The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6615

Lahy, Patricia Mary

(1928 - 2004)

Born	19280524, Cremorne New South Wales Australia
Died	20040511, Blue Mountains New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Academic, Academic administrator, Administrator, Teacher

Summary

Pat Lahy trained in physical education and established the first formal training course in counselling for people with disabilities in Australia. She was the first woman to hold the position of Dean of Arts at the University of Sydney.

Details

Born in Cremorne, the eldest of the three children of Vincent Power Lahy and his wife Valerie Roberta Wilson, Pat Lahy was educated at North Sydney Girls' High and after her father died in 1942 she trained as a physical education teacher at Sydney Teachers College, obtaining a diploma in 1947 and a teacher's certificate in 1950. Her commitment to physical education underlay many things she did later – some of her publications, her role in the university women's sports association and her interest in vocational rehabilitation for the physically disabled.

Later she was appointed to Wagga Wagga Teachers' College to lecture in Physical Education and lived in residence there. In order to undertake part time evening studies at the University of Sydney she transferred to Balmain Teachers' College. Eventually in 1963 at thirty-five she graduated as a BA with honours in psychology. Professor William O'Neil immediately appointed her a senior tutor in the department to organise the practical and tutorial program. In 1965 she became a lecturer and from 1967 she ran the first year. She was also general secretary of the new Australian Psychological Society and a member of the Staff Club committee. In 1968 she established the first formal training course in counselling for the disabled in Australia. On sabbatical leave in 1970 she began a doctorate at Queens University Belfast which focussed on pattern recognition. This she completed in 1975.

Back in Sydney she resumed her teaching and publishing, was promoted senior lecturer in 1977 and was increasingly seen as an efficient and reliable administrator and organiser who was well liked by her colleagues. In 1978 she became a sub-dean of arts and in 1979 pro-dean. Later that year the faculty of arts elected her dean – the first woman to hold the position at the University of Sydney. The University of Sydney News then put to her a question about her attitude to the women's liberation movement, of which she was not a member, and she replied that she was all for it, having changed her mind about the outrageous things they had done because 'they needed to shock people to make them think'. She hoped that at the end of her two years as dean she would not be seen as a token woman or a 'woman dean' and asserted that in the business of faculty there could be no difference of attitude between a man and a woman. She was re-elected twice before giving the position up. As the role of dean did not free the holder from teaching duties she also managed a heavy teaching load and in 1983 the running of an international conference for the Psychological Science society.

In 1982 she was elected as one of the academic representatives on the university senate – and was re-elected in 1984. The vice-chancellor, John M Ward, in 1986 appointed her his Executive Assistant and in 1987 she was appointed pro-vice-chancellor with responsibility for organising Chifley college. This involved persuading all the faculty deans and other key personnel meeting with the heads of the three colleges in the West of Sydney, which were to be amalgamated into the new university. As there was virtually no financing and much disagreement about priorities and structures it required considerable patience to draw up an acceptable scheme. After several weekend conferences the state government eventually abandoned the proposal after the 1988 Dawkins white paper, leaving it to the three colleges to develop their existing courses into a university. As Pat's good sense had been much appreciated in all three institutions she was appointed a member of the new university's board of governors in 1989 and remained a governor, making several important contributions to the structure, until 1997. In 1991 she ceased to be pro vice-chancellor at Sydney and retired from her long-term position. Acknowledging all she had done in thirty years of employment in the following year the university made her a D Litt and the government appointed her a member of the Order of Australia. She was too useful to be allowed to retire in peace however, and in 1993 she was given the responsibility of managing the merger of the College of the Arts with Sydney University. In 1994 she returned to the university part-time to a new role – that of student ombudsman. In 1999 she finally retired – and was given another honorary D Litt by the Western Sydney University. She moved to her Blue Mountains weekender, where she lived in failing health until her sudden death in 2004.

Events

1992 - 1992
Appointed Member of the Order of Australia for service to education

Author Details
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Created 15 August 2019
Last modified 16 August 2019