

## **An Educational Advantage for Women:**

### **Women's Colleges**

Katy Casserly

*This article explores alternatives for women attending college. It is suggested that attending a single-gender institution of higher education has multiple educational and social advantages for women. Furthermore, research indicates women who have attended women's colleges are more successful during and after their college years.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Students may investigate many variables when exploring options for higher education. The size and location of the institution, types of majors offered, and the amount of financial aid available are just a few of the considerations for potential college students. However, few students stop to contemplate the gender composition of their future institution. While some students might not consider attending single-sex colleges and universities, there are numerous benefits in single-gender institutions. In fact, research suggests there are multiple educational advantages for students, and for women in particular, who attend single-sex colleges or universities. As stated by Riordan (1994),

Coeducation is one of the least studied of all major topics in education. Researchers have attacked the issues of race and social class integration relentlessly. Likewise, the question of ability grouping (separate or mixed) has been investigated extensively. The pros and cons of mixed- and single-sex schooling, on the other hand, have received little attention. (p. 486)

This paper attempts to examine the benefits of a single-sex education for women at the collegiate level. These benefits may come in the form of academic success, identity formation, leadership potential, or future success. It is important to consider the history of women's institutions, as well as the benefits gained by women attending an all-female college or university. In addition, it is notable to consider the challenges presented by a single-sex education. It also is necessary to explore the different educational options provided to women and the viability of each option. Finally, the future of women's institutions is important to examine, especially in a time of social and cultural integration.

## HISTORY

"The history of women's education does offer a high road into the fascinating world of women's perceptions of themselves and the world" (Fox-Genovese, 1997, p. 203). The need for women's institutions was realized in the early 1800s. In 1821 Emma Willard, a pioneer for change in the education of women, founded the Troy Female Seminary in Troy, New York, (Komives & Woodward, 1996). As a whole, the southern United States made the first concentrated effort to establish women's institutions of higher education. By the 1850s 30 of the 39 chartered female colleges in the country were located in the

South. The stated goal of the first southern women's institution, Georgia Female College, later known as Wesleyan College, was to formulate an education for women identical "to that available at the highest levels for men and to use the term *college* in doing so" (Fox-Genovese, 1997, p. 204). The white male population believed that women could benefit from education, as a woman's role changed following the American Revolutionary War. Women were considered guardians of moral standards, since they provided their children with training and discipline. It was clear that women would need to be educated in a more orderly fashion (Komives & Woodward, 1996).

The process of educating women initially centered on the teaching of others. At the time, teaching seemed to be a natural extension of the woman's role as a nurturer and moral guardian. However, women's colleges eventually matched the proficiency of men's colleges in teaching modern languages such as French, German, Spanish, and Italian (Fox-Genovese, 1997). In addition, women's institutions surpassed men's institutions in the teaching of the arts, foreshadowing modern degrees in the fine arts. Women's schools also offered instruction in science and mathematics, and there were no "discernable differences" in the performance level of men and women (Fox-Genovese, 1997, p. 205).

## **BENEFITS TO WOMEN**

As stated previously, research has suggested women benefit from attending a single-gender institution. Studies have indicated the primary advantages for women educated at single-gender institutions were improved academics and emotional confidence

(Smith, Wolf, & Morrison, 1995; Kim & Alvarez, 1995; Monaco & Gaier, 1992; Riordan, 1994). Additional benefits included increased opportunities for leadership positions and enhanced post-graduation achievement.

The rationale for improved academic performance for women at single-gender colleges or universities was based upon research comparing coeducational and women's institutions. Research implied that a "chilly climate" in the coeducational, college classroom not only drives women from some "masculine" fields, such as engineering and science, but also hinders their learning processes (Riordan, 1994). "Male students generally receive more attention from teachers, and they dominate discussions and classroom interaction at all levels" (Riordan, 1994, p. 489).

A coeducational climate may dissuade female students from participating in class, prevent them from pursuing help outside the classroom, and cause them to avoid "sexist" classes or professors. Women's institutions, in contrast, "provide special innovative programs for women and, in some cases, tailor to the learning style of women" (Riordan, 1994, p. 490). For example, Ursuline College, in Cleveland, Ohio, has designed its curriculum to emphasize group discussions and collaborative learning, as it has been shown that more women learn in a social context (Gose, 1995). In addition, the mere presence of women, as well as encouragement from female peers, appears to be important in the development of women's interests in academic achievement (Riordan, 1994).

Another possible educational advantage for women attending single-sex institutions is the percentage of same-gender role models. Women at women's colleges and universities are much more likely to consider female faculty as role models (Whitt, 1994; Kim & Alvarez, 1995; Monaco & Gaier, 1992; Miller-Bernal, 1993; Riordan, 1994). Some argue this is a result of a higher percentage of women faculty and administrators.

According to the website for Scripps College, a women's college in Claremont, California, "more than 80% of all women's college presidents are women, compared to 12% at coed institutions, and the faculty, senior administration, and boards of trustees at most women's colleges are equally divided between male and female" (Scripps College, 1998, On-line source). Miller-Bernal (1993) concluded that students perform better in an atmosphere where it is perceived that the faculty and staff are sufficiently concerned with their needs. A greater proportion of women faculty, staff, and administrators may increase this perception of concern.

One of the many advantages to attending a women's college is gaining a higher level of self-esteem. Monaco and Gaier (1992) state, "Women in single-sex settings are also exposed to an atmosphere in which high-achievement women are the rule rather than the exception" (p. 586). Environments that promote highest potential performance, while at the same time support them in all facets of their education, boost their self-esteem. Miller-Bernal (1993) suggested the key reason women's colleges benefit their students is because the environment encourages students to be more confident in themselves. Miller-Bernal (1993) also proposed a women's centered curriculum, one that focuses on the learning styles of women, among other concepts, is an important instrument from which women learn to value themselves.

Single-gender institutions for women also increase the availability of extracurricular activities and access to leadership positions for females. All leadership positions at women's colleges are open to women. Phinney (1998) confirmed that attendance at a women's college increases the chance of women acquiring leadership positions during college (Collegexpress, On-line source). In addition, Monaco and Gaier (1992), in their study on adolescent females, observed how single-gender institutions address leadership for women. "First, they give women a better opportunity to become class president and vice-president, instead of secretary and treasurer. Second, they eliminate the conflict between assertiveness and sex-role stereotypes for women" (p. 587). In

addition, women at single-gender schools are exposed to more leadership experiences, and these experiences are typically of a "higher quality" (Monaco & Gaier, 1992, p. 92).

An additional advantage for women attending a single-gender institution is success after graduation. Many women's colleges expound these successes on their websites:

Of Business Week's list of 50 female "rising stars" in corporate America, 30% graduated from women's college (Collegexpress, 1998, On-line source).

One out of every seven cabinet members in state government attended a women's college (Judson College, 1998, On-line source).

Graduates of women's colleges are more than twice as likely as graduates of coeducational institutions to receive doctoral degrees, to enter medical school, and to receive doctorates in the natural sciences (Judson College, 1998, On-line source).

While this is not a comprehensive list, it is a sample of some of the successes of graduates from women's colleges. Women's colleges are quick to give evidence of their successful graduates. However, little research exists to support the notion that attendance at a women's university guarantees success for females. According to Miller-Bernal (1993), "Entering Wells students [an all women's college] were more likely to have definite career goals" (p. 28). Further studies have suggested that perhaps it is the successful nature of the students who choose to attend women's colleges, rather than the institution itself, that leads to women's college graduates' achievement (Marsh

1989). "When controls were made for women's background characteristics, precollege aspirations, other institutional characteristics, college academic and social experiences, and marital status, institutional gender had only nonsignificant and trivial impacts on women's postcollege educational, occupational, and economic attainments" (Riordan, 1994, p. 488).

## CHALLENGES AND ALTERNATIVES

Although there are many benefits for women attending single-gender schools, there also are some challenges. Many women's institutions are small, private, liberal arts schools. Such small schools, ranging in size from 500 to 2,000 full-time, traditionally-aged students, provide little margin for diversity. In addition, there is limited socioeconomic class disparity at women's colleges. Without much economic diversity, students at women's institutions have less interaction and experience with different economic classes. Also, students at women's colleges and universities do not gain the experience of leading men or working with men. Women's colleges and universities have been "criticized for not preparing women for the 'real' world of leadership" (Whitt, 1994, p. 203).

While it appears from the above information that there are educational advantages for women attending women's colleges or universities; there also are alternatives which may offer similar advantages. Miller-Bernal (1993) explored four different types of institutions of higher education: Wells, a women's college; William Smith, a coordinate college; and Middlebury and Hamilton, two coeducational institutions. All of these

institutions are small (between 500 and 1,500 students), private, liberal arts schools, located in small communities in the northeast United States. Via questionnaire, the study tracked 260 women, some from each institution, during their undergraduate experience. Students at William Smith, the coordinate college (which is comparable to a "sister school" for a men's college), had similar experiences inside and outside of the formal classroom setting to the students at Wells, the women's college. In fact, on some variables, female students at William Smith fared better than Wells' students. These variables included having taken at least one course on women's issues, and the amount of concern they feel the administration and faculty express for female students (Miller-Bernal, 1993). This study supports the notion that a coordinate school may be another viable alternative to women's college education.

## THE FUTURE OF WOMEN'S COLLEGES

At this point in time, the future of women's institutions is uncertain. Women's colleges were established in the 1800s because at the time there was no other higher education alternative. Throughout the last 100 years, the number of coeducational colleges and universities has increased, while the number of women's colleges has decreased (Smith et al., 1995). While there were 268 women's colleges in the 1960s, presently only 84 women's colleges exist. These numbers are not encouraging; however, women's colleges have moved forward with the times, incorporating innovative learning opportunities, such as collaborative learning and group discussions, for their students. The future of women's colleges and universities lies with these innovations. Riordan (1994) stated, "A choice of single-sex education is a proacademic/prowomen choice. This choice-making process clearly involves the concept of a shared 'value community'"

(p. 491). There always will be a need to produce strong, intellectual women. Women's colleges need to continue to fulfill this role.

In conclusion, Riordan (1994) suggested there are ten theoretical rationales that support the notion that women's colleges may be more productive academic environments than coeducational schools for females. These rationales include:

The diminished strength of youth culture values

A greater degree of order and control

The provision of more successful role models

A reduction of sex differences in curriculum opportunities

A reduction of sex bias in teacher-student interaction

A reduction of sex stereotypes in peer interaction

The provision of a greater number of leadership opportunities

A proacademic parent/student choice

Possible provision of special programs for women

Accommodations to gender differences in learning (p. 491)

The exploration of these explanations may suggest there are conceivable reasons to attend single-gender schools. While every institution has positive and negative qualities, prospective students need to examine all aspects of an institution to find one that best suits their needs. Research shows that women's colleges and universities are viable and promising choices for female high school students.

Women who attend, or have attended, women's colleges feel there are definite advantages to these kinds of institutions. According to a Wells College graduate, "The best thing [about a women's college] is the friendships I've formed. I feel like there is a special bond among the women here" (Wells College, 1998, On-line source). Another graduate expressed her feelings about a single-gender education by stating, "The most important thing to me was the experience in the classroom, the feeling that the professors expected nothing less than the best a lot of it was about women being able to speak up, not silenced" (Phinney, 1998, On-line). Although an education is a valuable possession, an education catering to specific gender needs and created to help maximize learning, has even more value. Women's institutions may provide the quality and experience that students are seeking. As women's colleges and universities offer precious rewards in learning, self-esteem growth, identity formation, and leadership potential, it is important to recognize them as valuable institutions of higher education.

## REFERENCES

- Fox-Genovese, E. (1997). Education of women in the United States south [Review of the book *The education of the southern belle: Higher education and student socialization in the antebellum south*]. *Journal of Women's History, 9*, 203-211.
- Gose, B. (1995). 'Women's ways of knowing' for the basis of ursuline curriculum. *Chronicle of Higher Education, 41*, A25.
- Judson College. (1999). "Greater Success at a Women's College." Retrieved February 6, 1999 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.judson.edu/why.html>
- Kim, M., & Alvarez, R. (1995). Women only colleges: Some unanticipated consequences. *Journal of Higher Education, 66*, 641-668.
- Komives, S. R., & Woodard, D. B., Jr. (1996). *Student services: A handbook for the profession* (pp. 46-48) (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Miller-Bernal, L. (1993). Single-sex versus coeducational environments: A comparison of women students' experiences at four colleges. *American Journal of Education*, 102, 23-49.

Monaco, S. R., & Gaier, E. L. (1992). Single-sex versus coeducational environment and achievement in adolescent females. *Adolescence*, 27, 579-593.

Phinney, S. (1998). Considering a women's college. [On-line]. Available: <http://www.collegexpress.com/admissions/womens.html>

Riordan, C. (1994). The value of attending a women's college: Education, occupation, and income benefits. *Journal of Higher Education*, 65, 486-506.

Scripps College. (1998). "Why Choose a Women's College?" Retrieved February 6, 1999 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.scrippscol.edu/wmnscol.htm>

Smith, D. G., Wolf, L. E., & Morrison, D. E. (1995). Paths to success: Factors related to the impact of women's colleges. *Journal of Higher Education*, 66, 245-266.

Whitt, E. L., (1994). "I can be anything!": Student leadership in three women's colleges. *Journal of College Student Development*, 35, 198-207.

Wells College. (1998). "Why Wells" Retrieved February 6, 1999 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.wells.edu/why/why.htm>

*Katy Casserly ('00) is an Associate Hall Director in Corbett Hall at Colorado State University.*