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Grupe Faculty Center

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What's in a Name? Grupe Faculty Center

When Mary Grupe was hired to teach at the Washington State Normal School in 1897, there were only about 200 students enrolled in the school, which had opened just six years earlier. According to Trustee records, Grupe was hired to teach drawing and reading, and paid \$800 over ten months.

Soon, however, she became what historian Samuel R. Mohler described as “one of the most vital and creative personalities in the history of the Normal School and one who very definitely influenced the trend of educational procedure in the region.

Grupe was born in Peabody, Kansas in 1873. As a child, she and her parents moved to Dayton, Washington, where she graduated from high school. Wanting to become a teacher, she earned her degree from the prestigious Oswego, New York Normal School in 1897, and was immediately hired to teach at the school that would become CWU.

In her second year at the school, she was elevated to principal of the teacher training school and introduced a number of progressive teaching ideas. In 1901, she enrolled at the University of Chicago and later attended Columbia University, eventually becoming the first woman PhD. at the school.

In 1907, Grupe left the school to become supervisor of the grammar school grades in Tacoma's public schools and then was an instructor in the Normal School at Mankato, Minnesota and the State Teachers College at Greeley, Colorado.

In 1912, she was lured back to Central, where she would teach until 1929. During her second stint at the school, she was supervisor of the teacher training program, appointment secretary, registrar, personnel director, and head of the department of psychology.

In the latter role, she became widely recognized as an expert in the field, publishing a number of articles in national professional journals.

In addition to her campus responsibilities, Grupe was also active in the Ellensburg community, serving as a member of the Governing Board of the Ellensburg Chamber of Commerce and on the Ellensburg Park Board.

In 1928, Grupe suffered a crippling stroke, which left her partially paralyzed. Unable to teach to her beloved students, she would sit near a window in her home near the campus, where she could watch the students walk by. She died in November 1929.

In 1961, Central Washington named the then-new Mary Grupe Conference Center in her honor. The building has a unique, round floor plan with a domed, shell-like, concrete roof and a façade of local basalt rocks set in concrete. The structure originally had a reflecting pond surrounding it but that feature was removed in the late 1990s.

The 1,799-square-foot building continues to serve as a conference center, primarily for faculty.