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“We Are Not Aliens”: Women’s Hours at Western

“It is plain that the independence which young men may, in college life, enjoy without injury, would be pernicious to young girls.” As a justification for the supervised housing at newly opened Vassar College, this assumption, made in 1864, would not have raised eyebrows on the Hill a century later. In fall 1966, as always, young women entering Western’s residence halls found their independence bounded by a curfew: 10:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday for freshmen (10:30 for upperclass women), 1:00 a.m. on Friday and Saturday, and 10:30 p.m. on Sunday. Less strict curfews for men, on the other hand, had been abolished altogether that summer.

Observing curfew was only the first of a coed’s duties. Unless she was going home, she could not leave Bowling Green without the permission of her parents and the hall director. Any time she left her hall after 7:00 p.m. she was required to sign out, giving her specific destination, and to sign in upon her return. Infringement of these rules drew a penalty known as a “campus,” which confined her to her hall, floor or room for a prescribed number of evenings. Hall regulations also advised the female student on matters of appearance and conduct: she should wear “skirts, blouses, sweaters, sox or nylons, and flats” to class and be mindful, wherever she was, of the effects on her character caused by smoking, “unladylike language” or “public displays of affection.”

Earlier generations of Western women did not find these edicts patently oppressive. After all, a smaller campus and personal supervision, not just of housemothers but of faculty and administrators, likely replicated the family hierarchy of home. The accepted view that women were society’s guardians of morality further justified rules intended to protect them from the more dangerous or corrupting aspects of male-populated colleges. For women students, the advantages and disadvantages of a curfew were mainly practical. “We rather welcomed the excuse to leave a party with the excuse that we had to be in,” remembered a 1954 graduate, but once in their rooms students were not permitted to prepare food, and the curfew did not allow time to get a snack after a dance or other campus event. This problem had, in fact, led to an extension of the weekday curfew in 1966 from 9:30 to 10:00 p.m.

Only a few years later, however, amid talk of civil rights, Vietnam and “women’s liberation,” campus debate shifted from practical considerations to the rights of students reaching for new levels of autonomy and maturity. “The college student is not a child,” insisted a Gilbert Hall junior, dismissing the century-old doctrine of *in loco parentis*—that, in the matter of students’ welfare, the university stood in the place of a parent. The rationale behind protecting female students with a curfew also endured critical scrutiny. “Are you suggesting that ‘perverts and robbers’ are going to wait until after hours to attack women?” a senior asked the editors of the *College Heights Herald*. Rather than guaranteeing safety, curfews used the threat of violence to enforce codes of feminine conduct that marked women as subordinate. “We are not aliens on a man’s campus,” the senior concluded. “WE SHOULD HAVE ALL RIGHTS, PERIOD.”

Not unexpectedly, Western's administration was reluctant to take the *Herald's* advice and become a trendsetter in the matter of abolishing restrictions. As a result, women attempting to chip away at the residence hall curfew and sign-out policies encountered frustration and red tape. Beginning in fall 1969, for example, a student who had her parents' permission could remain away from her hall overnight. Unfortunately, if she changed her mind, she could not then return without being penalized for violating the curfew! Women also met with condescension from administrators and fellow students. In fall 1970, Dean of Student Affairs Charles Keown considered a petition by 275 residents of Rodes-Harlin Hall to abolish the "obsolete and insane rules." Refusing to operate under an "ultimatum," he informed the women that they "didn't understand the situation," which was "much more complex than you think." Even the *Herald*, while generally supportive of the cause, preached that with freedom came the obligation to be a "responsible young woman" and favored retaining the curfew for "freshman girls."

Pressure from women's residence hall groups, student government and the *Herald*, however, soon bore fruit. In fall 1971, some women's halls were designated "no hours dorms" where students (except, of course, the lowly freshman girl) could, with parental consent and a \$15 fee to pay extra night staff, exempt themselves from the curfew. The need to distinguish between fee-paying and non-fee-paying students, freshman and upperclass women, and "hours" and "no hours" halls multiplied administrative headaches, but eventually the federal government ended the confusion. In summer 1975, regulations issued under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 mandated equal treatment of women and men in the residence halls of publicly supported institutions. In October 1975, Western became the last state university in Kentucky to abolish its remaining restrictions.

Now comfortable with the new regime, Dean Charles Keown anticipated a smooth transition, since the majority of women students were already observing their own hours. The thirty freshman women surveyed by the *Herald* were pleased, but were also nearly unanimous in asking "Why didn't they do this sooner?" The answer: "they" had inherited more than a century of traditional attitudes toward gender and equality which, in the 1960s and 1970s, required nothing less than a social and legislative revolution to unseat.

Sources:

College Heights Herald

Women's Residence Hall Regulations, University Archives

Kelly Thompson Papers, University Archives