A Forgotten Episode in the History of Management Education: The Department of Secretarial Science at Waterloo College

The purpose of this research was to understand the role of departments of secretarial science in the history of management education. The evolution of this department at Waterloo College was traced from its inception in 1954 to its demise in 1962 through archival records and interviews with its graduates and professors.

Research Purpose

The research project described here examines the history of the Department of Secretarial Science at Waterloo College (the predecessor of Waterloo Lutheran University and Wilfrid Laurier University) from its inception in 1954 to its demise in 1962. Our research helps to clarify the evolution of management education at Wilfrid Laurier University, with particular emphasis on the changing nature of education for women students and faculty.

The Department of Secretarial Science was a major academic unit within this small college, with a role of preparing women for careers in business. There were three full-time faculty members in the Department in 1957-58, while the Departments of Business Administration and Economics had just a single member each. While Economics and Business have grown into large departments, the Department of Secretarial Science has largely vanished from institutional memory.

This pattern of segregating business education for young women and men was not unique to Waterloo College but was widely practiced in Canada and the United States. As such, our project is important both for the history of Waterloo College and the history of management education. This aspect of the history of management education has been largely ignored and forgotten. In truth, it may be an embarrassing aspect of our educational heritage because it would seem to reflect a stereotyped and demeaning vision of appropriate roles for women.

Three sources of data were used to construct a history of the Department of Secretarial Science. First, a literature review was conducted of past research on commercial education programs for women. This enabled us to understand the historical context from which programs in secretarial science emerged. Second, archival research was pursued at the University of Western Ontario and Wilfrid Laurier University. This provided the official records of discussions and decisions at the Academic Senate (and other bodies) concerning the Department of Secretarial Science. Third, interviews were conducted with former students and faculty members of the Department. This allowed us to better understand the reasons why students enrolled in the program, their experiences in the program, and their subsequent careers in business.

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Past Research on Commercial Education for Women

To understand how departments of secretarial science emerged at universities, it is necessary to examine how education and work for women has evolved in the past century. Weiss (1981) has described how the rise of modern clerical work in the latter part of the nineteenth century created employment opportunities for women. This occupational category grew at approximately 6 times the rate of labour force growth from 1870 to 1900 in the US. This in turn created strong demand for clerical training, which gave rise to private commercial schools across the US and Canada. Secondary schools also began to offer two to four year commercial programs using the private commercial schools as their models. During this time, clerical programs became increasingly the domain of women. It is interesting to note that women comprised just 4% of commercial school enrolment in 1871 but this grew to 36% by 1900. Similarly, women comprised just 5% of the clerical workforce in 1880, but this grew quickly to 18% by 1890, 27% by 1900, and 52% by 1930. Stenographers and typists were almost exclusively women (92%) by 1920. The numbers of women office workers in the United States went from less than 1,000 in 1870, to 100,000 by 1910, to 1,000,000 by 1920 (Powers, 1992). Weiss suggested that during the 1910s and 1920s the nature of clerical work deteriorated through increased mechanization and specialization. The result was that clerical workers became less familiar with the overall functions of the organization and were thus less prepared to assume roles of greater responsibility than had been true in the past. The reduction in the range of skills and the increasing numbers of women in these jobs were also associated with relatively less pay than in the past. Despite these drawbacks, clerical work was a very popular career choice for women.

Surveys of the career aspirations of young women in the period from 1916-1931 revealed that clerical work was the most preferred occupation, with teaching being second in preference (Powers, p. 114). There were several attractive features of this occupation for women. Office work was viewed as a vocation for the middle classes, much like teaching, and thus possessed both status and respectability. Office work also offered a variety of opportunities and settings in which to work including, corporate, legal, medical, retail, and industrial. Although attractive for these reasons, the nature of clerical work and education for women appeared to have been guided largely by assumptions about social order. The “…cultural myth/reality of female dependence on male authority and guidance was replicated in offices and commercial education programs…” (Powers, p. 117).

Blackmore (1987) has described the process by which the segregation of women and men in commercial education evolved in Australia during the period 1935-1960. Commercial programs at the secondary level came after those offered by the private commercial schools, as was true in the US. The debate for educators in the public system revolved around the design of the curriculum for men and women. Rather than the specific training of the private schools, educators believed that public commercial courses for men should be integrated into a general education that taught the underlying principles and background for commerce. Young women, in contrast, were expected to acquire only specific skills in their courses. This notion of what was appropriate commercial education and training for young men and women reflected employer expectations. As early as 1900, clerical work for women was associated with typing, stenography and filing, while for men this work was the beginning of a career path into management.

The reasons women were directed into a narrow range of clerical occupations may be attributed to stereotyped views of their motives and capabilities. For example, women were formally barred in Australia from competing in examinations for higher clerical positions in the public service. The justification for this exclusion was contained in the Royal Commission on the Public Service
Administration in 1920-21: “…experience throughout the world is that equal services are not rendered, owing to the fact that constitutionally women are unable to give the same continuous effort as men” (Blackmore, p.34). A survey of employers in 1937 revealed the beliefs that young women lacked a career orientation and were in an organization for only a short time until they left to begin marriage and a home. Such stereotyped views of the roles and capabilities of women undoubtedly persist.

Truss, Goffee, and Jones (1995) examined secretarial work in several European countries and found that the nature of the work was consistent with stereotyped views of women’s roles in society. They identified 3 aspects of secretarial work that support their contention. First, a secretary’s status is contingent on the status of her boss, in the same way that a wife’s status depends upon the status of her husband. Second, the secretary shows deference and adapts her working style to that of the boss, much as a wife adapts her style to that of her husband. As a consequence, personality characteristics related to understanding and intuition became informal requirements for the job. Third, the secretary is engaged in custodial tasks, such as receiving and attending to visitors, watering plants, and making coffee, which correspond to the domestic duties performed by a wife.

Several investigations have helped to clarify the nature of the stereotypes that have served to confine women to a narrow range of roles within organizations, and preclude them from management. Schein (1973; 1975) noted that only a small percentage of middle and senior managers were women and proposed that sex role stereotypes were largely responsible. Schein found that successful middle managers were perceived to possess characteristics associated with men rather than with women. These included leadership ability, responsibility, self-confidence, and objectivity, among others. This suggests that women may be viewed as less qualified than their male counterparts for positions in management. Heilman, Block, Martell, and Simon (1989) sought to discover if positive changes in attitudes toward women had occurred since the time of Schein’s research. Heilman et al. found that descriptions of successful middle managers corresponded closely to descriptions of men but not of women. The authors concluded that stereotypes about women are deeply embedded in our society and remarkably resistant to change. Tomkiewicz and Hughes (1993) have shown that women who pursue studies in Business Administration at university differ from women who choose studies in Administrative Sciences. The curriculum in Business Administration prepares students for careers at the management level whereas the curriculum in Office Supervision and Administrative Studies prepares students for administrative support roles. Women students in the latter programs subscribed to more traditional views of the roles of women whereas women students in Business subscribed to more egalitarian views.

Women and Universities

Women began entering universities in increasing numbers in the early 20th Century. Several studies have examined the experiences of women at Canadian universities during this time. Neatby (1989) focussed on women at Queen’s University in the 1920s. In this decade, the proportion of women enrolled at universities rose from 16.3% in 1919-20 to 23.5% in 1929-30. Neatby examined the archival records of first year female and male students from 1925 and supplemented this with interviews of graduates from this era. Women tended to have fathers with higher status jobs and higher income than was true for men. Further, most women remember their parents encouraging them to pursue a university education. The career opportunities for women with post-secondary education were bleak in 1920s. The jobs available to women (teaching, nursing and secretarial work) did not require a university education and the professions that did require such credentials were closed to women. In fact, pursuing a university education could hinder one’s chances in those fields. Further, it was assumed that work in a woman’s life was meant to be temporary, an interlude before
marriage and family. The career ambiguity for women was evident in the archival records. More than half of the women did not have an intended profession on enrolling, compared to just one third of the men. Of women who had career goals, 90% intended to go into teaching. Men were more likely to describe a variety of career options.

Gleason (1992) has described the educational experiences for women at Assumption College in the period from 1950 to 1957. This institution was, during the period of the study, like Waterloo College, affiliated with the University of Western Ontario. Assumption College later evolved into the University of Windsor. Women had a separate and different educational experience on campus. Gleason suggests that although coeducation began in 1950, perceptions of women’s roles shaped the nature of their educational experiences, and segregated them at the College. In 1957 there was one female for every six males on campus. Gleason found very little involvement of women in less traditional fields. An examination of enrolments in the various faculties for 1956-57 showed that female students did not enter commerce or the pure and applied sciences to the same extent as general arts. Only a single woman was enrolled each year in commerce from 1956 to 1958. Stereotypes regarding roles for women created a climate where women were treated as “other” on campus.

Research on the History of Management Education in Canada

Pupo (1985) has described the development of business and commercial education in Ontario from 1900 to 1960. The commercial curriculum that evolved in Ontario largely mirrored the existing social and political order. In 1871 the School Act was broadened to include commercial courses and by 1891 the Education Act allowed commercial departments to be established in high schools. Pupo suggests that programs for women were typically designed to enable them to assist with the administration of business through courses in typing, stenography, shorthand and bookkeeping. Men, in contrast, had a broader range of courses available to them, including those in insurance, banking, stock markets, shipping and trade, in order to prepare them for more substantial roles in business. A Royal Commission on Industrial Training and Technical Education headed by John Seath in 1912 recommended the creation of two business programs: A four year general program to prepare students for positions of greater responsibility and a three year office program to prepare students for lesser responsibility, such as bookkeepers, accountants, stenographers, and secretaries (Pupo, p. 83).

Departments of Business and Commerce were established at Queen’s University in 1919 and the University of Toronto in 1921. The School of Business Administration at the University of Western Ontario was established in 1920 with the support and encouragement of the business community. According to Pupo, the emphasis of Western’s program was to develop students who would adopt “the business point of view.” In 1926, the Department of Secretarial Science at Western was created.

The Secretarial Science Program at Waterloo College

A transfer program in secretarial science was offered at Waterloo College beginning in 1938-39. Students would commence their studies at Waterloo College and then transfer to the University of Western Ontario to complete their degree. Such arrangements were common at Waterloo College since it was affiliated with Western and had only 10 full time faculty members in 1938-39. The decision to expand to a full program was likely made no later than 1953-54 when the full time faculty complement was 11 (see table 1). At the same time, a full time appointment was made in Economics. The researchers did not encounter any documents (or individuals) that could shed light on why the decision was made to offer a full program in secretarial science beginning in 1954, rather than
pursuing other program possibilities.

Table 1

Complement of Full Time Faculty at Waterloo College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>a</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>c</th>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963-64</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: 1953-54 (a,b,c,d)
1953-54 indicates calendar issue
a=full-time faculty at College
b=full-time business
c=full-time economics
d=full-time secretarial science

The researchers examined available documents from the University Archives at the University of Western Ontario and Wilfrid Laurier University. These included the minutes of Senate meetings and the university calendars. In the former, we primarily sought information regarding the issues surrounding the creation and eventual closure of the program, and in the latter, information on program requirements. Although official documents chronicle the decisions made over time, they typically do not cast much light on the discussions and reasons leading up to these decisions. Most important, such documents cannot capture the experiences of the faculty, students and graduates of the program.

The Department of Secretarial Science had a short life of only eight years from when the department commenced in 1954 to when it was terminated in 1962. In that brief period, the institution changed dramatically. The nucleus of what would become the University of Waterloo split from Waterloo College in 1957, and the College itself ended its affiliation with the University of Western Ontario and became Waterloo Lutheran University in 1960. The full-time faculty complement of the institution nearly quadrupled during this time, yet the size of Secretarial Science remained constant. The Secretarial Science program had not grown significantly and there was no reason to expect that to change. Although the numbers of women attending Waterloo College and then Waterloo Lutheran University grew, the numbers interested in secretarial studies were stagnant. When the program was discontinued in 1962, arrangements were made to allow students to complete their degrees. Esther Brandon, who was an Assistant Professor in Secretarial Science, joined the Business Department but reverted to the rank of Lecturer. She served through 1964-65. The two other full-time faculty members left the University.

The Secretarial Science program was a three-year general degree that included a mixture of university courses from the humanities and social sciences coupled with secretarial science courses. Students without Grade XIII could enter a preliminary year that paralleled the high school curriculum. Although the program was open to males, the students were almost entirely female and promotional materials were directed toward young women (see figure 1). The Secretarial Science courses were
clearly different from those offered elsewhere at the College due to their vocational nature (see table 2). In addition, the qualifications of its faculty were lower than those of other faculty. It can be conjectured that Secretarial Science was of lower status due to its subject matter and perhaps also the gender of its students. Indeed, a former student said that others on campus viewed the program as “…on the bottom of the pile.”

The Waterloo Lutheran program was discontinued yet similar programs at the University of Western Ontario and elsewhere continued for many years. Archival records did not offer any insights concerning the decision to disband the program. One former Secretarial Science faculty member informed us that the program was closed because the university lacked adequate laboratory space for its science programs and would be unable to grant degrees unless it rectified the situation. The space used by the Secretarial Science program was quickly converted for the science programs. Decision processes at that time at Waterloo Lutheran University were not collegial and the Secretarial Science faculty members did not appear to be involved in the decision.

The researchers were unaware of the existence of this program until they came upon documentary evidence during the course of a different project. When several faculty members and senior administrators who served in that era were asked about the program, they acknowledged its existence and offered little more. It appeared that a conscious effort was made to erase the institutional memory of the program and the circumstances surrounding its disbandment. This was a chapter in the institution’s history that was best forgotten.

**Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with 17 graduates (16 women and 1 man) from the Secretarial Science Program during the years 1957 to 1962 and with 2 former faculty members (both women). Addresses and phone numbers were obtained from the records of the alumni office at Wilfrid Laurier. Only 1 graduate declined the opportunity to participate in the study and we were unable to contact 5 graduates.

**Interview Process**

A letter was sent to each of the former faculty and graduates inviting them to participate in a study of the “History of the Department of Secretarial Science.” A copy of the questions to be posed to participants was also included in the letter. Since most of the questions referred to thoughts, feelings, and events that had occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s, participants were given several weeks to think about the questions before they were contacted for an interview.

Prior to conducting the interview, the interviewer reviewed the nature of the research project and then explained the participant’s rights. The interviews are best described as semi-structured, with predetermined questions addressing specific themes and then follow-up questions based on the participant’s responses to clarify and explore a topic in depth. The themes of the interview questions to participants were: Their reasons for coming to Waterloo College; their impressions of the College; their recollections of the courses, faculty, and fellow students in the program; their involvement in events and clubs at the College; their satisfaction with the program; and their careers following graduation.
Figure 1

Print Advertisement for Secretarial Science Program

GIRLS!
What’s YOUR ambition...
OFFICE MANAGER
PRIVATE SECRETARY
PERSONNEL MANAGER
TEACHER

"Secretarial Science"
A NEW DEGREE COURSE at WATERLOO COLLEGE
fits you for these and many other top-salary positions

"I know where I'm going", so stated a popular song
of a few years back. Possibly, like the girl who sang that
song, you have a pretty good idea of the kind of business
career you would like. If so, you'll probably welcome any
advisement that will make the achieving of your ambition
quicker, perhaps easier. Secretarial Science can do just
that for you.

A University of Western Ontario Course

The Secretarial Science course given by the University of
Western Ontario during the past 35 years has proved its
ability to give girls a definite advantage in business. It is
in the same course, leading to the same degree that Waterloo
College plans to make available to you.

Secretarial Science gives you not only an extensive and
up-to-date practical training, but also the cultured back-
ground of a sound university education. Modern business
needs young women who have developed skill and energy
to study advanced business techniques... young women who have been trained to think logically and
take responsibility.

For complete information
Phone the Dean at
Waterloo College, 7-7937
or mail this coupon

Waterloo College
WATERLOO, ONTARIO
AFFILIATED WITH UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
Table 2

Secretarial Science Courses for Waterloo College
Excerpts from the University of Western Ontario Calendar, 1955-56

Note that students with four Grade XIII credits entered at year 2

28-29. **Shorthand and Typewriting:** Pitman’s Shorthand: theory; speed up to 60 words a minute, and typed transcription of notes. Touch system of typewriting; care of machine; letter styles; copying from manuscript and printed matter; centering; accuracy; and timed tests.
   12 hours a week

30. **Accounting and Bookkeeping:** Prescribed for Secretarial Science students.
   2 hours a week

36. **Business Mathematics:**
   2 hours a week

37. **Office Practice:** The foundation of the work in Office Practice is laid in the third year. Lectures are given in office methods, and actual duties are undertaken in the Secretarial Science Office.
   3 hours a week

38-39. **Shorthand and Typewriting:** Shorthand speed up to 100 words a minute; typed translation of notes; typewriting from manuscript; tabulation; carbon copies; telegrams; financial statements; methods of duplicating; accuracy and timed tests.
   12 hours a week

47. **Office Practice:** The responsible duties of the various members of an office staff and the operation of modern office equipment are undertaken by the fourth year students. Units of work are assigned in rotation. Lectures are given on secretarial duties, office organization, the administration of services, and the problem of office personnel.
   15 hours a week

48-49. **Shorthand and Typewriting:** Shorthand speed up to 130 words a minute; typed transcription of notes; typewriting speed up to 60 words a minute; typing from advanced copy (technical matter, foreign languages) and from dictation.
   10 hours a week
Interview Results

Two faculty members were interviewed as to their recollections and impressions of the program. One faculty member was there from the beginning of the program in 1954 to its end in 1962, at which point she transferred to Student Services as an international student advisor. The other faculty member taught in the department for just two years and then pursued a career in teaching at a high school. For both, their impressions of Waterloo College were of a small, intimate college with a family atmosphere. This was very helpful to the students, because “the majority were from rural areas.” Waterloo College was described as “… out to give education to a group that couldn’t afford to go to Western or McGill.” One faculty member mentioned how she “admired the dedication of faculty to education. Anything they attempted to do, they tried to do very well. You became very loyal to the school.” The College had a reputation reflected in the expression that “It was easy to get into Waterloo College, but not easy to get out with a degree.” The Department of Secretarial Science was viewed by others on campus as being “on the bottom of the pile.”

Contrary to our expectations that women students would have felt isolated on campus by virtue of their small numbers and being in a program that reflected the limitations that society placed upon women, the graduates were exceedingly positive about their program and experiences at Waterloo College. Illustrative comments from graduates are provided below.

Reasons for Attending Waterloo College

As described by one participant, “In general, women didn’t go into higher education.” Women who did studied teaching or nursing. Women who pursued Secretarial Science saw greater choice in their career options: “I felt it would give me options when I went out to work, whereas an Arts degree would only lead to teaching. I didn’t think I would want to teach, but I did end up teaching commercial subjects at high school.” One person mentioned that the reason for coming to Waterloo College came through the connection with the Lutheran Church. She talked to her pastor about university and the pastor took her to meet Dean Schaus, a “dignified, gentle, approachable” individual, who convinced her that Waterloo College and the Secretarial Science program would be right for her.

The Secretarial Science Program

One graduate felt that the program was “slotting people into certain areas. They could have raised the bar. It was a high school course at the university level. We should have done more of the conceptual rather than the hands on.” This person also thought that it was a “perfect program. It gave me a chance, very kind people there, very warm and very flexible. For me, it was an excellent transition program. Happy, no regrets.” Others described it as a “wonderful program for women” and a “fantastic education”.

Many graduates mentioned the exceptional instructors inside and outside of the Secretarial Science program. According to one student, “The rapport between teacher and student was wonderful.” Ms. Brandon of Secretarial Science was remembered as a very kind and dignified person. Ms. Benno was described as “a lovely woman and excellent teacher.” Herman Overgaard of the Business Department was regarded as someone who was committed to ethics and who they approached for counsel regarding their careers. Flora Roy and Jim Clark of English, and Don Morgenson of Psychology, were described by many graduates as inspiring instructors: “I never wanted her lectures to end” and “I loved their courses.”
Life On Campus

Women comprised just 10% of the student body during this era at the College. They did not feel isolated or unwelcome on campus: “I enjoyed the friendly family atmosphere of Waterloo College.” Many of the students lived on campus: “They made you feel welcome. There were 21 of us in the women’s residence in an old house on Albert Street. We were close knit, made friends easier. I’m glad I did that. We had a house mother, a widow of a Lutheran pastor. She was someone who cared, who talked to us, and baked cakes for our birthdays. Our house mother wanted all the girls to go church. We had chapel every night at 10 pm.”

The activities of students extended beyond the classroom: “it was so small you got involved in everything.” Virtually every graduate echoed similar sentiments: “We could do everything, belong to everything.” Students played badminton, baseball, and basketball, did track and field, fenced, wrote for the student newspaper, and sang and danced in the Purple and Gold show. The friendly atmosphere and culture of involvement seemed perfectly suited to the types of women students attending Waterloo College: “For myself, coming from a small town, I would have disappeared in a larger place.” In sum, “I really loved my years at Waterloo College.”

Careers Following Graduation

Many of the graduates of the Secretarial Science program became high school commercial education teachers (10 of 17). One student completed a second BA at Waterloo Lutheran, the combined Secretarial Science and Business Administration program, and then completed an MBA at the University of Western Ontario. This individual worked in the public and private sector for a few years and then became a high school teacher. Another person pursued her PhD and became a university professor.

Five of the graduates pursued careers in business. One of the graduates who went into business described her career this way: “For me personally, at that period in my life, the Secretarial Science Program at Waterloo College was the right choice. Teaching was not for me. The degree got me in the door; businessmen were intrigued that I had a degree. It got me into a higher-level job at the university, and then into a major corporation. In the mid-1980s they were looking for women with degrees and I had one already. I stayed with them for over 30 years, as a secretary for 22 years, and in administration the last 8 or 9 years.”

Personal Benefits

Most of the graduates discussed the personal growth they experienced at Waterloo College. A graduate suggested that “we had a really good time as well as learning, a nice balance” and for another it was “the best experience for me socially.” Most graduates remained connected over the years: “We stayed in touch after graduation. We all retired around the same time. We have a reunion every year. It started as a small overnight thing but now we go on 3-4 day outings. It’s the main event of the year.”
Conclusions

Secretarial science programs have been a largely forgotten episode in the history of management education. In this study we investigated the history of one such program in a small college. Through a review of past literature on business and commercial education for women, archival research at two universities, and interviews with former faculty and graduates of the program, we attempt to understand the nature and context of this program, and the experiences of those who were directly involved. Clearly the origins of secretarial science programs reside in the stereotyped views of women's roles in the business community and the larger culture in the 20th Century. Universities in general, and Waterloo College in particular, created programs for women that reflected these narrow views.

Waterloo College arguably created this program relatively late in the life cycle of secretarial science as a field of choice for young women. The resultant secretarial science program was an unusual mix of highly vocational subjects embedded in a liberal arts experience. This vocational orientation soon became an issue as Waterloo College evolved into a university with strong programs in the humanities, social sciences and sciences. The decision to close the program was not surprising given the rapid evolution of both the host institution and business education. One unfortunate aspect of the program closure, however, was that it appears to have reduced educational opportunities for young women with interests in business. Men dominated the growing business program at the new Waterloo Lutheran University. In the period 1962-1967, only 3 of the 103 degrees in business were granted to women.

Although the origins of the Secretarial Science Program at Waterloo College may be troubling, the views of the graduates were exceedingly positive. The program provided an educational opportunity for a group who might otherwise not have pursued post secondary education. The program also proved to be highly beneficial in their careers and in their personal lives. The experience of studying at a small, intimate college also afforded the opportunity to form life long friendships.

References


Pupo, N. J., Educational promises and efficiency ideals: The development of management education


