

## Chapter 6

Dean Harper

1960 – 1980

*One day a shocked male professor was flabbergasted to see Harper walk out of the men's restroom. Noticing his startled expression, she said, "Well, it was the closest one available." (M. Sporakowski, personal communication, February 12, 1998)*

Harper described her first three years as dean of the School of Home Economics as "never a dull moment" (Harper & Howery, 1985). Besides organizing the overall operation of the school, Harper also taught classes on both campuses, conducted research in nutrition, and learned to play state politics. Other colleges and universities in Virginia had to be given assurances that the new School of Home Economics was not intended to encroach on their programs (Harper & Howery, 1985). Playing politics was particularly important to Harper because she did not want the new school to face unneeded opposition in General Assembly funding discussions. In order to provide assurance, Harper visited other institutions during the fall semester to explain the mission of the school, its curriculum, and its target audience. With her own plate full, Harper thanked her staff for their untiring hard work to establish the school (Harper & Howery, 1985).

Harper began to foster better relationships between the faculty, students, and administrators of VPI and Radford through socials at her home. For example, she invited groups -- mixed between VPI and Radford -- to a "meal with the dean." For some it was a

frightening prospect. For many others it began a lifelong connection with Harper (College of Human Resources and Education, 1998; A. Frame, personal communication; May 25, 1999; Harper & Howery, 1985; S. Strother, personal communication, May 28, 1999).

Harper and faculty from both campuses planned the new School of Home Economics' open house, which was held on October 28, 1960 at Radford's campus. The open house highlighted the new home economics facility and attempted to promote unity. More than 150 attended, including administrators, faculty, and home economics majors from both campuses, as well as home economics extension agents. Several students served as hostesses, giving the guests individual tours of the new building and serving refreshments (Grapurchat, October 31, 1960). Soon positive articles about the new school appeared in Radford's Grapurchat and VPI's Tech-nique student publications.

Harper worked closely with the faculty of the new school on both recruitment and assessment. They surveyed former students, employers, administrators at other institutions with outstanding programs, and leaders of governmental agencies, and asked for ideas to improve the school. Harper assessed the school's program, placement activities, and enrollment rates; constantly communicated with her faculty; and quickly implemented any needed changes to improve the school. "Undergraduate enrollments increased by nearly 75 percent and graduate enrollment increased in modest amounts" (Harper & Howery, 1985, p. 55). Then Harper began to hire new faculty members and create plans for new facilities and more programs.

## Operation New Building

To get Harper to accept the deanship permanently, President Newman had mentioned the possibility of a new home economics building. Harper immediately began planning to make that possibility a reality. She began by strengthening the school itself – fostering relationships with administrators, faculty, and students; and building curriculum and enrollment. Then she strategically planned to invite the board of visitors and the appropriations committee of the General Assembly to Agnew Hall on the day they were scheduled to survey the overall building needs of the VPI campus. (Figure 11 shows Agnew Hall.) She took them to the basement to reveal the collapsing ceiling, the cramped office space, and the meager provision for a growing school. During the tour, several legislators bumped their heads on exposed pipes (Harper & Howery, 1985).

This experience helped the board of visitors approve the space request. Toward the end of 1961, the Virginia General Assembly accepted the proposal in principle and placed the building on the wish list. Harper had won a mini-victory but much was needed to make the new home economics building a reality. At the same time, Harper was supervising the remodeling of Radford's home economics building, McGuffey Hall.

To help her plan strategy for the new building, Harper brought in Maude Wallace, a retired pioneer of home demonstration work in Virginia and Tate's predecessor as head of home economics at VPI. Wallace agreed to help. Harper listened to Wallace's suggestions and immediately began putting "Operation New Building" into action (Harper & Howery, 1985). Members of the faculty, retired women of extension, and alumnae were all carefully solicited to help. Harper discussed the needs of the VPI's



Figure 11. Agnew Hall, the Home of the Economics Department at Virginia Tech, from 1940-1968.

campus with influential people around Virginia. Operation New Building was proceeding as planned. Then President Newman retired. Harper, of course, began immediately to work on his successor.

T. Marshall Hahn became President of VPI in July 1962. Before he took office he told the Virginia Chamber of Commerce that “one of the ways VPI had failed to fulfill its land-grant charter was the lack of educational opportunities provided to women and that he intended, as president, to right the wrong” (Harper, 1980, p.9). Harper read this in the Richmond Times Dispatch. She mailed the clipping to Hahn with a note saying, “Please don’t ever make this statement again if you don’t mean it. Women students wishing to attend VPI have had all the disappointments they can stand...” (Harper, 1980, p.9).

Hahn called Harper immediately after receiving the note and told her that he *did* mean it and he did plan to do something about it (Harper, 1980; Harper & Howery, 1985). So Harper scheduled a meeting between President Hahn, Maude Wallace, H. H. Walton (a retired extension worker), and herself to discuss the new building’s prospects in the General Assembly. Hahn invited Newman to join the group. This was one of Hahn’s first meetings as president. At the end of the lengthy meeting, Hahn agreed to press for the building in his conversations with legislators (Harper & Howery, 1985).

After the meeting Harper invited the group to her home for lunch. She had prepared a special dessert. Walton promised talk to legislators herself about how important this building would be -- if she could just get the recipe for the dessert Harper had served. Harper replied, “You deliver and so will I” (Harper & Howery, 1985, p.63). This dessert became known as the “Million Dollar Dessert.”

Operation New Building was a wonderful success in only two years. In March 1964 Harper received a phone call from Hahn who was in Richmond meeting with the General Assembly. Hahn told her that the funds for the home economics building were approved. Harper was unable to sleep.

As in all other major decisions, Harper involved everyone in planning the new building. She elicited advice from extension agents, department heads, and work-study students; and she took a planning team to visit other institutions (J. Barton, personal communication, May 27, 1999; A. Frame, personal communication, May 25, 1999; Harper & Howery, 1985).

Soon, Harper and the planning committee discovered that the funding guaranteed by the Virginia General Assembly would not be enough; the money allotted was estimated for current needs only, not for future needs. Harper decided to begin using the planning money to visit other institutions and estimate the cost of future needs.

Despite the lack of money Harper made an elevator her highest priority for the new building. Harper had to climb the unlevel stairwell to the third floor of Agnew Hall with heavy supplies to teach nutrition classes. She often injured herself or dropped something on the way to class. She was very determined to have an elevator in the new building (Harper & Howery, 1985; J. Johnson, personal communication, February 18, 1999). As other items were added to the building's wish list, Harper began pondering how would they pay for the building she really wanted. She decided that they would plan for a building to which they could add later. To make such additions an obvious priority for VPI, she would have to increase enrollment, hire extraordinary faculty, and continue the school's research emphasis.

The new home economics building dominated much of Harper's time in the 1960s. She hosted many special dinners, serving her Million Dollar Dessert, to raise funds for the building. She encouraged donors to place a contingency on their donations - that the new building be named after Maude Wallace. Finally, on October 24, 1968, the new home economics building was dedicated, with Wallace in attendance. As Harper had planned, the building was named Wallace Hall, and it included an elevator, see Figure 12. To allow for the future growth in home economics enrollment that Harper hoped for, the building also included a closed-circuit television system.

### Strengthening the Curriculum

Besides the new building, Harper's second goal was a doctoral program. She realized that a more strenuous undergraduate curriculum was the first step toward it. She proposed eliminating courses such as Physics for Home Economics students and requiring instead that home economics students take regular chemistry or physics courses. Hahn, a physicist, approved of the changes. Martin opposed them because he felt they made the curriculum too difficult for his Radford students. The curriculum changes were approved in 1962. As she had planned, this strengthened curriculum provided the first step toward approval of a doctoral program in human nutrition and foods, which was finally established in 1971 (Harper & Howery, 1985).

### Radford and VPI Divorce

Both Hahn and Martin were dissatisfied with the awkward relationship between VPI and Radford. Others were, too, of course. Some felt that VPI's desire to grow would injure Radford if the relationship continued. Others felt that too much energy was spent



Figure 12. Wallace Hall in Spring 1994.

coordinating programs and little benefit was derived from the connection (Grupurchat, September 1, 1962; Harper & Howery; 1985; Kinnear, 1972; Lewis-Smith, 1971;). Early in his administration, Hahn began working with Martin toward a separation. By July 1964, the two campuses, whose marriage was “never consummated,” were divorced (Lewis-Smith, 1971, p. 132).

For Harper the split between VPI and Radford was very good news. Her dual administrative role could end and she could concentrate on building the School of Home Economics at VPI (Harper & Howery, 1985). Harper and the VPI faculty began this period of change by reviewing the curriculum. They kept its major features, but added a minor in extension and education to each of the three specialized areas of study. The faculty felt that this would keep the school unique in comparison to other institutions in the Virginia (Harper & Howery, 1985).

#### The Fight for Equal Pay

In 1965, President Hahn worked with the Virginia General Assembly to create a salary scale that would assist VPI in attracting prestigious professors to the institution. Hahn’s competitive scale matched the salaries of other institutions nationwide. It was based on research, subject matter, and terminal degrees. For many this scale was wonderful because it allowed them to recruit “superstars for their college.” For Harper this scale meant war. Instead of continuing the equal salaries that had been the norm for female home demonstration agents and male farm demonstration agents, the new scale created higher salaries for men compared to the women. Despite their equal years of service, and experience, women would be paid less only because they specialized in home economics rather than agriculture.

Enraged, Harper told Hahn to “fix it.” He explained that he could not fix the problem, but he asked her to help him smooth things over with the home demonstration agents. She said, “No, my voice is with the women” (A. Frame, personal communication, June 17, 1999; Kinnear, 1972).

#### Mentoring Faculty, Students, and Other Women Administrators

Harper provided faculty with an example of balancing teaching, research, and service. Between 1960 to 1967, she authored or co-authored seven publications in federal and state journals. She continued to conduct research in the Agricultural Experimental Station. She attended at least five professional conferences each year, presented at some, and helped to plan others. She continued to work with 4-H, serving on committees and in various executive roles. Yet she still found time for students and faculty (Harper & Howery, 1985).

Harper was known for demanding the best of her students, faculty, and staff. Former associates recall that she believed in them, so they did not want to let her down (L. Turner, personal communication, May 20, 1999; S. Ritchey, personal communication, May 26, 1999; S. Strothers, personal communication, May 28, 1999). For some faculty members this meant encouraging research and participation in professional associations. For faculty members without doctorates, it meant encouraging further education. Harper constantly asked, “Would you be interested in getting a doctorate?” or commented, “I think you should enroll in this doctoral program” (R. Purdy, personal communication, June 13, 1999; S. Strother, personal communication, May 28, 1999). When the faculty members agreed, Harper would help them find a doctoral program suited to their needs as well as financial assistance. She wrote letters of recommendation and gave words of

encouragement (R. Purdy, personal communication, June 13, 1999; S. Strother, personal communication, May 28, 1999; L. Turner, personal communication, May 20, 1999).

Harper was generous with praise for faculty. She made daily rounds to faculty members' offices, quickly saying "good job" about their most recent accomplishment. She was also careful to give personal thanks when faculty completed an assigned task (J. Johnson, personal communication, February 15, 1998; L. Turner, personal communication, May 20, 1999; S. Strother, personal communication, March 23, 1999).

Harper was just as supportive and just as challenging with students as she was with faculty. She became a principal support, for example, for Linda Edmonds, one of the first Black women to enroll at VPI in 1966. Harper demanded the best from her students and Edmonds was no exception, who worked for Harper as a work-study student. Harper would give her tasks that were beyond her skill level in order to force her to improve. One such task was Harper's enrollment report. Harper asked Edmonds to do the analysis, type the report, and create visual aids to explain the growth in the college. Edmonds began working right away. She first did the report as Harper had suggested. Then she used her creative skills and designed the report in an easier to read format. She showed Harper both styles. Harper looked at the two reports and said she liked Linda's version better. After Edmonds had left the office, Harper came out with three more reports and said, "Fix these, too" (L. Turner, personal communication, May 19, 1999). Edmonds credits Harper for helping her build confidence in her abilities.

Edmonds was not the only one to experience Harper's trust and confidence. Many members of her staff, department heads, extension workers, and colleagues in the discipline recall similar experiences (J. Barton, personal communication, May 27, 1999;

I. Leech, personal communication; J. Phillips, personal communication, June 6, 1999; R. Purdy, personal communication, June 11, 1999; S. Ritchey, personal communication, May 24, 1999; S. Strother, personal communication, May 28, 1999; G. Vaughn, personal communication, June 3, 1999). Harper was generous with her support for other women administrators, too. Peggy Meszaros, the third female dean in the history of Virginia Tech and the first female provost, clearly remembers having lunch with Harper shortly after she arrived on campus (see Figure 13). Harper drove to nearby Mountain Lake for the meal. She wanted Meszaros to know she would be her ally. Harper focused all of her attention on Meszaros, even while driving very fast up the steep, winding road (P. Meszaros, personal communication, June 11, 1999). Sandra Sullivan was vice president for student affairs at Virginia Tech in the 1980s. Harper offered her a standing invitation for resources, a sounding board, and free advice (S. Sullivan, personal communication, June 1, 1999). Both Meszaros and Sullivan described Harper as a wonderful role model with a forceful leadership style (P. Meszaros, personal communication, June 11, 1999; S. Sullivan, personal communication, June 1, 1999).

### Recruiting Minorities and International Students

Harper believed that everyone has the right to education. She became a driving force for integration of the College of Home Economics (College of Human Resources and Education, 1998). Harper demonstrated this belief by actively recruiting minorities and international students to the college. At conferences, workshops, association meetings, and during college visits, Harper would personally promote the college and VPI (I. Lynch, personal communication, June 5, 1999). She wanted her faculty to do the same. In addition, Harper would invite people she met to come to Blacksburg and visit



Figure 13. Harper attending the 1993 American Home Economics Association conference with Dana Quillen and Peggy Meszaros.

the college. She sent mailings about the department out to high schools and career counselors.

Martha Conley, a young Black woman, applied to the VPI College of Home Economics graduate program. Harper invited her to VPI to discuss funding for graduate school. Harper was willing to provide Conley an opportunity to learn and grow. Conley accepted Harper's offer of admission and support and came to VPI in the fall 1970 as the first black graduate student in the college. Harper asked Conley to assist her several times during Conley's first semester at VPI. Although Conley was not Harper's graduate assistant, Harper created assignments that were tailor-made to enhance her college experience. For example, Harper asked Conley to photograph and interview every faculty member in the college. This task gave Conley the opportunity to meet every faculty member so that she could create friendships, mentoring relationships, and discover a possible major professor for her master's program early in her career as a student. This project required that Conley meet with Harper occasionally to discuss the project and her progress. This demonstrated to Conley that Harper was busy but that she cared, and if Conley needed her, Harper would be available (M. Williams, personal communication, May 27, 1999).

For international students, Harper offered the same kind of recruitment and support, except that she did not travel abroad to recruit while she was dean of the college. Harper supported students from India and Africa, inviting them to her home for meals, mentoring them, and sometimes even giving them a place to stay. Harper met monthly with at least one graduate student from Africa, to offer support (L. Turner, personal communication, May 20, 1999). Colleagues remember Konda, a student from India,

whom Harper mentored in 1956. Konda traveled with Harper and assisted her on the regional nutrition study, where they visited Texas, Georgia, Louisiana, and Tennessee. Konda sent her own son to receive an education at VPI under Harper 20 years later because of the wonderful experience she had (S. Strother, personal communication, May 28, 1999). Many other associates remember the mentoring relationships Harper had with minorities and international students. Linda Edmonds summed it up best by saying “Harper was supportive to the understanding of cultural differences ...and she liked having students from everywhere...” (L. Turner, personal communication, May 20, 1999).

### Study Abroad

When Harper was working on her doctorate at Michigan State, she enjoyed discussing the differences in culture with her good friend Inkeri Suhonen from Finland. Later, after she became dean, Harper wanted her own students to learn about the differences and similarities in the world (S. Strother, personal communication, May 28, 1999; L. Turner, personal communication, May 20, 1999). In 1970, Harper took a delegation to Helsinki to set up a biennial study abroad program. The group consisted of two faculty members, Shirley Farrier and Oris Glisson, who would be co-directors for the program, and Linda Edmonds, who would provide a student perspective (Black Women at Virginia Tech History Project, 1998; Harper & Havery, 1985; S. Strother, personal communication, May 28, 1999). This group toured the Scandinavian countries, made connections, signed contracts with the University of Helsinki and planned the program that would last for six to nine weeks and include visits to both Finland and Russia. More than 250 students participated in this program in 1971, 1975, 1977 and 1979.

This study abroad program had the broadening effect on students that Harper had hoped for. One student, who had the opportunity to study in Finland in 1975, enjoyed the experience so much she convinced her parents to host a Finnish colleague three years later. She later recalled this study abroad opportunity as a life changing experience (College of Human Resources and Education, 1998).

### The Lavery Years

President Hahn retired in 1975. He was succeeded by Executive Vice President William Lavery, Harper's good friend. Lavery presided over Harper's final years at VPI, by then called Virginia Tech. Harper had supported Lavery's career and supported his candidacy for president. In turn, he supported the College of Home Economics, Cooperative Extension, and women at the university. Under his administration (and with Harper's encouragement) the first female vice president, Sandra Sullivan, was appointed. Lavery was the one who insisted that Harper deliver the Founder's Day speech in 1980 about women at VPI. During these years, Harper herself continued to work for higher enrollments and a wider national presence for the College of Home Economics.

### Administrative Vignettes

Harper was known for her no-nonsense administrative style and her commitment to her work and the institution. Administrative colleagues recall these vignettes:

I always expected a short meeting with Harper. She would just come in say what she had to say; wait for my approving 'yes'; and then she would say, 'Thank you, goodbye'" (J. Wilson, personal communication, May 25, 1999).

Harper was direct and to-the-point on everything -- especially important issues. Phone calls were the same way. Harper would call state, what she needed to say, wait for a reply, and then hang up. She did not believe in wasting your time. You could count on Harper being informed and knowledgeable on the subject matter (W. Lavery, personal communication, May 24, 1999).

Harper always researched the issues well. President Hahn listened for her opinion, and the other deans waited for her to speak first (P. Torgersen, personal communication, May 26, 1999).

When William Lavery became president, he searched for a new vice president for academic affairs. There were three internal candidates, including Harper. Lavery chose an external candidate for the post. Despite her own disappointment, Harper saw that the success of Lavery's administration depended on making peace about this decision. She hosted a dinner for Lavery and the other two candidates and forced them to address the natural disappointment and potential animosity that they felt. She made them make peace (W. Lavery, personal communication, May 24, 1999).

### Retirement

Harper's Founder's Day speech in 1980 was the final round in her fight for women at Virginia Tech. Less than a year later she was forced to retire because of her age. She was over 65, and she had served Virginia Tech for 31 years. She retired from the university, but not from professional life, continuing to publish and to be active in professional associations for many years. Her focus remained international as she

traveled to Egypt, England, Denmark, and Finland as a consultant for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Federation of Home Economists (see Figure 14).

Harper also continued to fight for home economics. One day, long after her retirement and when her health was already failing, Harper read an article discounting home economics as a profession. To get the ammunition she needed for a response, Harper drove from Blacksburg to Washington, DC, to see Gladys Vaughn, an executive officer of the American Home Economics Associate and a good friend. Harper quickly said hello to Vaughn, gathered the information she needed, and went off to fight. This was Vaughn's last image of her Harper -- a fighter to the end (G. Vaughn, personal communication, June 3, 1999).

Harper died on February 27, 1996, in Madison, Mississippi, of Alzheimer's disease.



Figure 14. Retired Harper at the American Home Economics Association's conference.