A picture taken in 1895 of the founders of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF)—all males—might suggest that women were absent from the movement until their formal admission several years later. Official histories of the movement and of its leaders would support this assumption. The formal entrance of women to the WSCF is generally marked by the appointment of Cambridge-educated Ruth Rouse (1872–1956) as women’s secretary in 1905.

This interpretation neglects an important part of the heritage of the WSCF, namely, the culture that blossomed from within women’s higher education. The interest and involvement of female students in missionary studies and clubs in nineteenth-century higher education for women formed an important stream that fed directly into the founding, methods, and expansion of the WSCF. This article examines three such organizational streams—missionary study in clubs and curricula in institutions of higher education for women, formation of the YWCA, and numerous philanthropic and service organizations founded, led, and staffed by women. The type of organizational culture and methods these women-run organizations brought to the milieu out of which the WSCF arose has received insufficient acknowledgment. Exclusive attention to male leadership in the founding of the WSCF neglects the active role played by women in the formation of wider student organizations, such as the Student Volunteer Missionary Union, that were immediate antecedents to the WSCF. Though many of the individual women had multiple overlapping commitments, which can be discerned only by reading from inside the individual lives as much as the records allow us, the women’s missionary and service organizations of the second half of the nineteenth century can rightly be spoken of, along with the SVM and SVMU, as precursors to the WSCF.

A New Day in Women’s Higher Education

The late nineteenth century witnessed an unprecedented growth in women’s participation in higher education, including ladies’ seminaries, women’s colleges, and coeducational universities. Graduates were eager to apply new learning and leadership skills to a vocation and to a life of service. This eagerness was inspired partly by a spiritual call to vocation, partly by an adventurous curiosity that quietly defied middle-class expectations, and partly by an eagerness to apply new learning and leadership skills to a vocation and to a life of service. This eagerness was inspired partly by a spiritual call to vocation, partly by an adventurous curiosity that quietly defied middle-class expectations, and partly by an eagerness to apply new learning and leadership skills to a vocation and to a life of service.

The women’s colleges, which bloomed mid- to late-nineteenth century in North America, England, and Australia, generally encouraged missionary societies as part of their extracurricular club life. At the Methodist Ontario Ladies’ College in Whitby, Ontario, for example, a missionary society was organized in 1889 by the lady principal, Mary Electa Adams. Other Methodist ladies’ colleges in Ontario, such as Alma College in St. Thomas, also had a missionary society, as did Albert College in Belleville.

One of the early American women’s student societies that can be considered a precursor to the WSCF was the Mount Holyoke Missionary Association (MHMA), founded by Mariana (MaryAnn) Holbrook in 1878. This small group met in secret because of reticence about letting people know they were considering foreign missionary service. In 1888 the MHMA ceased to be a society and accepted new members who shared their purpose. The group included daughters of missionary families, as well as others with an interest in missions. By 1884, thirty-four students had signed a declaration of their missionary purpose. Grace Wilder, class of 1883, was a member of the MHMA. Wilder, daughter of India missionary Royal Wilder, presumably influenced her brother Robert’s decision in 1883 to begin a Student Volunteer Movement (SVM) group at Princeton.

Mariana Holbrook, founder of the MHMA, was the daughter of Richard Holbrook and Ruth Ford Holbrook, from Rockland, Massachusetts. In 1878 she transferred to the University of Michigan to prepare herself for missionary service by studying medicine. After graduation in 1880, she interned in Boston for six months and then went to Tung-cho, North China. In ill health, she returned to the States in 1887 but recuperated sufficiently to go to Japan two years later.

In 1889 Dr. Holbrook and three Mount Holyoke students—Cora Stone, Caroline Telford, and Lizzie Wilkenson—wrote to the American Board for Foreign Missions, offering themselves as missionaries in Japan. Holbrook and her three friends offered to help establish a “Mount Holyoke College” in Japan so that Japanese women could be trained to their “sphere of usefulness” and that the college might do what the American Mount Holyoke had done for the world, namely, elevate the status of women.
proposals was rejected, and the prospect of imposing the Western educational model for women in the form of Mount Holyoke had already been established at Mount Holyoke in 1865. Primarily daughters of missionaries, the members called themselves SVs. They used “Watchman, what of the night?” as a motto and held monthly Sunday prayer meetings as well as social evenings with refreshments and guests. Grace Wilder was secretary of the SVs during part of 1881–82 and also for 1882–83. The Stella Vigiles society may have overlapped with the MHMA. The MHMA itself continued until 1898, when it was incorporated into the Mount Holyoke Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), which had been organized in 1893, as the Missionary Literature Committee.

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Meetings of the MHMA were held once a month on Sunday afternoons. Members, who were recruited by personal invitation, signed the MHMA pledge that stated: “We hold ourselves willing and desirous to do the Lord’s work wherever He may call us, even if it be a foreign land.” Members of the association subsequently worked in India, South Africa, East Africa, China, Constantinople, and India. Other members worked in the United States in various academic and social-service positions.

The women’s colleges and seminaries fostered a desire to learn about the foreign field as well as domestic problems, and planted the idea that mission work was an appropriate vocational goal for women. Four examples of students at Mount Holyoke who had pursued this goal well before the founding of the MHMA are Charlotte Bailey, who left in 1838 to work in Africa; Fidelia Fiske, who in 1843 went to Persia to start Fiske Seminary for girls; and two nieces of Mary Lyon (the founder of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary), graduates of 1838 and 1840, who both taught at Mount Holyoke before marrying and then departing for India and China. In 1897 the Mount Holyoke YWCA voted to adopt a missionary who was a recent graduate of the college. In 1907 Olive Sawyer Hoyt, class of 1897, was sent to Japan to teach at Kobe College (1902–13) and later to serve as principal of a girls’ school in Matsuyama, Japan (1913–40). Alice Seymour Brown, class of 1900, was adopted as a Mount Holyoke missionary and sent to China in 1905. The pattern of club life and commitment to overseas service demonstrated by Mount Holyoke in the late-nineteenth century was replicated in many of the women’s colleges of the time.

Coeducational Universities and Mission Clubs

Universities that began as male institutions made room for women in the missionary clubs as well as in the classroom and allowed for interdenominational work that later crossed university and college lines. For example, a branch of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) was established at Victoria College, Toronto, a Methodist institution, in 1870, later to be joined by a chapter of the Inter-collegiate Missionary Alliance (an interdenominational society connected with the YMCA) in 1885. From the 1870s until World War I, other clubs were formed that engaged students’ commitment to missionary work, including social and moral reform. These included the Methodist Missionary and Woman’s Missionary Society, the denominational Epworth League and Young People’s Forward Movement for Missions, and the non-denominational Student Volunteer Movement and its successor the Student Christian Movement. A Ladies’ Missionary Society was formed at the coeducational Victoria in Toronto in 1891 but previous to this women were generally welcome also in the nominally male missionary societies.

YWCA

Forerunners to the YWCA, which was founded in 1855, include an array of efforts by individual women and endeavors by women’s organizations to meet the needs of women. Though these early efforts were limited in scope, operating within national boundaries, over time they coalesced to inspire the international organizational vision of the YWCA. Most directly two individual efforts in England gave rise to what eventually became the YWCA; one was a prayer union founded in 1855 by Emma Roberts, and the other was a London hostel established by a Mrs. Arthur Kinnaird. The vision of the YWCA that emerged was based on a commitment to serve those in need, including the displaced, the marginalized, and the working poor, as well as the high school or college girl.

The American YWCA, inaugurated in 1858, began with a commitment to personal piety and social service and grew to incorporate educational methods and leadership training, traditions that were also part of the English and Continental YWCAs. The movement tended to transcend denominational lines in building local organizations with the help of voluntary, unsalaried leadership. Emphasis on Bible study and special evangelistic work was common to the YWCA in various countries. Their methods included summer camps and courses that helped with individual spiritual formation.

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organized by an international committee, an ecumenical theme that was continued in the WSCF. Indeed, the YWCA was more ecumenical than even the interdenominational church boards; by 1920 it had dropped membership in a Protestant evangelical church as a condition for YWCA membership. By 1894 the organization’s vision of an international movement led to a debate among YWCA members, who argued the merits of the title “International” versus “World.” They finally settled on the name “World’s Young Women’s Christian Association” because it emphasized unity, whereas for them “International” in the title would signify only cooperation between separate entities. The constitution provided YWCA members with active membership in the worldwide association but limited it to those who had a national organization. At the first World’s YWCA Conference in 1898, representatives of national organizations were present from Great Britain, the United States, Norway, Sweden, Canada, Italy, and India.

The rapid diffusion of the YWCA opened up worldwide employment possibilities for young women. Women graduates of higher education, who increasingly were looking for international experience, in turn provided a demand for service organizations with national or international emphases. Organizationally, problems arose due to the rapid growth of the YWCA, occasioned by the presence of multiple organizations working in the same international field. Some countries resisted what they saw as an aggressive takeover of work by British or American leaders. At the World’s YWCA meeting in 1902, it was decided to approve and sponsor the development of the association in countries then regarded as “mission fields,” although they specified that they intended only to supplement, not to take over, the work of missionary societies.

The history of the YWCA, particularly its international branch, is inextricably linked to the history and development of the WSCF. Personnel were shared for periods of time, and common training programs and summer camps allowed for a shared culture and shared norms of leadership. Institutional histories present a picture of separate organizations, whereas in reality there was a great deal of overlap in personnel, training methods, and territory.

The YWCA in America developed as a separate women’s movement, even though one of the early organizers, Luther Wishard, supported gender-mixed college Y’s. The executive of the American YMCA, who insisted on separate development, ordered Wishard to undo his original coeducational work. Women were told that they were best served by having their own movement. Women graduates provided the YWCA with a skilled workforce and transferred their skills to the organization. For example, Corabel Tarr left teaching in 1889 to become the second general secretary of the International Committee and served until her marriage in 1892.

**Philanthropic and Service Organizations**

Nineteenth-century activists belonged to a variety of organizations concerned with social betterment, and they brought an ethos of social service, outreach, and leadership that in many cases eventually carried over into the WSCF. A premier example is Grace Hoadley Dodge, the granddaughter of William Dodge, a metals business executive. Her leadership and philanthropic work supported an array of charities and dispensed more than a million dollars of funding. In 1880 she founded the Kitchen Garden Association (later renamed the Industrial Education Association) to foster manual and domestic training and industrial arts in the public schools. She funded the New York College for the Training of Teachers in 1886, which was absorbed by Columbia Teachers College in 1892. In 1884 she organized a club for working women that became the Working Girls’ Societies and served as its president until she helped to merge the group into the U.S. YWCA in 1905. She served as president of the YWCA board until her death in 1914.

Dodge was one of the first women appointed to the New York Board of Education. She also served as a member of the Educational Commission for the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, which she attended. Dodge worked for a united effort among Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Protestant women to greet incoming girls at the stations and docks. The National Vigilance Committee, which later became the American Social Hygiene Association, was formed at her house in 1905. This organization involved itself in the development of laws against the trade in women.

Influenced by the writings of Johann Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel, Dodge had talent for organization and creativity and was deeply dedicated to providing education and training. Ruth Rouse, who became the Women’s Secretary for the WSCF, spoke about the opportunities in student work to a group at Dodge’s home. Dodge apparently left a bequest for women’s work in the WSCF, one that by the 1940s had been redirected into the general funds of the organization.

**Overlapping Commitments**

Dodge’s varied interests and wide involvement provide an excellent example of the overlapping engagements of those involved in Christian social service, student work, and YWCA-sponsored activities. Her broad philanthropic and mission participation arose not merely from her inheritance, but even more from her commitment to provide practical help to those in need in order that they might have the skills necessary for survival.
Many of the early supporters and leaders in the WSCF carried forward this commitment to multiple constituencies. Dodge did not live to see the demise in 1928 of one of her projects, the National YWCA Training School.25

Educated women were inspired to take up the challenge of a career in the YWCA. Education was a key, as YWCA leader Annie Reynolds claimed, to the appeal and the growth of the movement: “It is the best education, the best brain, the strongest constitution and the deepest consecration that must stand in the breach of this advance stage of the world’s civilization. There is work for all, but now, when everywhere the standard of education has been so much raised, there is an especial need for those who have the higher advantages of any land to make their influence felt for Christian womanhood.”26

Since their work and personnel overlapped greatly, the relationship between the YWCA and the WSCF is at times confusing. Nettie Dunn Clarke, first national secretary of the YWCA in the United States, who resigned in 1891 and went to India in 1893, commented on the cooperation between the organizations. Looking back in 1940 on her career with the Y, she wrote:

You may remember how I really hunted for something to do in YWCA lines. In our first Station, Ludhiana [India], we had a YWCA mostly made up of young medical students and nurses of the Medical School there. But it was only after five years, when we moved to Ambala and had that camp that I felt that this was YWCA work that counted. By that time I had been hearing about the Federation and was rejoiced to have its help from you and Miss Cooke and to feel that here was an organization made to really help our student associations in a sympathetic way. It was something that the Federation had its own financial budget and paid workers who could give time to college groups in India, as we knew it was doing in various parts of Europe and other lands. And I judge that one great advantage was that the Federation gathered up a great number of Associations with various names, not always YMCA or YWCA, and these needed to be helped and coordinated. In those days it was therefore a much needed unifying influence in Europe and America as well as a spiritual stimulus to real Christian work in the Colleges.

As to the World’s YWCA, that was started several years before the Federation and in those years it was a great help to both city and college Associations, though at first it seemed far away from our American Associations, and we rather felt that the English organizations were getting most of the help.... So perhaps the World’s Federation was more warmly welcomed by the students.27

Women and the SVM and SVMU

How does this wide array of nineteenth-century mission, philanthropic, and service organizations founded and led by women relate to the founding and organization of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions (SVM) and the Student Volunteer Missionary Union (SVMU), and eventually to the WSCF itself? Until recently educational historians and consequently historians of campus-based voluntary organizations have focused on male clubs and organizations.28 For example, historian Timothy Wahlstrom discusses three male student organizations that led to the formation of the larger Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions (SVM), namely, the Society of Brethren (1808–70), the Andover Society of Inquiry on the Subject of Missions, and the Philadelphian Society at Princeton.29 Yet women were active participants in both single-sex and coeducational mission societies throughout the history of early missions and early campus-based voluntary movements. This coeducational participation carried over into the eventual formation of the WSCF.

For the formation of the SVM, the Mount Hermon Conference for students in 1886, held at D. L. Moody’s school in Northfield, Massachusetts, was a crucial event. It served as the catalyst for the development of an organization that would combine the smaller collegiate societies into a nationwide intercollegiate society within the United States. Organizationally, the next step occurred when Robert Wilder traveled to Britain in 1891 and, the following year, organized the Student Volunteer Missionary Union (SVMU), which comprised a committee of four representing England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. Membership in the SVMU was open to both women and men who signed a declaration proclaiming their intention to become a foreign missionary. One of the students who signed the declaration was Agnes de Selincourt, a high school friend of Ruth Rouse. When in 1894 Rouse herself attended the meetings of the Keswick Convention in England’s northern Lake District, 50 out of the 193 in attendance were women. At this meeting she met both John Mott (1865–1955) and Robert Speer (1867–1947), who became, respectively, the first and second traveling secretaries of the SVM. In 1896 she attended the first Student Volunteer Convention, in Liverpool.

The SVMU struck a chord with students. By that first convention in Liverpool, 1,038 students had signed the declaration, and 212 had already left for mission fields. The welcome accorded to the founding of the SVMU in 1892 led to the formation in 1893 of another British student movement with a broader scope called the Inter-University Christian Union (IUCU), renamed a year later as the British College Christian Union (BCCU). Both de Selincourt and Rouse were instrumental in
Impact of the SVM

The conventions organized by the student movements generated tremendous enthusiasm and formed powerful memories for those who attended. Helen F. Barnes, a secretary of the American YWCA, attended the SVM convention in Cleveland in 1898. The excitement generated at that meeting was still vivid for her four decades later. She wrote: “There [in Cleveland] I received a vision and an ideal which never left me. I was thrilled, and greatly moved by the proposed heights, and ideals in spiritual growth and possible achievement by the every day student, any young person who knew God.” Concerning the watchword to evangelize the world, Barnes wrote that the message “appeared to me, as to thousands, as heroic.” In spite of intervening wars and destruction, she felt that if every Christian had accepted and acted on the watchword, the subsequent destruction to civilization might have been avoided.

The SVM’s three major tenets were dependence on prayer, confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit, and confidence in the guidance of the Scriptures. The organizational approach followed by the SVM was to draw together a group of interested students who would form a Volunteer Band. These bands formed the core for Christian associations in the colleges (or inter-seminary alliances in the seminaries). The Executive Committee oversaw the movement as a whole and appointed volunteers as secretaries. Both the organizational structure and the culture of the SVM were carried into the WSCF by leaders, such as Rouse, who had training in the SVM.

Membership in the SVM was dependent on two things—possession of the appropriate educational status and willingness to make a sacrificial commitment. Though the slogan was the subject of increasing debate as the WSCF carried it into the twentieth century to a student population growing more skeptical, the sacrificial commitment called for by the SVM was epitomized by the watchword that it adopted in 1888: “the evangelization of the world in this generation.” Individuals could be members of a denomination and of the SVM at the same time. In the first twenty years of the SVM, 2,953 volunteers emerged; notably, 30 percent of them were women.

Conclusion

The inception of the WSCF can be dated to August 1895. When Prince Bernadotte of Sweden invited Christian student leaders to Vadstena Castle on Lake Vetteron that year for a conference, more than 200 accepted, the founders of the WSCF among them. Delegates came from North America representing the Intercollegiate Department of the YMCA, the International Committee of the YWCA, and BCCU; from the German Christian Student’s Alliance; and from universities in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland. Luther Wishard represented student associations in a variety of countries where he had done pioneering work.

Although no women appear in the official photograph of the founding committee, the cross-connections and multiple links between the women’s missionary clubs, YWCA work, and other service and philanthropic movements related to work at home and abroad made those clubs and societies important precursors to the WSCF. Although many of these links and individuals have been forgotten, their contributions live on in a variety of international student voluntary organizations on university campuses today, including the Student Christian Movement (formed in 1920) and World University Service of Canada (formed in 1950).

The commitment to student refugees and other social-justice work evident within them today was formed in the early mission movements, in which women were active participants.
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Notes

1. Founded in 1895 as the World’s Student Christian Federation, the WSCF formally changed its name in 1960 to World Student Christian Federation, the form of the name followed in this article.


10. Clipping file in the Mount Holyoke Library Archives, copied in box 71-576, YDS. For further information on student records and organizations at Mount Holyoke Archives and Special Collections, see RG 27.1 Alumnae Biographical Files (LD 7096.6), x-Class of 188-, Holbrook, Mary Anna; RG 27.1 Alumnae Biographical Files (LD 7096.6), Class of 1889, Stone, Cora; RG 25.3 Student Organizations (LD 7095.5 M66), Mount Holyoke Missionary Association; RG 25.3 Student Organizations (LD 7095.5 S75), Stella Vigiles; RG 25.3 Student Organizations (LD 7095.5 Y65), Young Women’s Christian Association. I am grateful to Jenny Smith, Archives Assistant, Mount Holyoke Archives and Special Collections, for assistance in locating materials.


13. Typescript by Mary Mathews, 1937, box 71-574, YDS.

14. YWCA file, box 71-570, YDS, shows that there were mission study classes at Mount Holyoke as follows: in 1902, two classes, with 21 enrolled; in 1903, six classes, with 87 enrolled; in 1904, five classes, with 91 enrolled; in 1905, twelve classes, with 181 enrolled. The figures for subsequent years are similar. In 1919/20, mission study classes were called World Fellowship classes; that year there were fifteen classes, with 229 enrolled. The numbers reflect a growing interest in missionary concerns among students.


16. At Silver Bay Conference Center on Lake George, New York, YWCA conferences drew enthusiastic participants. In 1904 there were 810 delegates to a YWCA conference, of whom 550 were college students and 50 were preparatory students. In 1905 there were 734 students from 111 institutions in twelve states and Canada. See E. Clark Workman, *The Contribution of Silver Bay to the Professional Training of theYWCA, 1902–1952* (Lake George, N.Y.: Silver Bay Association, 1952).


22. For example, Luther Wishard, who was urged to reverse the gender-integrated policy he had started in the United States, arranged for Fanny Beale, YWCA delegate, to speak at an Ohio State convention in 1883 to advocate for a separate association for women. Beale argued that only a girl could reach the heart of a girl. See C. K. Ober, *The Association Secretarship* (New York: Association Press, 1918), p. 69.


24. Robert C. Mackie to Ruth Rouse, June 29, 1942, record group 46, box 1, file 2, YDS. Mackie wrote: “I did not know that this money was still supposed to be set against women’s work, but I have no qualms of conscience on the subject. The only two members of staff being paid directly from our central funds are Suzanne and myself, and quite obviously a very high percentage of the students in the movements we are seeking to help are women students.”


27. Nettie Dunn Clarke to Ruth Rouse, April 22, 1940, box 84-689, WSCF Archives, YDS.


34. Helen Barnes, box 84-689, WSCF Archives, YDS.


37. The SCM of Canada was formed at the first Canadian National Student Conference, held in Guelph, Ontario, from December 1920 until January 1921. See Margaret Eileen Beattie, *SCM: A Brief History of the Student Christian Movement in Canada, 1921–1974* (Toronto: SCM, 1975). World University Service of Canada was formed in 1952 from the International Student Service (1925), previously known as European Student Relief (ESR). The ESR was established in 1920, under Rouse’s leadership, when the WSCF created an organization specifically to meet the needs of students in post-war Europe.
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