



Liberal arts in action

Two emeritus professors trace the history of today's human development major

By Margaret Keenan Sheridan '67 and Sara Radlinski

Few small liberal arts colleges offer a major in human development — and fewer still have a “laboratory school,” a children's program operated by a college or university to promote student research, education and service. Connecticut College has both: a thriving interdisciplinary major and an acclaimed early childhood program that serves more than 90 infants and young children from southeastern Connecticut. Both programs are rooted in the College's early history and, like the College itself, have evolved to meet society's changing needs.



Connecticut College students and children enjoy the Nursery School playground in 1939. Photo by William M. Rittase

EMERGENCE: 1911 TO 1947

In 1911, Connecticut College for Women had three founding principles: egalitarian access to higher education for women from socially diverse backgrounds, the importance of social responsibility and active citizenship, and a curriculum that balanced liberal arts with practical education. Scholarships, commuting options and off-campus housing facilitated access. Service leagues and war efforts fostered democratic and social engagement. The curriculum balanced traditional liberal arts with classes that would prepare young women for employment.

Courses related to children and families were available in home economics, psychology, sociology and education, but there was initially no child development major. The scientific study of children was an emerging field, with roots in the philosophy and practices of progressive education.

At the same time, growing awareness of the impact of poverty, the burgeoning need for child care and the many variables affecting all areas of development led to the establishment of settings for preschool-aged children. Lab schools offered college students a controlled setting to experience research, education and service in child development, health, social work, nutrition and family studies.

In 1939, the College established a child development major in the home economics department, and a lab school, the Nursery School. The major required courses in home economics, psychology, education, chemistry and zoology, along with observational and applied work in the lab school. The school served 12 faculty children, ages 3 and 4, in a play-based, half-day setting.

TRANSITION: 1947-1988

During this period, the College's commitment to access led to enrollment of men, students of

color and students with identified disabilities. The College continued to support service work in the community and saw an upswing in civil rights and anti-war activism.

Elite liberal arts schools were retreating from career-oriented curriculum in favor of a more traditional definition of liberal arts. In 1959, Connecticut College faculty eliminated the home economics department, but retained the child development major — having determined that child development fulfilled the requirements of a liberal arts discipline. An interdepartmental faculty committee oversaw the major initially. In 1965, the department was solidified when Eveline Omwake (see "Remembering a Pioneer") became the first chair. During this period, the curriculum expanded to include adolescence, developmental disabilities, language, cognition, social and personality development and social policy. The academic goals of the major were enhanced by field experiences in schools, hospitals and clinics, as well as the lab school, now called the Children's School, and in a second lab school, the Program for Children with Special Needs, which was established in 1972. In these sites, students worked with a wide range of professional staff, observed and interacted with children and integrated their learning through class assignments, individual studies and honors studies.

INNOVATION: 1988 - 2011

In 1980s and 1990s, many liberal arts colleges subsumed their child development departments into psychology, sociology or education. Many lab schools, because of their cost, were closed or replaced by child care centers.

In the 1990s, in light of the changing times, the department undertook an extensive self-study to determine how to better cultivate students' intellectual growth and prepare them for the needs of contemporary society. Child development became human development and, in 1996, the two lab schools were combined into one children's program. Aggressive recruitment of diverse faculty brought new expertise and helped create a department that attracted a diverse student population. Along with an expanded lifespan curriculum, the department continued its commitment to service by strengthening its collaborations with the Office of Volunteers for Community Service (OVCS) and the Holleran Center for Community Action and Public Policy.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT TODAY

Today, human development at Connecticut College provides students an interdisciplinary and lifespan perspective that examines the development of the individual within the context of topics such as diversity, culture and globalization, the impact of media on identity, social policy, adversity and resilience. Research skills and applied experiences remain central to the departmental teaching on themes of growth and developmental.

The Children's Program remains a model of an inclusive child- and family-centered lab school. Students from human development, psychology, education, dance, architectural studies and music, as well as OVCS and the Holleran Center, observe and assist in the program and conduct research related to their coursework.

With a continued commitment to inclusiveness, service and the balance between liberal arts and professional applications, human development continues to exemplify the College's founding principles.

REMEMBERING A PIONEER



One of the most influential figures in human development at Connecticut College was Professor Emeritus Eveline Beaver Omwake, who died in August at the age of 100.

Omwake was a national leader in her field, so well respected that President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy sought her advice when they established a nursery school in the White House. Her other prominent roles included president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, member of the National Reading Council and member of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory committee to study the effects of television on social behavior.

Omwake earned a bachelor's degree from Ursinus College, where her father was president, and earned her master's degree from Teachers College, Columbia University. She taught at the Dalton School in New York City, Vassar College and Yale School of Medicine's Child Study

Center before joining Connecticut College in 1963 and becoming the first departmental chair in 1965.

During her 14 years as chair, the department expanded its faculty and course offerings, increased enrollment and secured its position within the liberal arts curriculum. She was also instrumental in the creation of the department's special needs programs.

Omwake was committed to public service. In Connecticut, she served on the Day Care Council of the state health department, the Governor's Advisory Committee to the Department of Children and Youth Services, and the United Way Board of New London. She worked with local agencies to strengthen teacher training and quality programs for children and supported the community outreach efforts of students, staff and faculty. She even loaned students her "little red car" so they could travel to volunteer and field projects in the community. When she retired in 1977, she bequeathed the car to the College to support student work in New London.

Omwake was a consultant to schools, day care centers and Head Start, the federal program that promotes the school readiness of children from low-income families. She was also a sought-after lecturer and a prolific contributor to professional journals.

Margaret Sheridan '67 is the Martha Bennett '73 Professor Emeritus of Human Development. Sara Radlinski a former adjunct professor of human development and former director of the Connecticut College Children's Program. This article is adapted and excerpted from their Centennial Lecture on Human Development, presented on Oct. 21, 2011.