

Part One: 1909-1960

Joseph B. Moore

Going to college was unusual in the early 1900's. American higher education at the turn of the 20th Century included 500 or so institutions enrolling about 240,000 students. Less than 5% of the population between the ages of 18 and 22 years old was enrolled in college (Cole, 2009).

However, conditions were being set for significant growth in the number of institutions and students in the next few decades. Industrial expansion was generating new wealth and ushering in a new era and scale of philanthropy, and higher education institutions were among its primary beneficiaries. Various technologies were leading industrial growth, from manufacturing to transportation to utilities. States were enacting more regulations requiring school attendance and employment was less tied to the agricultural calendar. Rural school districts were consolidating and urban districts were engaged in efforts to systematize schooling based on the factory efficiency model of mass production.

As more immigrants arrived, local schools were increasingly viewed as the logical locations for teaching democratic values. The dominant force of religion and religious leaders on social norms was being usurped by business and industry leaders and, in some regions, by high profile university presidents. While this secular leadership was associated with rational—as opposed to spiritual—thought, many of these secular leaders retained a religious perspective. Their language was less overtly spiritual, but not their perspective.

The three essays in this section provide background about Edith Lesley, document the development of early childhood programs from the university's founding to the present day, and trace the role of faculty and their teaching from those early days. The connections are revealing.

As Cynthia Brown notes, Edith Lesley was able to start a school to train kindergarten teachers because the market was changing. Local school boards were voting to install kindergartens in their districts and there were few programs to train kindergarten teachers. Miss Lesley knew there was about to be a significant demand and there was little supply.

Edith Lesley also personified many of the themes that continue to influence Lesley University today:

- *Theory*: she was familiar with the work of Friedrich Froebel, including the gifts (“play items”) and occupations (“domestically-oriented activities such as sewing . . .”).
- *Experience*: she had studied independently, with others, and during her travels to Germany. But her major experience was actually teaching kindergarten. She understood both the setting and context for which she was preparing future kindergarten teachers.
- *Community*: Miss Lesley visited her kindergarten students' homes to meet their parents, visited the settlement houses that served new immigrants in Cambridge, and developed a

rich network of academics and non-academics to support the initiation and continuation of her school.

Early childhood education has been the touchstone of the Lesley University curriculum for one hundred years. In fact, Lawton, Mindess, Fiore, Mardell, and Szamreta describe the history of early childhood education at Lesley and how external events have influenced academic programs. Whether it was World War II, Sputnik, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, special education, new fears about immigration, or mandated standardized testing, each influence can be identified through curriculum changes, state regulations, and even programmatic outcomes and student internships. There are now other programs at Lesley with larger enrollments and their own histories, but it seems fair to say that all Lesley programs emanate from that original, student focus to engage and train kindergarten teachers in the early decades of the past century.

This focus on student engagement requires a talented faculty. If we strive to maintain our commitment to the centrality of the student learning experience, we must engage in critical dialogue about effective pedagogy. Powerful alumni narratives include vivid descriptions of effective faculty, but alumni also make specific references to what they, the students, needed to do, to write, and to experience. Byers, Hirshberg, and Sanville describe the students' respect for faculty who involved students as fellow learners, as people who could improve the condition of the world not just through righteousness, but also through study, experience, collaboration, and commitment.

For just over one hundred years Lesley University has added new programs and schools, served more students, and delivered programs in new locations, many of them well beyond Cambridge. There is ample evidence in these essays and in the work of our faculty that Edith Lesley's purposeful integration of theory and practice, her intentional connection between the academy and the community, and her relentless focus on each student's imagination and capacity for action, remain our most precious inheritance.

Reference List

Cole, J. (2009). *The great American university: Its rise to preeminence, its indispensable national role, why it must be protected*. New York: PublicAffairs.