Pursuing Truth
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Chapter 4

Educating Catholic Women

The Liberal and Practical Arts at the College of Notre Dame

As higher education for women expanded rapidly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and then again from the postwar era to the early twenty-first century, the question of its purpose was constantly raised, and frequently answered, by colleges’ curricular decisions. What did women need to know by the time they graduated from college? How were they to be formed for their future lives? The College of Notre Dame, like other women’s colleges, Catholic and otherwise, navigated between its aspirations for mainstream educational approbation (measured by accreditation, awards, and students admitted to graduate school) and pressures from students, parents, and church and civic leaders for a practical curriculum preparing students for specific careers as homemakers, educators, social workers, and more.

While men’s colleges faced similar questions about the relationship of liberal arts and vocational training, the fact of their institutional existence seldom came under attack. Not so with women’s colleges, commonly and correctly associated with radical ongoing shifts in the social, political, and economic place of its female students and graduates. James Cardinal Gibbons, who approved Notre Dame of Maryland’s foundation, held liberal views on social issues, especially the rights of labor. In the matter of women’s rights, however, he took a reactionary position. “The women of this and other countries confuse ‘equal rights’ with ‘similar rights,’” he pronounced.
“The noblest work given to woman is to take care of her children.”¹ He instructed Catholic women not to join the suffrage movement; their place was in the home. Baltimore clergy dependably backed him up. In 1911, Rev. Lucian Johnston blamed the “unchristian, unmoral element” in women’s movements for the increasing unwillingness of women to view domesticity and motherhood as their chief sphere of influence.²

One way to square these views with the reality of higher education for women was to insist that it was primarily preparation for mothering a family. Gender-specific messages to female collegians from bishops and clergy continued for decades. A 1933 baccalaureate sermon at the College of Notre Dame reflects a prevailing perspective on the potential of educated women and the purpose of women’s colleges. After informing the graduates that “we know full well that, both as a group and as individuals, you will not startle the world or the country or the city,” President Henri Wiesel, SJ, of Loyola College suggested that they “learn the humble arts of cooking and sewing and mending . . . [and] assume the responsibilities of child-bearing and child-rearing.”³

The 1940s saw little change. Hunter Ross Guthrie, SJ, a professor of philosophy at Georgetown University and the College of Notre Dame’s 1940 commencement speaker, spoke at length on “what precise good . . . women can do in the world today.” He concluded that it was their unique role to restore to world culture a sense of reverence, a greater appreciation of the family unit, and a true assessment of suffering, crucial elements that the feminist movement had severely weakened. Guthrie’s speech so impressed Baltimore’s archbishop, Michael Curley, that he called for its publication and national distribution.⁴ At the 1944 freshman cap-and-gown ceremony, thirty-year-old Walter Burghardt, SJ, who was to become a noted theologian and preacher, emphasized that “man can be forgiven for being selfish, but not woman. . . . God willed thus when he made woman to be a help to man.” The purpose of the higher education of Christian women, he said, was to prepare them for “the gift of giving and the life of giving.”⁵

These harangues, however, could not compete with the messages students were receiving on a daily basis from the faculty and administrators at Catholic women’s colleges. In classes, assemblies, official communications, and informal campus interactions where they did not attract the critiques of churchmen, sister-faculty and their lay counterparts encouraged young women to prepare to assume leadership roles in the professions, social service, and political life on equal terms with men; this was their responsibility as educated women. A supplement to the College of Notre Dame’s 1933 yearbook not only reprinted Henri Wiesel’s unenlightened address but also
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featured a spirited letter to “My Dear Young Friends” from the order’s thirty-six-year-old leader, Mother General Mary Almeda Schricker. Herself a graduate of the University of Munich, Schricker encouraged Notre Dame students “to travel along the narrow road with the few chosen ones who have written upon their banner, ‘Self-discipline, Fidelity to Duty, Morality, Religion.’” She said nothing about the duties of motherhood or woman’s place in the home. Later college leaders and faculty seized every opportunity to reaffirm that message. An excerpt from the 1968 Christmas letter from the college dean to the student body memorably captures its essence. “Dear Notre Dame Students,” wrote Dean Bridget Marie Engelmeyer, “I thought I would give you wishes from the liturgy for Christmas Eve. It tells us something about action, freedom, and the future. . . . ‘Loose the bonds from your neck, O captive daughter.’ Untie your false freedoms—those that free you only to choose your chains that somehow look like a garland.”

Over more than a century, the curriculum at the College of Notre Dame changed multiple times to meet the competing demands of its various stakeholders, often either in tune with or deliberately modeled against developments both at elite Protestant and secular women’s colleges and at its sister Catholic institutions. Working-class values underlay an enduring view among ordinary American Catholics that the purpose of a women’s college was to prepare students to support themselves between graduation and marriage. In seeking colleges for their daughters, parents tended to favor those offering career-related programs such as education, nursing, and home economics. A majority of Catholic women’s institutions readily accommodated this demand. As a result, a college like Notre Dame of Maryland, intent on following the strictly liberal arts curriculum of the Seven Sister colleges, was inevitably smaller than institutions with career-oriented curricula. Over time, however, the college often modified its curriculum to center the liberal arts and provide the kind of professional education needed by three groups of students: in the first half of the twentieth century, young nuns slated to teach in parochial schools as well as upper-class lay students, and, from the 1970s to the present, working- and middle-class Baltimoreans. The costs and benefits of the college’s ongoing commitment to the liberal arts lie at the center of its story.

A Liberal Arts Education for Women

The commitment to a serious academic, artistic, and social education for women dated to the college’s foundation. The first dean, Sister Meletia Foley, summarily rejected the European-style, seminary-based curriculum of US
Catholic men’s institutions in favor of that offered in leading mainstream women’s colleges. The institution, she said, was to be “on an equal plane of efficiency with the best Catholic Colleges for men, and inferior to none of the existing Colleges for women.” There was, however, considerable variety in the requirements for degrees awarded by Seven Sister colleges in the 1890s. “Vassar gives its degree without Greek; Smith offers three degrees—in arts, in science, and in letters; Bryn Mawr adopts the group system; and Wellesley offers two courses [degrees],” recorded one journalist in 1892. Mount Holyoke offered three degrees: bachelor of arts, bachelor of science, and bachelor of literature. The bachelor of literature degree focused more on modern languages and literature than the BA and less on science and mathematics than the BS. The college introduced it to protect “the integrity of the traditional classical course.” There was no consensus about the value of the BS degree; Mount Holyoke abandoned it after four years, Barnard after twelve, and Wellesley after fifteen, although Radcliffe offered it until 1946.

In 1895, the College of Notre Dame, following the Mount Holyoke model, offered BA, BS, and BLitt degrees. For the BA degree, students completed the “regular” or classical course of four years of Latin, mathematics, science, and English, and a course in civics and economics. For the BS degree, they fulfilled a four-year sequence in science and mathematics. Those opting for the “literary” course, culminating in the BLitt degree, were not required to take mathematics, and the science obligation (a second-year course in natural science) was minimal. The curriculum planned for the newly founded Trinity College in 1900 adopted the same degree programs. Within three years, however, Notre Dame dropped the “scientific” course and the BS degree. After 1902, the science curriculum was folded into the general BA degree.

General education requirements included English, chemistry, hygiene, modern language, Latin, religion, and philosophy. Like mainstream women’s colleges at the turn of the century, Notre Dame required Latin for admission, but was less demanding in modern language preparation. Mount Holyoke College applicants were expected to have studied Latin as well as two other languages, whereas Notre Dame required two foreign languages, “one Latin, the other German, French, or Spanish.” Until the 1960s, the college expected students admitted with a deficiency in Latin to select that language to fulfill their general education foreign-language requirement. A typical Notre Dame student in the class of 1899 earned a total of thirty-six semester hours’ credit over the two semesters of her junior year: English (ten hours); Latin (six hours); French (six hours); mathematics (six hours); modern history (four hours); astronomy (two hours); and geology (two hours). In her senior year, in addition to English, Latin, and mathematics, she took
philosophy (four hours) and political science (four hours). In both her junior and senior years, she completed required courses in religion and physical education and electives in music. Students fulfilled philosophy requirements in weekly classes of two hours, with freshmen studying logic; sophomores, psychology; juniors, cosmic philosophy; and seniors, ethics.

Like other turn-of-the-century small women's colleges, Notre Dame's four-year course of study allowed few electives. Freshmen and sophomores could elect one course annually in French, German, or history; juniors could choose among courses in civil government and political economy; and seniors were able to substitute French or German for Latin. Some southern women's institutions in this era were even more confining. At Wesleyan Female College in Macon, Georgia, according to one historian, “course requirements were so rigid as to compel students to take the same subjects together throughout their entire college lives.” To the north, students in the Seven Sister colleges had somewhat more discretion over their courses of study. At Mount Holyoke, notes another historian, “required work [in 1899] amounted to about half of the whole and occupied most of the first two years. About twenty hours were credited to ‘free electives’ amounting to five or six courses, mostly in the senior year.” With the exception of Bryn Mawr, which by 1902 did not have a Christian doctrine requirement, these institutions also expected students to take a course in Bible history, literature, or interpretation.

Notre Dame's first general curriculum emphasized the applied sciences, especially chemistry. By 1902, the college had added a new basement laboratory, “as the students [had] increased in the chemistry department.” This focus was attributable almost entirely to the efforts of Rev. John J. Griffin, who, from his days as a graduate student in chemistry at Johns Hopkins in the 1890s until his death in 1921, was a part-time faculty member at Notre Dame, first at the Collegiate Institute and then at the college. After earning his PhD in 1895, he joined the full-time faculty at Catholic University, but his loyalty to Notre Dame did not diminish. “I am going to do all in my power to build up the Science Department,” he told his colleague Rev. Edmund T. Shanahan, “because that will make for accuracy and prove a fine moralizing discipline.” Inspired by Griffin's enthusiasm for the new women's college, Shanahan also joined its faculty as part-time professor of philosophy, a position he held until 1917.

Like other liberal arts colleges, Notre Dame slowly made the transition from a general curriculum for all four years to a hybrid model incorporating liberal arts “general education” and the newer university model emphasizing close study of a single discipline. “Before 1910 or 1920,“
Bridget Engelmeyer recalled, “there were three programs, corresponding to majors: English, Science, Modern Language. All had requirements in English, chemistry, religion, philosophy, hygiene, and modern language. The English program required Latin; the science program required mathematics, physics, astronomy, geology in addition to chemistry which was the basic study; the language program required both French and German. There were electives varying from 8 to 12 hours and these were chosen from offerings in any of the majors.” Programs in English, modern languages, and science served as proxies for student majors until about 1915, when, according to Margaret Mary O’Connell, “major and minor fields of study were designated for upper-classmen, while freshmen continued to follow prescribed courses.”

The science curriculum became a notable strength over the first half of the twentieth century. When College Hall opened in 1910, it incorporated a chemistry laboratory with Father Griffin in charge. “Chemistry,” recalled one sister, “was the only science we had then in the college and everybody had to take it.” Other science offerings and faculty were still sparse in the 1930s. A chemistry major from that decade reported that she had spent the majority of her time “in the chemistry lab, and worked under Sister Denise.” Sister Alma McNicholas, who joined the Biology Department faculty in 1937 as its only full-time member, faced a “skeletal situation, both in physical plant, in materials, in faculty.” She and a part-time instructor shared “one room where we had all classes.” In 1938, 40 percent of the senior class majored in mathematics, physical sciences, or biological sciences, a trend that continued into the 1940s, when approximately one-third of each graduating class majored in a science field. At Vassar College, on average, 17 percent of seniors in the years 1931–34 majored in a science, a proportion that rose to 26 percent for the years 1943–45.

At Notre Dame the dominance of science among the majors chosen by students was a striking feature in the 1940s and 1950s. The average percentage of bachelor’s degrees awarded in the natural sciences by US colleges and universities in the years 1946–50 was nearly 11 percent. By contrast, from 1949 to 1958, about one-third of each senior class at the College of Notre Dame majored in biology, chemistry, or mathematics. In this feature, Notre Dame resembled elite mainstream women’s colleges more than Catholic women’s institutions, where, in 1955, on average, only 17 percent of students opted to major in mathematics, chemistry, biology, or physics. Science students worked with faculty on their research projects, and spent considerable time in laboratories. A biology major described her program in the early 1950s: “I had Sister Alma [McNicholas] every semester of every year that
I was a student here. . . . As science majors with two or three labs a week always, we were really in class from 8:30 to 4:30.”

A notable feature distinguishing Catholic women’s institutions was the place and expression of religion in collegiate life. Founding orders saw the provision of a liberal arts education under church auspices as a way to advance women not only intellectually but also socially and spiritually. Religion was integral to institutional identities. Colleges may have varied in their curricular offerings, but all emphasized Catholic moral teachings as a way to support their primary intellectual purpose. According to its 1912–13 catalog, the College of Notre Dame, by offering the student a fine liberal arts education, developed in her “the highest ideals by which to measure her own life; the broadest view by which to value kindly all life; and the deepest sympathy by which to view her life and all life with reverence; hence to give the young woman not only ideals by power—mental, physical, and social—and so to lead her to find power spiritual.”

Clergy from Catholic University in Washington and from nearby Loyola College taught courses in religion and philosophy until midcentury, when Catholic theological schools began to admit women. During Notre Dame’s first half century, eighteen of the twenty-two priests listed as faculty taught only religion or philosophy. Their turnover was very high, with nearly three-quarters departing after only a year or two. Women first taught philosophy in 1943, religion a decade later. In 1910, religion courses included Christian doctrine, ecclesiastical history, and sacred history. Traditional Bible studies and hagiology (now more commonly known as hagiography) courses offered by sister-faculty since the founding of the college were not considered “real” religion courses. Dean Meletia Foley’s hagiology course, for example, gave more attention to the cultural influences of religion than to church doctrine. As a 1917 alumna reminisced, “When I told her I was not sure I wanted to study Hagiology (her particular subject) as I was not a Catholic, she said, ‘Are you going to be . . . [visiting] galleries?’ I learned it was convenient to know the Saints and recognize them in the great paintings here and abroad.”

For decades, religion courses did not carry credits toward the bachelor’s degree. By the 1930s, while “required subjects for the degree” included four years of religion courses in Christian doctrine and church history, these courses were over and above the 120-point credit requirement set by Maryland accrediting agencies for a bachelor’s degree. However, Notre Dame did not offer majors in religion and philosophy. This was not unusual among mainstream colleges. Harvard, for example, did not offer an undergraduate concentration in the study of religion until 1974. Catholic women’s colleges began to move in this direction in the 1940s. Saint Mary’s College (Indiana)
introduced a graduate-level program in theology in 1943, and undergraduates were soon majoring and minoring in the field. President Madeleva Wolff, CSC, considered religion to be the college’s “strongest and pivotal department.” In the 1940s, sister-faculty at the College of Notre Dame introduced a few innovative courses in “applied religion,” focusing on such topics as the life of Christ, the liturgy, “life problems of the average Catholic,” and Christian principles for non-Catholic students. Nonetheless, until the 1960s religion and philosophy courses, like those at other Catholic colleges, concentrated firmly on the Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas. “We never really studied the other philosophers,” recalled the 1937 alumna (and later faculty member) Virginia Geiger, SSND, “except to find out really what was the matter with them.”

“Practical Work” and Vocational Training

As the liberal arts curriculum developed, there were constant questions about whether and how to add what College of Notre Dame catalogs of the 1910s called “practical work” courses that were “purely elective and [did] not count toward the A.B. degree,” including religion, art, music, business, and domestic science. These disparate subjects, while banished from the regular curriculum, were nonetheless regarded as necessary to a college education for several reasons. Religion, for example, while required for all students, was not recognized by Maryland state accreditors as a subject worthy of college credit. Hence, it could not be part of the official curriculum leading to the degree.

Physical Education

From their inception, eastern women’s colleges emphasized physical education. In the 1860s, wrote Mary F. Eastman, Matthew Vassar “provided a gymnasium and provided for out of door sports. He instituted a professorship of physiology and hygiene, and made its incumbent ‘resident physician’ and supervisor of sanitary arrangements.” The subject was among Rev. John Franklin Goucher’s top priorities when he became president of the Woman’s College of Baltimore in 1890. He established a faculty position in physiology and bacteriology and introduced a four-year physical education requirement. The college’s innovative curriculum, as well as its state-of-the-art gymnasium and swimming pool, was attracting national attention.

Stirred by Goucher’s progress, Meletia Foley took steps to improve Notre Dame’s limited facilities and curriculum, and by 1896 the Baltimore American
was praising its “well-appointed” gymnasium, where a qualified teacher gave
daily instruction in physical culture.47 “Three good tennis courts” were in
place in 1906, and plans were underway for improved baseball and croquet
playing fields. Most women’s colleges had always offered gymnastics and
calisthenics classes, and by the mid-1890s team sports, especially basket-
ball, baseball, and field hockey, were becoming extremely popular. Critics
argued that these “men’s sports” encouraged competitiveness and aggres-
sion, features prejudicial to the nation’s future mothers. The 1901 Radcliffe
commencement speaker, Professor Charles Eliot Norton, warned his audi-
ence against field hockey and similar competitive sports: “But there is one
form of vulgarity to which you young women are in these days especially
susceptible and exposed. . . . You are tempted to rival your brothers in sports
fit for men alone.”48 Notre Dame students heard the same message. When
a Baltimore journalist detailed his repugnance at the sight of the students
playing baseball, and condemned the college for allowing it, Rev. Lucian
Johnston countered that there was no resemblance between the way women
and men played baseball, and reassured the reporter that there was little dan-
ger that “the Sisters of Notre Dame are become inoculated with dangerous
‘modernism.’”49

The College of Notre Dame’s emphasis on outdoor physical education
activities suggests a somewhat limited indoor program. Early students played
tennis, basketball, and croquet, and in season rowed or skated on the campus
lake. But winter offerings amounted to little more than marching around
the campus. By 1910, a temporary gymnasium had appeared, and students
enjoyed bowling alleys with “two runs [and] . . . the standard outfits of ten
pins and duck pins” in the basement of the new College Hall.50 Initially the
absence of indoor facilities was not a major drawback since college women
generally preferred outdoor sports to indoor gymnastics. “All the girls’ col-
leges have splendid gymnasiums, . . . [but] they are not popular,” wrote a
Cosmopolitan reporter.51

Dean Foley and physical education instructor Lucille Johnston agreed that
the complete separation of college and academy students was crucial. How-
ever, as lack of funds made this goal unrealistic, they encouraged students
to form a college Athletic Association, “entirely separate from that of the
Academy,” and tried to appease them by improving outdoor sports facili-
ties.52 Few eastern colleges yet had golf courses of any size. Vassar had con-
structed a nine-hole course in 1896, but for three decades used the land for
other purposes. Wellesley and Yale had nine-hole courses by 1917.53 Follow-
ing a campus chestnut tree blight in 1916, Foley hired a Baltimore Country
Club professional to design a four-hole golf course. By the following March,
to loud cheers from the Athletic Association, the course was being laid out on land bordered by Charles Street and Homeland Avenue. But when Foley died two months later, college officials dashed the students’ hopes by calling a permanent halt to the ambitious golf course project.

Notre Dame’s outdoor basketball teams competed in the 1920s and 1930s with local institutions, among them the Lutheran-affiliated Maryland College for Women, the Methodist-affiliated Western Maryland College, the College of William & Mary, and Goucher College. According to an alumna of the era, for these intercollegiate competitions “the whole college went to the games in buses.” Outdoor campus facilities at this time consisted of “six tennis courts, a hockey field and volley ball court, archery targets, jumping pit, and track.” In 1925, the Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools of the Middle States and Maryland (MSA) recommended that the college construct a proper gymnasium.

With the debt incurred to construct College Hall in 1910 finally paid off in 1926, the trustees readily approved the college’s next capital project, a gymnasium and auditorium building. Following traditional practice, they borrowed $450,000 and engaged Henry A. Knott as contractor. A first-class gymnasium, named in honor of Alix LeClerc, a founder of the Congregation of Notre Dame, opened on February 16, 1927. Students celebrated by “testing their strength by climbing about on the apparatus and swinging from bar to bar.” It was the largest physical education facility in Maryland, boasting a large swimming pool, basketball and dodgeball courts, and an indoor baseball field. Its auditorium seated over one thousand, with excellent acoustics for dramatics, a balcony for moving pictures, music rooms, a dance studio, and bowling alleys.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the physical education requirement was three hours weekly for freshmen and sophomores, and two hours weekly for juniors and seniors; all students had to pass an annual swimming test. Given that 85 percent of higher-education institutions in the mid-1940s demanded only two years of physical education, these were relatively serious requirements. By 1960, the college offered a two-credit elective course for students aiming to work as athletics instructors or coaches in public schools.

Career Training

Other “practical work” subjects, beyond religion and physical education, were more fraught. Turn-of-the-century mainstream women’s colleges offered many courses in art and music but resisted awarding academic credit for them. Because men’s colleges did not emphasize the arts, administrators of
female colleges worried that if courses in so-called ornamental studies were offered for academic credit, critics would view their institutions as glorified finishing schools. Founders of early Catholic women’s colleges agreed. Yet these fields were areas of strength, and highly popular with both students and parents. In 1912–13, the College of Notre Dame’s Art Department claimed to “offer to all students, whether possessed of natural artistic talent or not, a broad introduction into the field of fine arts.” Music and art faculty alike encouraged students to pursue electives in these fields and to consider careers in them. 60 By 1915, elective courses in art and music were carrying credit toward the bachelor’s degree. The college introduced an art major in 1937.

Domestic science was another area that carried significant cultural freight, as it raised the still-troublesome question of the purpose of women’s education. By the early twentieth century, men’s colleges had begun to add “utilitarian subjects” to their curricula, and public coeducational institutions were
developing a range of gender-specific vocational programs. Educational leaders and the popular press alike pressed the nation’s women’s colleges to follow suit. Every female student should complete a course in “the science of house- and husband-keeping,” Cosmopolitan argued in 1901. “While mathematics will be a very good thing for giving balance to her mind and poise to her conceptions generally, she can’t feed them to the baby; and she can’t talk Greek to the cook.” G. Stanley Hall, a psychologist and the president of Clark University, reiterated that message in 1909, advising parents that since their daughters were likely to marry, they should attend schools with “well-developed departments in domestic science, music and art.”

A Scripps College Special Committee on Vocational Training, notes historian Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, “argued that the first two years of required courses should address women’s distinctive attributes while the final two years should center on prevocational training. Public health, child training, social research, business, and art” were more suitable fields of study for women, most of whom would become child-rearers, than a strictly liberal arts curriculum. Vassar’s president, Henry Noble McCracken, upon adding a eugenics division to the school’s curriculum in the 1920s, declared that “women must be trained for their careers of home-making.” As a result, he continued, “Under the new regime a student can major in eugenics just as she might in English or History. . . . We are interested in teaching women to make the family and the home a worthwhile place to stay.”

Although Vassar’s eugenics program was short lived, vocationally oriented curricula grew in popularity in the 1930s, and calls from prominent male educators for women’s colleges to introduce home economics programs escalated in the 1940s as postwar pressure mounted for women to leave the workforce. According to a 1947 study of graduates of accredited colleges by Ernest Havemann and Patricia Salter West, 31 percent of female college graduates had never married. This contrasted with a 13 percent rate for all adult American women. The rate for Catholic women was much higher, at 48 percent. “When our statistics are controlled for all possible extraneous factors, the findings are still the same,” the authors observed. “Age for age, family for family, college for college, and course for course, the Catholic girls are still overwhelmingly the most likely to remain spinsters . . . whether they go to Catholic colleges or non-sectarian schools. Our statistics give no clue as to the reason.” Since a majority of Catholic women college graduates attended coeducational institutions, the explanation does not lie with the heavily female faculties of the Catholic women’s colleges. Nonetheless, these colleges in the 1940s and 1950s experienced growing pressure from church authorities to adopt gender-differentiated curricula. In a major
1945 address to members of Catholic Women’s Associations, Pope Pius XII extolled “schools of domestic economy, whose object is to make the child and girl of today the woman and mother of tomorrow.”

Most Catholic women’s colleges immediately responded to demands from church and public officials for career-related programs in education, nursing, and home economics. From its establishment in 1906, according to Mary B. Syron, the College of New Rochelle had a “fairly well developed” Department of Domestic Economy that offered “a general course, elementary cooking, fancy and invalid cooking, general sewing and laundry work.” By 1918 it also offered a BS degree (in secretarial studies) and a BM degree (in music). In the 1910s, Trinity College students could follow a sequence of noncredit courses in domestic science. Saint Mary’s College in Indiana organized its domestic arts courses into a three-year program at this time, and conferred its first degrees in the field in 1917. With the passage of the Smith-Levering Act (1914), funding agricultural extension courses, and the Smith-Hughes Act (1917), promoting home economics teacher-training programs at land-grant colleges, home economics and a variety of other career-oriented programs appeared in most Catholic women’s institutions. More than 40 percent of the graduates of the College of Saint Scholastica in Duluth, Minnesota, from its foundation in 1926 until 1941, earned BS degrees. At this time, the college was offering programs in medical technology, library science, home economics, nursing, journalism, commercial education, secretarial training, medical records, speech, and education. Such practical curricula promised to prepare students for reliable employment before marriage.

In the 1920s, in contrast, Notre Dame continued to award only the BA degree; students could concentrate in biology, chemistry, English, French, German, or history, and by 1935, mathematics and Latin. Core requirements for all students included English, history, Latin, a modern language, philosophy, and a science, and for Catholic students, religion. Students seeking a full course in studio work each year had to spend an additional year at the college to earn their bachelor’s degrees. A 1910 statement explains the sisters’ perspective: “It is the endeavor of Notre Dame of Maryland to impart a training which affects the life of woman in all her aspects, sending her forth into the world with the ability to see, feel and act for her own life and for others, in the fullness of distinctively feminine power that is not an imitation of masculine force. This is accomplished by a suitable curriculum, of which letters, history, mathematics, science and philosophy are the fundamentals.” Notably missing from this suitable feminine curriculum was a domestic arts program. Because the College of Notre Dame proscribed vocational
subjects, Catholic families viewed it as a “bluestocking” sort of institution. They preferred colleges with broader curricular options. As a result, in 1936, while New Rochelle College, then the largest of the Catholic women’s colleges, graduated 142, Notre Dame graduated only 22.\textsuperscript{75}

Notre Dame offered fewer fields of concentration in the 1920s than secular women’s institutions, but its curriculum, like theirs, focused on the liberal arts. Music and art remained noncredit subjects. As national demand for music and art teachers in public elementary and high schools was increasing, however, administrators and faculty of women’s colleges began cautiously to revise their policies. In 1919 Vassar allowed “advanced practical work” in speech, music, and art to count for 8 of the 120 credit hours required for the degree, “a proportion assuredly small enough to preclude the charge of our becoming a school of music, art, or dramatics.”\textsuperscript{76} Smith College administrators had also begun to discuss “pre-vocational majors” to accommodate students aiming to pursue careers in medicine and public health. By 1930, the college was offering majors in landscape architecture and dramatic arts.\textsuperscript{77} Both colleges awarded the same number of credits for studio hours in art as for laboratory hours in the sciences.\textsuperscript{78}

Sister Frances Smith, who took office as president of Notre Dame in 1935, followed these mainstream initiatives. Catholic Church leaders viewed social work as an appropriate profession for women, and “a country-wide movement of Catholicity in this direction” was already well underway in 1916 when Notre Dame offered its first sociology course, with fieldwork.\textsuperscript{79} Smith moved quickly to expand a program in social work, promising skeptics that it would “encourage Catholic social workers to restore charity to the place in Christian economy that our Blessed Saviour destined for it.”\textsuperscript{80}

In the 1930s, Notre Dame had long since expunged from its curriculum the few electives in business and domestic science it had offered in its initial years, and Smith’s effort to restore the BS degree, defunct since 1903, to prepare science majors for employment in industry and science, did not survive the Depression decade.\textsuperscript{81} In fact, by this time, Notre Dame’s only “professional” offering dating from its 1895 foundation was a minor in the field of education. Now, as demand for public school teachers, especially in home economics, music, and art, rose during the 1930s, the field of education became the key “practical work” component in the college’s liberal arts curriculum.

The development of Notre Dame’s education program paralleled that of elite eastern women’s colleges. Mount Holyoke College had introduced a Pedagogy Department in 1899 to meet the rising demand for public high school teachers.\textsuperscript{82} Such programs were popular among students, but the
rising concentration of alumnae in schoolteaching almost immediately met with sharp press criticism. The journalist Frances Abbott, for example, remarked that “in the whole roll of Vassar alumnae over seventy-five percent are engaged in matrimony or teaching—two time-honored professions which certainly could be followed by women who had never received the degree of A.B.” Over three-quarters of Radcliffe’s 1900 graduating class opted for teaching positions, and Abbott estimated that at this time, “probably two-thirds of every class at Vassar, immediately upon graduation, experiment more or less with pupils.” A US Bureau of Education survey of five of the Seven Sister colleges confirmed that between 31 and 74 percent of their 1912 graduates became teachers.

Mary Van Kleeck’s 1918 study of the marital and occupational status of 16,700 college women reported that 70 percent had been in the labor force, with two-thirds working as teachers. This state of affairs reflected the fact that schoolteaching was the most accessible career open to early twentieth-century female college graduates. Even elite women’s colleges that prided themselves on their strict liberal arts curriculum justified education programs, as well as studio programs in music and art, that would prepare students for professional careers in these fields. As Smith College president William Allan Neilson observed in 1918, “In one respect we have long been vocational: we have prepared large numbers for the vocation of teaching. We have few courses explicitly announced as for teachers; but the vocational element has pervaded our curriculum and determined the choice of studies far more than is indicated by these special courses.” In their direct link to postcollege employment opportunities, the education programs at women’s institutions resembled the expanding commerce and engineering programs at men’s colleges.

From its 1895 founding, the College of Notre Dame had offered a single noncredit “teachers’ course” to prepare students for careers in public high school teaching. Concern over the quality of teacher training in Maryland was rising in this era. There was general agreement among educators that the Maryland State Normal School was inferior to normal schools in New England, New York, Georgia, and California, as its curriculum did not reach the four-year high school level and it admitted some students directly from the sixth and seventh grades. In 1910, Goucher College and Johns Hopkins University joined forces to offer what the Baltimore Sun described as a “special college course for teachers . . . conducted independently of the regular collegiate instruction of the institutions.” Classes met on weekdays in the late afternoon and on Saturday mornings during the school year, and both institutions offered credit toward the BA degree for satisfactory completion of course work.
In 1915, Notre Dame’s Department of Education offered courses in educational psychology and the history of education. By 1922, it had added courses in teaching methods and secondary school management, as well as a practice-teaching requirement at the high school level. Following a 1923 MSA inspection visit, the Maryland State Board of Education confirmed that Notre Dame students “who have completed the required courses in education” would receive state teachers’ certificates, qualifying them to teach in public high schools. All members of the class of 1926 qualified for certificates from the Maryland or Pennsylvania State Board of Education.

Students at women’s colleges in the 1930s were, of necessity, more career focused than their predecessors. In a depression economy, public school teaching promised dependable employment. Colleges, public and private, responded quickly. In 1934, the Maryland State Normal School in Towson developed into a four-year teachers’ college offering a BS degree. Among Catholic institutions, demand for programs in education also surged. Between 1933 and 1938, three-fifths of the graduates of Saint Benedict’s College (Minnesota) became teachers, and this percentage was not unusual. The College of Notre Dame introduced majors in art, music, and speech, fields in high demand among teaching positions in public high schools. In 1936, Frances Jackman Civis, supervisor of music in the Baltimore public schools, joined the faculty and, with music instructor Sister Theresine Staab, developed a major in public school music, with specializations in elementary- as well as high-school-level music.

The sharp rise in births following World War II resulted in a critical teacher shortage in public elementary schools. As the population of children entering these schools escalated, education departments at women’s colleges expanded to meet the new demand for lower schoolteachers. In 1948, half the respondents to an American Association of University Women national survey of female college graduates were engaged in schoolteaching. Even as employment opportunities in other fields widened in the 1950s, graduates of Catholic women’s colleges, more than their peers from similar institutions, continued to favor the teaching profession. Forty percent of Notre Dame graduates in this decade reported teaching as their employment, a proportion that continued in the 1960s. College administrators and faculty defended this concentration, arguing that the education of “a dedicated corps of young women” for teaching careers was fully in keeping with the college’s liberal arts tradition. They justified adding courses in education to the traditional liberal arts curriculum in religious as well as populist terms: “Because the community which conducts the college is a religious order of the Catholic Church devoted especially to teaching,” said President Margaret Mary O’Connell, “the college—although not thereby committed—has
a special dedication to the training of teachers.” At the same time, she added, “the college considers the teaching profession one of vital importance in a democratic society. . . . It desires to make this field of service available to its best students.”

Parochial Schools and Teacher Education

Catholic female colleges like Notre Dame had a long-standing and distinctive interest in the field of elementary education. At their 1884 meeting at the Third Baltimore Council, the church hierarchy called on every parish to build an elementary school. While this goal was never achieved, the number of parochial schools increased dramatically. Bishops took it for granted that teaching sisterhoods would provide faculties for these institutions. State teacher certification was becoming a matter of urgent concern for Catholic schools nationally, and young sisters had to be educated for parochial school classrooms. Since Catholic men’s colleges would not admit women, and bishops, for the most part, opposed sisters’ attendance at public institutions, the burden rested on the women’s colleges. Orders that sent sisters to study at state colleges met with resistance from some of these institutions as well. In the early 1920s, for example, Benedictine sisters seeking teacher certification in Minnesota enrolled in the state normal school in Duluth, since the College of Saint Scholastica, a Duluth institution conducted by their order, did not have an education department. When Minnesota’s attorney general decreed that it violated state law for practice teachers in public normal schools to wear religious dress, the sisters commuted to the teacher’s college in Superior, Wisconsin, a state that did not prohibit the wearing of the religious habit.

Catholic women’s colleges quickly became central agents across the country for the professional advancement of teaching nuns. By 1934, Saint Scholastica had added an education department, and the state of Minnesota permitted sister-students at the state college in Duluth to earn practice-teaching credits in local parochial schools under its direction. For the most part, Catholic women’s colleges fulfilled this commission nearly single-handedly. Neither hierarchy nor laity contributed financially to the education of parochial schoolteachers, although several noted bishops provided indispensable moral support for the cause. As early as 1890, for example, Bishop John Lancaster Spalding of Peoria, Illinois, pushed for the education of sisters to the normal school level. And in 1911, Rev. Thomas Shields, a professor of education at Catholic University, was the force behind the establishment of a Catholic Sisters’ College there.
Local bishops and pastors’ intense pressure on sisterhoods for school-teachers dictated that young nuns be educated on a part-time basis via extension and summer programs. They fulfilled minimum state certification standards in this way, although achieving bachelor’s degrees could take a decade or more. Most sister-teachers entering parochial school classrooms were inadequately prepared relative to their public school counterparts. This situation explains why Catholic women’s colleges were more willing than other female institutions to introduce summer schools. Harvard University had opened its summer school in 1871 and an extension school in 1910. Between 1909 and 1911, Johns Hopkins University introduced its College Courses for Teachers, a part-time degree program that allowed employed teachers to take professional and liberal arts courses part time during the school year and in summer sessions. By 1908, the Education Department of the four-year-old College of Saint Angela (New Rochelle, New York) had opened extension branches in Manhattan, Albany, and Brooklyn. Elite women’s colleges, however, resisted the concept of extension courses until late in the twentieth century. Vassar’s 1949 program of extension courses for local citizens lasted only three semesters. In contrast, educating employed adults had been integral to the mission of Catholic women’s colleges from their inceptions. In this group, the College of Notre Dame was a pioneer in offering a part-time program for sister-teachers. Over one hundred students enrolled in its first four-week summer school in 1897; they included members of other local orders as well as School Sisters of Notre Dame, all eager to “avail themselves of the opportunity for advanced study.” Dr. J. G. Wells taught elocution; Rev. C. Warren Currier, psychology; and Dr. Richard Malcolm Johnston, English literature. Sisters from the college faculty taught mathematics, English grammar, geography, and psychology. Daily assemblies addressed pedagogical techniques.

Following their novitiate training, a majority of the School Sisters of Notre Dame taught full time in local parochial schools and enrolled in the college’s summer sessions to prepare to qualify for state teaching certification. Notre Dame’s 1922 summer school, directed by Professor Elizabeth Morrissy and staffed by thirteen sister-faculty, registered eighty-three sisters and twenty-five candidates in the order. Since the religious order did not yet require applicants for admission to its ranks to hold a high school diploma, many students enrolled in the “high school summer course,” a program in English, history, mathematics, foreign language, and science. Of seventy-eight sisters in the 1925 summer school, only 46 percent were taking “college work.” At the behest of local bishops, a few Jesuit men’s colleges advanced the cause by offering summer and extension programs so that nuns teaching
in church schools could earn credits toward state teaching certification. In 1919, Fordham University added a six-week summer course “for the various teaching communities.”

By 1929, the School Sisters of Notre Dame admitted only applicants with high school diplomas, and most of the seventy-three summer school students that year were taking post-high-school-level courses. The college’s extension program gradually included not only the summer school but also Saturday morning and Monday afternoon courses held during the academic year. By 1934, the Notre Dame Teacher Training School, located at the order’s motherhouse, had opened. Accredited by the Maryland State Department of Education in 1936, it prepared young sisters to qualify for state teaching certificates in elementary education after two full years and one summer of study. The summer session remained popular. Enrollment in 1959 was 546, the largest in its history.

Notre Dame faced opposition from public school authorities over the question of whether its education students could fulfill their practice-teaching requirements in local public schools. Until the 1930s, students fulfilled practice-teaching requirements for high school certification in just two girls’ high schools: one located on campus, the other in downtown Baltimore. Notre Dame’s Education Department faculty had to observe practice teaching under conditions that did not meet minimum state standards. Unlike students from other local colleges, however, who fulfilled their practice-teaching requirements in public high schools, Notre Dame students were denied this option because public school authorities feared public outcry should nuns in religious habits enter public school classrooms to observe practice teaching by their students. College administrators resolved the impasse by assigning only lay faculty to oversee practice teaching by Notre Dame students in the public high schools. After the college added a program in elementary education in the next decade, lay faculty supervised practice teaching by lay students in public schools, and both lay and religious faculty supervised sister-students’ practice teaching in local parochial schools. Many members of the Notre Dame faculty felt that sister-students, like their lay peers, should be able to practice teach in local public as well as parochial schools. At this time, however, New Mexico’s practice of employing nuns in religious habits as public school teachers had become a contentious topic of national debate, with a court challenge on constitutional grounds underway. So practice teaching by Notre Dame’s sister-students remained confined to parochial schools.

By the mid-twentieth century, the competitive spirit that traditionally marked relations among Catholic sisterhoods had begun to dissolve in the
face of a common predicament. National and state requirements for the professional preparation of teachers, nurses, and social workers were rising rapidly, and young sisters needed proper training before embarking on professional careers. In her 1941 doctoral dissertation, Sister Bertrande Meyers, SC, called for major reform in the education of nuns. The initial response was negligible. However, at the 1949 meeting of the National Catholic Educational Association, the issue came to center stage. Sister Madeleva Wolff, CSC, president of Saint Mary’s College in Indiana, gave a stirring lecture titled “The Education of Sister Lucy.” She galvanized her audience. Her message, which attracted intense national interest among Catholics, especially religious sisterhoods, became a catalyst for the Sister Formation Conference, which held its first national congress in August 1952.

The Sister Formation Movement called for and facilitated the proper professional education of young sisters before they undertook full-time careers in church schools, hospitals, and social agencies. The idea met with considerable opposition from lay educators as well as ecclesiastics, who were concerned that it would delay the number of teachers available for expanding parochial schools. Foremost among lay critics was Roy J. Deferrari, a member of the College of Notre Dame’s advisory board. In his judgment, traditional motherhouse training programs and part-time summer programs were adequate preparation for elementary school teachers. That position mobilized sisterhoods across the country. At the College of Notre Dame, English professor Sister Maura Eichner answered Deferrari’s position. For her, the Sister Formation Movement, with its “broad intellectual as well as spiritual and professional training,” brought her hope for lasting reform: “We look forward,” she said, “to the promise of the young religious.” Superiors of sisterhoods across the country united to ensure that their young sisters held college degrees before they began their professional work as teachers, nurses, and social workers in church institutions.

The College of Notre Dame’s Education Department had prepared lay and sister students for certification as high school teachers since 1895. Although the State of Maryland had accredited the department in 1921–22, students could not major in the field until 1954. At that time, Provincial Superior Vitalia Arnold, chair of the college’s board of trustees, proposed that Notre Dame apply for state certification for an elementary education program. This would allow junior sisters, most of whom were preparing to teach in elementary schools, to complete a specialized course in education in the order’s Teacher Training Institute, located close to the college campus, and, at the same time, earn a liberal arts degree from Notre Dame. Dean Bridget Marie Engelmeyer and several faculty members objected unsuccessfully that
prominent eastern women’s colleges were at this time reducing their education programs. Arnold’s plan, they argued, would weaken the college’s reputation among liberal arts institutions.\textsuperscript{123}

In 1957, Engelmeyer later recalled, the board of trustees “accepted the [Teacher Training] Institute as the Bellona Avenue Campus of the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, expanded its faculty and curriculum, and gave its graduates the bachelor of arts degree.”\textsuperscript{124} Henceforth, sisters and candidates in the order who met the college’s entrance requirements would matriculate at Notre Dame. By 1958, the new elementary education program was in place. Since cloister rules still restricted candidates, novices, and junior sisters from attending classes with lay students, the college faculty repeated their lectures at the Bellona Avenue campus.\textsuperscript{125} Sister Delia Dowling, later professor of mathematics and dean of the college, had a typical educational itinerary for a young sister in this era. After graduating from high school, she entered the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1963 and, as a novice, resided at the Bellona Avenue campus. There she completed two years of general studies courses taught by Notre Dame faculty. After making her religious profession, she became a day student on Notre Dame’s main campus, taking classes with lay students and graduating in 1967.\textsuperscript{126} At this time, applications to the order were falling off sharply, cloister rules were disappearing, and by 1970 the Bellona Avenue campus had all but closed. The catalog for that year stated simply that “the college provides some courses for students who are SSND.”\textsuperscript{127}

**Seeking Mainstream Recognition**

Curriculum decisions—what to require, what to offer, which departments to staff and fund—were always of intense import as Catholic women’s institutions sought to gain recognition within church and mainstream higher-education circles. When the Association of Catholic Colleges was founded in 1899, under the direction of the rector of Catholic University, the College of Notre Dame immediately applied for membership.\textsuperscript{128} In 1920, the Maryland State Board of Education placed the college on its list of standardized institutions.\textsuperscript{129} Two years later, the New York State Board of Regents of the University of New York formally registered the College of Notre Dame of Maryland’s bachelor of arts program.\textsuperscript{130} To qualify for inclusion on the “fully approved list” of the MSA, an institution had to enroll at least one hundred students. Notre Dame met this requirement only in 1925.\textsuperscript{131} The college gained membership in the American Council on Education in 1926 and in the Association of American Colleges in 1927.\textsuperscript{132}
While Catholics at this time were making strides in social and economic integration into the American mainstream, in a number of ways they remained religious “outsiders.” Well into the twentieth century, the College of Notre Dame remained unfamiliar to most Baltimore Protestants, and stereotypes of nuns, endemic in American culture, lingered. George Constable, a Princeton graduate and convert to Catholicism who later became the college’s legal adviser, recalled his first impression of the institution in the 1930s: “To a non-Catholic [it was] an unknown quantity sitting up here on the hill, not reaching out to the community. . . . It was a forbidding place to a non-Catholic driving by, not knowing anything about it.”133 Sister Frances Smith, who became president of the college in 1935, set out to change that image. Among her primary objectives was to see Notre Dame included on the “approved list of colleges” published by the Association of American Universities (AAU), a major national higher-education organization.134

Founded in 1900 by fourteen PhD-granting universities, the AAU for many years maintained an “Approved List of Colleges and Universities” whose graduates qualified for admission to the graduate programs of AAU member institutions. Inclusion on the AAU list represented national recognition of an institution’s quality. It was also a precondition for institutional membership in other prestigious educational associations and honor societies, among them Phi Beta Kappa and the American Association of University Women. In the 1930s, approval by the AAU was the top qualification set by Phi Beta Kappa’s committee on qualifications.135 In 1917, several Catholic women’s colleges appeared for the first time on the AAU list: the College of Saint Catherine (Saint Paul, Minnesota), the College of Saint Elizabeth (Morristown, New Jersey), and Trinity College (Washington, DC).

Dr. Adam Leroy Jones, a representative of the AAU Committee on Classification of Colleges in the late 1920s, discouraged Notre Dame administrators from applying for inclusion on its approved list. He had, he said, “some doubts as to whether the time is yet ripe for the College of Notre Dame to apply.”136 In February 1932, however, the AAU accepted a preliminary application from Notre Dame president Sister Ethelbert Roche.137 Ryland Newman Dempster, registrar at Johns Hopkins University, completed an on-site inspection in October. At its November 15, 1932, meeting, the AAU committee took final “adverse action” on Notre Dame’s application. “A point . . . which the Committee found to be crucial,” Jones told Roche, “was in the records of graduates of the college in ‘leading graduate, professional and research institutions.’ The amount of such evidence . . . was so small that it was quite impossible for the committee to make a favorable recommendation.” Jones rejected Roche’s defense that the college’s enrollment was small
and that many alumnae married soon after graduation: “On the reasoning of
the Association a college which is doing really first rate work will stimulate a
fair percentage of students to go on for more advanced study.”

Sister Frances Smith, who succeeded Roche as president of Notre Dame
in 1935, believed that since Notre Dame qualified for the AAU approved list
“in every particular, except this of graduate study,” its chances for approval
were good. In 1939 and again in 1942, however, preliminary applications did
not lead to success, both times on the grounds that few students went on to
graduate study. Roy Deferrari offered to help prepare a new application. As
secretary-general at Catholic University, during the 1930s and 1940s Defer-
rari enjoyed a national reputation for providing expert counsel on academic
matters to sister-administrators of Catholic women’s colleges. Constrained
by episcopal oversight and cloister regulations, the sisters appreciated his
assistance. At Notre Dame, he became Frances Smith’s trusted intermediary
with the AAU. But reliance on external advisers like Deferrari was a risky
strategy. In Catholic circles, many continued to hold very conservative views
on women’s education. Notre Dame’s lengthy and ultimately unsuccessful
campaign for AAU recognition revealed some of these dangers.

Like many male academics of his generation, Deferrari did not believe
that women and men should have identical educations: “The qualities of
womanhood are such that women can on the whole best attain the desired
ends of a liberal education by concentrating on subjects ordinarily not so
popular with men, and sometimes by receiving a type of instruction rather
different from that applied to men.” In a lecture at Notre Dame in 1945, he
spelled out exactly what that instruction ought to be: “The most important
and most obvious contribution [of the Catholic women’s college] . . . is the
training of women to become home-makers.” In advising Smith, Deferrari
consistently minimized AAU criticism of Notre Dame’s deficiencies in pro-
ducing alumnae with advanced degrees. As he saw it, the college was unable
to gain AAU approval because of its low enrollment. If Notre Dame wanted
to reach the average size of the Catholic women’s colleges on the AAU list, it
should abandon its commitment to a strictly classical curriculum and intro-
duce professional majors.

Despite Deferrari’s conviction that low enrollment was the college’s fore-
most problem, AAU secretary Frank Bowles’s comments on Notre Dame’s
unsuccessful 1942 preliminary application focused on the need for the col-
lege to send more students to graduate study. When a 1946 application was
again rejected, Smith, trustees, and faculty, who had anticipated that the
college would finally join the fifteen Catholic women’s colleges on the asso-
ciation’s list of approved institutions, were perplexed and disheartened.
Deferrari showed no interest in pursuing the AAU’s suggestion that the college submit a “new preliminary application” for consideration at its fall 1948 meeting. Nonetheless, Smith swiftly prepared a new preliminary application, taking pains to provide an extra copy of the graduate school enrollment data incorporated in it. Before the scheduled 1948 committee meeting took place, however, the AAU voted to terminate its accrediting function permanently.

Notre Dame’s long campaign for AAU recognition was over. But despite failing in its ostensible goal, the quest itself had produced some vital reforms in the areas of faculty qualifications, curriculum, and the rate of alumnae earning graduate degrees. A March 1959 faculty survey of a total of 653 graduates in the decade 1949–58 regarding graduate study yielded a response rate of 84 percent. Among the respondents, 61 percent were married, and 8 percent were nuns; 8 percent held graduate degrees, and 6 percent were currently enrolled in graduate programs. Some alumnae commented that the college ought to have done more to prepare students socially for postcollege life, whether in graduate schools or in first jobs. “The great problem [for the Notre Dame graduate] is a certain naiveté and consequent insulation or isolation in the face of less intellectual, more worldly fellows,” one alumna wrote, adding that a graduate of Notre Dame does “not show well against her Vassar and Holyoke sisters (at least at first).” But the faculty also polled the universities where Notre Dame students had completed or were currently enrolled in graduate programs, regarding their academic performance relative to students from other colleges. Forty-two universities reported on a total of 155 students. They considered 10 percent to be superior, 43 percent above average, 44 percent average, and 3 percent unsatisfactory.

As the AAU battle in the 1930s and 1940s played out behind the scenes, Notre Dame leaders became acutely aware of the need to gain mainstream recognition of the college’s academic quality, beginning with encouraging its graduates to go on for further study but expanding to other areas as well. In the 1950s, Notre Dame leaders and faculty helped students to apply for graduate fellowships and awards. Between 1950 and 1954, three students won Fulbright Scholarships for graduate study. “Unsolicited publicity of a very helpful nature” followed a 1953 Mademoiselle article reporting that Notre Dame ranked fourteenth in a national survey of fifty-three women’s colleges that had averaged at least 5.6 scholars per 1,000 graduates annually since 1946. For the first time, too, the college sought visibility and public recognition for the professional achievements of its sister-faculty as well as its lay faculty. Whereas tradition had long dictated that sisters receive their graduate degrees in absentia, five sisters attended their 1944 commencement
ceremonies at Catholic University and publicly accepted their diplomas. When English professor Sister Maura Eichner’s book of poems took second place in the national 1951 Poetry Awards contest, the entire campus celebrated.

Notre Dame faculty also began to encourage students to enter national writing competitions, a common practice at mainstream colleges and increasingly at Catholic colleges as well. Winners of national contests brought desirable publicity to their schools. In 1946, a sonnet submitted by a junior at the College of Notre Dame took first place in the annual contest of the American Classical League. Eichner earned national recognition not only for her own prize-winning poetry but also for her success as a teacher of
writing. In the 1950s, her students gained recognition in writing competitions for college students. In 1953, a Notre Dame junior took first place in the national poetry contest sponsored by the *Atlantic Monthly*. A senior won first prize in the 1955 poetry contest as well as several other prizes in the same contest. In the 1957 poetry competition, a junior won first prize. Of 464 entries in the magazine’s 1958 poetry contest, Notre Dame students accounted for nine of the top twenty entries. They continued to rank high among *Atlantic Monthly* poetry contest winners in the 1960s, taking first and fourth prizes in 1968, first and second prizes in 1969, and first and third prizes in 1970. Eichner once explained why she preferred the *Atlantic* contests over other competitions: “The application blank . . . did not give the name of the college you attended. . . . The judges reading our students’ work did not know whether they came from Barnard or . . . from Radcliffe, or a small women’s College in Maryland. We did better that way.” Notre Dame’s successes in these contests significantly raised its visibility.

In 1948, when the Association of American Universities discontinued its practice of reviewing colleges, the College of Notre Dame had not yet achieved its goal of inclusion on the association’s approved list. Yet its lengthy and painful struggle to meet AAU standards in admissions, faculty quality, curriculum, endowment, and the rate of alumnae earning graduate degrees proved to be a watershed in its movement to participate on equal terms within mainstream higher-education circles. At the same time, by midcentury the small college was conspicuous among Catholic women’s institutions for its excellent science and mathematics programs and the disproportionate success of its students in national college writing competitions. As the higher-education landscape changed dramatically in the postwar decades, Notre Dame was well prepared not only to maintain a strong liberal arts curriculum for traditional undergraduates but also to shift toward a new population of adult students in Baltimore.

**The Late Twentieth Century**

During the College of Notre Dame’s first half century, decisions about its curriculum responded to contingencies, including the faculty’s desire for a prestigious liberal arts curriculum, students’ sometimes competing desire for ‘practical’ education, bishops’ demands for schoolteachers, accreditors’ requirements, and more. The second half of the twentieth century featured similar curricular responses to changing circumstances.

Patriotic demands, for example, led college administrators and faculties to re-confront the question of “practical” education during World War II.
Federal and state government agencies and the American Council on Educa-
tion called on colleges and universities to offer “accelerated courses” in tech-
nical fields to meet the needs of the crisis.\textsuperscript{160} Notre Dame’s faculty, noting
that “educational authorities do not consider a general program of acceler-
ation in women’s colleges either necessary or desirable,”\textsuperscript{161} only reluctantly
conceded to national pressure to modify requirements for the degree. They
followed elite women’s colleges in responding rather grudgingly; in July
1948, when Vassar awarded degrees to the final group of students in its three-
year wartime accelerated plan, it took pains to keep the ceremony entirely
separate from the May graduation of those who had completed “a normal
four-year program.”\textsuperscript{162} Noting the need for medical technicians, Notre Dame
did allow high-ranking science and mathematics majors to accelerate. In
1943 the American Medical Association authorized Saint Joseph’s Hospital
and Notre Dame’s Biology Department “to conduct a training school for
laboratory technicians.” After completing the program, students could “take
the examination of the American Society of Clinical Pathologists for regis-
try as medical technicians.”\textsuperscript{163} Once the war ended, Notre Dame, following
leading secular women’s colleges, returned to its traditional four-year degree
program and strict liberal arts curriculum.

The question of professional education was also ever present. President
Margaret Mary O’Connell exaggerated when she declared that until 1950
“the vocational motive . . . [was] not reckoned with at all.”\textsuperscript{164} But in 1943, fac-
culty and administrators had again rejected the idea of introducing home eco-
nomics and other professional programs. Chemistry professor Sister Mary
Agnes Klug summed up the majority view: “[We] decided it was better to
be a small college. You cannot do everything well, and if you start spreading
yourself too thin, it is not very good. So if you hold to doing the one thing
that we do, which is to give the B.A. degree and do a good job with it, it
would be better than trying too many things.”\textsuperscript{165}

The 1950 inspection report of the Association of Colleges and Second-
ary Schools of the Middle States and Maryland noted that, unlike most of
its peer institutions, Notre Dame remained committed to the liberal arts:
“The only degree granted is the Bachelor of Arts and this represents very
well the nature of the training given. Very little indeed of an applied, or
semi-professional, or vocational nature has been permitted to enter the regu-
lar program.” Except for religion, where “the lecture method seemed to be
employed exclusively, with a corresponding relaxation of attention on the
part of the students,” the report found that “stimulating discussion and origi-
nal thinking marked all classes.”\textsuperscript{166}
In 1950, President Sarah Blanding of Vassar College publicly opposed the introduction of vocational programs for women, such as home economics and family management. Few leaders of Catholic women’s colleges agreed with her stance. Notre Dame, however, was an exception. By this time, its emphasis on the liberal arts and sciences distinguished it from most of these institutions. According to a national survey of major fields chosen by sophomores and seniors at Catholic women’s colleges in the mid-1950s, 38 percent of respondents selected a professional major, with education, at 18 percent, by far the most popular choice. No other single professional field accounted for more than 5 percent. Among the liberal arts and sciences, 17 percent of respondents enrolled in one of the physical sciences, 15 percent in English or a foreign language, 12 percent in history or a social science. Music and art majors represented 5 percent. Schoolteaching, with its direct connection to the liberal arts, continued to dominate the chosen professions of Catholic women’s college alumnae in the 1950s. While Notre Dame graduates during the decade 1949–58 found employment in a widening range of occupations, 40 percent reported that they engaged in schoolteaching. This high rate continued into the next decade: “Of the 1964 graduating class of 142 girls,” noted Margaret Mary O’Connell, “58 [41 percent] went into teaching.”

There remained a direct correlation between the college’s liberal arts curriculum and its perennially small enrollment. As a sister-administrator noted in 1973, competing Catholic women’s colleges had “at least eight B.S. programs . . . physical therapy and business . . . home economics, which we have never had.” Taught properly, some faculty argued, popular professional programs need not violate Notre Dame’s commitment to the liberal arts. “Anything can be taught as a liberal art as long as the main thrust is the strengthening of the intellectual powers and the widening of cultural horizons,” Dean Engelmeyer told alumnae at about the same time. “So taught, subjects preparing for a gainful occupation are validly within the liberal arts.”

These comments were made against the backdrop of a serious enrollment crisis that came close to forcing the college to merge with nearby and newly coeducational Loyola College (described in the conclusion). President Kathleen Feeley’s priority was to attract more students. She expanded Notre Dame’s traditional mission by considering a new applicant pool: high school graduates who were employed full time, a demographic group unlikely to interest other prestigious local colleges.

Notre Dame had had limited and generally unsuccessful prior experience with adult education, aside from its long-running extension programs for religious sisters seeking to qualify as parochial school teachers. An evening
program in Italian, introduced in the 1940s, had failed, as had a noncredit adult education program. “The adult education has not been successful,” President Frances Smith reported to the advisory board in 1950. “We conclude that Baltimore is very little interested in Adult Education in the strict sense of the word. Generally, credit is wanted for whatever course is taken.”

Two decades later, however, Notre Dame returned to the adult-education idea to attract a new kind of student. In 1972, Feeley designed a Continuing Education Program for women who were at least twenty-five years of age and not in the labor force, “who wish to continue their education in search of a degree, to enlarge their ‘world view,’ or to prepare for volunteer or paid employment.” They would take classes with the regular college students. She also commissioned academic dean Sister Mary Oliver Hudon to design an “innovative program at the graduate level.” When a proposal for such a program in management and human services garnered little faculty support, Feeley turned her attention to developing a program for employed adults of both sexes that she envisioned as an alternative to a night school for this population. She was confident that they would welcome the opportunity.

Notre Dame’s Weekend College, introduced in the 1970s, while rooted in the venerable extension school movement, seemed a radical concept in US higher-education circles at the time. The college offered adult women and men employed full time an opportunity to earn bachelor’s degrees from a private college on a part-time basis. Faculty at elite women’s colleges had generally opposed such initiatives. Barnard College president Rosemary Park (1962–67) recalled that she “thought that Barnard was a good place to hold weekend classes for women. . . . The husbands were home over the weekend; they could take care of the children for several hours and the women could come to Barnard Saturday morning. With an occasional week or so in the summer, a good deal of college credit could be earned. I tried this out on the Barnard faculty and there was absolutely no support.”

Other institutions also tested the weekend-college concept. In 1963, with the support of a Ford Foundation grant, Goddard College, a coeducational institution in Plainfield, Vermont, offered an Adult Degree Program that allowed employed adults to complete requirements for the college degree on a part-time basis. It was, according to a later Goddard catalog, “the prototype of the current intensive low-residency model . . . [and] the first program of its kind in the country.” In the 1970s, Yale College admitted a few nondegree special students who took courses on a part-time basis. A Degree Special Students Program followed in 1981, but enrollments remained small.

Of course, while still uncommon in US higher education in the early 1970s, the education of adults on a part-time basis had had a long history.
at Catholic women’s colleges, which had educated young sisters in this way for decades. Among Catholic women’s colleges, in 1974 Chicago’s Mundelein College became the first to develop a Weekend College for employed lay adults. At the College of Notre Dame, Feeley saw in the Goddard and Mundelein models a means to preserve the college’s mission to women’s higher education. With limited prior consultation with faculty, Feeley proposed to the board of trustees that the college introduce a Weekend College as soon as possible. When faculty protested “the precipitate development of the Week-End College without due recognition of faculty committee action,” administrators insisted that the institution’s alarming financial and enrollment situations required immediate action. 179 In the fall of 1975, the Weekend College registered its inaugural class of eighty-one students (sixty women and twenty-one men). Their median age was thirty-two; 15 percent were African Americans. 180 The new program was the first of its type in Maryland. 181

In developing the Weekend College in the 1970s, Notre Dame built on its traditional commitment to educating employed women. Young sisters had been earning bachelor’s degrees on a part-time basis at Notre Dame for three-quarters of a century, so faculty took the Weekend College’s innovative calendar in stride. However, they had strong reservations about its potential effects on the liberal arts curriculum. There was a critical difference between the young nuns who had formed the college’s contingent of part-time students until the 1960s and the Weekend College’s part-time students. Whereas sister-students traditionally majored only in the liberal arts and education, the new Weekend College students, employed in a wide range of fields, looked for career-oriented courses. The Weekend College, as a result, would offer majors in business and communications as well as in the liberal arts.

For over sixty years, administrators, trustees, and faculty at Notre Dame had periodically considered adding professional programs. Each time, by a wide margin, they had opposed the move, with the sole concession being the introduction of a major in education in 1954. While other Catholic women’s colleges had been offering professional programs for decades and were open to adding more, Notre Dame in the mid-1960s remained dedicated to its original mission. As President Margaret Mary O’Connell wrote in her 1964–65 annual report, “We have nothing to attract students but our dedication to learning and to the liberal arts tradition: no programs in nursing, secretarial, business, medical technology, etc., as do many other colleges; and we are not interested in dissipating our energies on trying to support such a multi-purpose program.” 182 She did not take into account how the popularity of the education major, introduced ten years before, had affected enrollment in
other fields of concentration. By 1966, nearly 20 percent of the graduating class majored in elementary education, a figure equal to that of majors in science and mathematics combined.  

To provide career-oriented programs for employed adult students in the Weekend College, the college had to diverge from its traditional liberal arts focus. In September 1975, the *Baltimore Sun* reported that this exciting new program was already causing “some faculty members [to] worry about academic quality.”  

Supporters of the Weekend College argued that it posed no threat to Notre Dame’s integrity as a liberal arts institution. Not only were general education requirements for Weekend College and day college students identical, but except for the human services program, so were the majors offered. Full-time as well as part-time faculty taught in the day college, the Weekend College, the continuing education program, and the graduate program, “wherever they were needed.” Students in professional fields would be required to complete general education courses in the liberal arts and encouraged to elect more. At the same time, traditional liberal arts majors would enjoy wider opportunities to explore diverse career interests by choosing electives in professional fields.

In fact, the 1970s saw a revolutionary shift in the college’s curriculum. While in the middle of the decade the college offered only three interdisciplinary concentrations (creative communication arts, social science, and urban studies), by the end of the decade Weekend College students seeking a BA or BS degree could choose among six areas of concentration: business, communication arts, computer information systems, human services, liberal arts, and religious studies. In addition, a cooperative Weekend College program, developed with local Saint Joseph’s Hospital, offered a BS in nursing for registered nurses. The Communications and English Departments had merged by 1979.

At its 1980 visit to Notre Dame, the Middle States Association Evaluating Team expressed concern about the curricular direction of the college. While evaluators praised the high quality of the liberal arts program, they offered “one overall piece of advice. . . . Don’t try to do everything; curb programs.” Despite this admonition, the 1980s were to see more new programs introduced via the Weekend College, among them a master of arts in human resources and a postbaccalaureate certificate in mathematics education.

The Weekend College’s enrollment rose so swiftly that by 1983, full-time undergraduates constituted only one-third of the college’s total enrollment of 1,764. At the same time, enrollment in liberal arts fields of study was declining. The largest departments were now economics/business
management, communications, biology, and education. In contrast, history/political science comprised 6.6 percent of declared majors, and English and foreign language departments together accounted for 6.3 percent. In 1985, nearly half (47 percent) of undergraduate students were opting for professionally oriented majors; only about 6 percent majored in the sciences, English, and foreign languages combined. These trends led a worried Faculty Senate to set as a top priority for 1985 “the vitality of the day division, i.e., the regular college, as distinct from the adult divisions.”

A 1985 U.S. News & World Report national survey of college presidents on the best US colleges strengthened growing faculty apprehension that career-oriented programs, introduced via the Weekend College, were diluting Notre Dame’s traditional status as a liberal arts college. The survey singled out the College of Notre Dame of Maryland for its emphasis on career preparation and ranked it “among the ten highest colleges having fewer than 50% of its students in liberal education,” noting particularly that 25 percent of its degrees went to majors in the health professions. “We are receiving congratulations for being in the top ten,” wrote the college annalist grimly, “but it is obvious that most people do not know what top ten.” President Feeley, however, whose controversial expansion of professional programs had probably saved the college, was, on balance, pleased with the results. “To the timeless value of the liberal arts,” she wrote, “Notre Dame has connected timely innovations which mark its education as current and relevant.”

Catholic women’s colleges still reflect the tension between a commitment to the liberal arts and a desire both to maintain financial stability and adequately serve the local community. In the early twenty-first century, some have enormously expanded their professional education programs, including offering online degrees. Some have virtually eliminated liberal arts majors, with those subjects relegated to a few general education requirements. Others, like the College of Notre Dame, have continued to try to balance the two. In 2018, Notre Dame enrolled 805 undergraduate and 1,263 professional/graduate women, along with approximately 300 men (mostly graduate students). Its most popular majors, including nursing and business, reflect trends in other sectors of higher education. But at the same time, it continues to offer a general liberal arts curriculum to a very wide range of traditional and adult students alike, and to maintain its identity as a place that balances both scholarship and practical education.