Women's Hours Versus Campus Conservatism:

Feminism's Limits at Purdue by 1970

Taylor Cash

HIST 395: Purdue Changemakers

Prof. Nancy Gabin

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Historians recall the 1960s in America as a decade of social progress and nationwide political activism, especially among college students. Students gathered on campuses across the nation to protest civil rights, the war in Vietnam, and free speech—but one topic remained notably absent from the scene. Women's issues largely took a backseat during the Civil Rights Era, and the overturn of women's hours at Purdue in 1966 was no exception. Despite their success which overturned curfews for the majority of female students, women at Purdue failed to gain widespread support from their male counterparts or to organize an empowered movement. Largely contained within the Association for Women Students (AWS), a Purdue student government group, the overturn of women's hours embodies the limits of college feminism by 1970.

As early as women began to attend university, *in loco parentis* (in place of the parent) rules were commonplace and set the example for how women were expected to behave out of the classroom. These rules were set in place under the assumption that colleges maintained the duty to facilitate a supervised transition into womanhood; these policies included (but definitely were not limited to) dress codes, lights-out, curfews, and room inspections.

Identified as early as 1862 as Vassar college, universities faced a new phenomenon in which unmarried women were leaving their parents' homes and were thrust into a world of sudden, unmatched freedom which was unheard of for single women.[1] Parents feared that, without their guidance, their daughters might stray from the morals which they were taught. In loco parentis stemmed from a time when image, purity, and conservatism were important aspects of women's lives, and society believed that personal success was paramount to educational

[1] Lynn Peril, *College Girls: Bluestockings, Sex Kittens, and Coeds, Then and Now* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006), 145.

success. As author Lynn Peril put it, "in loco parentis rules were there to make sure [the college girl] didn't stray too far from accepted standards of feminine behavior."[2]

The persistence of these rules through the 1960s suggests that not much had changed since the 1860s in terms of expected female behavior on campus. The 1950s was undoubtedly a decade of conservatism and conformity for women and notions that women must be protected and guided were ever important. Women didn't begin attending universities in large numbers until the end of World War II, making these rules more relevant than ever by the 1950s.

The rules governing female extra-classroom behavior by the 1950s make even greater sense by examining some of the greatest forces for campus conformity and conservatism. Personal image was of utmost importance as indicated by the prevalence of etiquette books targeted to the college woman. Such books laid out how young women were expected to behave in a direct parallel to *in loco parentis* rules—the societal expectations found within etiquette books were, in a sense, the backbone of *in loco parentis.* Without their popularity, there would have been no need for curfews and dress codes.

Purdue Deans of Women Helen Schleman and Dorothy Stratton published an etiquette book of their own in 1955 titled *Your Best Foot Forward* which was widely popular at Purdue and campuses across the nation. The table of contents provides a brief overview of the important values, among them personal appearance and behavior in public places, on dates, and at the table.[3] Interestingly, the co-authors wrote in the original print acknowledging gradual shifts of social constructs through time:

> "If, seventy-five years from now, some young person were to brush the dust and cobwebs from this book and read of the customs of today, there is little doubt that they would

[2] Peril, 143.
[3] Dorthy C. Stratton and Helen B. Schleman, Your Best Foot Forward (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1940), IX-X.

appear more amusing and more outmoded to him than those of 1865 seem to us. For us, however they are integral parts of our daily life and are, therefore important."[4]

Schleman and Stratton couldn't see the implications of their etiquette books at the time, but the declining importance of etiquette books over time suggests a direct correlation between the relaxing of social constructs and universities' ability to uphold in loco parentis.

Campus pageantry also directly reflects the importance of etiquette books—and Helen Schleman involved herself with both. At first having very little interest, Schleman joined the judging panel of Miss America in 1955, the same year her etiquette book was published, after learning of the extraordinary academic reward bestowed upon the winner: a $5,000 scholarship (or $48,560 in modern day). Schleman received an exclusive packet which included criteria listing the features which Miss America must embody. Number one on that list read, "beauty of face" followed by "voice, manner of speaking, intellect, and charm."[5] Miss America was the single greatest academic opportunity for women at the time, effectively equating a woman's personal image and beauty to her educational potential.

The 1960s served as a direct rejection of such 50s conformity. For the first time, college students became politically active to protest civil rights, the war in Vietnam, and free speech, all which resulted from a new rejection of complacence. Women were similarly empowered; they were discontent with the outdated rules and lack of freedom they were afforded compared to their male counterparts. Women's movements, however, lacked their time in the spotlight throughout the 1960s. Instead of protests, women's issues were constricted within student government organizations which privately worked on solutions. While women were able to

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[4] Stratton & Schleman, 3. Referenced by Klink.

[5] Angie Klink, *The Deans' Bible: Five Purdue Women and Their Quest for Equality* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2017), 184. Primary source referenced by Klink from Purdue Archives.

achieve progress on their own, the lack of partnership in their fight indicates that feminism was a movement that had yet to gain much traction.

Purdue's *in loco parentis* policies were similar to those of virtually every university across the nation. While male residence halls were subject to virtually no rules, the Women's Self-Governing Association (WSGA, later AWS) first printed its handbook of rules for women in the 1930s which were no stricter nor more liberal than those at other universities: women were prohibited from overnight stays off campus and restricted to a 7 P.M. curfew unless otherwise permitted (referred to as parietal rules), they were forbidden to host male guests on days except Saturday and Sunday, and a housemother would serve as the principal enforcer of these rules.

Barbara Cook, who first served as a housemother at Purdue in 1956, described in an oral interview that the Purdue housemother training school was highly competitive, indicating the importance of a respectable figure for female students to look up to. Housemothers were expected to be "someone to whom girls may go with their problems and receive parental advice and encouragement,";[6] they were essentially live-in motherly figures that every female student could trust but were also expected to obey as they would their own mothers. The housemother was meant to foster a successful learning environment by forming a trusting bond with her students and ensuring that they were following the rules.

The housemother was, by all means, a figure of her time. In a time before telephones, these students had few means of communicating with their own mothers to seek advice, leaving the housemother's success primarily in the connection she was able to form with the students. The prevalence of telephones by the 1950s into the 60s, however, explains one of reasons for the housemother's fall from relevance: with her students no longer seeking her guidance, she

[6] Peril, 148

remained only as a rule-enforcer by the 1950s, and by the 1960s, women had begun to have enough of those rules.

Discourse about Purdue's women's policies first came about in 1965 when the Association of Women Students (AWS), a student government organization in which every female student was automatically enrolled, distributed a survey that discovered "80% of students wanted some sort of a change in the present system [of women's curfews]."[7] This finding echoed sentiments seen nationwide in which women sought more control over their own private affairs and grew discontent with living in conformity; they echoed the ideas written in Betty Friedan's popular 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique,* which lamented the status quo of women in society. Applying this discontent to the college setting was something new; however, by 1965, parietal rules were still very much commonplace at all universities, making Purdue one of the first universities to address the grievances of its female student body.

In response to the findings of the spring 1965 survey, Purdue's AWS launched a study group comprised of 20 male and female students who investigated the discontent with women's hours during the 1965-66 school year. The AWS began a program of forums which they called "Firesides" and were open to all members of the Purdue community. Here, female students voiced their grievances about women's hours and offered suggestions about alternatives. In the first Fireside meeting, student Jane Alford of Alpha Xi Delta complained about women's hours as "unfair discrimination against women" which she explained, "created false social situations [in which] women find that they must stay out until hours even if they want to come in earlier."[8] Alford's decision to refer to women's hours as "discrimination" was a bold statement for a

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[7] "AWS Hours Discussion Kicks Off Firesides" *Purdue Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Nov 13, 1965. https://exponent.lib.purdue.edu/?a=d&d=PE19651113-01.1.1&e=------196-en-20--1--txt-txIN-aws+FIRESIDES----1965---1
[8] Ibid

young woman to declare publicly, hence her quote's inclusion in the *Exponent*. Discourse about discrimination was not by any means a new idea: the recent Civil Rights Act of 1964 had explicitly prohibited employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin, but the inclusion of "sex" was seldom discussed. Women were hardly thought of as subjects of discrimination, especially because the Civil Rights Act formally forbade it. Alford nevertheless alleged that de facto discrimination against women *did* persist, and that institutions such as Purdue were the culprit. Her language resembles some of the earliest signs of discontent with women's inferior place in society, indicating a desire for change not only to women's hours, but to all the persistent systems of female oppression.

In response to the burning female discontent from those such as Alford, the first Fireside was tasked with brainstorming possible alternatives to women's hours. The earliest solution favored among the AWS study board and the Dean of Women Office was a graduated system in which women would gain more freedom as they grew older. They argued that, since freshman were still new to a world of independence, they would still benefit from guidance that helped establish a routine and help them get accustomed to life as a university student. The AWS was still interested in learning what students on campus desired, therefore they sent out a second questionnaire on November 29, 1965 that contained a list of 10 solutions to the women's hours problem. Both male and female students received the survey, but the *Exponent* recalled that only 74% of men returned their surveys whereas 95% of women returned theirs, making it difficult to determine what the general male stance was about women's hours.[9]

One thing was clear, however: men were generally uninvolved with women's grievances, their failure to respond to the AWS survey indicating that many men didn't have a passionate

[9] "'No Hours'—High Response On AWS Questionnaire" *Purdue Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Dec. 16, 1965. https://exponent.lib.purdue.edu/?a=d&d=PE19651216-01&e=-------en-20--1--txt-txIN-women%27s+hours-------1

stance on the matter. This doesn't mean that men saw nothing to gain from a change to women's hours, however. If the hours were abolished, men would no longer bear the responsibility of making sure their dates made it back to their dorms on time, a huge step toward breaking the traditional dating norms and allowing for young relationships to progress as they pleased. Eliminating women's hours would also beg the question of women-in-dorms (WID) hours, potentially allowing men to host women in their rooms for longer periods of times or even in private, closed-doored. For the typical heterosexual male, eliminating women's hours actually had a lot to offer his own personal interests despite his failure to engage in the discourse.

Regardless of this male disinterest, the new survey found that 95% of students desired some change to the existing hours policy, and most of them (albeit only 37%) desired abolishing hours for all students, though the graduated system was a close second contender. In response to these findings, the AWS designed their final recommendation to eliminate all women's hours and sent their proposal to the Dean's Office, which was incredibly hesitant to afford women the unlimited restrictions they sought.

One outlier, ironically, was Dean of Women Helen Schleman, who had long been a champion for women in the educational environment. Despite her involvement in maintaining the status quo in the decades prior with her involvement in Miss America and publishing of an etiquette book, Schleman was the greatest ally for female students who saw women's hours as discriminatory. Schleman voiced that all women should maintain the same freedoms as their male counterparts, and that women's hours were an unnecessary measure that reflected distrust in females to do the "right thing." She believed that, if given the chance, women would act as responsible adults and would face the consequences fairly if they failed to do so.

Reflecting upon the 1965 semester, Beverly Stone recalled that, "Helen Schleman was far more liberal…in terms of her willingness to give students responsibility" and was, in fact, willing to "go all the way and remove hours for freshman as well."[10] Despite her liberal stance and her position as Dean of Women, Schleman was outvoted by the Dean of Women Office, which voted overwhelmingly to maintain hours for female freshman while eliminating them for everyone else. Schleman wrote in a letter to students published in the *Exponent*, "We are willing and interested in seeing students move toward more and more complete individual responsibility for all of their academic and personal development," hinting at her own discontent with the restrictions placed on freshman, but also acknowledged, "We feel that we cannot accept the total recommendation [to abolish all women's hours]" in appeasement of the colleagues who had outvoted her.[11]

The University's failure to remove hours for all women in 1966 is ultimately characteristic of feminism's limits by the mid-century. The ladies at Purdue were largely the singular demographic responsible for championing change to a discriminatory and outdated system. Despite the male student body having just as much to gain, they left women to fight this battle mostly alone. With a larger student body to represent them, the women at Purdue could have strengthened their argument and even challenged the outcome of the vote.

With the exception of Schleman, the forces behind change were also a younger generation whose ideas were generally rejected by their elders. With their lack of mobilization and partnership, the women at Purdue were overshadowed by louder voices of conformity: the

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[10] Beverly Stone Interview, MSO2i043_01_stone, MSO 2, Purdue Office of Publications Oral History Program collection, Purdue University Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries, https://earchives.lib.purdue.edu/digital/collection/mso2/id/5498/rec/106

[11] "Dean's Office States Hours Policy" *Purdue Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Feb. 22, 1966. https://exponent.lib.purdue.edu/?a=d&d=PE19660222-01.1.2&e=------196-en-20--1--txt-txIN-aws+proposal----1966---1

older, male-dominant generations within the Purdue administration who ultimately had final authority. While the largest percentage of freshmen desired no hours, the Dean's Office reasoned that women had to earn freedom by showing their maturity and successful adaptation to the college environment. Such reasoning was largely based on parent concern, which Schleman claimed "vanished" after students had proven their successful adjustment to their new environment.[12] These concerns were less about parenting, however, and more about generational ideals. The board voting on women's hours came from the same generation as Purdue parents, both believing in long held ideas that a successful home environment was paramount to educational success. The Dean of Women Office relied heavily on Purdue parent opinion to justify their decision, ignoring the biases held by both groups by implying that young adults didn't always know what was best for them. Following the decision, there were absolutely no indicators that eliminating women's hours had caused any negative impact on their daughter's performance in class. In reality, Beverly Stone recalled that all GPAs for women actually went up following the 1966 decision.[13]

While the women's inability to gain support from their male colleagues played a significant role in the discourse (or lack thereof) surrounding women's hours, the Purdue administration's demographic was the ultimate deciding factor against any radical changes to women's rules. Helen Schleman was a singular anomaly: for her time, her ideas about feminism were groundbreaking but were drowned out in a sea of voices who were simply unwilling to fully break the status quo. While women's inability to mobilize and create a broad feminist movement across campus played a role, the conservative ideals of the administration were the single greatest obstacle to a full overturn of women's hours.

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[12] "Dean's Office States Hours Policy" *Purdue Exponent*
[13] Beverly Stone Interview

This conservatism even expressed itself in ways aside from the women's hours question. While curfews were abolished for most female students, the remaining list of residence hall rules stayed entirely intact, Schleman writing in the *Exponent* that the Dean's Office could not make any further adjustments to extra-classroom rules.[14]

While women weren't required to return home at a certain hour, they still weren't given keys to their residence halls which locked early in the evening. Instead, residence personnel were tasked with allowing women in after hours, a blatant mechanism to shame women for arriving home long past dark. The residences failed to give women privacy in their personal affairs, as they were unable to come and go as they pleased and in private. Someone would always know if they had gone out *and* how long they were gone. While this isn't inherently problematic, it's important to consider the social constructs still important by 1966. Women were still expected to behave in certain ways to maintain their respectability, something that directly conflicted with their desire to stay out late. While they were technically allowed, the lack of a key system remained as a barrier to women's autonomy in the residences because of the watchful eye of the residence staff.

Residence hall visiting hours also remained the same despite the elimination of curfews under the premise that "other schools have had poor experience when guest hours are permitted 24 hours/day 7 days/week."[15] Going back to the idea that young adults don't always know what is best for them, Purdue administration struggled with students throughout the 1970s who saw the visiting hours policy as an unfair encroachment on their personal activities. The University was still unwilling to give both men and women full control over their private affairs under the

[14] "Dean's Office States Hours Policy" *Purdue Exponent*

[15] Board of Trustee Minutes, 9 June 1972, BOTM19720609, Board of Trustee Minutes, Purdue University Archives and Special Collections, West Lafayette, Indiana, United States of America, https://earchives.lib.purdue.edu/digital/collection/bot/id/58

guise of protectionism, but women still bore the brunt of the burdens. While the Pendragon President Dave Morganstein of the men's Cary Quadrangle dorms admitted that visitor rules weren't always observed in male dorms, housemothers remained vigilant in women's dorms to enforce visitor rules.[16] Although eliminating the curfew may have seemed groundbreaking and a step toward full control over their private affairs, the policies that women on campus still faced following the 1966 decision were direct contradictions against women's desire for complete extra-curricular autonomy. Curfews were only one out of several outdated policies in need of change, making it only the first out of a series of policy reforms that would afford women the full rights they deserved as independent adults.

While the decision to eliminate women's hours seems less-than-radical in hindsight, Purdue was the trailblazer who set the precedence for other universities across the nation. Schleman described the new policy as "the most liberal hours system in the Big Ten and one of the most liberal in the country" which wasn't an overstatement by any means.[17] Purdue was the first university in the Big Ten to eliminate curfews for women, their decision coming in the spring of 1966. By the fall semester, universities across the nation were following suit after seeing the successes at Purdue.

There wasn't one resolution to the question of women's hours, as places like the University of Massachusetts eliminated all women's hours while the University of Oregon's policies reflected Purdue's almost exactly. Some universities even took a much greater chance than Purdue, as the Universities of Utah, Illinois, and Pennsylvania afforded women with keys to their

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[16] "Pendragon Questioned on Extension of Women's Hours in Men's Dorms" *Purdue Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Nov. 8, 1967. https://exponent.lib.purdue.edu/?a=d&d=PE19671108-01.1.1&srpos=7&e=-------en-20--1--txt-txIN-parietal-------1

[17] "Dean's Office States Hours Policy" *Purdue Exponent*

own dorms.[18] Regardless of the general lack of consensus on exactly how far to go with women's privileges, Purdue undeniably took the first giant leap that created a domino effect of change across the nation. As a rather conservative leaning university, Purdue's willingness early on to take a chance that other universities seldom considered was astonishing. Unlike schools like UC Berkeley, known by the 1960s for its political activity and liberal student body, Purdue was perhaps the last place anyone expected to become the conversation starter of women's issues on campus. The University's seemingly modest changes to women's hours were, in fact, radical for the era and the University's political climate. As the first major university to make such changes, Purdue only tested the waters for what was to come later throughout the 1970s, which saw collegiate women gaining even more control over their private affairs on campus until they were finally brought under the same rules as their male colleagues.

While Purdue's women's hours decision in 1966 seems underwhelming in hindsight, it's most important to consider the context in which the decision was made to fully understand how groundbreaking it was for the time. The 1960s was a time in which women struggled the most against the pressures of conformity and conservatism which had thrived throughout the 1950s. Society had long told women exactly who to be and how to behave, and universities were some of the most complicit institutions in upholding these standards. From campus pageantry to etiquette books, college women in the 60s felt pressures to conform in manners that were even less explicit than curfew policies, making women's challenges against institutional sex discrimination an incredible feat given just how loud the voices of conformity on campuses were and how little women's issues had inspired the youth into activism. With so many societal barriers, the women at Purdue couldn't have accomplished full autonomy in the matter of a

[18] "More Social Rules for College Women" *The Lincoln Clarion* (Jefferson City, MO), Nov. 18, 1966. https://www.newspapers.com/image/666819502/?terms=women%27s%20hours%20university&match=1

single semester, but these women were nevertheless some of the first major changemakers in the nation for women's autonomy in college. Due to their efforts, modern young women nowadays have all the right to live, dress, and behave how they wish without their university's scrutinizing eye to discipline them.

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