

HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

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Gendering Technological Education at Purdue University, 1925-1940

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Before World War II, American women were limited in their ability to enter engineering and other technological disciplines. Even over the remaining decades of the century, after pioneering women cleared barriers through the formation of societies, lawsuits, and other challenges to power, the percentage of women in engineering and technology fields remained low compared to their male counterparts. Many scholars look to the American university system in order to better understand the lack of female representation in these fields. Some prefer to point to programs historically geared to women, such as home economics, as an alternative path for technological training with which women could gain access to the industrial job market without blatantly challenging gender norms. I suggest that the complex interaction between technology, gender, and the American university system can be better understood by analyzing how different technology programs developed in relation to each other within a single university. This is not a strict analysis of programs with engineering and technologies in their titles, but also the alternative curriculums developed specifically for female students under the label of domestic sciences.

Purdue University hold historical distinction with regard to both its Schools of Engineering and Home Economics, making this institution a prime subject for this study. By focusing on early efforts to create post-secondary curriculums which formed around institutional and domestic management, I reveal the ways in which administrators and professors resisted merging these curriculums, though their courses often reflected the same aims. Early twentieth-century educators used the same principles to convey the importance of efficiency to students of both engineering and home economics, though the transmission was often cloaked in gendered rhetoric. During the 1930s, while the School of Home Economics offered efficiency classes centered on domesticity, the School of Engineering offered male students scientific management training which could propel them into managerial positions within the industrial workplace. Though the central components of labor management, costing, and efficiency were shared between them, these majors were constructed in ways which were meant to appeal to

different genders. Using personal papers, university records, yearbooks, and professional journals, I will highlight the gendered differences and professional similarities of these different curriculums over the course of the twentieth century.

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