

Dr. June Rose Colby (1856-1941)

June Rose Colby, or Rose as her family and friends called her, was born on June 4, 1856, in Cherry Valley, Ohio. She was the fourth of five children born to Lewis and Celestia (Rice) Colby. Rose's early education came from her mother, Celestia, who was very talented and loved to write. After being taught at home for several years, Rose went to school in Freeport, Illinois, where she completed both middle and high school.

As an adult, Rose became a teacher of literature and an author. She likely got her love for writing from her mother. Rose's father, who worked in sales, was often away from home.

When Rose was young, she became very ill or had an accident, and her family feared she wouldn't survive. Her mother took care of her until she got better, though Rose never regained full strength. She was often described as small in size, but her intelligence was remarkable. During a time when teachers only needed a tenth-grade education and many doctors and lawyers didn't go through as much schooling as today, Rose's education made her one of the most educated women of her time.

Rose graduated from Ann Arbor High School in Michigan and went on to the University of Michigan in 1874. There, she earned a four-year degree. After graduating, she taught high school from 1878 to 1883, but then returned to school at what is now called Radcliffe College (then part of Harvard). She later returned to Michigan and earned a master's degree in 1885, and a Ph.D. in 1886, making her one of the first women to earn that degree. Despite her impressive education, she couldn't get a university teaching job, so she taught high school in Peoria for a few years.

In 1892, she was hired as a professor of literature at Illinois State Normal University (ISNU), where she was one of the only women teaching at that time. She also became the Dean of Women (an academic administrator who is responsible for student affairs for female students). Rose often taught subjects like grammar and composition, which were considered less important than literature. She worked with over a hundred students at a time, and it was not unusual for Rose to have to read 14,000 words of student work a night, five nights every week. She believed that students should be taught good English in every subject.

Rose was also very involved in improving women's rights, which she learned from her mother. At ISNU, she became the sponsor of a society for women students and supported their intellectual growth. She was an advocate for women's suffrage (the right for women to vote), though her health and busy work life kept her from taking a more active role. She focused on helping her female students improve and expand their lives.

In 1911, Rose helped form the Normal Equal Suffrage Association, a group of women from the local faculty and town and was very active in the group. She was also a lifetime member of the state association. Her views on women's rights were well known on campus as well.

Throughout her career, Rose was an important leader in teaching and advocating for women's rights. She was a member of several educational societies and was honored by ISNU when she retired in 1931 after 39 years of service. Rose never married, which was common for women who had careers during that time. Her students were like her family, and she cared deeply for them.

Rose passed away on May 11, 1941, at her home, just a short distance from the university where she spent most of her life. Her obituary highlighted how important she was to the community, and in the 1960s, a residence hall at ISNU was named Colby Hall in her honor.