

Beyond the Domestic Sphere: Home Economics and the Education of Women at Maryland State College, 1916–94

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This essay presents a historiography of coeducation and home economics education at Maryland State College (now University of Maryland, College Park). Feminist scholars have recently begun to reevaluate the significance of home economics, the academic “functions and goals” (Holt 4) of homemaking, in the history of women’s education. The author uses course catalogs, yearbooks, and other archival sources to argue that the inconsistencies in word choice reflect disparate, classed, and gendered goals for women’s higher education. The language surrounding home economics suggests that it is both a scientific academic discipline and an inferior area of study that is appropriate only for women students. The author concludes that home economics can be understood as a progressive appeal to bring women into higher education and the sciences, even though it often reproduced and reinforced traditional gender roles.

Let the women of the country be made virtuous and intelligent, and the men will certainly be the same. The proper education of a man decides the welfare of an individual; but educate a woman, and the interests of a whole family are secured.

—Catherine Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841)

Mothering or mathematics? Folding laundry or food science? Educating children or earning a degree? For women in the early twentieth century, combining the roles of wife, mother, and university student may have seemed incongruous depending upon their socioeconomic class. Doctors, scholars, educators, and politicians engaged in heated, highly publicized debates about the best kind of education for women to receive, and in what kind of environment their education should take place (“From Domesticity”). Wealthy women had been able to earn degrees from Georgia Female College (now known as Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia) since its charter in 1836 and from Oberlin, the first coeducational college, since 1837, but women in the industrial classes had very limited opportunities to pursue liberal or vocational studies beyond primary school (Nerad 19). This essay investigates the history of home economics education at Maryland State College, a program that allowed women in the industrial and working classes to pursue university studies in “domestic service” (Beecher 204).

One of the first people to conceptualize a higher education curriculum for women in the industrial and working classes was Catherine Beecher, a teacher and writer from a Presbyterian family (“Women Working”). Beecher’s experiences as a teacher and manager of higher education institutions for women fueled her argument for gender-based, systematized studies for young women expressed in her 1841 book, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy: For the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and at School*. Young women typically learned to care for a family and a home by helping their mothers, but Beecher believed that this informal education was insufficient (65). She asserted that the only way to amend “the present imperfect, desultory, varying, mode of female education, where studies are begun, changed, partially learned, and forgotten” (68) was to implement “domestic service” (204) studies into women’s course curricula. Beecher’s book was extremely influential in the then-ongoing debates about women’s education, and as a result, “domestic serv-

ice” studies slowly became available at all levels of the public education system. The study of domestic service and home economics¹ served as a “critical pathway into higher education for American women” (“From Domesticity”), and it became a significant area of study for women students at land-grant universities beginning in the 1880s. In recent years, home economics “has become a context for analysis of questions about gender, authority and subordination, and power and control,” especially in higher education settings (Berlage 186).

As a female undergraduate at University of Maryland, College Park, I have become deeply invested in rediscovering the history of women students on my campus. Members of the university community work to acknowledge extraordinary women figures who are essential to campus history (such as Adele H. Stamp, the first dean of women students, for whom the Adele H. Stamp Student Union is named), but the histories of everyday women continue to be ignored. This essay only begins to uncover the forgotten narratives of women students at Maryland, beginning with the admittance of the first woman student in 1916. Three main questions have guided my research about the history of women’s education at Maryland. How and why did home economics become so distinctly targeted toward rural women from the industrial class? How did the “deliberate rhetorical efforts” (Hallenbeck 11) of educators and the government suggest that home economics education was both liberating and constraining for women students? What exactly encompassed home economics education, and did it, in fact, go beyond the domestic sphere? I argue that inconsistencies in the language choices of U.S. educational policies, Maryland educators, and Maryland State College documents regarding home economics reflect disparate, classed, and gendered goals for women’s higher education. Using Maryland’s yearbooks, I trace the history of women students at Maryland State College and consider the creation of Maryland’s School of Home Economics to contend that home economics was a progressive but gendered justification for women’s ascent into higher education. I compare the seemingly egalitarian qualifications for admission to Maryland and the explicitly classed, sexist reasoning behind the home economics program in the 1919 Maryland course catalog to elucidate the specious practice of coeducation. Furthermore, I describe the home economics course offerings and curriculum to suggest that it was more rigorous, scientific, and valuable than most scholars perceive, indicating more progress than regression for women students.

Early twentieth-century women students at Maryland State College took “technical” courses that required laboratory work, and they could earn four-year bachelor of science degrees that theoretically matched those of their male peers (Maryland State College of Agriculture 151). However, women students’ industrious efforts were undermined by societal expectations of appropriate professions for their sex. Most who worked outside the home pursued teaching careers, a traditional profession for women, even though their college degrees qualified them for jobs in other disciplines (Chamberlain 4). My archival research complements Maresi Nerad’s study of the origins of the home economics department at University of California, Berkeley, which demonstrates that women’s and home economics education at Berkeley were similarly gendered. I aim to reconsider the narrative of home economics and women’s education at Maryland in a study akin to those of other feminist scholars before me: Boydston, Cowan, Elias, Goldstein, Gordon, Romines, Stage and Vincenti, and Strasser. I assert that “separate but equal” language choices indicate that home economics was scientific and complex, serving as a circuitous route for women to pursue scientific study and higher education.

The History of Women Students and Home Economics at Maryland, 1916–19

The University of Maryland opened in 1856 as Maryland Agricultural College, a private school funded by landowner Charles Calvert (“University of Maryland Timeline”). Like comparable institutions, Maryland offered an English model of liberal education to the sons of white, wealthy farmers. In its early years the college was primarily funded by private donors and church-



es (Martin 378). Since 1888, applied courses, including agricultural studies, had been taught through the federally funded Agricultural Experiment Station, an extension program that catered to farmers (“University of Maryland Timeline”). Agricultural historian David Danbom suggests that college experiment stations were a step towards professionalism for farmers, who may not have needed a traditional liberal education but wanted to develop new skills (247). The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 proposed to “aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture . . . home economics, and rural energy” (*Cong. Rec.*). The transition of Maryland’s short-course, locally based agricultural programs to academic degree programs taught on its campus can be explained in part by the funding provided by the Smith-Lever Act. It can also be attributed to a shift in the perception of agricultural studies, which began as a pragmatic, nonacademic field but evolved into a scholarly discipline within the liberal arts and sciences. In turn, although home economics was once thought to lack scholarly prestige, its ambiguous inclusion within the field of agricultural studies gave women their first means of access to higher education at land-grant colleges like Maryland.

The first mention of women students at Maryland is documented in the 1917 *Reveille*, the school yearbook. Charlotte Vaux and Elizabeth Hook are pictured on a page titled “M.S.C. Becomes Co-Educational,” which explains that although only two women students have matriculated in the 1916–17 school year, the editors “expect to see courses in Home Economics and Domestic Science installed in the next few years” (Maryland Agricultural College 116). Home economics is not yet listed as a program of study, but the faculty listing includes Mrs. M. T. Moore, “matron” in the Domestic Department and sole female educator (33). Regardless, neither Vaux nor Hook studied home economics; Vaux later received a BS in entomology and Hook earned a two-year agricultural degree, which indicates that they were not forced to study home economics based on their sex (“University of Maryland Timeline”). In fact, Vaux’s inclusion in the first-year agriculture class photo implies that she followed the same course curricula and matriculation plan as her male colleagues. However, neither Vaux nor Hook are listed as members of any social clubs or societies, which suggests that they may have been excluded on the basis of sex.

The success of Vaux and Hook and Alfred F. Woods’s induction as college president account for the exponential influx of women students beginning in 1917. Woods publicly supported women’s pursuit of higher education in traditionally gendered fields. In a 1917 article for *The Town*, a Baltimore-based women’s civic journal, Woods insisted that “special courses for women” should be created within the arts, sciences, and humanities to allow “women to be on equal terms with men.” Woods noted that domestic issues require the “special consideration” of women and that the academic study of the home is “vital to the scientific and efficient home manager.” This language reflects Woods’s support for home economics education for women students at Maryland, which he considered a “foundation in the solution” to problems relating to nutrition, relationships, and disease. Woods asserted that home economics must be viewed as a scholarly discipline if women were to be considered authorities on domestic matters, regardless of their husbands’ academic and social standing. Woods’s identification of women as “home manager[s]” furthers his claim (Women’s Civic League and Woods 4–5). The title of “manager” connotes directorial, supervisory power earned by diligence and hard work; a woman student’s command of this role infinitely increases her agency, especially when compared to the compromised roles of “mother” and “housewife.”

Woods’s advocacy for home economics education truly opened Maryland’s doors to women students; by 1919, ten women students were enrolled at Maryland (“University of Maryland Timeline”). That year, three women educators were hired to operate the School of Home Economics: Agnes Saunders, MA, professor of home economics and acting dean of the School of Home Economics (Maryland Agricultural College, *Reveille* [1919] 16); Frieda M. Wiegand, BA,

assistant professor of textile and clothing; and Mary E. Walton, assistant in home economics (19). Despite the creation of the School of Home Economics, not all of the women students majored in that discipline. Of the ten women students, only three studied domestic science; two studied entomology, one studied botany, three studied animal husbandry, and one, who had already graduated from Chicago University, did “special work” (100). All women students lived in Gerneaux Hall, a converted house that served as both a living space and a practice space for applied work in home economics (101). In addition to their work in academic courses, women students began to engage with the campus community. Pages dedicated to campus life in the 1919 yearbook clarify that literary societies and other clubs began to admit women. In addition, women students formed their own organizations, including an athletic association, and some even became executive board members of organizations, including the school newspaper (174).

Women’s Education and Language Politics

As more women students entered Maryland’s academic and social community, the politics of gender and inclusion became more pronounced. The use of both gender-inclusive and segregative language in the 1919 Maryland course catalog suggests that women students are treated equally in admissions processes but expected to major in home economics. The admissions section states: “Women are admitted to all courses and under the same conditions as men” (Maryland State College of Agriculture 27), which is overtly egalitarian and much more inclusive than what is required by the Smith-Lever Act. The index even lists “Women, admitted to all courses” (208) as an entry for further clarification. This explicit inclusivity acknowledges past debates about women’s education and takes a firm, progressive stance on coeducational equality. The admissions section also uses gender-neutral terms in its description of college entry requirements and procedures; individuals applying to the college are referred to as “candidate,” “applicant,” and “student,” instead of “he” or “she” (27). This purposeful ambiguity invites both male and female applicants to apply for admission and reinforces the aforementioned claim that women will be judged “under the same conditions” as men. Moreover, the industrial chemistry section highlights the opportunities that come from shared courses and coeducation. The possibility that “[t]echnical and education positions are open to men and women trained in various phases of chemical engineering, in plant and animal chemistry, in the analysis of soils, fertilizers, and spray materials, and in food and dairy studies” (89) suggests that women are seen as equally qualified candidates for jobs outside of the home.

In stark contrast, the 1919 Maryland course catalog concurrently emphasizes the importance of home economics while marginalizing the women who study it. Home economics is introduced as a “new course of study for our young men and women,” but immediately thereafter the catalog specifies that “subjects taught in home economics are designed to fit young women” (Maryland State College of Agriculture 151). The phrase “designed to fit” implies that women require special courses appropriate for their sex; it also discourages women from taking the same courses as their male colleagues. Likewise, students are expected to gain “contentment, industry, order, and a womanly feeling of independence and responsibility” from home economics courses. “Contentment” and “womanly feeling[s]” are feminized emotions, not practical skills that can be applied to jobs outside of the home. It is clear that although women students are pursuing higher education, they are not expected to obtain economic or intellectual advancement from their studies. In fact, the suggestion of “womanly feeling[s]” completely excludes male students, although they might theoretically take home economics courses as well, further emphasizing the existence of sex segregation in a legally coeducational public college. The paradox between the apparent belief in coeducational equality and the simultaneous emphasis that home economics education is designed for future (women) homemakers is jarring.

Students who desire to become home economics teachers encounter similarly gendered expectations. It is apparent that home economics education is gendered female, while agricultural, industrial, and general teacher education are gendered male. Thus, “[s]tudents electing home economics education must present evidence of two years’ experience in the home as a house daughter during which time a large share of responsibility in the management of the home was assumed” (Maryland State College of Agriculture 100). It is absolutely impossible for a young man to fulfill this prerequisite, and it is difficult to imagine that a young woman could both attend secondary school and take a leadership role in the management of her home to meet college admission standards. Further, students of agricultural, industrial, and general teacher education are described using the pronoun “he” and are not required to have gendered life experiences to qualify for college admission. This is yet another obvious clue that women were expected to pursue only home economics education, and that the home economics program was designed only for female students.

The Home Economics Curriculum at Maryland

The home economics curriculum is portrayed as practical and modern, commensurate with other scientific disciplines described in the 1919 course catalog. The Maryland State College School of Home Economics was made up of four separate departments: foods and cookery; textiles and clothing; hygiene and health; and institutional and home management (Maryland State College of Agriculture 151). Critics of home economics education often remark that it is rudimentary and lacks depth; however, the need for division among specific fields of study is in itself an argument for the diversity and complexity of the overall curriculum. The departments of food, clothing, and home management seem to be areas specific to mothers and homemakers, but the inclusion of the business-like language describing “institutional” and “management” aspects of the course and the medically inspired department of “hygiene and health” reflect increased career options made possible with college education.

Home economics students were required to follow an intricate four-year plan in order to earn a diploma. Home economics course titles and descriptions evoked a technical, industrious tone that is far removed from the feminized goals for women’s home economics education. In their freshman year, home economics students were required to take “chemistry and quantitative analysis” and mathematics as well as “composition and rhetoric,” “physical education,” “social and economic history of the United States,” and a world language (French, Spanish, or German) (Maryland State College of Agriculture 117–20). It appears that these courses were the same as those taken by male students because there is one general course description for them, not a specific course description for the home economics version of them. However, it is unclear whether male and female students were put in separate classes. For instance, “General Chemistry and Quantitative Analysis” (Chem. 101–103) is taken by home economics students in their first semester, and a course with the exact same title is taken by general chemistry students (88), biochemistry students (92), general education students (104), and mechanical, electrical, and rural engineering students (119–21).

Home economics students also took classes related to the care and keeping of the home and family, including “composition and design,” “freehand perspective art,” “food industries,” “textiles,” “garment construction,” “drafting and elementary dress design,” “dressmaking,” and “education guidance” (Maryland State College of Agriculture 152). Critics of home economics may have considered these courses to be duplicative of students’ personal experiences with housekeeping. Conversely, descriptions for courses such as “food industries” and “garment construction” invoke industrial and scientific language to help change this perception and illuminate women students’ need for higher education. “Food industries” is not simply constructed as a cooking class; instead, the course description suggests that the creation and distribution of food is a valuable science, part of the flourishing home economy. According to the 1919 course catalog, this course

“describes the preparation of various staple foods from the raw state to the finished product in marketable form, and includes a discussion of the composition, nutritive value, and cost of materials” (153). Such wording voices an appeal to *logos*, implying that women who understand nutrition and budgeting are practical, responsible members of their sex who will become successful housekeepers and family administrators.

Like “food industries,” “garment construction” is a technical phrase. The use of “construction” instead of a term emphasizing creativity highlights the scientific approach to something as stereotypically feminine as sewing. “Garment construction” is understandably described as “the making of fundamental stitches” that are “applied” to simple garments, emphasizing its modern practicality. “Drafting” and “elementary dress design” have similarly official, technical auras; they are ambiguously depicted as the “drafting, cutting, fitting, [and] designing of patterns” (Maryland State College of Agriculture 154) to indicate that students will learn skills that can be applied to many household tasks, not simply dressmaking.

Upon completing their introductory coursework, home economics students advanced to other mandatory classes that required more refined skills and a wider knowledge base. Similar to male students who pursued botany, chemistry, biochemistry, and premedical studies, home economics students completed a plethora of upper-level courses, including “zoology,” “organic chemistry,” “bacteriology,” “quantitative analysis,” “history,” “dietetics,” “English,” and “sanitation and public health” (Maryland State College of Agriculture 152). These courses were rigorous and often included weekly science labs, far from the supposed unscholarly courses that were thought to comprise the home economics curriculum; course descriptions suggest that bacteriology and dietetics were two of the most challenging. Bacteriology included topics such as “bacteria and their relation to nature”; “morphology, classification, and identification and species and the different methods of sterilization and disinfection”; “use of experimental animals”; and the “culture characters of representative organisms from the following genera: micrococcus, streptococcus, bacterium, bacillus, pseudomonas and streptothrix [*sic*], protozoa, filterable viruses and immunity” (69). Correspondingly, dietetics involved a study of “the individual in health and disease throughout infancy, childhood, adolescence, adult life, and old age, in light of the chemistry and physiology of digestion, the energy value of food, and the nutritive of the proteins, fats, carbohydrates, and ash constituents” where “typical dietaries [were] planned for each group” (154). It is important to consider that wives and mothers in this historical moment constantly dealt with problems regarding food for their families, the well-being of their children, and caring for the sick, so these academic courses solidified the significance of their labor.

Home economics students were able to choose from a list of over twenty-five electives to complement their core curriculum. These courses were intended to supplement the home economics core curriculum and reflect gendered expectations for women’s education. Elective options included “costume design,” “advanced dressmaking,” “home architecture and decoration,” “household administration,” “problems in preparation and service of food,” “history of the family,” “education of women,” “drapery and advanced technique of clothing,” and more (Maryland State College of Agriculture 152). Although not mandatory, these courses were as demanding as all other curricular requirements. For example, in “household administration,” students learned about “the operation and maintenance of the household; its sanitation, plumbing, furnishing, and equipment” (156). If “household administration” coursework actually included all of these elements, it would mean that women students were learning managerial skills as well as certain aspects of architecture and engineering, not basic knowledge that they could have acquired by modeling their mothers and female superiors.

Students’ elective choices enabled them to specialize in a particular department (“foods and

cookery”; “textiles and clothing”; “hygiene and health”; or “institutional and home management”) or to take other courses that met their personal goals (Maryland State College of Agriculture 152). The ability to choose a specific path within home economics speaks to the disciplinarity of the field and to the college’s perception of women students’ academic abilities. Even if, in reality, advisers or other superiors cajoled home economics students into taking particular elective courses, the course catalog enables women to make their own educational choices and to fit their coursework to their interests and lifestyles. This transfer of power is significant because it implies that women are intelligent enough to choose courses that will be helpful to them, reaffirming their presence on the college campus.

A degree in home economics served a variety of purposes for women. Rigorous courses and lab work gave women students a well-rounded understanding of complex concepts in the sciences, mathematics, and the humanities in addition to a formal education in and scientific understanding of the domestic work of the home. Women in the working and industrial classes had never before had an opportunity to pursue higher education, and some may never have previously studied science or math in a formal setting. Before home economics, science studies were reserved for male students; home economics allowed women to study science alongside men without upsetting the carefully constructed gendered expectations for either sex. Although many students returned to their families and applied their academic coursework to their careers as “home managers” (Women’s Civic League and Woods 4–5), home economics graduates were qualified for jobs in education, agriculture, and the sciences. Most significantly, a degree in home economics professionalized what were once considered to be ordinary women’s duties, such as cooking, sewing, teaching children, and tending to the sick.

The Evolution and Ending of Home Economics Education at Maryland

Over time, the School of Home Economics at Maryland State College continued to increase women’s educational freedom in certain ways while restricting it in others. In the 1950s, the newly created College of Home Economics began targeting both men and women students. However, the program maintained different goals for men and women, not unlike the original, single-gender version of home economics established in 1919. The 1950 course catalog indicates that its program for women “combines good personal development with education for homemaking and for a livelihood,” while young men are “directed toward enriched living, vocationally and avocationally” (University of Maryland, *General and Combined Catalog* 401). The gendered expectation for women to acquire “good personal development” instead of enriched vocational living like their male colleagues suggests that home economics studies still intended to position women solely for success in the home. Although home economics also provided women with education for “a livelihood,” the focus on homemaking implies that women can best support themselves and their families as homemakers. This distinction points to the reality of coeducation, which was interpreted as men and women attending college on the same campus but pursuing higher education for completely different reasons.

The 1950 yearbook further capitalizes on gendered education; it explicitly states that as the College of Home Economics “has modernized its curriculum and its equipment, [the college] has also modernized its outlook and is now preparing young women for careers and vice versa” (University of Maryland, *The Terrapin* 118). The words “vice versa” indicate that the college is both preparing women students for careers and is preparing careers for women students; this duality indicates a shift from the early goals of home economics, which were to equip women students for success as homemakers or home economics teachers. The yearbook acknowledges the transition into coeducation for home economics students, explaining, “Perhaps the thought of having men in home economics still has a startling connotation, but actually the male is invading the

women's world without hesitation" (121). The use of the word "invading" suggests that although coeducation implies social progress, emphasis on the unequal power relationship between men and women students signifies regression. At this moment, home economics had empowered women within and beyond their family lives for more than thirty years; however, this statement indicates that the mere presence of male home economics students represses female students and that male students are eager to subordinate their female peers. Although the program is supposedly coeducational, male home economics students follow a slightly different curriculum. Male students cannot live in the home economics practice house, so they are not required to engage in the same kinds of applied learning as their female counterparts. They are also allowed to substitute certain courses if they are specializing in "textiles and clothing" (121); the course catalog does not provide any explicit reasons for this difference. It is evident that even though men have the opportunity to study home economics, their learning experience differs immensely.

The College of Home Economics retained popularity, eventually subdividing general home economics into three majors by the 1960s: "General Home Economics," which gave students a "good basis for personal development, for education in family living, and for job opportunities requiring a general knowledge of . . . home economics" (University of Maryland, *Combined Catalog* 620); "Home Economics Education," for students "preparing to teach vocational or general home economics" (629); and "Home Economics Extension," which "provides training for home demonstration work" (623). The courses were primarily coeducational, but the course catalog indicates that certain courses, like "basic air science," were solely for male students, while "personal health" and "community health" were designated for women only (629); these divisions reinforced the notion of gendered education. Later, home economics shifted from its own college to a division of the Department of Industrial, Technological, and Occupational Education. The general home economics major was eliminated, but home economics teacher education remained. Home economics teacher education of the 1980s and 1990s was "designed for students who are preparing to teach home economics and [includes] study in each area of home economics and the supporting disciplines" (University of Maryland, *Undergraduate Catalog* 1991 120). "Introductory psychology," "sociology," "biology," and economics courses, along with content courses such as "decision-making in family living," "scientific principles of food preparation and management," "family and household management," "design and furnishings in the home," and more were required to earn the bachelor of science degree (123).


In 1992, recommendations to the University Senate suggested that home economics education should be phased out and a new program developed (University of Maryland, *Undergraduate Catalog* 106). The program was officially closed to new enrollment in 1993, ending more than seventy years of home economics study at Maryland (University of Maryland, *Undergraduate Catalog* 104). The 1994 yearbook notes, "Although the College of Education suffered a loss with the planned elimination of the Department of Industrial and Technological Operations [in which home economics education was housed] in the fall of 1994, it was still able to provide a great number of outstanding projects and programs" (University of Maryland, *Terrapin* 176). It is unclear if a new program meant to directly replace home economics was developed.

Conclusion

The changes in and eventual elimination of the home economics program at Maryland demonstrates that the study of home economics is innately connected to the politics of class, gender, and higher education. Throughout the twentieth century, language used to describe women's collegiate education and the study of home economics varied greatly, often within a single document. Policy makers and educators aimed to market the scientific, resourceful elements of home economics while ensuring that it forced women to remain in socially appropriate feminized roles. Discordant

language choices both supported women's need for higher education and suppressed their ability to pursue studies outside of home economics. Maryland president Alfred F. Woods supported the need for formal higher education for women, as indicated in U.S. government policies; he advocated for women to take a leadership role in the home and to use academic studies at land-grant universities like Maryland to improve family life. Maryland course catalogs and yearbooks, especially the 1917–19 versions, present contradictory information: nominally espousing equal opportunities for women students and yet assuming that women will study only home economics. In the 1919 course catalog, egalitarian terms in the admission section are staunchly incompatible with the description of the new School of Home Economics, with a program “designed to fit” women students. The 1917–19 yearbooks illuminate that women pursued entomology, botany, and other scholarly disciplines before the creation of the School of Home Economics; after its implementation, it appears that women students were restricted to the study of home economics.

The conflicting ideologies regarding women's education expressed in these sources are epitomized in the home economics course curriculum. Courses were standardized, methodological, and scientific. Course descriptions authenticated that dressmaking, food preparation, and other home skills were not learned by natural aptitude or by simply modeling older women; instead, the descriptions highlighted the applied, technical nature of these practices and demonstrated how they were vital to the social and economic success of a family. In addition, home economics students were required to take a number of rigorous science courses, such as organic chemistry, botany, dietetics, and bacteriology, which challenges the notion that home economics lacked academic validity. Although the School of Home Economics at Maryland was created to educate women in the industrial class about domestic matters related to their lived experiences, a home economics education offered so much more. Home economics opened the doors for women students to attend Maryland State College and allowed women to engage in science studies that would not have been available to them otherwise. The applied nature of the coursework was particularly useful to early twentieth-century women's lives, and it gave women a chance to rise from the subordinated “housekeeper” to the more powerful, more knowledgeable “home manager.” Elective options gave women a chance to fit their college education to their personal needs without risking or delegitimizing their standard coursework.

The evolution of the home economics program and course offerings begets a number of questions. How many women students earned home economics degrees and were hired into professional, public-sphere positions? Were the change in course offerings and the shift to complete coeducation in the 1950s related to post–World War II cultural politics? Does the elimination of the home economics program at Maryland suggest that there is no longer a need for domestic or applied science education? It is imperative to acknowledge the first women students in the School of Home Economics who pioneered the university education that women students at Maryland receive today. By analyzing curricular documents associated with early women's education at Maryland, we can begin to make sense of why certain academic disciplines remain overtly classed and gendered as well as acknowledge the subtleties that perpetuate these norms. In the developing tradition of feminist historiography, we can rewrite the narrative of home economics education at Maryland in a way that examines the multifaceted experiences of women students and legitimizes their pursuit of higher education. 

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Note

¹ Although Beecher used the term “domestic service” to refer to the academic “functions and goals” of homemaking, this work has also been called domestic science, domestic economy, domestic arts, home economy (Holt 4) and, in the mid-twentieth century, home economics (“From Domesticity”). Each of these terms once denoted a specific concept, but they were often used interchangeably and therefore lost their individual meanings over time (Holt 4). In this essay, I will use the term “home economics” to describe this field because Maryland State College’s “domestic service” studies program consisted of the “home economics” major, which was housed in the School of Home Economics.

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