

The History of the Vassar College English Department

Beginnings- Present

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Introduction

Approaches to English instruction have evolved dramatically in Vassar's 150 year history. In the midst of the subject's evolution within the academy, Vassar dealt not only with the evolution in the approach to the English language in academia, but also with its relationship to the academic pursuits of a women's education. Throughout Vassar's history, the English department has housed some of the most influential professors at the college and in the field of women's education. They have consistently worked to make the study of English their own and relate it to the specific demands of students at Vassar. The department has struggled with negotiating the boundary between honoring the ideals instilled by those who founded the department's core educational principles and venturing forth to new approaches to education and the study of English. In a sense, that very quest characterizes the department's heritage and provides hope for its future. As chair Doris A. Russell wrote in 1961, "[A] reading of the letters of early students as well as of the more recent chairmen's reports from this department cause one to realize that there has always been something experimental and pioneering about English at Vassar." The experimental and pioneering element of English at Vassar dates from its earliest days and continues to the present time.

The Early Years

Henry B. Buckham

When Vassar opened its doors to students in 1865, professors throughout the college found that their students arrived at drastically varying levels of education and generally lacked

adequate preparation for college-level work. For the first year with students, Professor of Rhetoric Henry B. Buckham was the entire English department. Each department grew later on, but at the beginning, the college's faculty consisted of nine professors, each of whom represented his or her "department" in its entirety. Buckham's first and only departmental report, written in 1866, is rife with frustration about the unsatisfactory academic preparation of his students. He complained that students arrived unprepared in the fundamental principles of writing, class size fluctuated constantly, and the lack of sufficient faculty left him with too much responsibility for educating the ill-prepared students. He took on the task of training the 100 or so students requiring review in English grammar in order to make them "members of the college in good standing." He left after one year, clearly frustrated with teaching such basic material and unwilling to confront the task of creating an appropriate curriculum.

The Preparatory System

President John H. Raymond developed the system to educate and prepare the young women with whom Buckham was so dissatisfied. As he cast the Vassar education in its original mold, Raymond was highly influential in the founding of the school's initial core curricular principles. He believed firmly in the necessity of a well-rounded education, including work in mathematics, sciences, social sciences, and arts.

Keeping Vassar from devolving into a mere seminary stood out as one of Matthew Vassar's chief goals and the faculty's main challenges through the first years of the college's development. Vassar wanted to offer women a higher level of education rivaling that provided by the most prestigious men's colleges, so it strove to provide more than what other educational institutions for women already made available. Through the next few decades, as Truman J.

Backus chaired the English department and John H. Raymond presided over the college, the faculty struggled both to bring unprepared students up to the college level in their first year and ensure that all the young women received a comprehensive college education by the time they graduated.

Due to the circumstances, professors took the first years to root their students in a sufficient academic background rather than dividing them into class years. The faculty did not grade the students by a common standard, but worked to bring them to an adequate level to begin an in-depth college education. At the close of the college's third year, the faculty managed to lend the curriculum a more efficient shape based on the understanding they gained from experience with the students. They split the school into four divisions: preparatory students, art students, regular students, and special students.¹ Regular students passed a set of examinations proving their qualification and formed, as President John H. Raymond put it, the "college proper." Special students pursued course structures they arranged individually. Only advanced students qualified for this program. Finally, preparatory students were those unprepared for entry to the freshman year and took necessary courses in order to qualify as regular students of the "college proper." As the school's curriculum began to take shape, it prescribed a set of requirements in each discipline for each year of a student's time at Vassar, and early Vassar students had very little room to choose course work for themselves.

Truman Backus

¹ The separate schools for art and music that would later become one school of arts and then dissolve completely under Taylor's presidency were established for students who wanted to focus solely on artistic cultivation.

After Buckham's departure, Truman Backus took over while the college and the department established a more stable curriculum. Not much information on Backus' work in the department is available, but extant descriptions of him indicate that his perspective encouraged the school's evolution. He was a notoriously youthful and open-minded professor, who dared to challenge norms and thus brought the department and Vassar forward into an expansive system of education. Within the English department, he taught rhetoric.

Backus hoped to make a Vassar education more accessible; he wrote in an 1875 *Vassar Miscellany News*,

When Vassar shall become the college for the wealthy only, her present rank among institutions of learning will have been lost, her past ten years of unlooked for success will have been thrown away, and the women who have shared in the princely philanthropy of Matthew Vassar will have shown themselves unfaithful to claims which Vassar College has upon their gratitude and their help.

Backus also pioneered the advancement of women's education in America. In 1893, He wrote,

The time is at hand when the numbers of women students in colleges will surpass the number of men in college. The chief difference between a woman's college and a man's college is that in the former the teachers have to stand behind the students and urge them not to work too hard, while in the latter they stand in front of the men and try to drag them on.

In a time where the mere existence of a woman's college seemed revolutionary, Backus daringly encouraged the education of women and thus the expansion of Vassar. That he was forward thinking in so many capacities relating to the larger life of the College informed his chairmanship of the English Department; in her article "Some Faculty of Earliest Vassar" printed in the 1935 *Vassar Quarterly*, Cornelia M. Raymond wrote,

Miss Wood, who taught under Professor Backus for ten years, says of him, 'He was a born educator. Unhampered by ruts of traditional methods of education, he dared to try experiments hazardous often in the estimation of his older, more conservative colleagues; and much of the progressive, farseeing policy that insured the success of that early period is due in large measure to him.'

The Early English Department

The original English department was split into four divisions: Rhetoric, Logic, Elocution, and English Literature. The main assignments for students in the department were “themes”—short analytical essays, often unrelated to specific class materials. Students generally wrote one in class every week and two or three outside of class on a topic of their choice. According to Backus’ words in President John H. Raymond’s 1873 report on the college’s function entitled “A College for Women in Poughkeepsie, New York,” this combination of courses and exercises accomplished four main objectives:

To teach, theoretically, the laws of thought (logic), of expression (rhetoric), and of utterance (elocution); To train the student, practically, to a good style of writing, speaking, and reading English (essays, readings, and recitations); To drill her in specialties of the English word and sentence (etymology, synonyms, analysis of sentences); To introduce her to English literature.

The department’s curriculum strove to instill theoretical principles of writing in its students and then challenged them to apply those principles in their own work. Private “interviews” with professors and assistant professors, especially concerning essay writing and composition, were always an essential element of the curriculum. As chairman Manuel Drennan wrote in 1892, “It will always be a potent way of forming the minds and characters of the young people who come here, and that in a way not possible in the classroom.”

Skills in Rhetoric formed the foundation for work in English. Special, preparatory and art students had to pass an exam in rhetoric for entry into any of the courses in the department. In a section on the English department in President Raymond’s 1873 report, Truman Backus wrote,

Before entering the freshman class, [the student] must be well grounded in some good school-grammar, and must understand, theoretically, the rules for constructing sentences, the principles of punctuation, the definitions of rhetorical figures and terminology of literary criticism, and the general laws of style, as taught in manuals of elementary rhetoric.

Preparatory rhetoric instilled a foundation in rules of writing that proved absolutely necessary to upper level work in literary analysis and argumentative writing for both preparatory and regular students. A departmental report from the 1860's describes preparatory work in essay writing: "the theory of the Preparatory essay work calls for training in the structure of sentences, word analysis, paraphrasing, condensation, note-taking, study of the style of correspondence, 'newspaper English' and slang." Any student wishing to enroll in higher-level English courses involving substantial amounts of writing had to take a lower level rhetoric course in order to learn the skills described above.

The department distributed courses over the four years so that preparatory students took elementary rhetoric, freshmen took grammatical analysis, sophomores took one semester of English literature and one semester of English Etymology and Synonyms, juniors took a semester of Rhetoric and a Semester of Logic, seniors self-selected work in their specific areas of interest, and in all years students took Elocution. Composition exercises extended through all of the courses.

Within this framework, each year's curriculum endeavored to impart different skills. The freshman year aimed at challenging the student to apply principles of writing and reading to her own work. In President Raymond's 1873 document, Truman Backus wrote of the freshman in English,

Every five weeks she must present for criticism an essay upon a prescribed theme, and, with the help of a teacher, studies the principles of rhetoric as illustrated by the excellences or defects of her own literary work. The specific aim, at this stage, is to call forth her natural style of thought and expression. Models are not used, and every form of imitative writing is discouraged. The criticisms are minute, personal, and free, being made in private interviews between the teacher and the individual student. This method of criticism is observed throughout the course. During the latter half of this year, she is drilled in the analysis of English sentences.

In contrast, the sophomore year asked the student to focus on reading and analyzing literature, both expanding her base of historical knowledge relating to English literature and her ability to write about that literature. Backus explains,

The first half of the sophomore year is occupied with the history of English literature. Here, limitation is imperatively necessary. Twelve writers are selected who have most potently influenced English thought and the English language since the beginning of the sixteenth century, and these alone are studied. The study involves, however, a general view of the progress of literary development during this period. From the lectures of the professor, and copious references to the college library made therein, the student gathers material which she is required, after reasonable time for digesting it, to put into the form of a carefully written essay on the writer in question, containing her own estimate of the man, his writings and their influence, and her opinion on mooted points. By this method she acquires a habit of studying pen in hand, gains much historical and biographical information, and cultivates alike the power of original reflection and facility of composition on literary topics.

Although they always needed faculty approval, after the sophomore year, students had more freedom in choosing their own courses. The junior year cultivated methods of thought and argumentation by teaching rhetoric and logic, aiming to facilitate the “formation of style.” As Backus wrote, “the studies and exercises aim to increase her power of directing the processes of [the student’s] own mind.” The second half of the junior year focused on the theory of syllogism, in order to prepare the student for argumentative writing. After this study, the student had to apply her knowledge to crafting arguments about varying writers in science, philosophy, and literature. The senior year aimed at developing a given student’s specific literary interests. Additionally, seniors in English were called upon for the first time to read their work to faculty and students.

Faculty

Through the first few decades, the department functioned hierarchically. In the 1860’s, the department comprised a single professor, three assistants and one teacher for elocution. The

assistants' duties were extensive. They supplemented the professor's work: they taught classes where they covered sections of the professor's curriculum, held "interviews" with the students, and assigned and marked the students' themes. Those who worked closely with students in the academic setting, grading papers and academic work, were called "critics." Each class had its own critic, who performed duties and emphasized the cultivation of certain skills in writing, depending on the year's focus. Assistants also helped students with extra-curricular literary work, such as the "public exercises" of Philaletheis (then a literary society which functioned under the department), and poems and class songs written for Founder's Day and commencement. The first assistants were all female.

At Vassar's founding, Matthew Vassar and his advisers debated extensively about whether they should employ female professors. Although the very first professor Vassar hired was the female astronomer, Maria Mitchell, they ultimately decided to seek male professors for the other posts. In the English department, female teachers consistently occupied subordinate positions to men.

In addition to their academic duties, these women often acted as disciplinary mother figures under the direction of Lady Principal Hannah Lyman. Each of the nine assistants to Miss Lyman had charge over a single residential corridor. The female assistant teachers lived in the dorms on corridors with the students, while male professors lived in more independent apartments within Main building. This system was designed to ensure that the college preserved and cultivated the student's womanliness through her education. Because female faculty members lived more or less with the students, their duties extended beyond those of a conventional professor, placing a strain on their intellectual pursuits. The issues caused by this problematic dynamic appear throughout Backus' yearly departmental reports; he wrote at the end

of the 1879/80 academic year, “In addition to the time which is reported as used for the college, each of these teachers has regular duties to perform under the direction of the Lady Principal. Three of my assistants hold the office of ‘Corridor Teacher’- an office whose duties are said to be so trying that no man can understand them.” In conjunction with repeated requests for larger faculty, the early department felt and expressed a constant strain caused by these added demands placed on female faculty members. Only at the end of the century did female faculty members move out of the corridors and even off campus, establishing themselves as more independent and academically respected members of the college.

Graduate Work

At the end of the 19th century, when graduate work was almost unavailable to women, Vassar began offering master’s degrees. While a few very brave and very lucky women made their way to graduate schools, women graduating from Vassar had few opportunities to attain higher degrees. Vassar thus offered a few programs for master’s degrees. Each year, the English department awarded these degrees to several women, who usually chose a focus and studied closely with a few specialized faculty members while taking the most advanced courses pertaining to their subject.

Philaletheis

The Philalethein society, now known as Philaletheis, is Vassar’s oldest student organization. Originally a literary society, it functioned as a part of the English department under the auspices of departmental assistants. It was split into chapters based on area of interest. The first course catalogue asserts that “The leading object of these societies is to cultivate the art of

Composition, in all its forms. Their weekly meetings will be enlivened, according to the taste of their respective members, with recitations, readings, music, and other literary or aesthetic recreations. Occasional entertainments will be given by the Chapters, separately or in combinations, in the College Chapel.” Through time, Philaetheis switched its focus to these theatrical performances of written works and eventually transformed into the theatrical society it still is today. By the turn of the 20th century, students ran the association and split it into four chapters, each of which wrote and produced a hall play every year.

Expansion

Both the college and the department experienced enormous growth through the 19th century. As the school established a framework for its curriculum, it could afford to accommodate more students and, in turn, the Vassar education became increasingly more desirable. Seminaries for girls began offering classes geared specifically towards preparing students for Vassar. As a result, the initially small faculty was stretched too thin. By the 1880’s, the English department had hired three more professors to provide for the growing student body.

The end of the century also saw the introduction of a wider array of topics offered for study in English. Starting in the 1890’s, they included courses on individual authors and periods, such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, English Romantic Poetry, and 19th century prose, among others.

Writers from the Early Years

Elizabeth Williams Champney

Elizabeth Williams Champney graduated in 1869 with Vassar's second class. At Vassar, she infamously wrote "The First Epistle of Matthew," a mock-biblical account of Matthew Vassar's life. After graduation, she wrote *The Three Vassar Girls Series*: a group of books meant to enlighten American girls about places around the world through describing the buoyant adventures of three girls from Vassar. Clearly inspired by her experiences at college, Champney created stories about the intrepid women who went to Vassar in its early years. She wrote for women who didn't have the freedom to attend college and travel abroad, opening their imaginations to the possibilities beyond the limited world they knew.

Although late Victorians had learned to accept and praise female authorship, many vehemently disapproved of female professionalism. Champney wrote to a young fan who inquired about female independence and authorship,

Nearly all the lady writers are married or independent. Miss Alcott is an exception but read her struggles! Really dear girl, it is not worthwhile to try. Write if you must because you have the mania for ink, which with us authors is more unforgivable than the mania for alcohol, but look for support in other directions- With my present experience and reputation - If I were left now dependent on my own resources I should seek a situation as a teacher or in an office knowing that I could not support myself and children adequately on stories and books. This is very disheartening but it would be more cruel for me to hold up false hopes.

Champney's avid discouragement and insistent pessimism don't match up with the romanticized image many would like to uphold of this early figure of female strength, one of the first to graduate from a college famous for changing American women's lives. Nonetheless, this reality about attitudes towards female authorship corresponds to a greater societal uncertainty about women's writing. By encouraging women to write, the department was stepping into unfamiliar territory.

Laura Johnson Wylie's English Department (1895-1923)

Wylie's Educational Theories and Practices

Changes in the English department from the end of the 19th century through the early 1920's were characterized by the transition from teaching the student the nuts and bolts of writing to establishing a personal relationship between the student and literature. The first female chair of the department, Laura Johnson Wylie, instituted some of the most notable changes in this direction. Wylie was deeply rooted in the college for her entire adult life; she attended Vassar (class of 1875) and later was among the first group of women to receive a Ph.D. from Yale (class of 1894). She returned to Vassar to teach English in 1895 and chaired the department for over 20 years, from 1897 to 1921, shaping the department into the form it still holds today. As a colleague wrote in 1924, just a year after Wylie's retirement, "Whatever changes in our work the progress of education may demand, we shall never wish to depart from the fundamental principles on which Miss Wylie founded the present department of English at Vassar." Free from the constraints of ill prepared students who confronted Buckham and later Backus, Wylie could finally establish a department that came closer to providing the ideal scope of education. In her forward thinking modernity, she redefined the concept of English as an individual and expressive art form, completely revolutionizing the goals of work in English at Vassar.

President Henry Noble McCracken wrote of Wylie, "I always found her a fighter for the freedom of college and curriculum. She was of the modern school." She outlined what exactly being of the "modern school" meant for her and the curriculum that she essentially defined when she wrote about the "problem" of creating and shaping an English department designed for

young women in her article entitled “What Can be Done About It” in the July, 1918 *Vassar Quarterly*,

Not unnaturally [the English department’s] first attempt at a solution of our problem was to apply in education the method of statistician and cataloguer. And this imposition on teaching of a mechanism alien to its nature and spirit has been of late years not only a serious handicap in our work but a potent cause of the spirit of widespread discontent.... [T]eaching, aiming at nothing less than the fullest individual development of every student must read failure unless we provide in it for the personal opportunity that is of its very essence.... [I]t is indeed only when teachers are people teaching classes made up of other people that there can be in the long period of learning any genuine life and hope for future years.

Wylie’s goal was to modernize the English department from its original focus on providing a college entrance level base of knowledge to delving deeper into analysis and the experience of literature. In this quest, she saw English as a highly personal discipline that required work on an individual level.

Wylie emphasized the personal aspect of a student’s experience throughout her education as essential to the study of English. This theory factored prominently in her own style of teaching; Katherine Warren, a disciple, wrote, “It was largely in private conferences that the clinch work of Miss Wylie’s teaching was done.” Indeed, many students talked about the groundbreaking experiences they had in individual meetings with Professor Wylie. Her compulsion to teach students one on one and her desire to break barriers and open new doors meant that another former student, quoted in Katherine Warren’s 1924 article, reported: “[H]er personal interviews with her students, deservedly famous, were sometimes epoch making in their intellectual lives.... She often sent girls out with a new vision of what their intellectual life might really become and a new courage to achieve it.” Rather than offering her students a detached uniformity of knowledge through instilling a set of rules, she strove to educate on an individual

level in order to inspire her students to new heights, which were revolutionary for young women to imagine.

Wylie introduced an experiential study of literature to the Vassar education. In the *Vassar Quarterly* article “What Can be Done About It,” she wrote,

Our students when they write must appeal to their own experience;--we almost dare to believe, on the strength of overwhelming evidence, that the written word to be effective must be sincere. But what of the reading of our students?—is their knowledge of literature to be limited by a horizon helplessly narrow? And so we ask ignorance to come to knowledge, the experience of youth to the experience of maturity, in the vain hope that somehow understanding may be imposed from without, that by contact with one or another piece of great literature, our students may form for themselves a standard which their taste may later develop. But the kingdom of art is to be entered by violence no more than the kingdom of heaven; and it is hardly strange that when we force the minds of the young to unseasonable activity, we do little more than check their initiative, confuse their thought, blur their power of vision.

Wylie fundamentally believed, then, that the old model of requiring a supposedly objective education in the rules of reading and writing was inappropriate and basically destructive to the true intellectual growth that Vassar could provide for its students. She reoriented the English department to focus on experience in all senses: from improving the individual student’s experience in the classroom and with the professor to encouraging writing that sprang from and reading that spoke to individual experience.

Gertrude Buck

Laura Wylie’s long-time friend and co-worker, Gertrude Buck, also strengthened the relationship between writing and experience in the English department. She taught at Vassar from 1897-1922, arriving just after Laura Wylie assumed the chair. Buck encouraged growth in the number of writing courses. Additionally, she and Professor Elizabeth Woodbridge Morris (Vassar Class of 1892), authored the primary textbooks for freshmen studying English and thus

had a powerful hand in shaping the curriculum. Buck taught courses in rhetoric and argumentation. She, too, focused heavily on writing and strongly encouraged writing from experience. In a 1901 article about contemporary writing entitled “Recent Tendencies,” Buck described the way to critique one’s own writing as asking such questions as, “Did I succeed in reproducing my experience neatly in my reader’s mind? Did he receive from me the sensation I had previously felt? Did he see each event as it had passed before my eyes?” She stressed not only writing from experience, but also writing in order to evoke a feeling of shared experience with the reader. She effectively constructed a process of teaching writing from experience; starting with observation and descriptive writing, she trained students to write in a way that best communicated their own experiences through expository writing.

Like Wylie, Buck believed in bringing a personal aspect to the study of English rather than focusing on the mechanical. In 1984, Gerald P. Muldering wrote in “Rhetorical Theory and Modern Composition teaching” for the *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, “The proponents of sentence diagramming had produced an entire generation of students who conceived of grammar in purely mechanical terms...[W]hat disturbed Buck about this approach was that it ignored language as a means of communication based in the mental processes of a speaker and a listener.” For Buck, the previous methods of teaching were simply too mechanical, and by pursuing engagement into real thought and feeling, she helped Wylie expand the teaching of English into a fundamentally personal and experiential discipline.

Gertrude Buck extended her experimentations with the experiential element of English by teaching drama in the English department. In 1916, She introduced the first course in dramatic writing, and created the dramatic workshop, a chance for students to produce the plays they wrote. The study of drama sprang from the elocution sector of the English department’s

curriculum. Professor of Elocution Winifred Smith later continued Buck's dramatic pursuits as she explored Shakespeare as an experienced text, extending the ability to encounter literature through discovering its embodied form. Smith initially proposed the creation of a drama department. English professor Hallie Flannigan fulfilled the suggestion in the 1930's by spearheading the revolutionary Experimental Theater of Vassar College. But Gertrude Buck and her view of English as an experiential art form began that important journey by stressing the correspondence between dramatic performance and English.

Wylie's Departmental Reforms

The reforms Wylie enacted as chair of the department of English corresponded to the theories she and Buck practiced in the classroom. Laura Wylie worked to align the practice of the whole department within the same basic theory of education, grounded in close interaction between students and professors and emphasizing personal experience. In order to foster unity within the department, Wylie held departmental meetings more frequently than any previous chair to discuss ideas and course structures. That unity of purpose entitled students to receive a more cohesive education in English. Through the years, Wylie also expanded the breadth and depth of various courses, increasing the students' freedom to select their own program in order to allow room for more distinct individual development and scholarship. Most significantly, she ensured that all courses focused more intensively on writing. Before her time, writing exercises consisted almost completely of the weekly "themes" and a few short essays students wrote each year. Wylie stated in the 1900 departmental report, "Students were not required to relate this writing to the courses they took, so that there was very little effort for synthesis of knowledge

and skills in writing.” She changed this unsatisfactory trend and noted in a later departmental report, “Imaginative writing, the criticism of literature, and linguistic study have been an integral whole here, and most of our teachers are able to teach in at least two fields. In the writing courses and literature courses, writing has often been the approach to the appreciation of literature.”

By the end of the 19th century, Wylie’s changes had already begun to alter the curriculum’s structure. Freshman year focused on exposition, which continued into the sophomore year. The sophomore year also included a semester in argumentation and a semester on English literature. Work in writing focused on exploring the importance of description; an 1898 document reads,

The work begins with a study of description, since an understanding of the presentation of sense experience is necessary to the interpretation of sense experience—that is, to exposition. This study is based on a brief investigation of the manner in which impressions are formed in the normal mind, on the principle that the production of the process by which the writer has received a given impression is the most effective means for producing the same impression in the mind of the reader.

All courses and the English program at large emphasized writing, with the rationale that “the prominence thus given to composition is offset by the fact that [this study] forms for the student a basis of criticism, and that a starting point for the study of literature is provided...[T]he higher elective courses of the last two years are thus entered upon with a substantial equipment in both knowledge and method.” As indicated by the curriculum, the most important introduction and foundation for departmental work, especially work in English literature, was the ability to relate to and describe experience through writing.

The Freshman Writing Course

In order to initiate the Vassar student to her new regimen of a writing-based English education, Wylie placed a great deal of importance on the freshman English course. Throughout her chairmanship of the department, she worked to establish a writing course that would best prepare freshmen for their continued college work regardless of discipline.

Buckham and Backus struggled with preparing freshmen for actual college level work. By Wylie's time, the division between preparatory and regular students had dissolved. Ready to move on from providing the basic training that freshman year used to require, Wylie advocated "making the freshman work primarily a stimulus on the artistic side, with the logical faculty exercised subordinately; instead of purely logical and more or less mechanical training, so much the mode in earlier years." Wylie did, however, continue to work with theories of how better to prepare students for their entry into the college; she developed a questionnaire that she sent to the foremost seminaries in the country to gauge the level of teaching performed at those schools and suggest improvements which could ease the transition between seminary and college-level work. Nonetheless, her focus on freshman writing courses shows a departmental shift from preparing the students in basic skill and terminology to introducing them to the English department's new orientation and providing an individualized basis for their future work. The most effective way to do so was through a small class led by one of the school's respected professors in the freshman year. In setting forth this new model for the freshman year in English, Wylie hoped that the education would cross over to provide a foundation for writing through work in other departments, so that all Vassar students would have a fundamental grounding in the ability to write well.

In order to provide for the preparation of a freshman class that still entered at varying levels of skill in writing and analysis, Wylie stressed the importance of creating an environment

where a professor could work closely with each individual. She wrote in a 1910 *Evening Post* Article, “English Course at Vassar: A Statement by the College Department,” that the course fulfills an

old-fashioned endeavor to teach and to teach individual members of the class. Such endeavor, conditioning as it does every detail of our freshman course, has gradually given it what seems its peculiar character, that of no mere embodiment of abstract theory, but rather of a vital and constant varying response to the actual needs of actual students.

Wylie long sought to keep the student-teacher ratio low enough to limit freshman writing class enrollments to 20 and under. In the 1914/15 academic year, for the first time, classes maintained this limit, and Wylie admired the growth she subsequently witnessed in the students and their deepened ability to sustain the skills learned in freshman English. Because of the diversity of the freshman class, freshmen could take a wide array of variations of this course with different professors. Rather than drawing the division between advanced and regular students, the system ensured that the courses offered were diverse enough, classes small enough and the instructors skilled enough to meet each student at her level of need.

Wylie and the Connections between Disciplines

Wylie was not exclusively concerned with the teaching and studying of English. Rather, she famously drew on and encouraged the interconnection of all fields of study. Katherine Warren later observed that “the realization toward which she was leading [her students was] that every field of work, no matter how apparently restricted, opens out and still out onto the field of scholarship, and beyond that into life itself. ...[T]he study of a power is essentially the study of poetry and of mankind.” By relating students’ personal experiences to literature, Wylie simultaneously drew connections to other fields of study, opening up this examination of the human experience to other disciplines. Wylie suggested a close relationship between disciplines

that eventually gave life to the development of multi- and inter- disciplinary courses and programs in the college.

“Town and Gown”

Laura Wylie was a revolutionary force not only on campus and within the department, but also in the larger Poughkeepsie environment. She famously strove to bring “town and gown” together and fought for women’s suffrage as the leader of the local women’s movement. Her involvement in social activism also played into her influence in the English department; she wanted to relate her students to their world artistically, teaching them to analyze experiences in conjunction with their social and political settings. In her 1918 report to the president, she asserts that the English department should remember that “though the college is an institution for a training idler and less practical than that of any technical or professional school, its work should be vitally related to the interests and needs of the students as members of society.” Training the student to study English as an art not isolated from but inherently connected to social expression remained consistently important to Wylie’s teaching. After her retirement, a colleague summarized her work at the college: “The most remarkable aspect of her career here seems to me to be her enlightened view of the teaching of English as essentially the development of the individual up to the point when his imaginative life finds social expression.”

Wylie’s Legacy

Wylie retired from teaching in 1923, yet her legacy still lives on. She left the school \$10,000 to provide for a continued effort towards establishing better town and gown relations. More important, as both a professor and department chair, she inspired several generations of

students and teachers alike to look at the discipline of English in a new and revolutionary way. Her educational heritage still inspires approaches to English at Vassar today.

Graduates of Wylie's Department

Emily Jordan Folger

President of the class of 1879, Emily Jordan focused on and excelled in English composition and criticism, among other subject, throughout her time at Vassar. In 1885 she married Henry Clay Folger, a merchant in the oil business. The Folgers jointly endowed the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C. after acquiring an extensive collection of Shakespearean and Elizabethan literary works and overseeing the design and construction of a building to house it. This contribution to the study of Shakespeare constituted the largest literary endeavor in the history of American Philanthropy to date. The Folger library contains a unique collection of Elizabethan texts penned by Shakespeare's contemporaries in addition to an expansive collection of Shakespeare's work; this contextual aspect of the collection suggests that Emily Jordan Folger's Vassar education might have inspired her to look beyond the text in order to relate it to its world.

After they started collecting Shakespearean texts, Emily returned to Vassar to pursue an masters degree in English where she wrote a thesis on "The True Text of Shakespeare" and completed her final exam on *The Tempest*. In addition to the philanthropic pursuits she and her husband followed together, Emily Jordan Folger continued to engage in independent intellectual work on Shakespeare. She published her own creative writing in the magazine, *The Outlook*, and gave talks in the Meridian Club, a literary society in New York City that examined aspects of Shakespeare. Vassar invited Emily to speak at the jubilee celebrations in 1915. Folger was

especially interested in the prevalence of Shakespeare to women's lives; she interviewed actresses and women writers about their interest in and interpretation of Shakespeare. In 1915, Vassar invited her to return to speak at the annual Jubilee celebration and she gave an address based on her research entitled "Some Women Interpreters of Shakespeare." In addition to this special occasion, Folger maintained a very precious relationship with her alma mater and returned frequently to attend Shakespearian productions. In 1935, she endowed a lecture series called the "Folger Fund," which brought speakers on Elizabethan topics to campus.

Jean Webster

Writer Jean Webster attended Vassar from 1897-1901. Throughout her college career, she focused heavily on writing and cared deeply about her English courses. She went on to write many works of fiction concerned with young women in college, often set in a college based on Vassar. Her books include *When Patty Went to College* (1903), *Wheat Princess* (1905), *Jerry Junior* (1907), *Four-Pools Mystery* (1908), *Much Ado About Peter* (1909), *Just Patty* (1911), *Daddy-Long Legs* (1912) and *Dear Enemy* (1915).

Webster's work in the English department influenced her writing. At the beginning of her sophomore year, she wrote in the *Vassar Sunday Courier*,

If any mortal should ever escape from the freshman class without knowing how to write readily and fluently in every style, it will be due entirely to her own utter and irrevocable stupidity and not to the fault of the English Department....She is put through a course of English gymnastics which tends to bring out every atom of native ability that she possesses, and she emerges at the end of the year astonished at her own literary prowess.

Webster's description simultaneously proves that the Raymond/Backus curriculum achieved its goal and indicates the early integration of Wylie's ideas to that curriculum at the turn of the 20th

century; she believed that in Vassar writing classes, and especially the freshman class, the English department cultivated and rigorously exercised her “native” ability to write.

Adelaide Crapsey

Adelaide Crapsey attended Vassar with Jean Webster from 1897-1901. The two began rooming together in their sophomore year and remained life-long friends. At Vassar, Crapsey was the class poet for three years. According to Webster, “Adelaide could write finished verse in her early college days.” Jean and Adelaide recognized each other as literary equals and often read and critiqued one another’s work. Both passionately involved in Philalethis, they wrote, staged, and acted in their hall plays. In their senior year, Crapsey and Webster edited *The Vassarion*.

Academically, Crapsey had a wide range of interests. During her Vassar career, she completed academic work relating to politics, history, and writing. She formed a special bond with Lucy Maynard Salmon, a founding force in the History department.

Crapsey went on to study the science of phonetics in metrics. She wrote the posthumously published *A Study in English Metrics* (1918) and simultaneously composed many poems influenced by her scholarly study of metrics. She invented a verse form called “cinquaine,” a 22-syllable, five-line unrhyming poems with varied stress. Her poetry also was published only posthumously.

Ruth Benedict

Ruth Fulton Benedict attended Vassar from 1905-1909 and went on to become one of the first women to exert a major influence on the study of anthropology. At Vassar, she primarily

studied English literature. The pioneering female professors who reformed their fields of education in the early 20th century at Vassar encouraged her intellectual growth and feminism. At college, she discovered the theories and philosophies that shaped the person she went on to become, most important, transcendentalist thought. She wrote poetry, prose, and analytical literary essays that were published in *The Miscellany News*, and she continued writing poetry for the rest of her life under the pseudonym Ann Singleton. Galvanized by professors like Laura Johnson Wylie, she had a strong sense of vocation to change the world through her writing. Her best-selling and highly influential books were Patterns of Culture (1934) and The Chrysanthemum and the Sword (1946).

Edna St. Vincent Millay

Poet Edna St. Vincent Millay attended Vassar from 1913-1917, arriving as Vassar a 21-year old published poet who was already known in literary circles. She was and still is renowned for her flippant demeanor: she left campus frequently without acquiring permission, skipped classes daily, and smoked openly in public—all of which were activities that the still protective, Victorian college strictly prohibited. Nonetheless, her work never failed to astonish her professors. She was wild, but her brilliance outshone even her most outrageous intransigence. Despite her willful irreverence, she, her professors, and college administrators collaborated to maintain her enrollment at Vassar. “Vincent” received a well-rounded education, and Vassar wanted to claim credit for providing such a promising poet with that education. In a tense meeting that brought Millay to tears, President Henry Noble MacCracken famously remarked, “I know all about poets at college, and I don’t want a banished Shelley on my doorstep!” to which Millay responded, “[O]n those terms, I think I can contrive to live in this hellhole.”

Her gifts as a writer and daring character not only won Millay the faculty's favor, but made her a celebrity within the student body as well. She wrote and starred in the Philaletheis hall plays, wrote the class poems and the class songs, and enlivened Vassar's social and sexual world.

Millay studied many subjects at Vassar; while she did a baseline study in English, she also invested herself in the study of foreign and ancient languages. She was especially close to Classics Professor Elizabeth Hazleton Haight, and their relationship lasted for years after Millay's graduation. Describing Millay's program, Haight wrote,

The college then set exacting conditions for the B.A. degree: required year courses in English, one Classical Language, one modern (French or German), History, Mathematics, Physics, or Chemistry, half a year of Philosophy, and students had to take 14 or 15 hours of class work for three years, 12 to 15 in the last year. Vincent fulfilled all these conditions and then built her course around her own interest. English studies were its foundation, and they included a wide range and great teachers: Old English and Chaucer with Christabel Fiske, Nineteenth Century Poetry, and Later Victorian Poetry, an advanced writing course with Katharine Taylor, English Drama with Henry Noble MacCracken, The Techniques of the Drama with Gertrude Buck, who started the Vassar Theater. Then she enriched her knowledge of literature by many courses in foreign languages: both Greek and Latin, French, German, Italian, Spanish.

Millay must have encountered Laura Johnson Wylie in her time at Vassar, especially if she studied 19th century poetry, along with the memorable professors listed by Haight. As a girl and throughout her career, her poetry was highly influenced by the English Romantic Poets—writers with whom the English department also had a deep connection. However, Millay came to Vassar to attain a well-rounded education meant to enhance and inform her writing, but not necessarily for training in the craft specifically, where she had already achieved distinction. It was the rest of her learning that needed development. For this reason, her work in the classics, foreign languages, and social sciences may have seemed more critical in her time at Vassar. Thus, the importance of the interdependence of the disciplines as equal parts in relationship to

writing— so prized at Vassar— seems to have informed and enriched Millay’s diverse academic program.

MacCracken and the 1920’s

MacCracken’s Curricular Reforms

During his legendary term as President of Vassar College (1915-1946), Henry Noble MacCracken established the foundation for the college’s current curriculum. Most notably he introduced the concentration, or major, to the Vassar curriculum in 1927. Before MacCracken’s presidency, the college enforced strict requirements and a rigid distribution between subjects upon each student’s program. The concentration was a sequence of study within a department including courses from other departments that applied to the given field. It set up the freshman year as a year of experimentation, pursuing breadth, where the student took courses in all the disciplines, before choosing a specific field of concentration. Once she found a subject in which she felt sufficiently interested, the student designed her major in close consultation with an adviser from the faculty to pursue depth in that discipline. The 1927 curricular framework established a course of study that demanded depth, breadth, and individuality.

With these innovations, the student had more freedom, yet more focus. There were still distribution requirements, much stricter than those Vassar students abide by today, but as Vassar Historian Elizabeth Daniels wrote in her book on MacCracken, *Bridges to the World: Henry Noble MacCracken at Vassar College*, “[MacCracken’s curriculum] would also seek to break down boundaries, compartments, and unnecessary walls which made false separations, and to change the patterns of the future lives of its students. MacCracken thought that the liberal arts should be studied in a more interdisciplinary context.” While the major inspired a greater focus

in one area, it similarly spoke to the alignment between various subjects, encouraging a student to include courses in her concentration outside a single discipline, and thus formed bonds between disciplines. MacCracken applied a more concrete form to the student's academic path, yet, by allowing her to individualize her education within that form, he enabled greater academic liberation.

From Wylie to MacCracken

MacCracken arrived in 1915 while Wylie still chaired the department of English, and he held an appointment in the department during his presidency. Her educational theories and his later college-wide curricular revolution complemented each other. First, his creation of an academic program based on the individual matched Wylie's desire to recognize each student as an individual. Second, his interdepartmental approach to academic learning clearly corresponded to Wylie's search for interconnection between disciplines. Finally, Wylie's last important reform before retirement was very much in the spirit of the changes later enacted by MacCracken; she made the course of study for the student of English more cohesive by creating advanced work that followed in a linear fashion from basic, introductory work.

In the development and fulfillment of her curricular plans, Wylie laid the ground for MacCracken's eventual introduction of the concentration. Academic departments, especially the English department, had talked of "sequential study" early in the decade. Establishing such a focused, individualized, and developed line of study was central to Wylie's plans for the department; in the late 19th century, she firmly stated that, in order to keep up with competing institutions like Wellesley and Smith, Vassar had to require its English students to finish their English education with some experience at an advanced level in courses focused on a more

specific period or genre. She wrote in the annual report of the department for the academic year of 1916/17,

We are this year centering our work on the better correlation of our courses and on an attempt to determine the special power, and the degree of that power, which each student should gain in each course. To this end we have partially re-arranged our schedule, in order to make more easily possible strong consecutive courses in several subjects.

She developed these ideas further when she wrote in 1918,

The principles that, in my judgment, should guide the future development of the curriculum are... that a high standard of achievement should be both in the quantity and quality of work done in certain lines, i.e., that we insist on the election of a definite number of advanced courses and on the attainment of high grades in at least one or two departments...[and] that in order to justify this demand of excellence, opportunity be given, by the reduction of our present requirements, for freer election than is now possible in the freshman and sophomore years...It would be difficult to recommend generally any particular combination of courses without regard to the student's particular line of interest...[F]urther direction would have to be worked out with individuals after full knowledge of their main line of interest, their special purposes and the work accomplished or projected in other departments...[B]y study of this, and if she so desires, by consultations with some member of the department, the student can decide both as to the end she wants to reach and which of the several courses leading to it she may most wisely follow.

Wylie stressed not only the development of advanced courses, but increased freedom in that development—both central tenets of MacCracken's overarching curricular revolution.

Even through reforms that followed Wylie's retirement, the development of advanced work in English based upon the needs and desires of each individual student corresponded to her earlier theories and furthered the evolution she set in motion. In the mid 20's, the department not only introduced more advanced courses on specialized subjects such as Shakespeare, Romanticism, and Verse Writing (among others), but also began to experiment with seminars that allowed the student more freedom to work independently with professors in a special field.

Unity of Writing and Reading

Wylie's influence also carried forth in the maintained connection between writing and reading. Throughout the 1920's and 30's, members of the English department met with members of English departments at other Seven Sisters colleges to discuss and debate principles of the English curriculum, sharing ideas and exploring where and why they diverged. Most of the other colleges divided creative writing from English literature courses, creating two departments. As Wylie noted after the conference in 1923, "Vassar differs from the other colleges in placing more emphasis on the essential unity of the two kinds of 'English,' critical reading and creative composition, and hence in not splitting into two departments the teaching of literature and composition." Five years later, in keeping with the theories espoused by Wylie about the interconnections of all disciplines and the importance of experience even within the context of analytical and creative writing, Amy Reed wrote, "[T]he unique feature of the English department at Vassar has been for many years that it regarded the teaching of literature as necessarily bound up with the teaching of self-expression by means of writing, and to abandon this idea utterly is a [fundamental] change." Through the years, this endeavor resurfaced repeatedly within the department and, even up until the present time, the department has remained firm in preserving the unity between the two elements of the study of English.

The Role of Female Professors in the 1920's

By the end of the 1920's, throughout the country a change had taken place for women in the academy that affected female professors at Vassar. The female faculty member's dual role as teacher and dorm mother faded away when female professors started to move off campus. As higher educational degrees became more accessible to women, their scholarship also grew in esteem, so that burdening them with disciplinary and parental duties seemed less appropriate.

The students themselves were also demanding a greater degree of independence, especially in the 1920's as the times expanded their awareness about romantic possibilities outside Vassar's walls.

Despite this apparent empowerment, female scholarship in the 1920's was still in tension with society and the college. In a 1920 report to President MacCracken, Laura Wylie bemoaned the far from ideal situation of the female professor and the damage it caused the English department. She wrote,

[Professors Christabel Forsyth Fiske and Rose Jeffries Peebles and Miss Warren].... have reached only secondary positions, with small immediate outlook for promotion. Besides their slight professional advancement - apparently inevitable in the case of women teachers- they are now pressed upon very heavily by limitations of poverty. They are unable to look forward to a year of refreshment through study or travel; they have no freedom for travel or study in vacations, they often are unable to attend meetings which would bring them into contact with other professional workers; and they are forced to give far more time and thought to the mere mechanics of living than is compatible with the best intellectual and social life. Everything should be done in the case of these women to advance their chances of promotion into a rank that will give them relative professional and financial freedom.

Wylie asked for all of them to receive professorship or at least associate professorship.

However, President MacCracken claimed that he couldn't give some teachers such drastic promotions unless he enacted such a change in every department. A few assistant professors were promoted to associate professor, yet the overall professional recognition for women that Laura Wylie fought for was not achieved, as the college and even the English department still struggled to come to terms with respecting women's position in the academic setting.

Yet female professors continued to staff the English department, which sometimes went years without a trace of a single male faculty member. In 1927, Amy Reed, English department chair, expressed her displeasure with this condition. She wrote,

We shall certainly wish to renew in the future both the experiment of engaging more men, and that of engaging authors whenever opportunity offers, but we have come to...conclusions on these matters. 1. Because of the higher market value of men's work in the outside world their salaries average about one thousand dollars a year higher than

those of women equally well equipped or better; 2. Because of the more dominating position of men in the outside world, it is difficult for them to feel as much obligation as do the women towards the college routine and drudgery of teaching.

Women still commanded less respect than men in the academy. Reed's dissatisfaction with the lack of and call for more male faculty reveals that women's education and women's scholarship, even though becoming more established and respected, had not yet found complete social acceptance at the end of the 1920's.

Heroines of the Early 20th Century English Department

In the tradition of Laura J. Wylie and Gertrude Buck, a generation of female professors upheld their curricular ideals and brought new elements to the teaching of English at Vassar through the first half of the 20th century.

Helen Drusilla Lockwood

If Laura Wylie shaped the English department at the turn of the century, Helen Lockwood carried her ideals forward and developed them to the middle of the 20th century. Descended directly from the academic heritage of Laura Johnson Wylie herself, Vassar alumna of 1912 Helen Lockwood took Wylie's and Buck's principles and expanded upon them through her time as a revered professor in the English department from 1927-1956. She was chair for only six years at the end of her career, but her influence remains a remembered legacy at Vassar today.

Wylie pioneered ideals of interdisciplinarity in academia and in the relationship between the academic world and its social settings. Helen Lockwood carried those ideas based on teaching "parts in relation to the whole" to fruition in the principles that she encouraged and

classes that she introduced in the department. In a 1967 article entitled “The Essence of Vassar’s Education,” she wrote, “[A]lways [English courses] have been rediscoverers of the tradition and the new world not as materials to be labeled and talked about but as experience at the depth that only the arts can reach.” She encouraged the convergence of and connection between writing and experience in the English department and the Vassar student that Wylie had imagined and hoped to educate. Lockwood wrote in a 1953 departmental report,

[O]ur studies can approach doing what Coleridge says the poet must do, ‘bring the whole soul of man into activity.’ Here the poet and the scholar become identical. For without learning the poet is often partial and may be tempted to escape. With learning and not poetical imagination the scholar may miss the needs of an age for life and go down protesting honestly against anti-intellectualism, having given his students only the stone not the bread of intellect.

She believed that that the interdependent relationship between language and experience belonged to the deepest levels of human experience.

While Wylie also had focused on bridging gaps and relating literature to life in the real world, Lockwood emphatically stressed the possibility for social change in this curricular ideology. As her former student Josephine Gleason wrote, “[H]er view of English as an art that begins in experience and gives form and vision to it was not unique in her department. But... her strong social interests gave a particular push to her efforts to bring her students to an understanding of the dynamics of a work of the imagination.” Lockwood was passionately interested in public discussion and debate, hoping to use rhetoric and writing to share ideas and catalyze social change. In keeping with these ideas, she introduced classes like “The Contemporary Press,” “Public Discussion,” and “Today’s Societies.”

Like Wylie and Buck, Lockwood encouraged writing from experience. She linked this ideal to the goal of closing the gap between town and gown in the surrounding community— a cause Wylie had fought for earlier. Lockwood brought those two goals together in her classes.

Vassar Historian Elizabeth Daniels remembers that on the first day in her freshman class, Lockwood asked all her students to take a walk in Poughkeepsie and describe what they saw. She wanted them to write about their own experience but also, through experiential writing, to involve themselves in the world beyond Vassar's gates.

In keeping with Wylie's desire to show each discipline and each class as part of a greater academic whole, Lockwood's courses were often interdisciplinary. She taught a seminar in American Culture in 1953, which later inspired the founding of the American Culture program at Vassar. Attending graduate school in intellectual history at Columbia aligned her academic perspective on English with historical expertise and oriented her teaching towards an interdisciplinary approach. Upon her death, Helen Lockwood bequeathed a six million dollar estate to the college. However, her legacy, like that of Laura Johnson Wylie, remained integral to the college not only due to its financial support but its advancement of innovative curricular ideals.

Rose Jeffries Peebles

Rose Peebles came to teach at Vassar in 1909, and remained until her death in 1952. She specialized in medieval literature and the literary romance. Her colleagues noted that along with Laura Wylie, she held a "deep conviction of the rightness of sustained, advanced, independent work for all students, the plodding as well as the brilliant." She supported the growth of advanced work, believed in the importance of individualized study, and was known to have a "sympathetic care for individual progress." Through her long career at Vassar, she inevitably contributed to the department's evolution and the endurance of Wylie's principles. Like Wylie

and Lockwood, she also left the college with a financial legacy, an endowment of \$10,500 upon her death.

Helen Sandison

Helen Sandison taught from 1913-1950 and served as department chair during part of that time. She specialized in Shakespeare and Renaissance literature and enjoyed the respect of an accomplished scholar and a brilliant teacher. Mary McCarthy remembered that Sandison asked students to think about King Lear in terms of Woodrow Wilson, contextualizing literature in the interdisciplinary mode of the modern Vassar.

Anna Kitchel

Anna Kitchel, professor of English from 1918-1943, was a similarly beloved and influential presence in the English department. Kitchel specialized in Romantic Poetry and 19th century literature, and colleagues noted that in her approach to the “Blake to Keats” course, “[s]he brought an unusual richness of historical perspective to her study of the Romantic Poets.”

Barbara Swain

Barbara Swain was another a long-term integral member of the department; after attending Vassar and graduating in 1920, she taught from 1926-1963 and served as chair from 1947-1950. She, too, taught the famous “Blake to Keats” course, but was uniquely interested in the incorporation of science into literature.

With other colleagues in the department, these professors with their long careers spanning the first half of the century adopted and developed the principles of pedagogy espoused by Wylie and Buck. They furthered a tradition of ideals in the English department that characterized its curriculum and remained strong into the 1950's.

The 1930's

The Great Depression

The Great Depression inevitably affected the Vassar community. As a result of financial restraints, many students attended on scholarships; however, academic life in the college seemed remarkably unaffected by the social and economic climate outside the college walls. Mary McCarthy (who attended Vassar from 1930-1934) later wrote of the Depression years that “what was happening outside in those years...was so heavy, sad, and ominous that it seemed better to stay, while we could, with dream experiments, and with Catullus- Tibullus, Propertius- and Ovid: the condemned man ate a hearty breakfast.” The English department does not seem to have suffered significantly from budget cuts. Chairs Amy Reed, Helen Sandison, Winifred Smith, and Rose Peebles did not request additional staff, and although a few courses were cut or consolidated, the English department shows surprisingly little strain from the economic crisis of the time.

The Senior Program

Supported by this group of strong female professors and the new developments instituted by MacCracken, curricular changes in the 1930's focused on enhancing the newly established programs. The English department developed the senior program. Once the concentration

seemed secure, with a sensible progression for varying areas of interest and enough advanced classes to provide a comprehensive individualized study through the concentration, the department needed to find the best way to culminate the Vassar English program for majors. The current program lacked an outlet for seniors to reflect upon what they learned and demonstrate their level of academic achievement. For the second half of the decade, the department experimented with various forms of senior examinations and papers. Faculty tested three types of examinations: oral examinations, timed written tests, and lengthy final papers. By the end of the decade, they settled on the longer paper after determining that it fitted the most harmoniously into a program designed around Wylie's values. Helen Lockwood wrote that the problem with the oral examinations was that "students thought in terms of separate courses. They used correlatives either shallowly or not at all." Other professors indicated that a timed written examination evoked a regurgitation of comprehensive information and a tendency to "stay safe" when pressed for time rather than an intellectual processing of material; it failed to ask the student to draw daring connections between aspects of her education in the discipline. Starting in the 1939/40 academic year, the senior English student spent her final year planning and writing a culminating paper in conjunction with a class labeled "English 500," a project later known as the senior thesis.

Interdepartmental Work

In the late 1930's, the department began thinking more intensively about interdepartmental majors. Interdepartmental learning had remained an integral aspect of the English department's philosophies since Wylie's time. Helen Lockwood used the established

stability of the English department to encourage the interdepartmental major with more force.

She wrote,

Interdepartmental majors are important to the field of English from the point of view of research and of actual functioning in present day institutions. In research in American Literature, the concern of scholars now is to rewrite the history of American Literature and to consider it in a context. As preparation for graduate study, therefore, a major should be built up that crosses departmental lines and that requires a thesis and examination more completely, explicitly and frequently using varied disciplines and materials. In present day institutions, if one is to be a good editor of a newspaper, a magazine, or for the radio, one must have been trained not so much in separate subjects as in interrelationships....[T]he Department of English has something to contribute here which is different from the disciplines of the social and natural sciences. But it needs their materials.

Lockwood had long supported the interdisciplinary concept of education in conjunction with the social role of English, and the 1930's saw a greater acceptance of the concept than ever before.

Under Lockwood's encouragement, the increase in interdepartmental work and comparative modes of study continued through the 1940's and beyond.

Writers from the 1930's

In the 1930's, the Vassar English Department nurtured a group of acclaimed writers, most notable among them, Mary McCarthy and Elizabeth Bishop.

Mary McCarthy

Mary McCarthy attended Vassar from 1929-1933. While McCarthy struggled socially at Vassar, largely due to personal financial stress, she appreciated many elements of her academic experience. Although her inherently contrary nature occasionally inspired her to dismiss people and courses she later went on to praise, she seemed to think highly of the English department and the model it followed. In her memoir *How I Grew* (1987), she wrote, "A good deal of education

consists of un-learning—the breaking of bad habits as with a tennis serve. This was emphatically true of a Vassar education....Vassar remade a girl. Vassar was transformational.” One transformational element for her was the personal aspect professors incorporated into the relationship between a class and the authors it studied. The English department’s emphasis on the personal experience of literature markedly affected Mary McCarthy and had a hand in shaping her as the author she later became. Much of McCarthy’s work deals with personal experience, like her travel writing about Italy, *The Stones of Florence* (1956) and *Venice Observed* (1956), her autobiography, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957), her novel, *The Group* (1962) (based on her group of friends in her graduating Vassar class), and her memoir, *How I Grew* (1987).

Although her praise for her professors is often inconsistent, McCarthy was especially attached to both Anna Kitchel, who taught her freshman writing course, and Helen Sandison, then chair of the department. McCarthy remembered that her classes with Anna Kitchel were always “long conversations between her and me” and that there was ““a filial dimension to the apprenticeship.”” She saw Kitchel’s classes as far superior to others she took at Vassar, claiming with possible exaggeration that her class with Kitchel was “the last course that I ever got anything out of.” However, she said of Sandison in a 1982 interview with Historian Elizabeth Daniels:

I adored miss Sandison....[S]he was a better teacher than Anna Kitchel, at least she was a deeper Kitchel. Kitchel was very good in terms of spontaneity and the girls somehow—but Sandison was better with the material. ...It was absolutely an illumination, her Shakespeare course. Oh, I remember discussing King Lear in terms of Woodrow Wilson, and I think it was the class that brought that out, and we kicked that idea around in a rather Vassar way, and I was much taken by that sort of thing too.

Her contrary and somewhat dismissive attitude permeates her descriptions, yet McCarthy clearly valued both professors and the pedagogies they employed. Kitchel and Sandison were her mentors, and her relationship with each ran much deeper than that established in the classroom alone.

Rose Peebles also had an important influence on McCarthy, although they did not have as deep a personal relationship as McCarthy established with Kitchel and Sandison. McCarthy wrote in *How I Grew*,

The course senior year that had the greatest visible influence in my future life was Miss Peebles' Contemporary Prose Fiction, in which we studied the 'river-novel' and something she called 'multiplicity.' As I have related elsewhere, we read Dos Passos's "the 42nd Parallel" (perhaps merely as an example of multiplicity), and, one thing leading to another, I was prompted to go to the library basement to find Dos Passos's pamphlet on Sacco and Vanzetti which turned me around politically from one day to the next (or so it seemed). There was no more talk from me about royalism; instead, I was pursuing the Tom Mooney case through the back numbers of the "The New Republic"...I had been 'radicalized.'

Before this, McCarthy had remained stubbornly disinterested in political and social matters outside Vassar's gate. But in "Contemporary Prose Fiction," Rose Peebles managed to inspire the somewhat headstrong McCarthy to care about events in the outside world.

Contrary to the experience of many Vassar students from her time, Mary McCarthy personally despised Helen Lockwood and disdained her courses. Of Lockwood's frequently praised "Contemporary Press" class, she wrote critically,

But it was not just the fine art of reading behind the news that the girls learned, sitting around a long table seminar style; they were getting indoctrinated with a potent counter-drug. The class, we heard (I never took it), was the scene, almost like a camp meeting, of many a compulsory transformation as hitherto dutiful Republican daughters turned into socialists and went forth to spread the gospel. It was said that Miss Lockwood insisted that a girl completely break with her mother as the price of winning her favor.

McCarthy believed that belonging to Lockwood's crowd required a defection from one's core principles and beliefs, and she wanted nothing to do with it. When she compared Lockwood to Kitchel and Sandison, she wrote,

Miss Kitchel and Miss Sandison shook up their girls more gently. ... The idea that English majors were drawn up in hostile camps, one pro-Kitchel (or Sandison), and the other Pro-Lockwood, was a myth propagated by Lockwood's disciples. One of the delights of Kitchel and Sandison was that they would never seek to make a disciple of a young person or encourage the formation of any kind of alignment. They were trying to teach us to stand on our own.

Although she mocks the idea of a Lockwood camp set against a Kitchel/Sandison camp, McCarthy herself perpetuated it by praising her favored two in such stark contrast to her contempt for Lockwood. She held a highly personal grudge against Lockwood and remembered that in one class she did take with Lockwood, Lockwood drove her to tears. McCarthy seems to have been an intense, tempestuous student, and a harsh, political personality like Lockwood, who may have been unapologetic in criticisms of her students, would have enraged the young McCarthy. Regardless of antagonism toward Helen Lockwood, however, Kitchel and Sandison taught with similar principles in mind and instilled in Mary McCarthy many of the department's core ideals that Lockwood also espoused. As McCarthy later wrote, "[W]ith all the enmity I felt and possibly still feel for Miss Lockwood, looking back on her, I can now see that she embodied in her aggressive way faculty traits that could be found even in the mildest of teachers."

Elizabeth Bishop

Elizabeth Bishop was a contemporary and friend of Mary McCarthy's. A year behind McCarthy, she attended Vassar from 1930-1934. Bishop's professors remembered her as a particularly shy and withdrawn student who also stood firm in her convictions and protected

them fiercely. Nonetheless, she established important formative relationships at the college. She studied 16th and 17th century literature in depth, and prided herself on a close knowledge of the classics. As her biographer, Brett C. Millier, writes, “Elizabeth never strayed far from the authors, ideas, and convictions she developed [at Vassar]...More important, she learned at Vassar that she could have a literary career despite the limitations of gender.”

Bishop formed relationships with Professors Barbara Swain and Rose Peebles. Peebles remembered that she was particularly “a writer reading.” In the style of the greater department she belonged to, Bishop approached reading and analysis through the lens of her own experience as a writer. Although she respected her professors, she never developed the strong bonds with them that McCarthy seems to have had. Nonetheless, Swain recognized early on that this student was “doomed to be a poet.” Like McCarthy, Bishop disliked Helen Lockwood, and according to a fellow classmate, Bishop’s presence in Lockwood’s Contemporary Press class was “a disaster.” Surprisingly, Bishop apparently paralyzed the aggressive Lockwood. One of Bishop’s classmates, Eleanor Clark Warren, recalled,

Her presence ruined the class for everyone. Bishop was quite authoritative, without saying a word. Lockwood was used to stirring up a great deal of enthusiasm. She could get people passionately interested. Bishop represented the death knell to any such passionate interest in the press, in current events, in any of that. She was quite authoritative in class without saying a word.

While Warren clearly harbored negative personal feelings for Bishop, her account nevertheless indicates that Bishop’s indifference to or indeed dismissal of Lockwood’s subjects may have shaken the professor’s usually assured mastery over the class.

Con Spirito

In McCarthy's senior year and Bishop's junior year at Vassar, the two, along with a few other literary friends, formed a rebellious literary magazine. At some point, *The Vassar Review* had rejected both of them. Frustrated with the closed-mindedness of the established literary magazine, they founded *Con Spirito* (a play on the word "conspire"), a literary magazine of their own where all writing was submitted and published anonymously. Before its publication, co-editor Frani Blough wrote, "[I]t is really going to be good, a little shock at the Review! Nothing tame, arty, wishy-washy, ordinary or any of the other adjectives applicable to so much college writing." The editors of *Con Spirito* met in a speakeasy off campus, where they daringly drank red wine out of white coffee mugs. They nailed up posters for the illicit publication in the dark of night. Most of the submissions came from the editorial board themselves, but because submissions were anonymous, no one knew their sources. When *Con Spirito* was printed, an uproar arose on campus, especially in the administration and the department. The magazine published nothing overtly offensive, but its statement of rebellion troubled some faculty members. McCarthy speculated that Sandison, well aware of who had produced it, vouched for her students in response to this upset. *Con Spirito* was relatively short lived—published for the first time in McCarthy's senior year, it didn't have much time to develop before its founders all graduated. However, it accomplished its purpose: It tested the boundaries of the freedom allowed by the college, causing desired ripples in the community. All of its editors went on to publish in *The Vassar Review*, having conquered its disagreeable standards with the fact of *Con Spirito's* publication.

The War Years

The Three Year Plan

In response to World War II, Vassar offered students an accelerated three year curriculum to allow them to move through their college years more expeditiously and emerge prepared to volunteer their efforts for the war. This innovation corresponded to the greater change in the woman's place in American society, catalyzed by the war. In a 1943 letter to parents and guardians of undergraduate students, President MacCracken wrote,

In response to the urgent demands for college trained women, Vassar College will begin next September a program of studies leading to the degree of Bachelor of Arts in three years....The great draft of manpower into armed services and war industry and the entrance of very large numbers of trained women into the same branches have left insufficiently staffed many of our professions and other essential occupations requiring higher education....[I]n any case, we are determined— trustees faculty and present student body— that a Vassar degree, whether earned in three years or in four, shall continue to represent the same thorough education in the fine arts, languages and literatures, the social sciences, and the natural sciences as it has in the past, the same sound scholarship and the same social purpose.

Women equipped with adequate higher education needed to enter the workforce as quickly as possible. For the first time, college-educated women were not only accepted, but actively sought and needed by the larger society. In this way, the three-year plan was Vassar's response and contribution to this welcomed change.

The plan lasted until the end of the war, from 1943-1945; for three years Vassar offered students the opportunity to select the three year curriculum. The academic year was lengthened and daily work increased for students who elected the three year plan. For the department, the accelerated plan involved adding a "c" term of courses, consisting of year-long courses condensed into a semester. After the war, in the late forties, the department phased out the "c" term.

Throughout the college, the war inspired a sense of duty to nationwide needs, bringing the social function of English encouraged by Wylie, Buck, and Lockwood to the forefront of the department's awareness. It inspired a reevaluation of the purpose for studying English. Faculty

and students engaged in frequent discussions about whether the information taught in the department and the degree supplied by the English major equipped students for civil service jobs. In this way, the war inspired the department to relate its established principles to some greater function; the department focused on “(1) Training in articulateness, clarity of writing, understanding of propaganda, ability to state general and national aims, learning to think, (2) preservation of cultural values, (3) increase of internal resources and maintenance of national morale.” Students justified their study of English by defining its relationship to current events and nationwide needs. One student remarked that studying English made for “an understanding of ‘more life than one’s own’”; another claimed it worked towards “establishing a basis of communication in times of war and discord, when communication and understanding between people are so necessary to personal equilibrium.” In a final affirmation of the social relevance of an English major, Chairman Barbara Swain’s report at the end of the 1946/47 academic year reads, “[W]e believe that the heart of the English teaching problem is to establish a relationship between language and actuality.” Within the English department, theories of education were geared towards training readers and writers who could relate their skills to their social setting and, in so doing, serve their country.

Post War

With the new popularity of women’s education and women in the work force, the college took in more students after the war. In addition to more female students, Vassar also admitted male Veterans of WWII starting in the c term of 1946. The program lasted until 1953. About 170 male Veterans took courses at Vassar within those years.

With an expanded student body and a disproportionately small faculty, the English department allowed a larger volume of students in the second year literature classes, while freshman English and senior seminars remained small. Later, this change threatened the dynamics of the department.

The 1950's and 1960's

The Mid-Century Vassar Writer

In the early fifties, the department remembered and reinvigorated its original core values. At the end of the 1949/50 academic year, Barbara Swain set forth possibly the most comprehensive definition of the Vassar writer as yet described. In her 1950 departmental report to President Sarah Blanding she wrote, “[T]he kind of writer that the English Department would like to train must be a woman whose whole personality is involved in her writing. She must think clearly about emotions, and feel strongly about ideas.” For Swain and her immediate successor, Lockwood, the personal development of the Vassar student was as integral to her training in writing as the writing itself.

Later in her report, Swain defends the choice to keep creative writing and literary studies within a single department of English—a subject that the department was very frequently asked to address, in light of its vision of the interconnection between all areas of writing:

This idea of the writer explains why the English department has never allowed Composition and Literature to be separated by academic artificialities, has never allowed a ‘Creative Writing Major’ or a special ‘Major in literature’. We have insisted instead that skill in communication between writer and reader, that power both as author and critic, are the goals of English study. For this reason we have never offered courses in ‘professional writing.’ Which means in current terms writing for sale, to the specifications of definite markets. The cultivation of devices, the exploitation of limitations, works against that development of the whole person which should be the privilege of students in college.

Like her predecessors, Swain ardently believed that the development of the writer and the reader in college were inextricably linked to the development of a student's human growth.

The Freshman Writing Course

These theories are evident in Helen Lockwood's descriptions of the freshman writing seminar through its mid-century evolution. In a 1955 report, she highlighted for the first time the emotional and psychological significance of the freshman writing course in the English department and its relationship to the student's personal development as a freshman at Vassar:

The first year at a residential college is especially important, for the student is in a new environment with all her daily life reorganized. It is bound to be a time of specially heightened consciousness and bolder questioning. The student discovers freshly how her own times are related to the great tradition, how she is related to her home community and her family, how the different aspects of college are related to her and to the arts, and how she needs other people and can contribute to them. She approaches reading, writing and speaking with a view to attaining deeper mastery of them and an enlarged philosophy of language and form in relationship to other disciplines and to life. We find freshmen apt to be full of a spirit of adventure, full of curiosity—especially about human relations and values. They are often very well prepared for a new stage of development.... We offer two courses based on different approaches: they both include writing, reading, and speaking.

Because of the valued connection between writing and experience, in Lockwood's mind, the freshman writing course occupied a central role in the development of the Vassar student and the launching of her Vassar career. The student was to graduate with an expanded view of the world, her relationship to it, and the means for expressing that in writing. The fundamental transformation experienced in the freshman year of college initiated this vital process of personal growth.

These ideals are also prevalent in the debates over whether or not to introduce advanced placement courses to the English department. Through the department's 20th century history consideration of the option of instituting a program for advanced placement repeatedly arose.

Various experiments with placing certain students in higher level courses occurred, and professors attended numerous conferences on the topic. However, professors like Helen Lockwood stood firmly in opposition to such a program. AP classes in high schools encouraged the uniformity in writing from which Vassar professors struggled to free freshmen. Professor W.K. Rose supported this sentiment in his papers from the fifties, where he wrote,

We recognize that our freshmen are all in a new environment and thus are, in important ways, NEW PEOPLE. And they are GROWING people. No matter what they've done in school, there can be no question of resting on laurels or even consolidating positions. Certainly not in the English department at any rate. For use of language and study of lit. are, as we know, a part of experience. And experience is, thank Heaven, an on-going affair. This is why in freshman courses in English at Vassar we try to meet students WHERE THEY ARE, to help them to make use of their knowledge of selves and world in order to become better writers and better readers. Because of this principle of meeting students where they are, the dept. doesn't encourage advanced placement....

In his argument against advanced placement, Rose returns to the awareness of the student's psychological experience at college and its relationship to learning within the discipline of English. The established freshman writing class strove to address the student as an individual in the way Wylie had initially imagined, rendering advanced placement unnecessary and unharmonious with the Vassar education in English.

Threats to the Curriculum

Helen Lockwood and her colleagues maintained the pedagogical vision of Wylie and Buck, reinvigorating the department with important fundamental principles of education. However, the continuation of these ideals in a changing set of cultural circumstances also required significant re-imagination. In her 1953 department report, Lockwood described such possible re-imagination:

We have harmonies of our own to work out; we cannot live wholly on those already made. We need to work out new ones in depth as the writers of the great tradition did in

their times. We shall include today's technology, today's hunger for spiritual life, today's struggle of individuals to be free in terms of possible, even needed institutions in spite of the pressures to conformity, today's sight of vast new ranges of human beings who must be understood in their own right. We shall need more than direct experience since this is bound to be partial. We shall need to know in perspective. This will involve the fullest freedom of movement from direct experience to others' experience of today and others' of the past. Our own expression will include clear, full statement of freshly experienced relationships and the expression will be shared with many people. But this fresh expression will be strong and deep because of its living inclusion of centuries.

Lockwood anticipated the need for the English Department and the whole college to adapt its older educational vision to an expanding world. Yet this assertion came long before the world and the college were ready to accept such an expansive view. The department's inability to enact this kind of reformation as a result of a paralysis inspired by a restricting climate contributed to the struggles that would follow in the next two decades.

The late 1950's saw a period of intense change for the college at large and for the English department in particular due to practical economic problems brought about by low enrollments. The few faculty members surviving from earlier decades struggled to keep alive old principles that seemed obsolete, while financial considerations challenged those principles. A Coordinating Committee on Educational Policy convened to examine the college's educational goals and formulate a new curriculum that would revitalize them. A report from the committee to President Blanding in 1959 points out,

There are several sources of doubt whether the small privately endowed liberal arts college for women will be able to survive the impact of the next decade or two: the increasingly smaller proportion of college-bound women who choose such colleges; the expansion of public facilities in local communities; the early age of marriage that both prevents the enrollment of women and accounts for a high rate of withdrawal in mid-career; the high cost of these colleges; the difficulty of maintaining well-qualified faculties as the supply dwindles and salaries go up.

While the accessibility and acceptability of women's education grew as a result of World War II, in the post-war era marriage reclaimed precedence over education as the central object of an

American woman's life. The 1950's called the place and value of women's education into question. The Coordinating Committee on Educational Policy (CCEP) report elaborated further problems "that beset a woman's college":

[P]roblems of motivation; the slighter degree of career orientation, and the tendency of women students, if they expect to seek employment at all, to think in terms of temporary jobs requiring no specialized training; the one-sidedness resulting from resistance to some areas of knowledge that are essential to the modern educated person, e.g. science, especially the physical sciences and mathematics.

Concerned about her apparent disregard for the value of education and the importance of her own academic pursuits as well as career opportunities beyond filling the time until marriage, the faculty wanted to encourage the female student to explore her potential fully. Vassar's future looked grim; the college was in fiscal straits, and the culture's values demanded that it compromise its educational vision.

Changes in the curriculum of 1959 in response to this crisis sought to engage students by encouraging academic freedom and independent programs, but the focus on fiscal health dominated curricular changes. A reduction of course offerings and an increase in distribution requirements characterized the reforms. The size of the faculty diminished, and the length of the term shrank by four weeks, while students enrolled in five rather than four courses during their freshman year. As class numbers decreased, class size increased. A greater emphasis on the interdisciplinary approach was accompanied by new requirements in math, science and logic. Innovations allowed students less freedom and guided them along a more specific path. Freshmen were encouraged to choose majors in their first year; majors themselves were streamlined and a sequence of courses outside the major department with some connection to the major was recommended. The CCEP report from 1959 reads,

All courses offerings should be re-examined with a view to making a sound and adequate offering in each subject with a minimum number of courses, in order to prevent

fragmentation of the subject with consequent sloppiness and lack of balance in the student's acquaintance with her central subject, and in order, also, to achieve optimum economy of teaching.

The effort to preserve "economy of teaching" inevitably betrayed Vassar's pride in small class size, the depth of a student's education, and her freedom for experimentation and exploration.

The freshman writing classes were modified, and they suffered as a result.

The courses expanded to admit 25 students, inhibiting the individually oriented conception that previously characterized them. Moreover, "Freshman writing" classes became a cross-departmental option, so second year students could enter English courses without having learned the principles of the department in their introductory freshman course.

The desire to condense and broaden rather than expand and deepen challenged the objectives consistently encouraged by the English department in the past. Department Chair Richard A.E. Brooks wrote in his 1959 report, "The probable economic situation ahead...demands a heavier student-teacher ratio than we had recently, but the preparation of our students will demand at least the present ratio if we are to provide the sort of training which we cherish for our students." In this period, the faculty of the college and the administration battled between cutting costs and preserving the college's educational integrity.

Due to these curricular modifications and a general turn-over in faculty during the late 1940's and 1950's, the department faced a time of great uncertainty about its future in relation to its anchoring in past traditions. Brooks notes in the 1959 report, "As a department we are in a state of significant transition, we know; but it is not altogether clear what the department will be like ten years hence." A combination of curricular changes and the retirement of many of the professors whose teaching embodied the goals that the Vassar English Department pursued in the earlier half of the 20th century inspired this doubt. From Wylie to Lockwood, strong teachers had

continued to impress upon their students the philosophies espoused by the whole English department, and, in doing so, they preserved a lineage of educational vision. By 1960, the era of Laura Wylie, Gertrude Buck, Rose Peebles, Helen Sandison, Anna Kitchel, and Barbara Swain had ended. With the addition of eight visiting professors lacking the personal history with and attachment to the department, it lost cohesion. Brooks noted that the department rarely ever met to discuss and unify the educational theory of its discipline. He remarked that the department's pedagogy had been "a deeply cherished tradition and practice as long as I have been a member of the department – and it was a venerable thing when I joined the faculty in 1933." The "tradition" may have seemed ineffectual, but there was apparently no effective way to inform the age with inherited wisdom, or to inform that wisdom with modern ideas. In 1959, Richard Brooks mourned the end of a valued lineage: "There has been no attempt to enforce a departmental view or gospel on our younger colleagues though some of our elders hold earnestly and deeply to a philosophy of teaching English at Vassar which largely derives from Gertrude Buck and Laura Wiley in the first two decades of our century and from the galaxy of able women who staffed and led the department from 1920 to 1945." The new environment threatened the department's rooting in its central philosophies.

1960's and 1970's

Coeducation

The curricular reforms of the late 1950's and early 1960's did not achieve what the faculty curriculum committee hoped: rather than drawing in more students and engaging them on a higher intellectual level, the increase in guidelines elicited disinterest and criticism from prospective and current students. Throughout the decade, concerns about the college's decline in

popularity and the deficiency of qualified applicants escalated. In 1967, a faculty committee convened to examine the causes of this decline, and it

[came] to the reluctant conclusion that some of the curricular innovations of 1960, when the new curriculum was voted in, have not worked toward the proper goals. Last year the Vassar faculty voted to request the Curriculum Committee to give the students more leeway as soon as possible, and the committee made some progress along these lines by implementing Pass-Fail courses this year as well as new opportunities in independent work. But improvements, we feel, need to be on a much larger scale. According to Vassar's basic educational goals, we must make sure our curriculum is supple enough both to encourage student individuality and to keep students in flux with their world.

Due to the changes made in the early sixties, faculty and students alike felt restricted yet still wanted the comprehensive and individualized education those reforms sought to provide. The 1967 report also complains that

[a] second large problem is that of faculty recruitment. There is concern that the college will not be able in the future to draw the best faculty, who, it is felt, will go more readily to institutions with higher pay scales and where they will have a greater number of prestigious colleagues; often such institutions are universities, with more funds and larger departments. . . . [T]hen there are today's students, and the problem that many of the best of them, as measured in a variety of ways, are applying to colleges other than Vassar.

Suffering financially, Vassar seemed in danger of losing its prestige as its academic program failed to meet the demands of the times.

The college subsequently reversed the changes instituted in the early sixties and, determined to pursue the same goals with a different approach, loosened curricular requirements while encouraging more in depth and individualized study. As a result, more students had the opportunity to engage in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary work. This was a step in the right direction. The 1967 report encouraged taking these ideas even farther:

The sound barrier, the language barrier, the color barrier, the sex barrier are all cases in point. If there was ever an age which disbelieved in fences, it is ours. The college-age students coming up want to hasten the process, they feel that barriers between disciplines should be broken down and new, inter- and even mutli-disciplinary courses should be built as bridges. They disbelieve in the barriers of requirements too, since they feel these

only tend to reinforce disciplines and, while perhaps being of some use in introducing them to new subjects, are of no help at all in introducing them to new ways of thinking.

Mirroring the social and political climate of the time, students at the college desired a freedom to break institutional barriers and explore new ground. The important reforms made this possible, expanding the vision in the way Lockwood had imagined over a decade earlier.

The changes that ensued focused as much on social as on curricular reform. At this time, Vassar students spent an increasing amount of time off campus, struggling with a desire to expand their world and break free from the confines of a protected environment that prevented them from fulfilling their social desires. The absence of men in the Vassar student's life created the trend of focusing on social life outside the college, dating back to the sexual revolution of the 20's. Women at Vassar wanted to explore romantic possibilities unavailable in Poughkeepsie. Once allowed to leave campus frequently in the 1960's, they seemed to lose interest in their on-campus pursuits. After its research and reflection, the faculty committee concluded that co-education would resolve a number of Vassar's most pressing issues. The decision to go co-ed in 1969 mirrored the era's desire to "break boundaries" and embrace radical innovation.

Beyond the social changes involved in coeducation, the curriculum didn't actually change as drastically as it might have with the introduction of men to Vassar classes. Distribution requirements loosened, and the curriculum returned to prescribing a program of four courses per semester, encouraging a deeper study of each subject. However, despite the English department's awareness of problems resulting from the changes enacted in the early sixties, some condensing of courses continued at the end of the decade. The 1959/60 curriculum changes limited the number and expanded the capacity of 200-level courses. Larger classes placed a greater strain on professors and meant that students received less individual attention. The 1967

report on coeducation avows that “the freshman seminars and the like attempt to draw students early into a learning process which can generate the greatest possible number of lines of development for the next years.” Faculty used these courses to train freshmen in Vassar’s traditional way, preparing them for continued writing during their college career. Some professors, however, believed that new conditions did not challenge students to continue meeting the same standards in their writing throughout college.

Curricular Changes of the 1960’s and 1970’s

Major curricular reform followed coeducation in the early 1970’s. The careful examination of the curriculum from the late 1960’s informed these changes. Despite the presence of male students on campus, the department continued to complain that students didn’t put sufficient effort into their work in English. In addition to the social issues leading to coeducation of Vassar, current events affected academic performance. During the Vietnam War, young people across the country experienced a revolution in their social and political awareness. Academic disengagement motivated the English department to kindle passion where students were disenchanted and perhaps even cynical about the state of their world. In 1969, Vassar graduate of 1929 and chair of the English department, Caroline Mercer, wrote that some students “are lonely or enraged, or obsessed by the misery of the world – one need not repeat the things we have seen in these months of 1968-69. But all students need still to know what honesty involves by way of experienced life, disciplined thought, and an understanding of language. Here is where we have our opportunity.” Mercer saw English as a means to reawaken students and allow them to channel their emotions meaningfully in a difficult political and social context through artistic expression in academic work. In this way, forging a strong relationship between

students' experience of the world and their work in English reclaimed its priority as a significant objective. In 1969, Mercer observed, "If we continue to make the student the center of freshman English, as I trust we will, we will have to find imaginative and fruitful new ways of relating the student's experience to the written word—to his own and to the writings that we ask him to study."

Although the era of Wylie's influence came to a decisive close in the 1950's, Caroline Mercer, another venerator of the Romantic Poets and teacher of the popular "Blake to Keats" course, energetically restored the ideals of Wylie and Lockwood in the latter half of the 20th century, redefining them to fit a new context. In the late 1960's and early 1970's, the department saw writing as a means for social expression, so that the earlier concept of English as an art with the potential for expressing personal experience was reawakened and expanded to fit the times. Mercer synthesized and modernized the values of Wylie, Buck, and Lockwood by simultaneously emphasizing the artistic nature of English and its capacity for social reform. In 1969, she wrote,

It would be a disaster for the English Department to attempt the proper work of sociologists, political scientists, and anthropologists. At the same time the department recognizes that the study of literature involves a study of its relation to society and all of its problems. This relationship between literature and society does not have to be one which forgets that literature is an art.

Thus, Wylie's and Lockwood's teachings gained force and relevance again as the concept of studying English as a forum for experiential social expression adapted to the cultural climate of the times.

Inspired by this educational vision, the department reexamined its courses and, in conjunction with input from a committee of departmental majors, enacted new changes at the beginning of the 1970's. The department continued to loosen requirements and encourage inter-

and multi-disciplinary approaches. The requirements for concentration were both decreased and made less specific, allowing for a greater freedom and level of self-selection in the individual student's course of study. Instead of a set of prescribed courses for the major, students simply had to take three courses, before 1830 and one after 1830. Responding to student requests, the department offered more courses in modern literature and encouraged new varieties of independent work. Options for the freshman writing seminar expanded.

Social Awareness and Diversity

Other changes followed, and new levels of social awareness concerning race and gender inspired the introduction of courses in the department through the second half of the 20th century. In the 1960's, a new diversity in background and experience was incorporated into the student body, calling for an appropriate change in the curriculum to address awareness of diversity at Vassar and in the world at large. Such developments included the addition of "Black Writers" at the end of the sixties, the introduction of courses dealing with Women's literature and issues of gender and sexuality as well as African American literature and ethnic literature in the seventies, and a great expansion of global and multicultural literature in the late eighties.

Creative Writing

Creative writing experienced growth and transformation in the 1980's. At the time, the teaching of writing gained esteem and independence from the study of literature throughout academia, and MFA programs in writing emerged across the country. In the preceding years, professors taught creative writing within other courses that focused on literary context. There

were no professors who specialized in composition alone. In the 1980's, however, Vassar's department of English hired professors expressly so that they could teach composition.

The workshop method, developed in writing programs throughout the country, came to the forefront of the department's creative writing courses. This method focuses primarily on student writing rather than literary analysis or the relationship between the two. Students critique each other's work, and the class focuses on work-shopping student writing. If the syllabus includes literary texts, student writing receives priority. The workshop method displaces the prevalent link established through the department's history between literary analysis and composition. Professors William Gifford (1955-1996) and Paul Russell (1978-present), among others, featured prominently in the development of the workshop method at Vassar.

Although students cannot pursue an independent creative writing major, English majors can take up to half their courses (six) in composition. Some students thus follow this informal creative writing track.

Recent Changes

In recent years, increased expansion and diversity have been matched by attempts to unify the growing department.

In the mid 1990's, the second semester continuation of the freshman writing seminar was cut, and English 170, "Texts and Contexts" (now called "Approaches to Literary Studies") was conceived as a supplement to the semester long freshman writing seminar. The course seeks to impart skills in close reading and basic terminologies, skills in research in primary and secondary sources, a knowledge of criticism and literary theory, and an awareness of disciplinary

concerns. In some ways, it is the modern rendition of Wylie's freshman writing course, as it explores the relationship between literature and analysis within an evolving discipline. Course coordinator Peter Antelyes wrote in his report at the end of its first year, "170 is essentially a course in rhetoric, in the conventions and conventionality of literary expression, reception, and analysis." Freshman writing seminars have transformed, and a number of departments now offer these writing intensive courses. The goal of the course is now to teach writing skills that a student can adapt to apply to any discipline, rather than to introduce the student to writing in the English department.

In the last decade, the department has continued to undergo expansion in diversification of the curriculum and the faculty. First, the department began to offer correlate sequences in English. There were and still are specific tracks that students follow, including Literary Theory and Cultural Studies, Poetry and Poetics, British Literary History, American Literary History, Race and Ethnicity, and Literary Forms. Now students may also follow a Creative Writing correlate track. The department has also hired a number of faculty members with diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise and added courses in related areas of literature and popular culture. The introduction of these new elements, however, caused some students to see the curriculum as disjointed. A 2008 document reports that "students were bewildered by the number of courses and the unclear relations among them." In light of this, "What we needed was a way to re-envision the curriculum as a whole, along the fault-lines exposed by the changes in the discipline, and to see our community from different points of view."

For the past five years the department has devised strategies to feature new ways of looking at the field of English, and to help unify the vision of the department. The department also added a new distribution requirement for majors, a course covering materials in

Race/Ethnicity/Gender/Sexuality. These changes centralized the diversity that had previously remained on the periphery, aiming to achieve more cohesion in this expanded discipline.

The last few years have also seen efforts to coordinate courses in the English and drama departments, pioneered many years ago by Gertrude Buck. The collaboration has flourished: English Professors Donald Foster and Zoltan Markus as well as Drama Professor Denise Walen oversaw the cross-listing of more courses between the two departments. Professors in the department of English have used performance techniques in courses on medieval drama and Shakespeare, and discovered that the encouragement of this inter-disciplinary view enriches the understanding of approaches to texts in an exhilarating way for both teachers and students.

Conclusions

The history of the English department is still in the making. From Laura Wylie onward, the department's faculty have maintained and developed a lineage of innovative curricular and academic ideals. Her core principles have advanced with the college, molded the curriculum of the English department over the years, and will continue to affect its evolution. Along with the transformations that necessarily accompany the passing of time and the evolving cultural frame of reference, the department has continued to reflect the essence of the educational vision articulated by its early pioneering professors. They created a lasting framework by opening the field of English into a general approach to scholarship that worked to connect all levels of the human experience, ultimately striving to shape experience of the world through artistry with language. Professors and students alike continue to re-imagine this educational vision and adapt it to contemporary circumstance, thus maintaining the integrity and value of a Vassar education in the liberal arts.