Two of Luther’s most transformative changes came in the early 1930s: the ending of the classical curriculum and the beginning of coeducation. Both decisions were in part driven by financial concerns. The enrollment of the college dropped from 345 in 1930-31 to 283 students in the 1931-32 school year, and the college had significant debt.

President Olson had strongly supported the classical curriculum, but in the face of financial pressures and student and constituency challenges, he affirmed the faculty’s vote to adopt new curricular requirements starting in September of 1931. Christianity retained its 14 hour requirement, but students were no longer required to take Greek, Latin, German, Norwegian, history, and mathematics. A two-year requirement in the language of the student’s choice remained (one year if the student had taken two years in high school). History was folded into a social science requirement and mathematics into a science and math requirement. Since majors, minors, and electives were already options, Luther had finally adopted the pattern common in most of the colleges and universities in the United States.

The day after the adoption of the new curriculum by the faculty, President Olson announced that he was advocating coeducation. A staunch supporter of Luther as a college for men, Olson must have believed that the financial crisis would be alleviated by the admission of women. Not everyone agreed. Some believed coeducation would require additional resources: new courses for women, female faculty, housing needs. And, indeed, it did. But eventually women were to contribute to an eased financial situation.

There was a connection between the new curriculum and coeducation. The classical curriculum had always been the foundation for the college’s main, although not its only, purpose—preparation for the ministry. With the ending of the old curriculum, one of the reasons for not admitting women disappeared. The new requirements would be a foundation for women, as well as for men.

Approval from the church did not come quickly. After five years of wending its way through various church committees, coeducation was approved by the church in convention in June, 1936. By that time, community leaders (in 1932) had established the Decorah Junior College for Girls (later called the Decorah College for Women). Although they lived in the Weiser House, the women began attending all their classes at Luther College in the 1933-34 school year. Accredited in 1935, the Decorah College for Women graduated two students in 1935 and five in 1936 in separate ceremonies as part of the Luther commencement. Later the seven women were granted Luther degrees.

And so, in the depths of the depression, transformative decisions resulted in a stronger, more inclusive college.