in cooking, sewing, and housekeeping, significantly also offered a two-year teacher training course whose diplomates would be qualified, indeed expected, to take positions teaching domestic science to girls of public school age. Did this, perchance, represent a retreat by Sabin from her fundamental opposition to the sort of “specialization” that aimed at purely vocational training?

The answer to the above question is that the establishment of the two-year teacher training course in domestic science at Milwaukee-Downer did not constitute a significant departure from Ellen Sabin’s basic goals of character-building and stimulating devotion to social service. Although this two-year program sought to place women in public-school teaching positions where they could earn a livelihood, a goal that, by itself, Sabin would have scorned as “utilitarian,” it ultimately would serve society by equipping young women to transmit the knowledge and skills required for rational, scientific management of the American home. The very presence of a home economics department at Milwaukee-Downer would, at one and the same time, allow two-year students to earn a diploma and a credential to teach, while giving the four-year, degree-bound students opportunity to round out their education with electives in such aspects of homemaking as dietetics, house management, home nursing, evolution of the home, textiles, and food study.

For the regular, four-year college students, then, there was initially no suggestion that home economics be used for vocational purposes; these courses were for their own enrichment only. And while the department did prepare two-year students for vocational life as teachers, this was always seen in the much broader context of serving the higher need of society for intelligent homemaking. Ellen Torelle, a faculty member of the home economics department, explained this in the following way:

It is difficult . . . to overestimate the importance to the individual woman and to the nation at large of the work of domestic science. Since it affects all sides of life, the teaching of cookery, household management, and sanitation throughout the land will affect the health and prosperity of all our people to the end that they will become stronger physically, mentally, and morally.

One did not teach domestic science just to accomplish the utilitarian goal of earning a livelihood; the greater purpose was to achieve a wide range of salutary social effects.

Not long after its initial introduction as a two-year teacher training course, home economics at Milwaukee-Downer also came to be offered as a four-year degree program. The college’s catalogue for 1910-1911 announced its intention to confer a new degree, the bachelor of science in home economics, upon four-year students who majored in that area, making them eligible to teach home economics in high school, as well as take positions as institutional supervisors and managers. Could this have represented a shift in the college’s basic aim; did it now make the pursuit of narrow, vocational goals, of a “career” rather than the pursuit of a well-rounded education, the more legitimate concern of the undergraduate curriculum? No, because for Ellen Sabin, training in domestic science and training in academic subjects that promoted mental discipline were not mutually exclusive but, rather, complementary. Domestic science represented to Sabin the
realm of problems that were part of women's unique responsibility to understand and help solve, problems pertaining to the welfare of the home, childhood, and society. It was the responsibility of the women's college, in her view, to endow women with the discipline that inevitably resulted from the study of languages, mathematics, and the sciences, in order that they be properly equipped to deal with these problems.

Upon many occasions during her long tenure as Milwaukee-Downer's president, Sabin could indeed be found repeating some version of the statement that "Woman's education should prepare a woman for women's chief vocation, and ... the science and art of homemaking, which is a business most complex and most significant, should form a recognized part of her training for life."

As important as what this says about the place of home economics within a liberal arts curriculum is what it says about the view of what constituted women's proper role. Homemaking, according to Sabin, was women's chief vocation, and so it was through no accidental oversight on Sabin's part that neither her public nor private pronouncements advocated that women be educated to pursue paid, professional work, "careers," unrelated to their homemaker roles. On the contrary, Sabin maintained that homemaking and social service were what women should be prepared for, "even more specifically than the gainful occupations."

That Milwaukee-Downer engaged in the training of teachers did not represent an exception to Sabin's main line of thought, as it remained her view that teaching, like homemaking, was simply a part of women's natural and proper social role. In performing as homemakers and as teachers, women were simply living up to what was expected, to what they were supposed to do. This was clearly an expression of the ideology that held that women made their most significant contribution through the intelligent performance of those functions that fell within women's own "separate sphere."

Occupational therapy at Milwaukee-Downer: expanding "women's sphere"

While the "separate sphere" ideology continued to govern most college women's lives, the "sphere" itself underwent considerable expansion. Educated women in the 19th century had moved from acquiring a thin veneer of social graces to pursuing scientific training that would prepare them to practice intelligently their "professions" of teaching, nursing, and homemaking. In the early 20th century, although the importance of women's homemaker role continued to be emphasized, its attendant skills were increasingly applied to occupations outside the home. Thus, there came to be a legitimate place for college women in such areas as dietetics, social work, church work, library work, and secretarial work. As had always been the case, the merit of jobs in which Milwaukee-Downer women became involved was judged by Ellen Sabin according to the extent to which the best interests of society were served. "Our students," she said, "are prepared to maintain themselves economically in many different lines of work. I believe," she immediately added, "they are also prepared to live in a manner elevating to themselves and helpful to society." With these words, expressed close to the end of her tenure, Sabin once again stressed the importance of service to society over the attainment of mere vocational goals. Her words also tacitly acknowledged that women's sphere had indeed expanded beyond what she had formerly considered its proper boundaries—the home and the classroom—to the world outside.

Ellen Sabin's willingness to see the sphere of college women expand beyond its traditional boundaries was tied not only to her determination that society's needs be served but also to her ever-present desire to bolster the growth of Milwaukee-Downer College. United States participation in the First World War, which gave rise to an immediate need for occupational therapists to engage in the rehabilitation of injured soldiers, presented Sabin a unique opportunity to serve society by introducing a program into the college curriculum the potential success of which was virtually guaranteed.

The impetus to introduce occupational therapy at Milwaukee-Downer College came from a former student and member of the art department, Elizabeth Greene Upham, who, as a consequence of her own visual handicap, had become interested in discovering means by which she might help handicapped individuals realize their potential. Naturally inclined toward the arts, she had specifically studied the uses of arts and crafts in the treatment of the disabled and had, as early as 1909, approached Sabin with a proposal to offer a course in handicrafts. By Upham's own account, Sabin's consent to the introduction of a course in jewelry and silversmithing had been accompanied by the expression of strong reservations about the appropriateness of such an offering in an academic, liberal arts institution. Although not stated explicitly, it may well have been the case that Sabin initially considered this course too vocational in nature, appearing too much to involve Milwaukee-Downer in the business of teaching women a trade for the purpose of securing employment for pay. Yet, with the advent of the war, the creation within the art department of a program in occupational therapy could clearly be viewed as transcending any narrow, vocational purpose, to be viewed instead as responding to an expressed and urgent need of the United States military and as making a valuable contribution to the war effort.
1918 identified this role as promoting the "conservation of life":

The second year of participation in the war is revealing new demands for the trained woman. It is foreshadowing the vital part she is to play not only in the war but in the reconstruction after the war. It is the part which she alone can play, the task that is peculiarly woman's, the conservation of life.

Ellen Sabin's rhetoric was filled with statements that stressed the importance of women's role as conservators of all that was good about civilization. "Conservation," she told the women graduating Lake Forest University in 1917, "is the compelling word." The war, she continued, was placing the most precious gains of the human race in jeopardy, and it was women's job to "rescue every imperiled good." In Sabin's view, this duty was not confined to the wartime situation but was a perpetual responsibility of women in general—and of college women in particular. In an early commencement address, that of 1905, she had told her audience:

Women are the acknowledged conservators of society, and they must be nobly prepared for their limitless responsibilities. If the scions of royal houses must be carefully fitted for their high careers, no less must be adequately educated women—companions and mothers of sovereigns! . . . Women with trained judgment, large and altruistic spirit, [and] enlightened patriotism refine and elevate all relationships. Such women are all too few, and their number should be the jealous concern of an enlightened public. Public interest . . . particularly requires the college woman of liberal training to preserve general culture.

Whether or not Sabin was conscious of it, these sentiments strongly echoed those of the 19th century founders of higher education for women in Milwaukee, who had viewed women as the "bearers of civilization," as the conduits through which culture was transmitted to men who were otherwise engaged in business or political pursuits. Apparently, Sabin's commitment to this notion was very intense, because she communicated it to her students with an almost religious fervor. Thus, a member of the Class of 1915, attempting to identify the Sabin conception of women's role, later recalled:

Her idea, Miss Sabin's idea—I think this, I think she thought women were going to save the world. And they would really have
to live up to everything that college had taught them. And then they would go out, and they would save the world. I'm sure of that. I can almost hear her say, ‘Women will save the world.’

At the end of her administration, in June, 1921, Sabin was still insisting on women's power to influence the world through the exercise of their roles as wife, mother, teacher, nurse, and social guardian and still viewing this as equal in importance to “man’s great part in the splendid realms of business and politics.” Though women’s sphere may have expanded to allow their direct intervention in the problems generated by war and industrial society, it still was distinctly separate from the sphere of men.

What now becomes a question is how students were actually affected by the gradual expansion during the early 20th century of the “women’s sphere.” Milwaukee-Downer rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, was it not possible, for example, that students actually viewed the introduction of home economics and occupational therapy programs into the curriculum as encouraging their entrance into “careers”? More generally, was it not possible that, whether or not the college so intended, Milwaukee-Downer students came to feel less restricted by college rhetoric about the limits of women’s roles and more encouraged to act with increasing independence? Looking beyond college rhetoric to the realities of everyday life in the institution actually gives us reason to respond to this question in both the negative and the affirmative. On the one hand, there is much evidence that the institution, acting in the role of surrogate parent, organized daily life on campus in such a way as to place rather severe restrictions upon student independence. Yet, at the very same time, there were factors in the Milwaukee-Downer environment that supported student independence. This was true to some extent of the rituals and traditions of the school, and true to a very great extent of the very strong models of independence provided by the college’s all-female, unmarried faculty and staff.

The “Milwaukee-Downer Woman” of the 20th century was increasingly characterized by an independence of mind and action that enabled her to meet all manner of challenges. How did this come about? What aspects of the college’s internal life affected the growth of student independence and contributed to producing the “Milwaukee-Downer Woman”? There were a number of factors at work, not all of which pulled in the same direction. Daily life on campus, for example, was restrictive and worked against the growth of independence. The rituals and traditions of the institution, meanwhile, although restrictive too, contained elements of support for autonomy. And the personnel who guided and governed the school strongly modeled independence and in so doing promoted its growth.

**Daily life on campus**

Milwaukee-Downer students’ day-to-day lives on campus were governed by strict rules and subjected to close supervision. For students who resided in the college’s dormitories, daily life conformed to a routine outlined for them in the *Student Activities Handbook*. Thus, they were awakened by a “rising bell” each morning at 6:30 a.m. (Sundays at 7:30) and were expected to arrive promptly for breakfast at 7:00 a.m. (Sundays at 8:00). Lunch was the only “informal” meal, served at 12:30 p.m., and dinner was served at 6:00 p.m. (Sunday dinner was at 1:30 p.m., and there was “tea” at 6:00). Mail was distributed twice a day in each residence hall, at 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. The schedule for classes in academic subjects, of course, applied to the entire student body, as did the schedule for Chapel. The *Handbook* outlined these in this way:

There are seven recitation periods a day, fifty minutes in length, with five minutes between periods. Two bells are rung, one at the beginning and one at the close of each period. Academic work begins at 8:30 a.m. . . . Chapel is held every day except Saturday and Sunday in Merrill Hall at 12:05. . . . Vespers are held every Sunday in the chapel at 6:40.

The life of “city” students, those who lived at home and commuted to school, was governed by the schedule of classes. This was true, as well, for the students who lived in residence, but members of the latter group were
also obliged, as indicated earlier, to awaken to the residence hall bell and to eat meals strictly by the clock, as well as to be held strictly accountable for their evening activities and for any absence from campus. Yet, the suggestion that under these conditions it might have been more advantageous to be a city student was vigorously disputed by some who lived in residence at the college. One such dormitory student later insisted that living on campus "made all the difference" to whether or not one would experience true college life:

The city students lived on the exterior of what the college gave. But those of us who lived in the dormitories, we had the full college experience... They [the city students] had none of the actual experience of living in a hall...

And there did, indeed, appear to be aspects of dormitory life that fostered a sense of fellowship among the students. A good example of this was in the after-dinner activities described in the Student Handbook:

Every evening there is dancing in the gymnasium until the study-bell rings. Wednesday evenings we have class tables, and this means singing in the dining rooms. Each class vies with other classes to have the very best songs, and all join in the singing of the regular college songs. Occasionally we have college songs in the chapel or out on the campus.

The price dormitory students paid for this esprit de corps was the regimentation inherent in all their activities and the real constraint upon their freedom of action, which they had no choice but to accept. Indeed, the city students might well have argued that they occupied the better of the two possible worlds; for, while they were receiving the same academic background as the college was providing for the dormitory students, they were not obliged to surrender freedom in their personal lives. Whether or not students thought in terms of the relative advantages or disadvantages of belonging to one or the other group, it is important that there was consciousness that these distinct groups did exist and that they were thought to define the social structure of the student body. This consciousness was reflected in the fact that the Student Government Association had separate chairs of the Residence Halls and of the City Student Organization. That the dormitory students, along with the administration, also assumed that residential life at college was the best—and that the city students must have been aware that this attitude existed—was indicated by such advice to city students as appeared in the Student Handbook of 1915. Here, the college urged them to participate actively in the City Student Organization, telling them this was essential "... if you would come as near to that experience expressed in the term 'college life' as you possibly can without actually living at the college..."

Still, it cannot be assumed that city students either shared this attitude or would have welcomed all aspects of the "college life" one experienced in living on campus, especially those that placed restrictions upon dormitory students' freedom of action. In matters of personal conduct, dormitory students were subject to constant scrutiny, and there were many instances in which individuals among them were disciplined for violation of the rules.

The story of Thelma Richards provides a good example. A graduate of Huron High School in Huron, South Dakota, Thelma first enrolled at Milwaukee-Downer in 1918 and had what was apparently a successful and uneventful freshman year. Returning as a sophomore in September of 1919, problems associated with Thelma's conduct immediately began to arise, causing Dean Mina Kerr to communicate the following information directly to Thelma's parents in early October:

On Sunday, October 5, your daughter Thelma registered in our Student Government Registration Book to go to Grand Avenue Congregational Church... Instead of going there, she spent the morning attending the movies. This was, of course, dishonor and falsehood in that she went one place when she was registered for another place. Moreover, the college stands for keeping the Sunday, and we do not permit our students to go to theatres on Sunday. She has confessed to this action. The punishment is that she is misregistration and is suspended indefinitely from the Student Government Association for being dishonorable. If we again have similar difficulty with her, she will be in danger of being asked to withdraw from the college.

Thelma’s father’s reply to Dean Kerr indicated that he felt that Thelma had not transgressed deliberately but that she had probably had a change of heart about her destination after signing out from school and, based on an upbringing that always had afforded her "her fullest personal liberty," she chose to go to a movie instead of to church. Parenthetically, Mr. Richards opined that a "... good Christian portrayal of character in Sunday movies may produce good spiritual and moral results, even better than a sermon...; because our sense of sight is the most reliable and much more so than hearing."
He insisted that disciplinary authorities at the college base their punishment for Thelma's behavior upon her intentions, for he firmly believed that "It is the intention and purpose . . . which determines every moral crime, legal or otherwise."

Communications between the college administration and the parents continued during the balance of October 1919 and indicated that all concerned were satisfied that Thelma now understood the need to obey rules. Also, they further agreed that Thelma's "social sense of friendliness and response to the plans of other people [had] led her astray." Thus, Mr. Richards must have been very surprised by the contents of yet another letter to him from Dean Kerr early in November:

Again I must write to you about your daughter. On Saturday evening, November 8, she left the college soon after eight o'clock and several blocks from the campus met two young men in their machine. Thelma and another student had made a previous appointment with these two men. The four of them drove about the city, went to the Badger Room of the Hotel Wisconsin, returned to the college about twelve o'clock, and reentered the hall by a basement passageway. This is the story which these two students now tell us. They had been reported on Sunday morning by the faculty head of one of our halls as having been out during the evening without any permission. On Sunday evening, without being sent for, they came to me with an entirely different statement than what is given above, a false one, and made up for the occasion, as they confessed yesterday.

Dean Kerr further told Mr. Richards that she and President Sabin had conferred about this matter, and they had agreed, because Thelma was still under discipline for her prior infraction when this latest one occurred, that her parents should be asked to withdraw her from the institution. The dean closed with these words: "Will you come to Milwaukee to take her home? We would like to have her leave here as soon as possible, certainly before the end of the week. . . . She needs . . . to be with her family and to have their constant watchfulness and care."

Thelma's father did not accept this with equanimity. Extensive correspondence by letter and telegram during the rest of November saw the development and clash of two very different viewpoints. On the college administration's side was the contention that Thelma's offense had been of such a nature that the school, which conceived of itself as serving in loco par-entis, could no longer take responsibility for her. "[It] is a serious thing," President Sabin wrote Mr. Richards, "for a student to absent herself without authority from the college after dark, or, indeed, at any time. It is too serious to be treated leniently. . . ." And, if the first two offenses hadn't been bad enough, Sabin also had to report in this letter that Thelma had absent herself from campus yet a third time, giving as her subsequent explanation that "she supposed she was no longer under college control." On the other side, Mr. Richards increasingly saw his daughter as the victim of the piece, and his letters reflected this growing hostility. He kept demanding that Sabin answer some specific questions, complaining that her letters had "failed to report if Thelma lead [sic] others astray or if she was lead [sic] array and if every student told the truth, so that you do not punish the truth and reward the liar as you have passed judgment." His final position was that if Thelma were actually guilty of wrongdoing, the responsible party was clearly the college itself, which, he asserted, was suffering from "delinquency in management." In the end, Thelma's mother came to Milwaukee to retrieve her, and President Sabin subsequently wrote Mr. Richards that an understanding had been reached about what had actually transpired in the incidents involving Thelma. In forcing Thelma to withdraw, Sabin must have felt that she had both made her point and adequately safeguarded her own authority, for in this final letter to the father she expressed willingness to re-admit Thelma for second semester if he and Mrs. Richards so desired.

The exercise of control over students was not limited to disciplining them for violations of rules that already had been committed. There was also a concerted effort on the part of supervisory personnel, of both administration and faculty, to heighten students' awareness of the rules before any violation had a chance to take place. Thus, for example, the faculty "head of the hall" would be physically present and actively a part of the ritual in which students were called for by their male dates. An alumna who had lived in McLaren Hall as a student recalled such a scene:

The men would come, and the head of the hall, Lena B. [Professor of Latin Lena B. Tomson] would meet them—they would be dressed up—and they would be ushered into the drawing room. And then the girls whom they were going to take out were called, and they would come. And then they would say goodbye to Lena B.—the couple—and out they would go. And Lena B. never hesitated to say, 'You know the curfew is . . . whatever the curfew was. . . . And, oh heavens! . . . I should say they were chaperoned—everybody was chaperoned!
The dormitory students were well policed. In fact, it might be argued that one reason the administration felt college life was “better” for residential than for city students may have been that the college could exercise more control over the lives of the former group outside of classes. This would surely improve the school’s prospects for achieving its major goal, producing well-rounded Christian women who would both value and contribute service to society.

Indeed, it was always with this goal in mind that the college did its best to exert influence over the lives of all the students, residents and commuters alike. This was the purpose of Chapel, which was held daily from 12:05 to 12:30 p.m., and at which attendance was required. President Sabin used these sessions to provide guidance for students on subjects ranging from their physical appearance to how much credence they should give to fortune tellers, mediums, and psychics. Sabin was interested in everything that affected student behavior, which is why she even took very seriously a parent’s upset over the fact that the college allowed the students to dance the Tango. This mother wrote:

It is almost criminal to let young girls dance these dances because the men are bad about it and while many behave properly others take advantage of the opportunity and not only [handle] the girls immodestly but take liberties which would not otherwise be tolerated.

In her reply, Sabin justified allowing the “new dances” by telling this parent that, had they been prohibited, “The result would have been loss of training in character that results from permission to dance them, united with the responsibility to use the privilege with perfect propriety.” Character-building evidently remained an important goal at Milwaukee-Downer.

Sabin recognized that part of a student’s character would be shaped by the sort of relationships she engaged in with other students. This was the reason, for example, that Sabin staunchly opposed having chapters of national sororities on the Milwaukee-Downer campus, believing that they led to “separations and exclusions” among students and that they were therefore “unchristian.” It was on these same grounds that she also resisted admitting students of racial minorities to Milwaukee-Downer. When a black student sought entry into the college, Sabin asked her to think about what her situation as a student there would be like:

I wonder, Miss Thomas, whether you have imagined the situation sufficiently to realize that it might be very hard for you to be a student in a college where you were the only one of your race. There are prejudices that exist against the entrance of those of another race. You can hardly realize perhaps that this might be a very uncomfortable situation. It might make you unhappy to feel a distinction. It would require a great deal of force of character for you to carry yourself with poise and keep from bitterness of feeling.

While she deplored situations that set up artificial barriers among students, Sabin objected equally to conditions that brought students unnaturally close. She was aware that “crushes” existed between some students and did not hesitate to make known that she considered “friendships of this sort harmful, no matter with whom they exist.” An alumna recalled that Sabin made this the subject of one of her Chapel talks:

I do remember this... I remember Ellen Sabin talking about having crushes on each other... It seems to me that, in Chapel one day, she talked about the importance of knowing and being friends with a great many, and not focusing on just one.

It may have been the influence of Sabin’s attitude that caused some students to express discomfort about the whole matter of “crushes.” One former student defined a crush and told about her feelings while witnessing one:

[When someone had a crush] the person admired the other person so much, and they wanted to know all about them, and they’d think about them. I used to sit in one of the classes, and the desks usually were for two people. This girl had a crush on one of the older students, and she just suffered—I mean it was like a man being in love, I guess. And I didn’t like that sort of thing at all. I liked to have good friends and intimate friends, ... but I didn’t realize ... [at first that this] was kind of unnatural, but I think it probably was.

Of the two students just quoted, the former resided at the college and the latter lived at home. Both acknowledged that having many friends was the alternative to indulging in crushes, reflecting the probability that, especially in matters considered important to character development, Sabin was equally successful in getting her message across to dormitory and city students alike.

While President Sabin had no compunctions about establishing and enforcing rules for acceptable behavior, both she and the rest of the faculty
nevertheless appeared to hope that students would develop the ability and will to police themselves. Sabin's rhetoric seemed to make this explicit:

To secure right conduct by the inner determination of each person, uninfluenced by fear and unconstrained by outer influence, is the aim of all training from the first to the last effort in education. The end sought by home, school, and society is self-government. We think all restriction and control futile...that does not...make the individual wish to do right....Control by external authority, by the imposition of another's will, is repugnant.

It may well have seemed that self-government was the end the faculty had in mind when, in 1908, it granted a charter to the Student Government Association. Under the terms of the charter, officers of the Association took part in supervising students so as to maintain proper decorum in the residence halls and to monitor the destinations of students who left the campus. When infractions of the rules occurred, it was the executive board of the Student Government Association that was given authority to investigate the cases and recommend penalties. But, although there was a desire to make it appear that student government could act independently, the reality was that genuine power was exercised only by the college administration in general and by President Sabin in particular. Part of an account of Milwaukee-Downer student government, titled, "Co-operation with Faculty," made this clear:

Student Government does not really indicate pure student government, but rather a co-operative government of faculty and students. Every residence hall has a member of the faculty presiding over it, guiding, counseling, and supporting the forces of student government. A weekly meeting of faculty heads and student chairmen of halls is held to gain full co-operation and uniform procedure in all halls, and to plan for the welfare of the whole community. The penalties recommended by the executive board are never imposed without consultation with the president or dean. Student government means not less but rather more care and direction on the part of college authorities. It is a means of quietly, patiently, unassertively teaching students to govern themselves.

President Sabin stressed the point that the existence and operation of student government at Milwaukee-Downer was not, and should never be, "a device to relieve president and faculty of their responsibility." She in fact felt that there were real dangers in allowing student government to go unsupervised, not the least of which was the potential for that body to impose inappropriate penalties upon offenders and, even worse, the potential for student opinion to become the dominant authority in the institution. In connection with the latter point, she sometimes quoted a colleague who had had long experience dealing with student government:

...the most mischievous influence [of student government], as it was the most subtle and the most prevalent, was the idea which grew into even an arrogant and imperious force, that the dominant authority, ruling and controlling the institution in all its aspects, existed rightfully and necessarily in the public opinion of the students. The result came to be such as might be illustrated by a magnificent ocean steamer, not guided by its officers, but navigated according to the will of a committee representing the public opinion of the passengers.

The critical thing, in Sabin’s mind, was that the institution not compromise its control over the students. And, in order for it to exert maximum control, it was highly desirable that the college govern as much of the students’ lives as possible. As has been pointed out, this may have been the motive behind the official rhetoric that had it that dormitory students enjoyed the “better” of college life, for in the case of residential students, the college could monitor not only academic performance but personal habits and activities as well. It was thus not unusual for President Sabin to write to parents, criticizing the “attitude” of a daughter. “I am sorry to add,” she wrote Mr. M. H. Raymond, “that Ruth has not in all respects supported good discipline and been a cordial cooperative student.” Replying to Mr. Raymond’s concern that his daughter not be severely penalized for an infraction, so she might graduate with “pleasant recollections” of college, Sabin said:

I need not say that we would like to have a student have only happy recollections of her college days, and I do not know any ways in which such memories may be established that are equal to the loyal and cordial cooperation of the student with the aims and methods of the institution.

Sabin went on to enlist the Raymonds’ support for “such an attitude of mind as Ruth ought to have,” declaring that this would even prove beneficial to
play, which will be described in some detail later. Another, also in this category, was the Washington’s Birthday Cotillion, originally a Downer College tradition that was continued after the schools merged. The Student Handbook of 1915 described it in this way:

In the morning of Washington’s birthday there is always a ‘shirt-waist’ cotillion, when every girl dresses in white and those acting as men wear a black band around their arms. There are all sorts of charming figures [a ‘stately’ Minuet chief among them] and some of the prettiest little favors you ever did see. That night each hall has a banquet, when patriotic songs are sung and some program is given.

Dining room entertainments involving all students were also traditionally carried on at Hallowe’en, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentine’s Day, and St. Patrick’s Day. Although entertainment was generally part of traditional events at the college, it was by no means always the central goal. The entire school participated annually, for example, in a project known as the “Missionary Fair.” This evolved out of the connection that had existed between old Downer College and Congregationalist and Presbyterian missionary interests and became an effort by students to raise funds to support missionary work in China. This effort, like the Christmas play and the Washington’s Birthday Cotillion, was cooperative in nature; although each of the classes set up its own booth and sold the handcrafts that its own members had made, there was no air of rivalry about it but rather a camaraderie produced by working for a common cause.

More numerous than the traditions at Milwaukee-Downer involving the entire student body, however, were the traditions that invited the participation of a particular class or classes. There were, for example, events at the opening of the school year, in September and early October, that were directed toward initiating freshmen into the college community. On the first Friday of the college year, a reception was held by the YWCA (the most active student group on campus) with the specific purpose of having the “new girls” and “old girls” meet. It was customary, as well, for classes to be paired such that “the juniors champion the freshmen, while the sophomores look for advice and aid in class difficulties to the seniors.” The first freshman class meeting was in fact traditionally called by the president of the junior class, and this facilitated the subsequent election of freshman class officers.

The most significant aspect of this occasion, however, was the ritual in which the freshmen were presented with “their” color by a representative of the
preceding year's seniors, whose color it had been. Possession of a color—
which could have been yellow, green, lavender, or red—gave the freshmen
membership in the college community and proceeded to serve as a symbol
of class solidarity for them during the entire period of their life at
Milwaukee-Downer. The importance of the class color was reflected in the
ceremony with which it was bestowed:

The classes started around the horseshoe [circular driveway in front
of Holton, Merrill, and Johnston Halls] at 4:30 promptly, led by a
trumpeter and singing the 'Colors Day March'. . . . The freshmen . . .
were [clad] in white.

Each of the presidents of the senior, junior, and sophomore
classes welcomed the freshmen, and each class sang its class song.
The juniors presented a red rose to the [incoming] Class of 1926,
for them to have as their symbol. Sara Pratt, 1922 [a graduate of the
previous June], presented the red of her class to the new class. . . .

Following [the singing of other songs and more words of wel­
come], the Alma Mater was sung, and the procession again wound
its way around the horseshoe, but this time every girl had a color.

Once the freshmen acquired membership in the college community, they
could proceed to establish their unique "personality" as a class. To this end,
during the second decade in the life of Milwaukee-Downer, Freshman Rally
was conceived and instituted, the feeling being that this would give fresh­
men a distinctive means of self-expression. Freshman Rally called upon all
the freshmen to participate in compilation and oral presentation of the best
written work they had produced during freshman year. A literary motif was
to be dominant, the programs for the event taking the form of a current
periodical, and allowing latitude to incorporate the class's color, or any other
identifying traits, in the title. Thus, in the spring of 1912, the freshmen
(Class of 1915) initiated what was hoped would become a Milwaukee­
Downer tradition:

. . . the Class of 1915 . . . selected as the name of its periodical, The
Freshman Evergreen, a title suggested by the time-honored color of
the class. It prepared for so-called publication a great body of mate­
rial gleaned exclusively from assignments made in English class.
These were revised, rehearsed, and ultimately presented by their
authors, who were appropriately introduced by the chairman of the
freshman committee, otherwise designated editor-in-chief. The

Rally was pronounced a success, justifying not only its existence but
also its continuance in years to come.

Freshman Rally, a Milwaukee-Downer rite of spring, marked the fact that
the freshman class had come a long way. Having begun the year literally
without "color," they were able to end it with the assertion of their own dis­
distinctiveness, assuring themselves and those around them of their compe­
tence to assume the role of sophomores.

Both the ability of freshmen to undertake the responsibilities of sopho­
mores, as well as the strength of their solidarity as a class, were put to the
test in the Hat Hunt, probably Milwaukee-Downer's most outstanding and
well-known ritual. As in the case of acquiring the class color, introduction to
the ritual of the Hat came very early in freshman year, at the First Hat
Banquet, always on the third Friday after the opening of college. Freshmen
learned that Hat Hunt was an event in which only freshmen and sopho­
mores participated; it was, indeed, a contest between them. Hat Hunt chal­
lenged sophomores to hide the Hat so ingeniously that the freshmen would
be unable to find it and mandated that sophomores tender the freshmen a
Second Hat Banquet if the latter achieved success in finding the Hat during
the four-week period prior to the 29th of May. For freshmen, Hat Hunt was
really a year-long ritual, in which the First Hat Banquet served as the setting
for rites of initiation into the college community. The college yearbook for
1912 made it sound like the sort of ritual that precedes acceptance into a
sorority:

This banquet is the initiation of the freshmen into the mysteries of
the Hat, by the upperclassmen. The freshmen were dressed in
ridiculous costumes, as demanded by the sophomores. . . . They
carried a towel and large safety pin with which they were blind­
folded and carefully led about by the sophomores. . . . They took
the vow of 'Loyalty to the Hat and its Traditions' in the privacy of
a senior's room. Then came the banquet. . . . The legend of the Hat
and the rules regarding the hunting of it, were read by the president
of the senior class, and the banquet ended with a 'Cheer to our
Alma Mater.'

The legend of the Hat explained what Hat Hunt was all about. It seems that
in the days of the old Downer College, even before Ellen Sabin, students bor­
rowed the silk topper of Methodist Parson Ames for use in a play and, despite
frantic search, could not find it so it could be returned to him afterwards.
Wherever the original 'beaver' was hidden, it did not turn up until after its owner had been placated by the gift of a new one, and then he bequeathed the old one to the seniors of the college. Apparently for some years all classes competed for its possession and it did not evolve into a sophomore-freshman contest until the move to Milwaukee. Hunting... was confined to the outdoors, since that historic day when Miss Sabin's voice interrupted an excavation project with the stern command, 'Girls, this must stop! You are undermining the foundations of your college!'

Indeed, elaborate rules governing Hat Hunt evolved over time, specifying permissible hiding places and hunting hours. The Hunt itself marked the culmination of freshman year; the Second Hat Banquet became the setting in which freshmen received confirmation that they had "passed the test" and were now entitled to claim the exalted status of sophomore. As freshman year drew to a close, the most celebrated individuals on campus were the person who had found the Hat, designated the First Hat Girl; the president of the freshman class, who was Second Hat Girl; and a Third Hat Girl, chosen by the other two as having been the most diligent hunter. It was these three who, just three days after the Second Hat Banquet, were responsible for hiding the hat again, so that the whole process could be reenacted by the next year's incoming freshmen.

Interclass competition was not limited to freshmen and sophomores at Milwaukee-Downer. Crew races, early established at the college as a tradition of late May, saw all classes vying against each other for primacy in rowing. The Annual Regatta on the Milwaukee River was an event that raised class spirit to fever pitch:

The coxswain's call echoing across the water, rowers straining at their oars in slim racing boats, the judges' launch chugging along the course, spectators on the riverbank cheering as the crews near the finish line, and finally the thrust of a flag high into the air as the judges of the finish indicate the winner—all combine to make the Milwaukee-Downer Regatta a memorable occasion. The crowd rushes to the dock to witness the triumphant landing of the winning crew. Cameras are poised to click as the coxswain is tossed into the river, while classmates cheer themselves hoarse.

The Regatta, then, provided a climax to interclass athletic competition at Milwaukee-Downer. It also, like many of the traditional events of May, marked closure for each class, for anything in which they would henceforward become engaged would be approached from a different place within the college status hierarchy. Apart from the Regatta, the end of the school year was marked by several occasions that highlighted the passage of the individual classes to a new status. Just as freshmen had to demonstrate their competence to be sophomores by successfully hunting the Hat in late May, so the sophomores had to demonstrate that they had what it took to move into the upper echelons of the hierarchy. Their opportunity to do this also came in the month of May each year, when they presented an original production, known as the May Play, to the entire student body in an outdoor "theatre" on campus. A picture of solemn ritual is conjured in this student's description:

The procession, consisting of all the sophomore class, in white dresses, formed between the infirmary and McLaren [a dormitory], with the trumpeter at the head, next a violinist, behind her Robin Hood, followed by four girls dressed as his men. Then came two little girls as pages, and a jester, and then the rest of the class, two by two. When the audience had gathered, the trumpeter gave a bugle call and then played 'Blow Trumpet,' leading the procession singing, down into the theatre.

The May Play was not really a play at all; it was a ceremony in which the crowning of the May Queen was enacted. Characters like Robin Hood and his men always appeared, and though their role was usually to escort the May Queen to her throne, there was no story provided telling how they came to do this. The May Play was essentially a vehicle that was used by the sophomores to display their ingenuity at making costumes and out-of-door sets, to demonstrate their good choice and rendition of appropriate music, and to perform the ever-popular May Pole Dance. This presentation in a sense symbolized sophomore competence; it verified their fitness to undertake the increased social and academic responsibilities of juniors.

There was no such ceremony to mark the passage of juniors to senior status. Instead, the juniors functioned throughout the year as guardians of the freshmen, and at year's end as catalysts in the process of ushering the seniors out of college and into the wide world outside. Events that were part of this latter process included an annual luncheon and day-trip that the juniors gave for the seniors, essentially to bid them farewell. Juniors also traditionally escorted the seniors to Hawthornden, a spot on campus used for outdoor classes during the year, for the annual senior Class Day program, ". . . an
organized presentation of the character and philosophy of the class, as it had been moulded by four years on the campus. . . .” Typically, the talks that the seniors gave on this occasion recounted their life at Milwaukee-Downer, speculated about what the future held in store for them, bequeathed some sort of gift to the college, and frequently tendered some parting advice to the juniors now about to enter their own graduation year. It is significant that on this occasion the juniors were clad entirely in white, reminiscent of when they were freshmen about to receive their initial college identity (i.e., their color) on Colors Day and now about to assume their final college identity as seniors.

As the school year drew to a close, the focus of the seniors was increasingly upon leavetaking. They had observed all the rituals that the four years at college had required of them and now engaged in those that would bring their experience at Milwaukee-Downer to a close. These closing rituals began with Class Day in May, described earlier, followed, over a period of several days in mid-June, by activities and events associated with the official Commencement. Having just imparted advice to the juniors at Class Day in May, the seniors now found themselves the recipients of “advice,” as various college and outside dignitaries elaborated what would now be expected of them as women college graduates. All that would now remain for the seniors to do, in terms of completing the cycle of Milwaukee-Downer traditions, would be to bestow their color upon the new freshmen who would enter the college the following September.

Traditions, then, described a cycle that enabled students to mark their progress through college. Some were annual events involving the entire student body, like the Christmas Play, Washington’s Birthday Cotillion, Missionary Fair, and several holiday celebrations. Some required the participation of one or more individual classes and often signified a change in the classes’ status. Thus, freshmen were the particular focus of traditions that contained initiation rituals, like the YWCA reception, the First Hat Banquet, and Colors Day. Having thereby acquired legitimate identity as freshmen, they were then expected to demonstrate the unique personality of their class at Freshman Rally and later to prove their competence to be sophomores by successfully hunting the Hat. The demonstration of competence, however, was not unique to freshman traditions; it was also the motive behind the traditional sophomore May Play, as well as behind the role the juniors played as guardsians of the freshmen and supporters of the outgoing seniors. Finally, some of the traditions marked culminating points in either the history of the college or the history of one or more of the individual classes. The Annual Regatta, in which all classes participated, called for a show of class solidarity as it drew the college’s athletic season to a close. And, for the seniors, Class Day and Commencement were traditions through which they could take final leave of their college days.

The teachers: women without men
Milwaukee-Downer was an institution with a very human character, in which life was shaped by the nature and quality of the interactions among the major players, the students and the teachers. The context for these interactions is important to understanding the role the institution played in influencing the development of those who attended. Thus, it is useful to picture Milwaukee-Downer as, above all, an all-female institution in which all leadership positions were occupied by women, unencumbered by competition from men, an institution in which faculty and staff were strong models of self-sufficiency and independence.

Over the course of the college’s history, the members of the Milwaukee-Downer faculty shared a number of characteristics. They were all well-educated women, a substantial and increasing proportion of whom held degrees beyond the B.A., from institutions of recognized reputation. In the early days, even when this was not the case at other colleges, all Milwaukee-Downer teachers had to hold a bachelor’s degree, at the very minimum. Thus, a woman applying for a job teaching home economics was turned down because she was without a degree, and even applicants for positions in physical education were turned away for lack of a college background.

The make-up of a Milwaukee-Downer teacher consisted of more than just certifiable educational credentials; the woman in this position also had to possess certain much less well-defined elements of personality, character, and belief. Loyalty, for example, was a prime requisite for teaching at Milwaukee-Downer; President Sabin wanted a woman who would dedicate herself to building up the college, who would not come and teach for only a year or two but who would think of herself as part of a permanent body of teachers. The Milwaukee-Downer teacher was a woman for whom school was a total life experience; she needed to be able to fit comfortably into the pattern of life in the classroom and dormitory alike. Her good breeding, evidenced by the way she presided at table, by her manner in enforcing rules, by the way she modeled her acquaintance with the best standards of social life, would inform the conduct of college life and would make it positive. Above all, the Milwaukee-Downer teacher was a “loyal and earnest” Christian woman, in sympathy with Christian education and imbued with the Christian spirit of helpfulness. Her actual church affiliation was important, too; during the Sabin years the Milwaukee-Downer teacher was a
Protestant, most frequently from the Congregationalist, Presbyterian, or Episcopalian denominations.

This was, then, the type of woman Sabin had in mind when, in 1908, she wrote to Miss Amelia Clewley Ford, offering her a teaching position in history:

We need one who will work heartily for the upbuilding of the college in every direction, who will work as men work to develop a business enterprise: *i.e.*, wholeheartedly, devotedly. We need one in sympathy with the thought that the training of character is the chief function of education and that the religious development of the student is an aim in our work. We want no one to come who would not expect to work here several years . . . an instinct of my own [says] that you would do us good, and [I am] hoping that you will think it best to accept the position. . . .

Sabin must have been delighted with Ford’s reply:

My instinct is to go to Milwaukee-Downer, largely because your standards of teaching appeal to me. I intend to set for my students such ideals of scholarly work as were set for me by Professor Channing at Radcliffe and by Professor Turner at Wisconsin, and I should look toward making the history department at Milwaukee-Downer eventually as strong as that of any woman’s college in the country.

Miss Ford’s commitment to scholarship was clear. She had worked, borrowed, and secured scholarships in pursuit of her bachelor of arts degree at Radcliffe and had used similar means to earn both an M.A. and Ph.D. in history at the University of Wisconsin, where she studied under Frederick Jackson Turner. In short, she possessed the credentials to be potentially a strong asset to the history department at Milwaukee-Downer eventually as strong as that of any woman’s college in the country.

While fresh out of graduate school when the position at Milwaukee-Downer was offered her, Miss Ford nevertheless had, by that point, considerable teaching experience to her credit, having taught at both the elementary and high school levels while living and studying in the Boston area. It was this experience upon which she undoubtedly relied when advocating “character training” as part of the teacher’s legitimate role.

And if the accord with Sabin’s views on the importance of scholarship and character were not enough, Miss Ford further assured Sabin that she had “no inclination to change positions often,” clearly implying that she had the potential, which Sabin sought, for longevity as a faculty member. Only in the matter of living arrangements did Miss Ford deviate from the usual practice of Milwaukee-Downer teachers. She chose not to reside in the college dormitory, explaining that, “I can be of more value to the college by giving my whole vigor and personality to history teaching than by expending energy on social duties or other functions outside my legitimate sphere.” And this she did: Miss Ford gave her whole vigor and personality to history teaching. She took her subject and her teaching of it seriously and was apparently unruffled even when the unexpected occurred in the classroom. A student of hers later recalled:

I remember that class so well. She was lecturing—she was a little bit of a person—and she was lecturing away at a great rate. And she stepped, by mistake, into the wastebasket. She turned and apologized to the wastebasket and went right on talking! And we just nearly died! . . .

Students agreed that Miss Ford had a congenial personality and rated her an excellent teacher. Her popularity was enhanced by the frequent talks she gave before the whole college on “Current Events,” which always concluded with a new anecdote, story, or joke. These she called her “Happy Endings,” and over her thirty-one-year tenure they became truly institutionalized.

It would not, in fact, be wrong to call Amelia Clewley Ford herself an “institution,” as her own life was woven into the fabric of Milwaukee-Downer’s life for over three decades. Her personal history was a story in which everything she accomplished was by dint of her own wit and enter-
prise; what she achieved was done without the support of men. This same self-reliance seemed to carry over to, and characterize, her life at Milwaukee-Downer.

Miss Ford, at least, was a woman for whom marriage might have been a realistic possibility. This was not necessarily true of a good many of her counterparts on the faculty. Speaking of the teachers collectively, an alumna of 1915 offered this opinion:

You know what they all were, all these dear women at Milwaukee-Downer; they were all the original 'spinsters.' That's really what they were. I don't think they ever met the right man. I don't think they ever were in a position, economically, to travel in the society in which they would have met a man. They never met men, and, as a result, they were all just darling spinsters. . . . [Most of them] would have been terrified if any man had approached them. They were just darling spinsters. . . .

"Terrified" by men, perhaps, but, if this were really the case for these women, it was hardly congruent with the aggressiveness manifested by some in pursuit of their personal interests. Miss Alice Emeline Belcher, for example, a member and chair of the Milwaukee-Downer economics department for forty-two years, put a great deal of energy into turning her average salary of $3,000 a year into over $100,000 worth of holdings in the stock market. Her savings and investment activities were motivated by a need for independence and by a desire to provide for her own old age; they were a response to hardships she had endured as a young person. Perhaps this drive to take care of herself interfered with her development of social skills. She was clearly not the kind of personality who would have been comfortable in a position of dependency upon a man. To her students, Miss Belcher was a person in whom "there was a fine mind, but there was not a social type of culture . . . at all; [it seemed to students that] she didn't know how to be friendly."

Miss Elizabeth Rossberg, who, by contrast, was considered a much friendlier personality, nevertheless also did not engage in social life with men. She devoted much of her life to travel, making at least eighteen trips abroad during her forty-three-year tenure at Milwaukee-Downer. Some of these trips were student tours that she conducted, perhaps best viewed as an extension of her leadership role at the college as resident head of McLaren Hall. The exercise of leadership was apparently very important to her, for she was head, too, of the Milwaukee-Downer Division of Language and Literature and chair of the college's curriculum committee. Men, however, did not figure in her life. A student of hers, who went on to become a personal friend, later claimed that Miss Rossberg never had any close association with men, that she indeed felt a sense of superiority to them. At the very least, she was probably not inclined to risk suffering the decline in her own status that might result from such association.

The faculty members at Milwaukee-Downer, then, were women without men, but probably less because of terror than from personal choice. Whether they had actually, during young adulthood, made an active decision not to marry is not ascertainable from the written record. It may well have been the case that some of these women were examples of the "Victorian feminist," the late 19th-century daughter of a middle-class family who was formally educated and who had decided to accept spinsterhood as the price of a career. It was almost certainly the case that they depended a lot upon each other for friendship and emotional support. A student later stated:

I can tell you this much; this I know: they found great joy in each other. Now, not intimacy—none of the lesbian business . . . They always took their walks together, they'd walk after classes, and go into Lake Park, and things like that . . . I remember Miss Belcher walking around the horseshoe [a circular driveway on campus] with one of the other teachers. You always spoke of them as, 'those two go together.'

Thus, the social life of Milwaukee-Downer teachers seemed to center around each other and their common dedication to the school.

Sometimes, however, the relations among teachers were not friendly. Miss Felicitas Minna Haberstich, professor and chair of French, wrote to President Sabin at great length about insults to her dignity that had, she said, been knowingly perpetrated by two other faculty members, Miss May L. Cook, an underling in her own department, and Miss Emma M. Cowles, a professor of mathematics. The indignities Miss Haberstich claimed to have suffered at the hands of her colleagues ranged from their criticism of her mode of dress and decoration of her private living quarters to their undermining of her authority with residential students, essential to her success as head of Johnston Hall. Miss Cook's purpose, Miss Haberstich insisted, was to supplant her as department head and destroy her relationship with President Sabin. Calling Miss Cook "a crafty little Machiavellian," Miss Haberstich went on to reveal to Sabin aspects of what she saw as Miss Cook's underhanded strategy:
[Miss Cook] once said to me: When I want a thing to get to Miss Sabin's ears, I don't tell it myself, but I tell Miss Denton, and then I know that it will get there, the way I want it presented. . . . [This was preceded by Miss Cook's] avowal of making up tales and the cynical expression that, if a lie served her better than the truth, she would tell the lie every time. . . .

Miss Cowles, Miss Haberstich told Sabin, was just as bad:

... what Miss Cook invented, Miss Cowles told. . . . Yes, Miss Cowles is somewhat brighter than I, [I] certainly do not possess her remarkable power of persuasion with you nor her shrewdness in dealings, but neither do I stoop to intrigue to accomplish a selfish purpose. . . .

Much of this may be interpreted as the product of Miss Haberstich's rivalry with her colleagues for Sabin's favor and attention. Clearly disappointed in not having received more support from the president, Miss Haberstich turned upon her, asking whether "you could realize what a desolation and failure you have made of my life." And she closed the letter as follows:

Miss Sabin, if your aim has been through all these six years of heartless torture, to make life a sea of bitterness to me, to turn into bitterness and gall what was once sweet in a woman's soul, I can let you have the joy, that you have accomplished what you aimed at. You most always do.

Miss Haberstich served at Milwaukee-Downer from 1898 until 1910. She did not return there to teach again after this letter was written. As her final sentences indicate, she viewed Sabin as always operating from a position of strength and as capable of accomplishing whatever goal she set herself. Her view of her own position, by contrast, was that it was relatively weak and that Sabin could always take advantage of this to victimize her or allow her to be victimized by other faculty members. Unfortunately, there is no evidence in the written record that provides insight about Ellen Sabin's actual perspective on Miss Haberstich's case. Absence of such evidence, however, supports the likelihood that Sabin made no effort to induce Miss Haberstich to return, perhaps regarding her problems as reflecting weaknesses of character or personality. Given Sabin's preference for having women at Milwaukee-Downer whom she regarded as possessing strength of character and pur-

pose, she may well have regarded Miss Haberstich's departure as a desirable outcome.

Student-teacher relationships
Just as interesting as the relationships among Milwaukee-Downer faculty members and administrators themselves were the relationships that existed between them and the students. Students' feelings about teachers varied in quality and intensity and ranged from crushes on younger and more physically attractive personnel to a certain awe for a few of the more well-established faculty and administrators. While, as in all schools, there were people whom the students found disagreeable, their attitudes toward those they admired might be seen as having existed on any one of three different levels.

First, students tended to admire those teachers who were youthful and made an attractive appearance. Physical education teacher Miss Elizabeth Dickerson, at Milwaukee-Downer from 1909 to 1914, received students' attention on this account:

There was a gymnastic teacher—physical education . . . Dickerson. And she was young, reddish hair it seems to me, and very athletic. And, oh, some of the girls thought she was just great. They admired her very much. I don't know that you'd call it a crush, but she was more attractive than some of the other teachers.

Being the object of a student's crush, however, was often tantamount to being admired secretly, from afar. Indeed, there might have been no awareness on the part of a teacher that these feelings toward her even existed. And so, in the absence of reciprocity, if this were to be called a relationship at all, it would have to be regarded as existing on only the most superficial level.

By contrast, the next level of relationship between students and those who taught or supervised them did involve direct contact of the parties with each other. Admiration was a key factor here, too, but, as in the case of Mademoiselle Amelie Serafon, native of France and professor of French at Milwaukee-Downer, it was reciprocated in some way. According to a student who knew her through her retirement years, until she died, Mlle. Serafon:

... was a great personality. She came, I think, my freshman year, and that was 1910. . . . By that time she was no longer young; she was young-middle aged, possibly. . . . [In manner of dress] she had French chic, very simple and inexpensive—I don't think she had
means. But, she had an air. She powdered her hair; I suppose it was turning gray, and she used a great deal of powder which kind of came down on her—she didn’t always look very neat! But she was a great personality. . . . She became very active, of course, in the Alliance Française, and she really was the spirit behind it for many years. And very generous; she spent all the money she had. . . . She had so much pride; I know she spent more than she could. She would send beautiful presents to people that did any little courtesy or offered her any hospitality—beautiful flowers and expensive things that we wished she wouldn’t do.

Students found more than just superficial beauty to admire in Mlle. Seraton. She was a woman with style; you appreciated her French costumes, as you did the requirement that at her table in the dining room conversation be carried on in French. She was a woman of great sensitivity; many students were impressed by her dedication to war relief work, including summer trips to Paris during the First World War that they knew she could ill-afford. Most significant, while they never interacted on a very personal level, never shared details of their private lives, Mlle. Seraton nevertheless acknowledged her students’ admiration and respect, making them feel that she appreciated them as much as they appreciated her.

Finally, there were those teachers who became “legends in their own time” and who were regarded by students with awe. Ellen Sabin herself was one. Here was a woman whose physical presence alone made an impression upon students:

She was large. She had a moon face. She wore long skirts, and her little feet minced along under those skirts. She wore a shirtwaist. She had a belt, always with a buckle. And her hair was tight back, just tight all the way around, and then she had a little bun right on the top.

Miss Sabin’s manner, the way she carried herself, must also have contributed to students’ awe:

She was formidable to young girls. I was scared of her, but I admired her very much. She had a very imperious way about her and a beautiful, deep voice. . . . Like many people of that exterior, I think inside she was quite sentimental. I saw her weep in Chapel a couple of times. . . . But she unfortunately had a way of kind of scaring young girls. But I can say that we didn’t dislike her, but we were kind of in awe of her.

Being “scared of” President Sabin didn’t really mean fearing her. Rather, it meant that students put her on a pedestal. As one of them put it:

Well, I wasn’t intellectually equal to her. I mean, I couldn’t argue with her—anything she said, we just said, ‘Yes, Miss Sabin.’ It wouldn’t have occurred to me to oppose her; I wouldn’t know how to do it. It [Sabin’s] was an overwhelming personality. But, as I say, I admired her very much; as the years went by I admired her more and more.

Another student reinforced this image. While insisting that President Sabin was not a dictator, she strongly implied that one did not easily contravene Miss Sabin’s wishes:

I don’t agree with a lot of the graduates—they were afraid of her—she was in no sense a dictator. But she was a power: ‘It’s going to be the way I say it’s going to be, and that’s it.’ And that’s the way it was. But that’s how she kept Milwaukee-Downer together.

And President Sabin did, indeed, keep Milwaukee-Downer together. If students stood in awe of her, they had good reason to; it was she, more than any other individual, who was responsible for the substantial growth experienced by the school in the period 1895 to 1921.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that, in confronting any issue, President Sabin’s approach was always informed by her conception of what would be of maximum advantage to the college. Her consistency in this respect was of such a high level that it would have been difficult not to attribute to her a great share of the credit for the way the school flourished during her tenure. It was her strength of character and purpose that indeed led students and peers, both in and out of the college, to regard her with awe.

“Awe,” it will be recalled, also describes the way students felt about other notables among the faculty. Indeed, no account of life at Milwaukee-Downer College would be complete without mention of the one person, next to Sabin herself, who engendered these kinds of feelings, Miss Emily Frances Brown.

Although always listed in the college catalogues as having joined the faculty in 1900, Emily Brown’s relationship with the college dated back to the
early 1890s, when she was hired, fresh out of Wellesley College, to teach science and physical education at Downer College, then still at Fox Lake, Wisconsin. The story went that she had been recommended by someone who had seen her swinging Indian clubs and thought she would make an excellent calisthenics teacher. She taught at Downer from 1891-94, left for a period of time and did some high school teaching, then returned in 1900 to the recently merged Milwaukee-Downer College, where she remained for forty-five years. She no longer taught science, however, and Milwaukee-Downer students knew her only as a teacher of rhetoric and English literature. Why the change from science to English? She told students over the years that an explosion in the chemistry lab “blew her out of science into English.” Clearly, Miss Brown was a “character”; she was one of those teachers whom the timid avoided, but of whom enthusiasts could never get enough. An alumna of 1915—and an avid fan of Miss Brown—described her in this way:

Emily Brown! Let me tell you about Emily Brown... Her hair was always stringy. She never got her hair into place. And she always taught us looking out of the window; she never looked at the class. ... And I simply loved her because she taught poetry; she taught Browning so that you just never forgot about it. ... Here she would be, staring out of the window and talking about what Browning said about the truth, that it is within us and we should give it an opportunity to come out. She would meet you in the hall... , and Emily Brown knew me very well, but she might just as well have said, ‘Miss Jones, how are you?’ as... [use my correct name], because she never would have remembered... If she were in a college today, they’d call her a ‘weirdo.’ She was a weird individual, but believe me, she could teach.

By contrast, another student who encountered Miss Brown at about the same time had a totally different response:

I didn’t appreciate Miss Brown... I wasn’t ready for her. She was a brilliant woman, and people who were particularly interested in English and in drama thought very highly of her. My memory—now, this is very personal, and it may not be so at all—is that she was going through some kind of a conversion into I think it was a High Episcopal Church. And in my course on pre-Shakespearean drama—of course, drama is founded on church service, most of it—she would stand with this far-away look and lecture in terms that I didn’t understand at all, being brought up in a very liberal, as I say Unitarian, religion... And I didn’t have the wit or the intelligence to go and say, ‘Miss Brown, I don’t understand it. I haven’t been exposed to that kind of thinking or service. Is there any way I can find out more about it?’ And the consequence was that when the examination time came, I flunked. First time I’d ever failed an exam.

Miss Brown had a distinct style; people who were in her classes, whether they did poorly or well, never forgot her. But though she made a great impression in the classroom, what she seemed to be remembered for most were the plays she produced each year, at Christmas and in May. There were three original Christmas plays given on a rotating basis: “Fezziwig Swarry,” with characters right out of the Charles Dickens her students read in her classes; “The Little Sanctuary,” a medieval nativity play that she created out of Biblical sources; and “The Elizabethan Revels,” the students’ favorite play, portraying a festive, old English yuletide dinner. Miss Brown, an avid Anglophile to whom authenticity meant a great deal, filled her plays with properties and costumes brought back from frequent summer trips to England. What she treasured most, however, were the various bits of English lore she came upon in her travels through England, which she also incorporated into her scripts. It was Miss Emily Brown, in fact, who discovered, in an old bookshop in Oxford, a yellowing manuscript containing the lyrics and music to a Christmas Carol titled “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” Bringing it home with her, she gave it its debut at a Christmas dinner for the trustees, held in Milwaukee-Downer’s Holton Hall, in 1910. Thus, an old English Carol that went on to become part of the American Christmas tradition had its start in what turned out to be Emily Brown’s first and most modest Christmas presentation at Milwaukee-Downer.

It is indicative of her concept of education that Miss Brown did not think of production of the plays and pageants as extracurricular activities. Even her students recognized that Miss Brown considered producing the plays an extension of her teaching: “She conceived of teaching as something that stirred up a chain reaction of further learning—in related arts, in music, in drama, and dance.” Miss Brown did not hesitate to involve any and every student whom she encountered and thought a suitable candidate for a part in the play. In fact, according to an account in a school publication, Hawthorn Leaves, her casting methods were legendary:

From the opening day of the fall semester Miss Brown could be
observed closely studying every new student in the halls. Soon little notes signed E.F.B. would appear on the bulletin board inviting Miss So and So to come to Room 14 for an appointment during the noon hour. Not knowing Miss Brown very well, the student would be either terrified or astonished when Miss Brown handed her a book, marked a passage, and said, ‘Read this to me.’ Nobody thought of demurring, and frequently a very much surprised freshman would find herself cast for an important role in the Christmas play.

Students who had experienced this firsthand remembered it for the rest of their lives. An alumna, age 93, had vivid memory of her friend Milda’s encounter with Miss Brown when they were very new freshmen at Milwaukee-Downer:

I remember one of my very dearest friends . . . came down the hall one day, and Miss Brown looked at her, and she said, ‘There’s Plum Pudding, Plum Pudding you will be!’ And poor Milda didn’t know what she was talking about, but she was talking about the Christmas play.

Years later, in a written tribute to Miss Brown, Milda herself told of the effects participation in this play had had, not only upon herself, but upon her family as well:

Not only I, . . . but the whole family was touched by the excitement which educated us in old English Christmas lore when I was cast as ‘Plum Pudding.’ My mother was certainly confused but determined to make correctly that brown and purple costume which would make me look like a fat pudding as I stepped gaily on to the stage, burning pudding held aloft, announcing:

‘Here come I, Plum Pudding so brown,
The plumpest of persons in all London town,
As round as a ball and as brown as a berry,
With sauce and with brandy to make you all merry!’

The drama was, in fact, so important to Miss Brown that she did not miss an opportunity to create and heighten it. She turned her announcement of the cast for the coming production each year into an eagerly-anticipated ritual:

She would walk down the long aisle of the college chapel on the first fall day which carried a trace of snow in the air. Under her arm she carried a large book with two wide red ribbons hanging from its pages. Suspense would mount as she opened the volume to the current entry, and slowly divulged which of the three plays was to be produced. Then she would gradually reveal the cast, saving her major roles for the final announcement, which always met with a burst of applause.

Miss Emily Brown, and numerous colleagues, were strong models of individuality and independence for the young undergraduate women at Milwaukee-Downer. That students were impressed by these teachers is clearly evident in their reminiscences as alumnae, and so the teachers must be credited with playing a key role in the development of the “Milwaukee-Downer Woman.” Teachers as role models—along with college rituals and traditions that encouraged students to see themselves as growing into increasingly responsible roles—may well have counteracted the brake on independence inherent in the rules and regulations that governed the college’s daily life.
Part III

Milwaukee-Downer College, 1921-1964

The history of Milwaukee-Downer College is not complete until its story through 1964 is told. Indeed, analyses that encompass this period in the college's history reinforce the idea that factors did exist in the Milwaukee-Downer environment that—whether or not the college so intended—promoted the development of the "Milwaukee-Downer Woman."

The influence of Milwaukee-Downer ideology

There are several reasons to believe that the guiding ideology of Milwaukee-Downer, an ideology that placed prime importance upon women's domestic role, was not, in fact, guiding what students chose to do, both during and after college. If, for example, students had been responding to a very strong signal that development of their abilities as homemakers was of paramount importance, the expected rate of participation in the college's home economics degree program might have been greater than the actual enrollment figures showed. From the time the program was instituted in 1909, in fact, until the college stopped reporting the number of students taking it in 1951, average enrollment was only 18.6 percent of the total student body.

As another example, if alumnae were strictly adhering to the ideology of domesticity promoted by the college, their marriage rate could be expected to be as high as the rate in the general population. Yet, when such a comparison was actually made, marriage rates of Milwaukee-Downer alumnae were consistently lower than those of the general population and were in fact much closer to the rates for other women's colleges. The literature on other women's schools, meanwhile, showed them adhering to a different ideology, an ideology of individualism, which might better account for their lower marriage rates. Perhaps, it may be conjectured, Milwaukee-Downer alumnae were responding to a different ideology than the one promoted by their school.

Finally, and equally significant as a possible reason to believe that the institutional ideology of Milwaukee-Downer was not guiding student and alumnae choices is the absence of reference to college ideology in the oral histories collected from Milwaukee-Downer alumnae for the present study. Even among women who had been home economics majors, ideology was never identified as among the factors motivating them to enter that program. Instead, the greatest influences seem to be personal interest in the content of the courses and the attractiveness of the faculty members who taught them. Ideology was indeed never mentioned by any of the alumnae interviewed in any way that would suggest it was something they had been conscious of during their student days. They made no reference to "women's sphere" or to "women's proper place" and when directly questioned about these concepts, claimed that they had simply not been discussed at school, that the subject of women's role in society had not been an issue. This being the case, it appears to make sense that students might well have viewed such curricular innovations as the programs in home economics and occupational therapy as tacit college support for their setting "career" goals. Indeed, among alumnae of the Briggs and Johnson periods (1921-1951 and 1951-1964, respectively), there seemed to be a sense that options open to women were not narrow at all but were, if anything, on the increase. Upon interview, the demeanor of these women, and the stories they told about their lives after graduation, gave every reason to believe that the college had not only equipped them, but had also encouraged them, to carry on as independent individuals. In short, the interviews supported the contention that, however unwittingly, the Milwaukee-Downer education fostered independence among its students.

Tradition and change at Milwaukee-Downer under Lucia Briggs, 1921-1951

Ellen Sabin must have had feelings of considerable satisfaction when she retired from the presidency of Milwaukee-Downer College in June of 1921. She could look back upon a career in which she had not only successfully launched a college for women but had been the prime mover in the efforts to help it grow. And grow it had. Back in 1895, the first year of joint operation of Milwaukee and Downer Colleges, the institution had a faculty of nine members, including President Sabin herself. The annual catalogue for 1896-97, the first in which a student roster appeared, showed an enrollment of eighteen students in the college department. In 1921, when Sabin retired from Milwaukee-Downer, the institution had grown to include a faculty of forty members and a student enrollment of 382. The curriculum had expanded as well, the actual number of course offerings having risen from thirty-three to 194. Other evidence of growth during the Sabin period was also apparent and included expansion of the college's funds through endowment and the relocation and expansion of its physical plant. Thus, when Lucia Briggs was installed as Milwaukee-Downer's second president, she was inheriting from Sabin what appeared to be a well-established educational institution.

During her tenure in office, Lucia Briggs enunciated an educational...
philosophy that bore a clear relationship to that of Ellen Sabin. The thread that tied them together was their common emphasis upon women's special role being derived from their differences with men. Thus, in an address to the North Central Association, Briggs acknowledged that, in their college work, both men and women take courses for a liberal education as well as for professional training in a definite calling. But only women, she contended, “must prepare for two alternate and very different possibilities, home life and professional life, since, unlike men, women have a divided purpose because many do not know which kind of life will be their lot.”

It was with this latter observation in mind that Briggs admonished college women to prepare for both intelligent handling of home responsibilities and possible professional life. In addition, Briggs repeatedly stated her belief that women are best equipped if their education goes beyond just the acquisition of narrow technical skills and gives them thorough grounding in the liberal arts. Expanding on this, she said:

I believe, for example, that would-be teachers should not crowd their college program with so many courses in education that they have no opportunity to get an adequate background in the subject in which they wish to teach and in kindred subjects which will enrich their teaching.

It was Briggs’ view that, even though the content of liberal arts courses was often forgotten, just the process of learning these subjects improved the caliber of the mind and, hence, the quality of life. In this, as in her aversion to narrow vocationalism, Briggs’ thinking was clearly a throwback to that of her predecessor, Ellen Sabin.

There is a great deal more to be said about Lucia Briggs’ philosophy of education, but it is all more meaningful when placed in the context of her life at the college. Born in 1887, Briggs was thirty-four years of age when she took over as president of Milwaukee-Downer College. This was the beginning of the 1920s, a period of rapid and marked social change, especially among American youth, who staged a general attack upon accepted authority and tradition. Thus, genteel manners were discarded; clothing styles changed such that women started wearing bobbed hair, short skirts, silk stockings, and cosmetics; women drank and smoked; and men and women danced to the new jazz music.

Briggs, a New England Puritan and a staunch traditionalist, was very much at odds with this new pattern of social life. She thought that so much emphasis was being placed on developing the individual that people were coming to believe they could do as they pleased, without respect to other individuals or to established authority. It was fine, she felt, to cultivate individual initiative but not at the expense of “the fundamentals upon which every fine character must be built.” These “fundamentals” included honesty; “industry,” which meant seeing work through to its conclusion; “ backbone,” which meant facing tough jobs; and a “right attitude toward others.” People of fine character were notable for their willingness to reach out to the community, to participate, to be helpful, to have civic interests. Briggs was even able to recommend particular organizations appropriate to participation by women with a liberal arts background, including the League of Women Voters, the American Association of University Women, PTAs, and various women’s clubs and social welfare organizations.

What was the role of the women’s college in all of the above? With respect to civic participation, the women’s college provided students the opportunity to develop executive ability by holding school offices, such as in student government, usually held by men in coeducational institutions. With respect to the general rapid social change occurring, Briggs saw the role of Milwaukee-Downer as protector of students and faculty alike, against what she perceived to be evils in the larger society outside. As president of the institution, she was in a position to influence what form this protection would take. Thus, during the 1920s, there was an increasing level of restriction imposed by college rules and regulations. Formulation of the rules was technically the province of student government, but, in reality, just as had been true during the Sabin period, the college administration had a great deal of input in this area. Milwaukee-Downer Dean of Women Aleida Pieters’ statement about this was especially telling:

In the beginning rules were imposed by the president or faculty and the student respected vested authority. Later democratic principles developed and students formed College Government Associations which made the rules necessary for a successful and happy community life. These rules have been made with more or less aid, and shall I say pressure, from the college authorities.

This left little room for doubt as to the real source of social control at the college.

The publication of Milwaukee-Downer rules and regulations in 1927 increased the size of the student handbook by twenty pages over what it had been in 1926, indicating that there was clearly a perception that there was a great deal to protect students against. Mainly, for Lucia Briggs, there was a
need to cope with the “fast pace of life” that she saw dominating the social life of the 1920s. In a speech to a Girl Scout convention, Briggs lamented:

The quiet intellectual matching of wits, which our fathers delighted in, no longer holds interest. And as for conversation? When a man calls on a girl nowadays, do they sit at home and talk? Not they. They must go and do something. They go to the movies or somewhere to dance; and of course the street car is too slow and plebeian for them [so they go out in an automobile]. It’s an expensive kind of evening, and not one that makes for real understanding and companionship. We need to emphasize simplicity and to learn concentration in this age of distraction. We need to renew our interest in the simple things of home life. A jazz attitude towards life, overstimulated and restless, constantly tries to invade our strongholds.

The rules were complex and varied both from year to year and in how they applied to the different classes of undergraduates, freshmen, of course, being subject to the greatest restriction. In the most general terms, regulations were established to control student behavior in areas regarded as posing the greatest threat. Thus, rules of 1927 required permission of the dean to attend dances, required the presence of chaperones at social functions, greatly limited the conditions under which students could go riding with men in automobiles, restricted students from having both automobiles and radios on campus (the electricity in dorm rooms could be used for curling irons only!), prohibited attendance by students at the theatre and at movies on Sunday, and strictly forbade smoking. In addition, there were detailed rules governing checking out of the residence hall and checking back in; there were curfews that, although different for each undergraduate class, applied to all; and there were definite hours designated during which “guests,” presumably male, could be entertained in the college parlors.

The list could go on, but the point is clear: the college in the 1920s consciously functioned as an agent of social control. As in the Sabin period, it continued to believe that it was acting in loco parentis; although it turned out that some parents were not at all pleased with such a restrictive environment for their daughters. This was confirmed by cases, during the 1920s, in which the college took disciplinary action against students. While there were expulsions for stealing and for academic infractions, in a majority of these cases President Briggs expelled students from Milwaukee-Downer for social violations like drinking; spending a whole night out with men, without permission and unchaperoned; going out with men whom the college deemed “unsuitable”; and going to unauthorized places, like dance halls in the city and roadhouses in the country. Briggs acted summarily and unilaterally in these cases, bringing howls from some parents to the effect that “the punishment far exceeded the crime,” and that Briggs’ handling of these matters showed her to be a petty and unfit administrator.

The intensity with which Briggs pursued violators of college rules, however, decreased markedly during the 1930s and 1940s, when matters of student discipline were handled by the Office of the Dean in conjunction with the College Government Association. Not only was there a relaxation of Briggs’ personal participation in these matters, but there was also a general relaxation of the rules themselves.

What accounted for these changes? One likely possibility is that there was a change in Briggs herself. Lucia Briggs had come to Milwaukee-Downer as a young woman, embarking upon her first major administrative job. She was quite sensitive, perhaps oversensitive, to the rapid social changes going on right outside the boundaries of the campus. And it is likely that her expulsion of students for social infractions was an overreaction, based upon her own fears and insecurities. Still, she may well have been stunned by the intensity of some of the parents’ reactions to the expulsions; for she quickly sought protection, coming to rely heavily on support from the college’s Board of Trustees in letting the parents know that her decisions were not subject to change. In the end, she came to temper her responses in these cases, perhaps even making a conscious decision to steer a different course with matters such as these in the future.

That Briggs was maturing and feeling more the master of her situation was evident in the way she administered the affairs of Milwaukee-Downer during the 1930s. Given the disastrous condition of the American economy during these years, it was a credit to Briggs that she was able to keep the institution afloat. Her ability to do this was due in part to her New England frugality and taste for simplicity and in part to the nature of the relationship between herself and members of the Milwaukee-Downer faculty. Briggs watched closely every dollar she spent and, by her own admission, faculty salaries were lower at Milwaukee-Downer than at other such institutions. In correspondence with applicants for teaching positions, Briggs often pointed out that the pay was lower at Milwaukee-Downer but that this was more than compensated for by the small classes and the warm, friendly environment of the school. Apparently the faculty agreed, for Briggs was not only able to cut faculty salaries during the Depression but managed to keep these reduced salary levels in force until practically the end of the 1930s. It might be argued that faculty members really had no choice but to accept pay cuts,
that they were fortunate to remain employed during these hard times. However, the fact that they remained at Milwaukee-Downer, accepting lower pay, also bespoke the deep sense of loyalty they had developed to the school. This loyalty was illustrated by the fact that, when President Briggs retired in 1951, fully a third of the faculty was still comprised of individuals who had been either Sabin appointees, before 1921, or hired by Briggs before 1939. The proportion rose to forty percent when Briggs' appointments prior to 1945 were also counted.

Keeping her faculty intact was only half the Briggs accomplishment of the 1930s. She was also able to keep enrollments high, in the face of economic conditions that were forcing students out of school in search of means of support for themselves and their families. To keep up enrollment, many strategies were employed: Milwaukee-Downer student on-campus employment, known as “self-help,” was greatly expanded; the college's Placement Bureau, in existence but dormant from early in Milwaukee-Downer history, now made concerted efforts to secure employment for students outside the school; scholarship policy, formerly applicable only to students already enrolled, was altered to allow the offer of such aid to potential freshmen to facilitate their entrance into Milwaukee-Downer; and administrative personnel were hired to carry on an active program of recruitment, carrying the search for students as far as California.

In sum, during the Depression the Briggs administration showed a heightened sensitivity to student needs and managed through frugality to keep the faculty intact. Apart from the financial aspects of the story, however, there also was the change already noted in the general atmosphere of the school, signified by a decided relaxation in college rules. Restrictions of the 1920s against theatre and movies on Sunday were dropped, as was the prohibition against having radios in dormitory rooms. The college deferred to parents on the question of permitting students to ride with men in automobiles; all that was now required was blanket, written parental permission on file. Chaperones were eliminated and curfews extended; even the ban on smoking was lifted, the college going as far as to designate smoking areas on campus.

The rules were relaxed not only because Briggs felt herself more in control of her institution but also because she saw change in the students. Behavior problems seemed to lighten as economic depression worsened. The reality was that students in the 1930s were of necessity taking more responsibility for themselves and that regulations were perhaps not now so essential to their well-being. That other educators noted this as well was evidenced in a 1933 article in School and Society claiming that a decline in financial resources was subduing students, leading them increasingly to appreciate the value of broad cultural training. This article further claimed that students were reading more and that student interest in extracurricular activities was declining, mainly because the importance of these activities faded in the light of a world-problems perspective. The Depression was, in effect, solving the problems that for Briggs and other educators had loomed so large in the 1920s.

During the 1940s, enrollment at Milwaukee-Downer hit an all-time high of 444, exceeding the record of 429 set back in 1927-28. It was indeed in the years during and immediately following the Second World War that Lucia Briggs was perhaps at her best as the college's president. As previously noted, Briggs had strong feelings about the importance of performing one's civic duty through participation in community affairs, which she now put into action by plunging the college into war work. Furthermore, she capitalized upon the unique features of Milwaukee-Downer's curriculum to aid the war effort, bringing large numbers of extension students in to take courses in occupational therapy. The net result of this for the college was continued growth, such that, by 1951, the year Briggs retired, the number of women graduated by Milwaukee-Downer reached a record high of eighty.

The history of Briggs' administration, then, was a history of change in the posture of an all-female institution, vis à vis the women who formed its constituency. In the 1920s it was important to families who sent daughters to Milwaukee-Downer that the college stand in loco parentis, as a bastion of good manners and good taste in a society that appeared bent upon challenging and undermining traditional values. The need for the rigid rules and regulations that were imposed was vitiated, however, by the desperate economic conditions of the 1930s, that seemed to sober students into taking more responsibility for themselves. This resulted in a significant relaxation of college rules, a trend that continued into the 1940s. With America's involvement in the Second World War, student demands for increased personal independence were met with much greater sympathy than the college would have displayed twenty years before. President Briggs could now be tolerant, for example, of students missing classes to participate in social activities with servicemen. To Briggs, students were no longer a threat to her authority; they were individuals, many of whom she took the trouble to get to know well.

The granting of increased personal independence to students, however, must not be misconstrued as representing a change in the college's view that the locus of women's proper roles was in a sphere uniquely their own. In this, the college administration in the 1920s and 1930s, under Briggs, did
not deviate from that of Sabin before her. In the 1940s, while cognizant of the movement of women into critical industrial work, President Briggs nevertheless held that college women would best serve the war effort by remaining in school. It would be most helpful, for example, for women to train in occupational therapy and thus become equipped to deal with the ravages of war within the context of a bona fide women’s occupation. Even in the face of women taking men’s places in industrial jobs, Briggs would very likely have argued that this was a legitimate, if only temporary, women’s role, an expedient with which to meet the demands of war. In short, women were still confined to their own separate sphere, and their legitimate social roles remained those not identical with, but rather complementary to, the roles of men. This placed Milwaukee-Downer very much in harmony with the general society in the post-war decade, when the separate sphere ideology, now identified under the rubric, “the feminine mystique,” enjoyed its final period of dominance.

**Milwaukee-Downer under John B. Johnson, 1951-1964: an institution transformed**

Lucia Briggs retired in 1951 and was succeeded in office by John B. Johnson. Holding a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago, Johnson had had teaching and administrative experience at only one place, Park College in Parkville, Missouri, before coming to Milwaukee-Downer. Between September 1946 and June 1951, he had risen from instructor to associate professor of political science at Park, had served as chair of its political science department and its social science division, and was academic dean-elect of the college at the time of his recruitment to Milwaukee-Downer. Although there was no apparent intention of attenuating Milwaukee-Downer tradition, Johnson’s accession to the presidency did signal the college’s readiness to be governed by a younger mind, in a different style.

When records of the administrations of Briggs and Johnson are considered together, they indeed present a study in contrasts. For example, the faculty rosters showed that a total of eighteen men served at various times during Briggs’ thirty-year tenure, while a total of fifty-three men served during Johnson’s thirteen-year administration. During a number of successive years under Briggs, specifically the period between 1924 and 1932, the faculty was composed entirely of women, and a majority of these were single and lived in residence at the college. During the Johnson years, by contrast, the number of men on the faculty increased in almost every year. Male faculty, of course, never lived in residence at Milwaukee-Downer, and in 1957 the Trustees voted to provide housing only for female faculty dormitory heads and staff engaged in custodial, food, and nursing services.

The foregoing was just one among many indicators of change that took place at Milwaukee-Downer during the Johnson years. Enrollment figures provide another striking example. Under Briggs, there was a steady increase in enrollment, peaking at 429 in 1927-28, leveling off to the low- to mid-300s during the Depression, and peaking again at 444 in 1946-47. During the Johnson period, by contrast, enrollment declined in almost every year, falling from a high of 278 in 1951-52 to a low of 176 in 1962-63. The decline was so serious that enrollment figures were not reported in the last three catalogues of the Johnson period, from 1960 through 1963.

Striking, too, were the student-teacher ratios under Briggs, as compared with Johnson. During the Briggs period the total number of faculty members never rose above fifty-three, and that was with a student enrollment of around 360. Under Johnson, the size of the faculty reached its peak of fifty-two during the college’s last year, when student enrollment was only 176.

As noted previously, Briggs was very careful with the dollar, and data in the files of the faculty indeed reveal that she rarely gave a teacher more than a $100 increase over the salary that person had earned during the previous year. Johnson, by contrast, gave much more generous increases, well illustrated by the case of Miss Frances W. Hadley in the English department. Hadley had begun her career at Milwaukee-Downer in the academic year 1922-23 with the rank of assistant professor, at a yearly salary of $1,600 plus “home,” the latter representing the amount charged by the college for living quarters in the dormitory. While by 1932 Hadley had become a full professor, earning $2,600 a year plus “home,” Briggs decreased her salary to $2,300 plus “home” in 1933 as an austerity measure and kept it at this lower figure through most of the Depression. When Briggs retired, in 1951, Hadley’s salary was up to $3,700 having risen in $100 annual increments after 1944. Hadley’s last contract, under Johnson, for the academic year 1958-59, set her salary at $7,050. During Johnson’s tenure, between 1952 and 1959, Hadley’s salary had increased on an average of $525 per year.

The contrasting styles of the two presidents provided yet another source of change. Their practices in hiring new faculty, for example, were very different indeed. Briggs handled the entire hiring process personally, from initiating inquiry about possible candidates from other schools and teacher agencies, to corresponding with the candidate, to personal interviews and formal offers of employment. When corresponding with a candidate’s references, Briggs always asked a standard set of questions, making quite clear her criteria for the successful candidate: scholarship and personality; the “right
kind of background,” which “gives thoroughness”; ability to interest students; a saving sense of humor; ability to fit well into the closely integrated community of the small college; loyalty and spirit of cooperation; ability to work hard; and an outlook that was neither too radical nor too conservative. Briggs made it very clear that, if a particular candidate was hired, that person was expected to come to Milwaukee-Downer with the intention of staying longer than just one year, the standard length of the first contract.

In regard to hiring practices, Johnson’s style was quite different. He did not, for example, collect letters of reference on applicants for teaching positions, so important to his predecessor. Also unlike her, Johnson involved his current faculty in the hiring process. Rather than conducting interviews with candidates personally, Johnson scheduled a series of interviews between the candidate and selected faculty members, both from inside the department that had the opening and from outside that department as well. Perhaps the most important factor differentiating Johnson from Briggs was Johnson’s practice of hiring part-time, ad hoc faculty to teach one or two courses but clearly not to form any long-term relationship with the college. Finally, Johnson’s sources of faculty were located primarily in Milwaukee, in Wisconsin, and in the Midwest, contrasting markedly with Briggs, who drew much of her faculty from the East.

Briggs engaged to some extent in educational innovation, introducing a degree program in occupational therapy in 1931, a Freshman Orientation program in 1932, and a Reading Period in 1933. But, in her thirty years at Milwaukee-Downer, she never came close to the number of innovations of the Johnson period. Johnson, for example, kept systematic records on the activities of his faculty. He required faculty members to provide data indicating number of courses taught, number of teaching hours, and number of students enrolled in each class. He further required information about the graduate work faculty had completed and their participation in extracurricular activities. Like the data on faculty, data collected on students tended to be quantitative in nature. Thus, the dean’s office under Johnson spent a lot of time graphing predicted student performance based on actual student achievement as determined by testing through the College Entrance Examination Board. Johnson also used student scores on the Board’s Advanced Placement Tests to facilitate exemptions of individual students from the college’s general requirements. Although it actually was initiated by Briggs, Johnson placed much more emphasis upon the Reading Period and on opportunities for independent study, both considered educational innovations at the time. He also encouraged students to take advantage of the privilege, that he instituted, of auditing courses. Finally, he introduced an Early Decision Plan to attract talented applicants for admission and a Junior Year Abroad program to appeal to those who did not want to spend all four of their college years on the same campus.

It is thus clear that, under President Johnson, Milwaukee-Downer’s essential character was transformed. At least part of the reason for this was that Johnson had a different notion than his predecessors about the mission of the women’s college. It will be recalled that President Briggs, as President Sabin before her, upheld the ideology of the separate sphere, even though what students actually chose to do could be seen as indicating that they did not necessarily consider themselves bound by it. President Johnson, by contrast, offered no rhetoric in support of women’s separate sphere. He saw the women’s college as providing freedom for women from the perennial restrictions to which they were subject when in the company of men, thus allowing them access to all avenues of development. And he saw the women’s college as providing freedom for women from the perennial restrictions to which they were subject when in the company of men, thus allowing them access to all avenues of development. 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In short, from the time Johnson ascended to the presidency, the ideology of Milwaukee-Downer appeared increasingly to be encompassed within a more modern brand of feminism. This would have boded well for the school had the women’s movement of the late 1960s and the 1970s been underway when Johnson took office in 1951. Indeed, if Milwaukee-Downer under Johnson can really be viewed as potentially in tune with the coming women’s movement, then Johnson must be credited with having been ahead of his time. But the reality was that the prevalent ideology in American society during the 1950s, “the feminine mystique,” was really just a version of the age-old theory that equality with men would lead to the
destruction of home and family. This meant that, as long as Lucia Briggs was at the helm and Milwaukee-Downer's domestic ideology was in place, the school had whatever stability was derived from treading ideological waters that were consonant with those of the general society. The shift in ideology under Johnson, along with the substantive changes he made, weakened that stability.

What is now apparent, and may well also have been apparent at the time, is that the effect of Johnson's changes was the transformation of Milwaukee-Downer into a more typical Midwestern institution. His own prior educational experience had been only in the Midwest, and it is likely that his experience provided the model for Johnson's vision of what Milwaukee-Downer should become. But in making what he considered the appropriate changes, Johnson was also changing the essential character of the school. By increasing the male presence on campus and closing the residence halls to women faculty, the intimacy of what had been a female enclave was lost. By hiring part-time, *ad hoc* faculty, the long-standing tradition of faculty loyalty was greatly diminished. By focusing upon specific career training and by devising an interdisciplinary core curriculum, the traditional link between the liberal arts and the building of character was attenuated. By evaluating students on the basis of standardized test scores, at least some of the traditional responsiveness to the unique expression of the individual was lost. In sum, the effort to modernize Milwaukee-Downer, to make it more generically Midwestern, substantially altered the institution's historic character and constituted a major challenge to its longevity.

Threats to Milwaukee-Downer's survival came from other quarters as well. In the post-Second World War economy, for example, the college was being pressured by rapidly rising costs, without commensurate increases in its income. Apparently the general population was experiencing this pressure as well, because it became increasingly difficult for Milwaukee-Downer to recruit an adequate student enrollment. Further, the college was threatened by a strong movement during the 1950s to establish a four-year, degree-granting branch of the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. This finally came to pass in 1956, and ultimately Milwaukee-Downer found itself unable to both compete with the state university's lower tuition charges and to withstand its determined efforts to acquire the Milwaukee-Downer campus.

Meanwhile, Milwaukee itself was becoming a city involved in the type of expansion that, if anything, further limited support for the college. The 1950s was an era of cultural development for the city, in which initiatives were taken toward projects like a performing arts center and an art museum. The people who involved themselves in these projects were also traditionally Milwaukee-Downer supporters, often members of the college's Board of Trustees. So it was that, during the Johnson period, the attention of some traditional supporters was diverted from the college, while others who remained attentive to the college's situation nevertheless placed the full weight of responsibility for improving it upon the shoulders of the president. And when, ultimately, the survival of Milwaukee-Downer as an independent entity ceased to be a realistic possibility, the College agreed to a consolidation with Lawrence College in Appleton, Wisconsin.
Conclusion

This history of Milwaukee-Downer College has sought to show that the essential character of the college was well-established by 1921. Its 19th-century background had laid the foundations for the development of this institution as a college of liberal arts that, like its counterparts in other regions, aimed to build Christian character in its students and teach them the value of service to society. Milwaukee-Downer was also, historically and by its own choice, a college for women only, dedicated to equipping women with the homemaking, teaching, and nursing skills required to perform effectively in their own separate sphere. Inherent in the very "personality" of the school was the belief that women's own institutions provided an excellent context for teaching them that the social roles for which they were being trained were as important as the social roles of men that they complemented.

While the college overtly expressed its devotion to strengthening the position of women in their own sphere, it tacitly devoted itself to exercising social control over the women who were its students. Milwaukee-Downer perceived itself as serving in loco parentis. The college attempted to exercise social control, not only through explicit rules and regulations but also through its use of student government and college rituals and traditions. The desire for control was also an important factor in the college's promotion of the residential—as opposed to commuter—experience for its students.

Other aspects of the liberal arts education, however, produced a discrepancy between what the college thought it was doing and what it actually was doing. While its intention was to exercise social control, for various reasons it actually was fostering independence among the students. For the fact was, intentions notwithstanding, that an all-female institution, in which there was no competition from males, placed all leadership positions in the hands of women, and the all-female, single faculty modeled self-sufficiency and independence. The curriculum fostered independence, too; its vocational aspect appeared to favor the pursuit of careers, and its liberal arts aspect taught thinking skills that tended to limit the extent to which students remained willing to conform.

The heart of the matter is that the women's college, whether it liked it or not, whether it admitted it or not, played a role in producing women who would be advocates of what has come to be identified as 20th-century feminism. Yes, the college did attempt to communicate the importance of women operating skillfully within their own sphere, only to have students tacitly reject that sphere by following the role models and using the thinking skills that the college gave them. And yes, the college sanctioned the entrance of its alumnae into jobs appropriate for women beyond the limits of the home, only to have them further breach the sphere by thinking of this experience not as women's work but as serious participation in the world outside traditional women's boundaries. In essence, the separate sphere was undermined by college women's actual experience; the separate sphere ideology that stressed the complementarity of women and men had to give way to a feminist ideology that stressed women's independence from men. These were indeed the factors accounting for the emergence of the "Milwaukee-Downer Woman."
About the author

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The Milwaukee-Downer Woman is based on her doctoral dissertation, "Milwaukee-Downer College: A Study in the History of Women and the History of Higher Education in America, 1851-1964." She also has presented and published on a variety of topics in women's history, including "Higher Education for Women at Mid-Century: The Demise of Milwaukee-Downer and Other Women's Colleges," "Archival Research Methods: Constructing the History of Milwaukee-Downer College," and "Feminism at Milwaukee-Downer College, 1848-1964."