



Women with High Influence, Low Visibility

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A Flourishing of Women with High Influence, Low Visibility

Phyllis Keller

I first came to work at Harvard in 1951, armed with a Barnard College B.A., a Columbia University M.A., and a crash course in shorthand and typing from the Delehanty Secretarial School. My particular corner was the Graduate School of Education, then in its Lawrence Hall quarters. I was one of many graduate student spouses who took on an entry-level secretarial job to help meet expenses.

We were much in demand: we were educated (if inexperienced), eager to be part of the university, and bargain-priced.

Another category of employee then was (usually unmarried) older women who had gradually climbed up the secretarial ladder to positions of considerable administrative responsibility. They had long been essential to the smooth functioning of Harvard.

One such was Anne MacDonald, executive secretary of the Harvard College Admissions Office for four decades after 1900. When James Bryant Conant became president in 1933, she instructed him in the admissions process. The real work of the Admissions Office was in the hands of Miss MacDonald and her staff. She and her opposite numbers at Yale (a Miss Elliot), at Princeton (a Miss Williams), and the College Entrance Examination Board (a Miss McLaughlin) met yearly “to compare notes on all matters pertaining to admission.”

Women with high influence and low visibility continued to flourish at Harvard. President Nathan Marsh Pusey proposed in 1955 that the status and perks (though not the salary and benefits) of Harvard Corporation appointments be given to “a small group of women in administrative positions whose responsibilities included confidential participation in the implementation of University policy at a relatively high level.” He had in mind a half dozen or so movers and shakers. But new names came rolling in from the Law and Medical Schools and other venues, suggesting that Harvard's invisible government was larger than anyone thought.

When I came back to Harvard in 1973, there still were some “executive secretaries” whose titles belied their influence and managerial roles. One such was Verna Johnson, who rose through the ranks from the early 1940s to become the enormously influential secretary to the dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences by the time she retired in 1984. She knew everything there was to know about administrative practices, was keeper of the Faculty's institutional memory, and authoritatively instructed deans, faculty, and younger staff members like me.

These women were mainly in the offices of the deans and the president, no longer in the other administrative units. But clearly they too were a vanishing breed. In many cases the earlier generation of women had been replaced by “old boys”--Harvard College graduates or graduate students who were tapped for entry-level posts on administrative ladders.

From the 1970s on, professionally trained women (and men) began to compete for the specialized jobs (and attractive salaries) available in the burgeoning middle

management ranks of large institutions such as Harvard. They came armed with Ph.D.s, M.B.A.s, LL.D.s, or equivalent work experience.

In the year 2000, as I look back over this major demographic and organizational shift, I am struck by the far higher proportion of women in key managerial and professional posts. Competition for attractive jobs is more open to all comers; the pool of qualified candidates for a wide range of positions continues to grow.

Women at Harvard have benefited greatly from these changes. What has been lost, however, is the sense of being part of an extended family, the continuity of lifetime employment, the preservation of institutional memory. The unresolved question is not whether growth, centralization, and specialization are good, but how much is too much.

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