

Elizabeth Lichty



*"You know how well I have enjoyed
my work at Hope College."
-Elizabeth Lichty*

“A petite woman with a man-sized job—that’s our Dean of Women, [Miss] Lichty,” said the *Anchor* in 1944. Serving as the Dean of Women from 1936 to 1947, Lichty was a well-qualified and accomplished woman. Lichty became an integral component of life at Hope, teaching French while living in Voorhees Hall among the women whom she sought to lead. Even six decades after her tenure at Hope, her influence can still be felt around the campus.

Elizabeth Ellen Lichty, called Betty by her friends, was born in 1899 in Palouse, Washington. She attended elementary school there, but by the time she entered high school, Lichty had moved to the Chicago area. As the only girl in a family with four sons, she grew up accustomed to being surrounded by men, preparation that would serve her well for her future work in the male-dominated world of academia. After completing high school, Lichty enrolled in Lake Forest College in Lake Forest, Illinois. At Lake Forest, she majored in Romance Languages, a discipline that included specializations in French and Spanish. She also studied English and History as minors.

Lichty had a talent for languages and she continued her studies at the University of Wisconsin Madison, earning a Master’s degree in French as well as completing advanced studies in Spanish and English. After finishing her Master’s work, she taught at three different colleges as an associate professor of French and Spanish. Starting at Iowa Wesleyan University, she moved to Mt. Union College in Ohio. Eventually, her work brought her back to the University of Wisconsin-Madison to teach French part time while earning her doctoral degree.

During her college career, Lichty also pursued her French studies abroad, living in Paris and traveling around Europe. With her dissertation, “Realistic Treatment of Love in French Drama,” Lichty finished her degree and was ready to move on and become a full professor. While studying in Madison, Lichty had also worked with the women’s organizations at the university, which prepared her for the position she would later accept at Hope College.

In 1936, Winifred Durfee, the Dean of Women at Hope, retired. The council of Hope College began a search for a candidate who could take on both the jobs of the Dean of Women and the Head of the French Department. When Lichty was appointed, she became the third Dean of Women at Hope. Like the previous deans, Lichty’s duties included residence in the sole female dormitory, Voorhees Hall, which housed seventy women.

The two former deans had been hired to act as “matrons,” and the previous title for the job had been “Lady Principal.” The council had hired these women in part to instill “ladylike virtues” in the female students. Voorhees Hall residents lived under a separate set of expectations. Women were expected to learn how to be sophisticated while completing their college education. When Lichty was hired, times had already begun to change. Overall college enrollment and especially female enrollment had increased dramatically during the previous dean’s term. Voorhees Hall had been practically empty when it opened in 1907, but by the 1930s there were more applications to live in the hall than openings.



Voorhees Hall during Lichty’s tenure, ca. 1936

With the growing numbers of female students on campus also came a growing insistence on more freedoms for college women. Although dancing and card-playing had always been among the activities outlawed in the hall, more students were asking for the right to behave like college women at larger schools. They wanted to be involved in more campus activities and have opportunities to interact with their classmates, male and female. On the whole, women were entering a wider variety of career fields and becoming more respected as students. As the first Dean of Women with a Ph.D, Lichty modeled the changing expectations of women for the students. Described as “a scholar and a very capable woman,” Lichty was well-qualified for her new position.

When Lichty joined the faculty, she began her work with the women, exerting her influence over the “coeds,” a slang term for college women, who lived in Voorhees Hall. The job of a dean was complex, covering many different aspects of campus life. At the time, there was no Dean of Students. The work was shared by the Dean of Men and Dean of Women. These campus figures were well-known to all of the students and their responsibilities were multi-faceted. “Any gripe not cared for by any other faculty member winds up settled by the Deans,” a student paper explained, “they stand as intermediaries between the student, the school, and the world.”

Milton Hinga, the Dean of Men during part of Lichty’s term, described his and Lichty’s life at Hope: “A Dean’s job is a combination of things. I play the role of ‘father confessor’ on occasion, and then again . . . I will chaperon a college party. Tonight I may be called out of bed at 3:00 A.M. due to a college prank or to attend a student who may have to go to the hospital with an acute case of appendicitis.” As members of the administration, the deans were also on the Executive Committee that helped to govern the school. With all of these responsibilities in addition to teaching duties, the Deans maintained a busy life on campus.

One of Lichty’s primary roles was overseeing the operation of Voorhees Hall. She became in a sense the “house mother” or “matron” of the dorm. Voorhees housed most of Hope’s female residents at the beginning of Lichty’s term at Hope. The rest of the female students were required to live with either their parents or another family in the Holland area. The domestic details of the hall were Lichty’s responsibility.

One of Lichty’s female colleagues remembered that “in the summer [Lichty] was busy seeing to the renovation and cleaning of the dormitories, buying furniture, planning color schemes, etc.” The faculty and students appreciated her efforts as “there was a woman’s touch in lounge decoration and rooms.”



A formal event in the Voorhees reception room, ca. 1940

Voorhees Hall was the social center of campus during Lichty's era at Hope. Because it contained the reception room and dining hall as well as the home for women, Voorhees served as the main meeting place not only for the female residents and their male admirers, but also for the high-profile campus visitors. Lichty's role as the Dean of Women made her the "official campus hostess whenever there were important speakers."

By the end of Lichty's time at Hope, there were four new women's residences in addition to Voorhees Hall. Van Vleck Hall was transformed from a men's to a women's dormitory in 1942 and three cottages—Fairbanks, Columbia, and Beach—also housed women. By the time Lichty left Hope in 1947, there were six women's residences, with one hundred eighty students in Voorhees alone. Although Lichty's home was in Voorhees Hall, all of the new housing fell under her authority.

Lichty's position as the Dean automatically made her the head disciplinarian for Hope's female students. The *Hope College Bulletin* of 1943 described Voorhees Hall to prospective students and parents as a home-away-from-home that would provide the "constant care and supervision" of the "dean of women and her assistants." Although rules and regulations were beginning to change, the women's halls still maintained a separate set of rules. Quiet hours occupied most of the day to accommodate studying. Regulations such as, "Every girl must provide herself with soft-soled slippers for evening hours," and "There shall be no undue noise in the corridors at any time, such as shouting, loud talking, running, noisy walking, noisy groups in rooms," governed dormitory life. Residents had to sign in and out of the hall and inform the Dean where they were going at night.

Lichty faced the difficult task of enforcing these rules, especially when the residents were constantly trying to get around them. Especially troublesome were curfews that required women to be in the Hall unless granted special permission. Voorhees residents had developed a system whereby men would sneak their dates in through the dining room windows after hours. Students were less accepting of the system of regulations than they had been in the past and found ways to bend the rules. In an interview with the *Anchor*, Lichty admitted that "her pet peeve [was] the girl who [came] to her for permission and [said], 'I'm going away now. May I?'"

Another of Lichty's duties as the Dean of Women was to help organize and aid the women's activities on campus. A fellow faculty member remembered that "the Dean of Women was a kind of catalyst for the women's organizations on the campus." Women's clubs and societies were a fairly new aspect of life at Hope and they soon became very popular. As the Dean of Women, Lichty was automatically the faculty advisor to all of the women's groups and she also took on the leadership of the French Club. She also started a society called Alcor, now called Mortar Board, to recognize women's achievement in academics.

The most popular group for female students was the Women's Activities League, which included all of the women on campus. When they entered Hope, female students automatically all became members of WAL. The stated goal of the organization was to "bring about more social relationships among the women of Hope." The League organized most of the activities available for women on campus.



The student governing board of the WAL, 1942.
Lichty is seated, second from left.

Throughout the year, WAL provided the opportunity to attend dinners, teas, and formals, as well as the main event, the May Day festival, which has evolved into the modern Spring Fling. May Day included track meets and a showcase of women's sports, along with the election of a queen and her court, followed by a formal banquet. The WAL provided female students with planned events and connections to other Hope students.

According to their 1942 brochure, the WAL told freshmen women, "your life as a Hope coed will be crammed full of extracurricular things to do, problems and pastimes, bull sessions and spreads, friends and dating, (and studies—of course)."

Sororities also rose in popularity during Lichty's term at Hope. As the predecessors of the modern Greek organizations, these societies were extremely well-supported by students and the college. Most of the women at Hope became involved in one of these groups, though rules for rushing prevented them from joining until their sophomore year. Lichty formed the Alpha Sigma Alpha sorority for the freshmen so that all Hope women would have the opportunity to be part of one of the societies, but freshmen would not be taken away from their studies.

In order to organize all of the sororities, Lichty also founded the Pan-Hellenic Board, which consisted of members of the different women's groups on campus. The purpose of this society was "to see that all sororities adhere to inter-sorority rules," and to "make sorority membership possible for every girl who desires it." The Board served to regulate the sororities and students had the opportunity for self-government, with the Board setting the rules concerning the rushing and pledging system.

Lichty also served as a counselor to the women on campus, helping them with their emergencies as well as day-to-day problems. In a report to the president, Lichty remarked that "Counseling all girls has been a major concern of this office." Living in the dorm with the students, Lichty was constantly present with them and they came to trust and confide in her. She made sure to meet with all of the freshmen when they arrived on campus and became acquainted with each student individually. The house mothers, a faculty member attested, "were available night and day, one might say, for help. I think they played a very great role."

Although she had advanced training only in French, Lichty was required to provide "guidance and psychiatric help" to her students. Supporting all of the students was trying but gave Lichty the opportunity to have a positive influence on campus. The Dean of Men remarked that "campus problems which are tragic in nature never are pleasant to handle, but they often give me personal satisfaction when I feel that I have done the right thing in caring for the situation."

Eventually, Lichy moved out of Voorhees Hall, spending her last two years in an apartment near campus with friend and fellow faculty woman, librarian Margaret Gibbs. In an interview after Lichy left the hall, she reported that she “[missed] dorm-life after having lived in Voorhees for the past seven years.” She still held the Dean’s title, so she could continue with most of her involvement: “besides acting as friend and guide to the Hope co-eds and advising students in many campus activities, she teaches French and loves it.” Other women oversaw the operation of Voorhees, as well as the other female residences, so Lichy was able to enjoy some of her time in Holland for herself, away from the busy life of her campus residence. She had a chance to indulge her favorite hobbies: reading, knitting, cooking, and golfing.



Dean Lichy talking with a student, 1946

By the time Lichy left Hope in 1947, she had favorably influenced the school for women and had gained attention not only for herself but also for the college. One of Lichy’s major projects was to help Hope become accredited by the American Association of University Women, an important honor for schools trying to promote equality between the sexes. In order to achieve this recognition, there had to be the same percentage of female faculty members as female students and so by 1946, the school had increased the number of employed women to thirty percent.

Both in Michigan and nationwide, Lichy was recognized for her work as an administrator, especially as a woman who had overcome the usual challenges for female educators of her time. She became the president of the Delta Kappa Gamma honorary sorority for educators as well as the vice-president and eventual president of the National Association of Deans of Women. Along with these leadership positions, Lichy was active in the National Association of Teachers of French and the National Modern Language Association.

After resigning from her position at Hope, Lichy transferred her work to Western Michigan University in 1947. The decision to leave was difficult, and Lichy wrote to former Hope President Wynand Wichers, who had also moved to Western, about her concerns. She had loved her time at Hope, writing, “I hesitate considering any move that might make me change from here.” However, Lichy wanted to try working for a larger state school and Wichers wrote back, “there is no question as to your ability to handle this job and I think you would like it.”



The Hope yearbook's sketch of the Dean of Women

Under Wichers' advice and her own desire for a new experience, Lichy moved to Kalamazoo and became the Dean of Women at Western. As powerful and influential at Western as at Hope, Lichy quickly became well-respected by the students and faculty. "During the regular college year," the student newspaper claimed, "any coeds who are uncertain about various aspects of college life are encouraged to visit the Dean who will try in every way to give helpful and friendly advice."

Lichy's years at Western proved to be extremely influential for women at the university. When Lichy arrived in 1947, there were 1,300 female students and only one women's dormitory. When she retired in 1965, she left the school with 6,000 women living in thirteen residence halls. Lichy had enjoyed her work at both Hope and Western but looked forward to her retirement in Holland with the intention to relax and travel. Her plans were cut short, however, when she died less than a year later.

Speaking of their Dean, Elizabeth Lichy's students commented that "with her sparkling personality, good sportsmanship and fine character, Miss Lichy has won a place in the hearts of all who know her." She retained their affection after she left Hope College and her impact upon Hope is significant, even today. Lichy influenced the entire student body through her administrative skills and planning of campus organizations. She especially aided the women at Hope through her professional example and leadership among the female students.

Lichy was an important figure in education and gained much recognition and respect during her life. Nonetheless, Lichy found her relationship to her students to be more important than any professional acclaim. "I would like to have [my students] forget the title entirely and think of me, not as a dean but as a person," she said, "one who is always ready to give any assistance possible."

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Photographs courtesy of the Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College.

This project grew out of my own recognition that the Hope community could be enriched by an examination of the lives of notable persons in Hope's history. Words like "Phelps," "Dykstra," and "Kollen" are in constant use around campus but often with little understanding of the people behind the names. A knowledge of the people whose names we use in everyday conversation can serve to reconnect us with our heritage, as well as acquainting us with past and present visions for Hope College. At the suggestion and encouragement of several members of the Hope community, my idea evolved into a study of the eleven residence hall "ancestors."

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If you would like to learn more about all the individuals for whom the other ten residence halls have been named, visit www.hope.edu/student/residential/halls and click on each building. For more information about the history of Hope College, visit the Joint Archives of Holland at 9 East 10th St.

Laura Shears, August 2008