

Shagun Doshi

Professor Hays

Rhetoric 105

17 November 2015

### Women's Rights in College

Imagine being an American woman in the late 1920's. You are finally allowed to vote. The Equal Rights Amendment has just been introduced to congress. You see girls just like you starting to compete in Olympic field events. The first woman has been elected to congress (Decade by Decade 3). The world around you seems to be rapidly changing, yet women have been waiting for this day for centuries. Within a 10 year span, women went from voice-less to being the strongest voices of the decade. Being a woman in the 1920s meant that you were a part of one of the most important revolutions in American history. It was a time of prosperity and new opportunities. More and more women were taken over traditionally male jobs. Gender roles were being pushed. Most importantly, during this time, women earned 39 percent of the college degrees given out in the United States (Decade by Decade 1). The University of Illinois was one of the many places that women went to get those degrees. Although America's view on women had progressed, being a woman at college was still a taboo. Since it was so uncommon for women to attend college, The University of Illinois scripted a set of rules. To lay out these rules and regulations, The University of Illinois created a pamphlet. The claim for writing these rules can be found throughout the script, the college simply created it to keep women out of harm's way as they adjust to college life. They named this pamphlet: The Woman's League Rules.

The university presented The Woman's League Rules to every freshman girl upon arrival. It was created by the college itself and cultivated a sense of responsibility by placing

curfews. Since it was only a one sided piece of paper outlining the rules, the authors did not include a rebuttal. The college supported their claim through multiple rules. One in particular stated, “The house shall be locked at 10 o’clock on week nights and 12 o’clock Friday and Saturday nights during the school term, at which time students should be in their residents” (Woman’s League 1928-1929). At the specified curfew times, all girls had to be checked into their rooms. The house mother would manually check off all the residents; making sure they were in bed. Under special circumstances women could be granted, “Special permission from the house mother or the chaperone” (Woman’s League Rules 1928-1929). These requests could be granted for unusual and infrequent occasions only and they were more likely to be granted if men were present with the women. Traveling with a male insured that women wouldn’t be harassed by other men who felt that they were still superior. In general, women were still viewed as less than men, by men. Creating a firm curfew was simply a way for the college to make sure women were safely returned to their homes at a normal time. This is a warrant that the author heavily emphasized throughout the document. The safety of the female students was the university’s main concern. While going to college had been more popularized for women by the time this particular set of rules of rules was created; it was still hard for women to do the same activities men because many men still didn’t accept women as equals. They were often segregated completely from the males. They weren’t allowed to participate in many of the same college activities men were able to partake in. The University wanted to keep women away from the brutality of the traditional male.

Throughout the pamphlet, there were no qualifiers. The college wanted to make sure that the rules were direct and to the point. The rules regarding women going to social events emulated this nature. The rules were especially strict when it came to outings. The rule stated,

“No undergraduate woman shall visit a fraternity house unchaperoned” (Woman’s League Rules 1928-1929). The “chaperones” were usually male. It was still seen that men had more power and influence than women. There is no denying that women were held to a different standard than men. They were often expected to prove themselves to males. The originators of this list prepared it to create a safer environment for women to learn in. The fraternities were especially critical of women. Based on traditional values, such as male dominance, these fraternities often used their power to endanger women. Social events, such as frat parties, also objectified women. During this time especially, many males used sexual assault as a way to assert their power and demean women. Having a male chaperone usually ensured safety and comfort as women enjoyed the social aspect of college life. This is another source of backing that the author of the pamphlet provided. This backed the warrant that was previously discussed regarding how the university cared about the women’s safety. By requiring a male chaperone, the authors emphasized their concern for the student’s well-being. The college set these rules to do their best to protect women and keep them out of harm’s way.

Another warrant the creator stressed was that the university wanted to ensure incoming student’s parents that their children would be in a nurturing environment. The college wanted to continue the surplus of women that were now joining the campus. To provide backing for this warrant, some of the rules even stretched further beyond the confinements of college. The rules that applied to off campus life, provided backing because the college wanted to ensure that the women knew there was somebody always watching out for them. One rule regarding women leaving the campus was, “No undergraduate should leave town without notifying a chaperone or house mother of her departure, her destination, and the hour of her return” (Woman’s League Rules 1928-1929). If they wanted to leave for out-of-state football games or spend a weekend

away, the girls had to go through the same process. They were required to pre determine their plan to relay to their house mothers before they left. The house mothers were just that; mothers. They created a sense of hospitality and love within their houses. It showed young women that they were still cared for during the harsh transition from home to college. This system also reduced the risk of kidnapping and overall created a community within each household. College is viewed as a major turning point in any young male or female's life. College is usually the first taste of freedom that one experiences. It becomes a place where a student is allowed to explore interests and discover themselves outside of their family. The rules allowed women to experience this freedom under safe circumstances as they adjusted to adulthood.

The university's set of rules helped women safely transition into college without being scrutinized. They continually strived for better by going out of their comfort zones and enrolling into college. It was usually the first taste of freedom that a woman experienced. College is a place where a student is allowed to explore interests and discover themselves outside of their family. But, this is also met with risks. Freshman are rewarded this freedom as a way to come into their own, but often misuse their power. The complete lack of structure often creates an ineffective learning experience. The league allowed women to experience these freedoms within a safe environment, during a time when they were making a name for themselves. The Woman's League Rules cultivated a strong sense of pride and safety within the committee of women attending The University of Illinois.

Works Cited

"Decade by Decade: 1920s - Women of the Century." *DiscoverySchool.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Sept. 2015.

University of Illinois. *Women's League Rules for Undergraduate Women*. Urbana-Campaign: n.p., 1928. Print.