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Women's Activism and the Founding of
Dutchess Community College, 1955-1960

Thank you to Dean Van Winkle for the introduction, and to Linda and Trish for the invitation to speak at this event. My wife Kari and I are delighted to be here. My address tonight is on the role AAUW, among other women's groups, in the founding of Dutchess Community College in 1957. I should qualify that I'm not an historian of Dutchess County, nor was I around then. Some of you here in the audience are historians, and perhaps one or two of have memories of that time. I look forward to hearing your thoughts, questions, or memories, if you're willing to share them.

I'd like to start with two vignettes, one from 1955 and the other from 2006. These two events are separated by 51 years, and yet they are closely related.

Vignette #1: It's September 1955, Poughkeepsie resident Helen Ostrow sent an enthusiastic letter to fellow members of the Taconic District of the Parents-Teachers Association (PTA). Her prose was peppered with exclamations. "If the job is worth doing," she enjoined, "it is worth doing well!!" [Two exclamation points.] The "job" was the county-wide distribution of a survey that posed a simple question: "Do We Need a Community College in Dutchess County?" To Ostrow and her compatriots, the answer was patently obvious. The purpose of the questionnaire was to provide evidence

objectively for what they already knew subjectively: the families of Dutchess County desperately needed a community college. “We said we wanted it,” she concluded: “Now let’s prove it!” [One exclamation point.] In a 2007 interview with me, Helen spoke of driving all over Dutchess County with bundles of these surveys rolling around the trunk of her Dodge Dart.

Now, Vignette #2: Much of the documentation of what I just told you comes from a mysterious artifact. It’s a folder, with about 100 pages of letters and other documents dated 1955 to 1957, enclosed in an untitled black three-ring binder, currently in my possession. The provenance of this artifact is unclear. In 2006, it just appeared, with no note of explanation, in the Vassar College mailbox of my colleague at DCC, Professor Emeritus Richard Reitano. Correspondence in the Folder suggests that it may have been compiled by PTA leader Helen Ostrow or Vassar professor and AAUW member Leslie Koempel.

So, what’s the connection between the two? One is a portrait of determined womanhood; the other is mysterious artifact deposited at an historically-women’s college. Both events point to the shared history of our two respective organizations: women, including prominent members of the AAUW, founded Dutchess Community College.

The fact that women helped to found DCC has not gone unrecognized. The names of Martha Reifler Myers and Eleanor Roosevelt grace the pages of DCC’s official histories and appear on campus plaques. There’s no conspiracy to bury their memory, or anything like that. But while the role of certain individuals has been duly noted, much

more remains to be known and said about the organizational “mothers” of DCC, particularly the PTA and the AAUW.

What interests me about the PTA and AAUW activists is the historical context of their activism. We often view the 1950s as a decade marked by conservative attitudes about gender. Movies and television sitcoms were suffused with images of women as wives and mothers. But the pro-college women activists of the 1950s were not content to be sequestered in the domestic sphere. Indeed, their intervention in the “public sphere” of politics was quite aggressive, in its own way. Their story, in other words, helps us puncture the myth of female domesticity that pervades our historical memory of post-war America.

There’s no doubt that the pro-college women were pioneers. But I would not describe them as gender radicals. They never challenged patriarchal myths frontally. Their approach was more subtle. It is worth remembering that in 1957, when DCC was established, feminist author Betty Friedan was conducting surveys of her former Smith College classmates living in the New York suburbs and compiling material for her landmark feminist tract *The Feminist Mystique* (1963). She began writing articles about the “problem with no name,” a vague and formless discontent that overshadowed the lives of so many educated, married, middle- or upper-class, suburban women—not unlike the women who helped to create DCC. We might view the pro-college movement as a proto-feminist event, or a tentative step towards the more direct assault on patriarchy that marked the women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s.

How did the idea for DCC originate? In November 1955, Dr. Leslie Koempel, a Sociology professor at Vassar College, sat down with several of her sisters in the campaign for a community college. The title of the document they produced—“Chronological History of Action Taken to Determine Need for Community College in Dutchess County”—suggests their ambition to set the historical record straight (even with only one year of history to tell). According to Koempel and her colleagues—Mrs. D.M. (Margaret) Allardyce, Mrs. Albert Drake, Mrs. C.H. Pennock, and Mrs. Nathan Reifler (Myers)—the idea emanated from an October 1954 conversation between Reifler Myers and Fox Holden, the Superintendent of Schools in Poughkeepsie. Over the next year, the women subscribed the leaders of several women’s groups into a pro-college coalition: the Poughkeepsie YWCA; the Poughkeepsie branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW), led by Allardyce; the Taconic (i.e., Dutchess County) PTA, led by Drake; and the League of Women Voters (LWV). This coalition—YWCA, AAUW, PTA, and LWV—proved to be a successful union. I am convinced that without the coalition’s advocacy, DCC may not have been founded until the 1960s, if at all.

The pro-college coalition leapt immediately into the fray of county politics. Between October 1954 and November 1955, the coalition staged a coordinated campaign to place the issue of a community college on the county’s political agenda. But they faced resistance from objections of officials in Dutchess County, a Republican stronghold and traditionally skeptical of any plan to expand government. The county Board of Supervisors and the City of Poughkeepsie, fearing runaway costs and higher taxes, were reluctant to make any commitment to the community college project.

Rebuffed by the county and the city, the group tried another approach: taking the issue directly to the schools. In September 1955, the coalition made the brilliant decision to sponsor a county-wide survey to gauge (and in the process, build) public support for a community college. (These were the same surveys stashed in the trunk of Helen Ostrow's Dodge Dart.) The task of managing the survey fell to Leslie Koempel, the Vassar sociologist and expert in field work. The survey would be co-sponsored by three organizations—the PTA, LWV, and the AAUW.

Like all surveys, “Do We Need a Community College in Dutchess County?” was billed as an objective assessment of opinion. But its organizers understood its real purpose—to spread the good word. Appended to the survey were allegedly neutral “fact sheets” that provided information while phrasing the community college proposal in a favorable light.

The propagandistic quality of the 1955-56 survey was not coincidental; it was the whole point. The community college was a relatively new invention, and few citizens in Dutchess County knew what it was. The women organizers unapologetically viewed the “fact sheets” as an opportunity to frame a new issue in terms likely to give positive results.

Even before the results were in, the September 1955 surveys had a dramatic impact. After months of inaction, the Board of Supervisors took its first official step in October when it invited Dr. Lawrence L. Jarvie, Executive Dean of the SUNY system, to appear before the Board to explain the concept and structure of a SUNY community

college. Now blessed with official imprimatur, the issue began to appear on the agenda of the male-dominated institutions that ran the county.

But then, the movement itself began to change. The County's decision in November 1955 to appoint an official committee signaled the start of a new phase. The creation of a county committee shifted the debate from the matriarchal women's groups to chambers of county government, all dominated by men. When it came time to appoint members, the county named eight men and only two women—Martha Riefler Myers of Poughkeepsie and Madeline Johnson of Beacon, only one of whom was involved in the pro-college coalition.

In addition, the 5 C's Committee explicitly rejected the coalition's choice of speakers and chose different ones, rejecting educators in favor of who would "put [an] emphasis on the financial problems and their solutions."

These slights did not go unnoticed. Immediately after the county committee was announced, thirteen of the most dedicated activists from the women's groups met at Vassar College in November 1955 to form their own committee, competitively entitled the "Steering Committee to Consider the Need for a Community College," with Allardyce as Chairman and Koempel as Secretary. (It was at this meeting, by the way, that she sat down to write the "Chronological History of Action Taken" that I mentioned earlier. That's something that you do only when you really want to set the record straight!)

Impatience with the Board of Supervisors' slow pace of action grew throughout 1956. The Supervisors did little beyond authorizing an official committee, focusing their

efforts instead on solving the county's looming housing shortage. In June, hoping to spark action, the AAUW's Allardyce started a letter-writing campaign. Leaders of civic groups were asked to write their Supervisors and request faster progress. Although the letters never made overt political threats, the implication was pretty clear: "Since the Supervisors want to carry out the wishes of the electorate," Allardyce wrote, "communications from groups and individuals are important in helping them reach a decision." Others took a more direct approach. According to Helen Ostrow, some PTA members made phone calls to Supervisors and issued blunt warnings: if you fail to support the college, "we're going to vote you out of office."

Those efforts bore fruit. A key endorsement came in April 1956 when the Dutchess County American Legion—a key's men's group—went on record as supportive of the project. When you've got the American Legion on your side, you're in business!

The women also received a big boost from the surveys results, which showed overwhelming support for the idea of creating a community college in Dutchess County. In May 1956, Koempel announced that 2909 completed questionnaires were received, representing families "in which there were 3269 children." Of these families nearly 80 percent believed that the advantages of a CC "will be worth the cost to the taxpayer" (an especially important locution for a Republican county).

In Koempel's rendering, the survey objectively confirmed anxieties that so many women felt: that if their children were to have a chance to be successful, the county would have to create more opportunities for higher education. By late 1956, just two

years after Martha Riefler Myers got the ball rolling, women in Dutchess County had made an irresistible case for a community college.

Part of what made their arguments irresistible was that they responded to threats, both real and symbolic, to the “domestic tranquility” that women had been asked to protect in the 1950s. Increasingly, the community college was put forth as a solution to a three-part crisis—demographic, economic, and strategic—that threatened to undermine the stability of the post-war family.

First, demographics. The entire region was experiencing rapid social and economic change. Dutchess County’s population jumped 50% from 1940 to 1960. The driving force behind this was the post-war Baby Boom.

In the late 1940s, the sight of returning veterans and a profusion of babies symbolized the sunny optimism of the age. But by the 1950s, that optimism was tempered with anxieties about the future. In 1955, the first wave of the Baby Boom cohort entered middle school. Their huge numbers placed an enormous burden on the school systems and sparked fears about the ability of the economy to sustain the one-income, nuclear family—the gold standard of post-war suburban affluence.

I don’t think it’s coincidental that the pro-college campaign began in the same year as the box-office hit *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) hit the theatres. *Rebel*, as you may recall, a movie about misunderstood youth starring James Dean . The fever-pitch obsession with juvenile delinquency hinted at a deeper anxiety: society was failing to provide for the psychic and material needs of the new generation.

This is where the community college came in. Keeping kids “off the streets” meant keeping women in the home and their husbands gainfully employed. The community college was offered as a magic bullet that could solve all of these problems simultaneously. The college would keep kids in the classroom, while offering job-retraining and continuing education for their parents.

W. Wendell Heilman, an attorney in Poughkeepsie who was active in the public schools, expressed this idea with memorable imagery: “We have seen in our public school system a tremendous increase in the number of students. This is sweeping like a tidal wave through the grades into the high schools. This tidal wave represents the future leaders of the communities of Dutchess County. It is the young people... who will either be eager because they have had an opportunity to improve themselves or disgusted because opportunity was denied.”

The “tidal wave” to which Heilman referred had already sparked emergency action in Albany. The SUNY system was created in 1948 in part to accommodate thousands of GIs returning from action in WWII and the Korean War. Now, a new problem. Even as some war veterans continued their educations as adults, the system would soon face the burden of educating their children. “Existing colleges,” explained the “Community College Fact Sheet” going out with the 1955 surveys, “already seriously overcrowded, are being forced to [turn] down many able students.” It is not coincidence that the PTA’s 1955 survey was geared towards parents of children in grades 6, 7, and 8 (e.g., born in 1945, 1946, and 1947, the leading edge of the Baby Boom). “It is hoped,” the Fact Sheet continued, “that if the need exists a College would be built by the time

their children have graduated from high school.” With the first Boomers expected to arrive as college freshmen in 1963, the clock was ticking.

As fears about the education shortage peaked, companies in Dutchess County were complaining about a worker shortage. This economic concern gave rise to a second potent argument for a public community college in Dutchess County: without a supply of trained workers, the economy of the county would grind to a halt. Respondents to the 1956 industrial survey complained of a “current shortage of qualified personnel,” especially in technical fields where training was not locally accessible.

The Cold War supplied a third rationale for a public community college in the 1950s. In late 1957, visitors to the hill-top Bowne Hospital site, the college’s future home, would have had the perfect vantage point to witness the slow movement of the Soviet-built *Sputnik I* across the night sky. *Sputnik* served as a rebuke to America’s confidence in itself.

It also spurred fears that the U.S. was falling behind the Soviets in science education. To close the alleged “engineer gap,” the Eisenhower administration boosted investment in science and engineering education. This Cold War strategy set the agenda for deciding who should supply more higher education in Dutchess County: the public or the private sector. Recall that major employers—notably IBM, a major component of the nation’s military-industrial complex—were complaining of a potential “worker shortage.” If that were true, one might well expect the corporations themselves to invest more in private training programs. But the Soviet menace strengthened an alternative claim: because DCC would supply the country (i.e., IBM) with the engineers it needed to

contain communism, taxpayers should pay for the community college as a patriotic duty. More than one respondent to the 1956 survey of businesses mentioned the “national shortage of scientists” as a reason for supporting the creation of a public community college.

The 1950s are frequently portrayed as a decade of stability, order, and domestic tranquility. But Dutchess County in the 1950s was anything but stable and well ordered. Men and women in Dutchess County were gripped with anxieties about the future. Pro-college advocates frequently touted the public community college as a cure to the county’s ills, a means of protecting the family from all threats to its stability. Fear of a disordered family life, as much as hope for the future, propelled the pro-college argument and helped give it the edge over its opponents.

All three major justifications for the community college—the “tidal wave,” “worker shortage,” and “engineer gap” arguments—worked to the advantage of the women’s pro-college movement. All three implied doomsday scenarios that added a sense of urgency to the women’s cause. They did not want a college in the early 1960s; they wanted one now. The decision to listen to DCC’s “mothers” set the stage for the next half-century of Dutchess County’s history.

Their tenacious activism helps explain why one of Dutchess County’s most Republican counties became one of the first to create a government-run community college. Consistent with its philosophy of small government and low taxes, and reluctant to create a massive new government agency, the county’s Republican leadership class moved warily on the issue between 1954 and 1957. But the county’s leadership class

knew a good deal when it saw one. The state was offering most of the initial capital and more than a third of ongoing support needed to sustain a public community college. And so, in 1957, with concerns about educational access trumping concerns about expanding government, Dutchess Community College was born.