

Helen Young Nelson

November 19, 1913 — January 8, 2001

Helen Young Nelson, Professor Emeritus of Human Service Studies in the College of Human Ecology, was a competent and dedicated professional in the field of evaluation in education and home economics education. Her competence was recognized both at Cornell and throughout the country.

Helen Young was born in Minneapolis and spent her early years there. From the University of Minnesota she earned the B.S. (1938) and M.S. (1942) degrees in Home Economics, and the Ph.D. (1952) degree with a joint major in Educational Psychology and Home Economics.

She began her professional career as a high-school teacher in Minnesota. Her reputation as an outstanding teacher, coupled with strong academic credentials, made Helen an attractive candidate for college-level positions, including teacher education.

In 1944, Helen Young and Carl B. Nelson were married. They had one daughter, Victoria. Carl's professional interest is music education. After he joined the music faculty at S.U.N.Y. Cortland, Helen explored possibilities in upstate New York where there might be career opportunities for her in home economics teacher education and program evaluation.

In January 1958, Helen Nelson accepted a faculty position in the Department of Home Economics Education (HE Ed.) at Cornell. This was a period when funding for higher education was expanding both from the federal government and from a number of large foundations. The Home Economics Education Department was successful in obtaining a grant from funds allocated by the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) for fellowships intended to "increase the quantity and quality of potential faculty members." NDEA fellows were expected to enter the program as seven-year doctoral candidates, i.e. to have had no formal study beyond the Bachelor's degree. This stipulation was expected to decrease the time required for formal education and thus increase the quantity of potential faculty members, but it challenged the universities involved to find ways to increase the quality of their graduates. This was one of the first grants made under the NDEA program. Helen assumed major responsibilities for implementing the HE Ed. program supported by the grant, and continued to play an important part in it for its duration. Students, who completed the program, including some who did not qualify for fellowships because of the seven-year criterion, became teacher educators in home economics units in a number of land-grant colleges

and universities, including Cornell. Some also became college administrators. Helen became a mentor for young faculty members.

Helen also taught for several years in a teacher education program developed by a consortium of faculty members in four upstate New York universities and funded by the Ford Foundation. She carried major responsibility for home economics education on the Cornell staff for this project. The first publication of that program, and one of the most widely distributed, was the Master's thesis of one of Helen's students. Largely at Helen's insistence, the Cornell faculty allocated resources for evaluating this program, although the Foundation grant had not provided for, nor required, evaluation.

Throughout her 25 years at Cornell, Professor Nelson was an important part of the instructional staff of the college. She taught a basic course in program evaluation at the graduate level, as well as undergraduate courses in this and related topics. She offered short courses and directed summer workshops for teachers.

Professor Nelson's influence on the development of the HE Ed. graduate program was particularly strong. She placed high value on providing opportunities for students to work alongside of faculty in meaningful and stimulating research. She saw such training as an effective and efficient way to help today's students gain research competencies needed by tomorrow's leaders—those who will be responsible for the development of an increasingly research-based profession. Helen served as chairperson for a large number of graduate students, probably more than did any other faculty member in the field of Human Service Studies at the time.

The evaluation of innovative educational programs was Helen's primary interest. She expected students to immerse themselves in real-world evaluation efforts. Working with interested students, she moved from evaluating programs designed by others toward active involvement in designing programs to be field-tested; she expanded the scope of her interest from secondary school and teacher education programs to other human service efforts. Throughout her work, emphasis was placed on clear-cut definition of objectives; assessment of change in understandings, attitudes, skills, and/or overt behaviors during the period of instruction; and follow-up after instructions had ceased. She was more deliberate in her approach than were many workers in the field.

Because she was interested in teaching strategies and tools of instruction as well as evaluation, most of her studies produced materials representative of then-current developments (e.g., programmed instruction geared to a variety of educational objectives other than merely information-giving, educational games, single-concept films, complete curriculum packages).

Helen kept abreast of the rapid changes in emphasis that characterized the school and non-school educational efforts of the late sixties and the seventies. She and her students evaluated secondary school programs in family relationships, programs designed to prepare high school students for wage earning and the dual role of homemaker and wage earner, and programs in consumer and homemaking education for low-income adults. She was awarded grants for those studies from the U.S. Office of Education and the New York State Education Department. Working with Cooperative Extension personnel and with funding from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), she provided leadership in evaluation of the effectiveness of paraprofessionals in the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program. Also, with USDA support, she evaluated interagency cooperation in the provision of services in isolated rural areas. She evaluated tenant education programs with funding from the New York City Housing and Development Administration, the New York State Urban Development Corporation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and the Ford Foundation. She emphasized measurement of program outcomes in terms of understanding, skills, attitudes, and overt behaviors of the learners. When the “learners” were paraprofessionals or other trainees, the evaluation focused not only on the trainees but also, at appropriate times, on the next generation of learners—the persons taught by the paraprofessionals. Selecting or developing measurement tools was a necessary part of each evaluation project. Helen and her students were generous in sharing their tools with others.

She participated in research projects that involved cooperative work among researchers in the U.S. Office of Education and several universities. Professor Nelson emerged as the leader. Most of her work in the sixties was supported from federal funds for vocational education research, coming to the university either directly from the U.S. Office of Education or indirectly through the Bureau of Occupational Research of the State Education Department.

The quality of Professor Nelson’s contributions to research in vocational education was recognized in many quarters. She prepared the home economics section for the 1969 and the 1983 editions of the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*. She wrote the second edition of *Review and Synthesis of Research on Human Economics Education*—one of a series of manuscripts commissioned by the ERIC Clearinghouse in Vocational and Technical Education at Ohio State University. She served on the editorial board of the *Home Economics Research Journal* and chaired the editorial board of the *Journal of Vocational Education Research*. She and her students regularly reported their research at meetings of the American Vocational Association and the American Educational Research Association. She served as consultant to such diverse groups as state departments of education, Job Corps, the New York City Board of Examiners, and Science Research Associates.

On two occasions, Helen was given special “recognition of outstanding leadership and distinguished service” to the Home Economics Division of the American Vocational Association and to the development of the Home Economics Education Program in the nation.

The Nelsons managed to find time and energy for a good life outside of their professions. They bought and remodeled a house in Cortland, with plenty of space for family needs and interests and for entertaining. The house sits on a hillside, part of which they converted into a lovely Japanese garden by adding tons of stone and a few well-chosen plantings. They were active members of the Cortland community and, to a lesser extent, of the Ithaca community, as well.

Their daughter Victoria graduated from the College of Human Ecology. She married Ralph Nuzzo and had two children, Matthew and Emily Nuzzo, of Champaign, Illinois.

Mary Margaret Carmichael, Sara Blackwell