

## **From the Kitchens to the Chancellorship: Women at the University of Ottawa**

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One hundred years ago, there were no female students at the University of Ottawa, since this Oblate institution admitted only young men. Of course, there were a few women working at the institution, but they were all members of the *Petites sœurs de la Sainte-Famille*, a religious order relegated to domestic chores, specifically kitchen, laundry and housekeeping duties.

However, things changed quickly in 1922 when four members of female religious orders were granted university diplomas. Even so, these women did not attend the University of Ottawa, but rather its affiliated colleges led by religious orders.

### **The first women students**

It wasn't until 1923, with the creation of the a teaching school, namely *l'École de pédagogie*, (which would become *l'École normale* in 1927), and later, in 1933, with the founding of a nursing school known as *l'École des garde-malades* and finally in 1956, with the creation of a school of home economics known as *l'École des sciences domestiques*, that the Sandy Hill campus would begin to see young women as students.

In 1929, Bernadette Tarte and Rita Roy were the first lay women to receive a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Ottawa. Four years later, Sister Joseph-Arthur (Claire Laramée) and Thérèse Archambault were the first to be awarded doctoral degrees. However, these women were certainly the exception to the rule back then.

These three schools played a major role in the progress of female students because they specialized in areas largely dominated by women, particularly nursing and home economics.

In fact, there were no male students in home economics: the school aimed to impart all the theoretical and practical knowledge required to run a household, a goal that was not appealing to men. Eventually, however, this school would become the School of Nutrition.

In contrast, a 1957 photo of the graduates of the Faculty of Arts is one of the first to show feminine faces, evidence that women were now entering new disciplines. That said, these women were still pioneers.

The University's administrators were quite conscious of the imbalance in the number of men and women on campus after the Second World War, which explains their decision in the late-1950s to hire Éveline LeBlanc, the first recruiter of young women. She aimed to increase the number of female students,

especially in traditional areas. Although she did not believe that women should be admitted into the sciences, mathematics or the Faculty of Medicine, Éveline LeBlanc still managed to increase the proportion of female students to 20% by the time the University was restructured as a public institution in 1965. In recognition, she has a hall named in her honour, one of the few buildings to commemorate the presence of women on campus.

### **Female staff members**

From 1859 to 1902, the *Sœurs de la Charité* religious order were responsible for all domestic duties at the University of Ottawa. In 1902, this role was taken over by the *Petites Sœurs de la Sainte-Famille*, whose members lived discretely in a convent behind Tabaret Hall. With the creation of the *École normale*, the nursing school and the home economics school, the first women directors and professors were hired.

Before the Second World War, office work was not considered suitable for women, and it was considered unseemly to have a young woman spend an entire day in the same office as an Oblate father.

One notable exception was Bernadette Tarte, the first professional lay woman to work as a librarian at the *École normale*. In recognition of Bernadette Tarte's accomplishments, when the University of Ottawa's daycare centre opened its doors, it was named in her honour.

It wasn't until 1959 that a woman was named to the Senate, namely Sister Madeleine de Jésus (Corinne Laflamme), who was then Director of the School of Nursing. The following year saw Margaret Beznack become the first woman to head a department, in her case, the Department of Physiology.

Margaret Beznack was a remarkable woman who was a trail-blazer in many ways: in 1968, she became the first woman member of the Board of Governors. Afterwards, she became the first vice-dean and then the first woman dean when she was named Dean of the Faculty of Medicine. The University of Ottawa owes this pioneer a great debt, but strangely, there is nothing to commemorate her role on campus.

### **After 1965**

In 1965, the Oblate Fathers, who had managed the institution since 1848, left the University of Ottawa to manage Saint Paul University. Thanks to funding from the Ontario government, the number of students quickly increased, including the number of female students, who could be found in virtually all fields. However, women were still underrepresented in graduate studies. In 1965, the school of home economics became the School of Nutrition.

During the 1970s, senior managers at the university strove to hire greater numbers of female professors, but these efforts were hardly very successful: in 1998, only one fourth of the professors on campus were women. It wasn't until 1984 that a woman was promoted to a senior management position, namely when Susan Man became Vice-President, Teaching and Research. A lovely heritage home on Seraphin Marion street, which houses the Institute of Women's Studies, bears her name.

### **Women today**

As we have seen, the University of Ottawa awarded its first diplomas to women in the early 1920s. At that time, it would have been hard to imagine that less than one century later, female students would outnumber their male counterparts in this institution that was once a male preserve.

Today, female students are unquestionably a majority: 60% of undergraduates, and over 55% of graduate students, are women. The only field in which they are still underrepresented is engineering. Women also account for one third of the professors and this percentage continues to increase.

Although the University of Ottawa has yet to have a woman at its helm as President, Saint Paul University, which is federated with uOttawa, has had a female president, Chantal Beauvais, since 2009. Even so, women are well-represented in senior management at uOttawa, with Diane Davidson as Vice-President, Governance and Mona Nemer, as Vice-President, Research. And we certainly must mention former governor general of Canada the Right Honourable, Michaëlle Jean, who has been Chancellor since 2012, and who succeeded eminent Franco-Ontarian and senior public servant Huguette Labelle. It is interesting to note that from 1889 to 1965, the prestigious position of Chancellor had always been reserved for the Catholic Archbishop of Ottawa. In 1966, Pauline Vanier, the spouse of Governor General of Canada Georges P. Vanier, became the first woman, and the first lay person, to be named Chancellor.

Finally, we must also mention the women who have led the faculties, schools, institutes and administrative services.

That said, we are still some ways away from complete equality in certain areas of this educational institution. For example, of the ten deans, only one is a woman, namely Sylvie Lauzon of the Faculty of Health Sciences.

In summary, the status of women at the University of Ottawa genuinely mirrors the changes in Canadian society over the past decades. Women are now present at every academic and administrative level in the institution that was established on Sandy Hill in 1856.

To learn more about the history of women at the University of Ottawa, contact the University Archives, 100 Marie Curie, Room 012, telephone: 613-562-5750, [archives@uottawa.ca](mailto:archives@uottawa.ca)