

# Homefront Mobilization, Patriotic Service, and Suffrage: North Carolina Women's Colleges during World War I

Keith Phelan Gorman, PhD and Kathelene McCarty Smith

Special Collections and University Archives, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

## Rise of Campus Patriotism

Mobilization resulted in a rise of patriotism on college campuses. Students showed their commitment to the war effort through patriotic essays, songs, and poems. Some students signed formal pledges vowing to cooperate with campus mobilization.



## Meeting the Immediate Need

Taking the place of men who had worked on campus, the young women kept the campus grounds, and tended college farms and war gardens, raising and canning fruits and vegetables for use at the schools. Students also created campus clubs and groups that focused on war work.



## Answering the Call

With the declaration of war in 1917, President Wilson's Administration mobilized the homefront, as well as its military forces, for the fight in Europe. Federal agencies turned to national women's associations and state women's groups to activate pre-established social networks to optimize wartime service. At the state level, this included the recruitment of administrators, students, and alumnae from women's colleges, who answered the call by offering a skilled and motivated workforce. The central message for these women was patriotism, service, and sacrifice. These college students immediately began to shape their own campus mobilization, making significant contributions to almost every aspect of the war effort, including fundraising, agricultural production, and food conservation. Drawing on the archival records of thirteen North Carolina private women's colleges and one state sponsored normal school, our research examines how students and administrators took up the patriotic call and ensure that their wartime service would result in greater social and civic advancement in postwar America.



## Service and Sacrifice on Women's College Campuses

Personal sacrifices, such as forgoing trips home, new dresses, and treats, were embraced at the women's colleges. Pageants and entertainments were staged to raise money for the purchase of Liberty Bonds. Patriotic Leagues and war-related clubs focused the students on campus war work, including knitting and sewing, Red Cross work, and training in nursing and stenography.



## Peace and Payback

The rise in women's national responsibility and civic engagement resulted in a greater expectation of gaining the right to vote. Students held rallies, collected signatures, took citizenship classes, and encouraged campus visits by suffragists in hopes of the vote. With few remaining records of these women's colleges regarding suffrage, it is impossible to know whether students were being encouraged to consider their active citizenship in the impending vote. Yet, it is clear from campus publications that suffrage was on the minds of some young North Carolina women.



## Absences in the Archives

While there was a concerted effort to document homefront mobilization by the state, many of the institutional records of these colleges have been lost. Thus, our research relied heavily upon campus publications, scrapbooks, newspapers, and extant records from the state archives.