

The Seven Sisters: The History of America's Elite Women's Colleges

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I - Introduction

Women's colleges contribute to the diverse tapestry of American higher education. Today, there are 49 women's colleges in the United States (Women's College Coalition, n.d.). This is down from significantly from the 233 that existed in 1960 (Landgon, 2001). Over the past fifty years women's colleges have begun to admit men and embraced coeducation, while others have closed their doors. Since their creation, women's colleges have been played an influential role within the greater landscape of American higher education. Scholar Leslie Miller-Bernal (2006), clearly articulates importance of the study of women's colleges.

Women's colleges have played an important role in the lives of thousands of women.

They are defended passionately by many students and alumnae who see them as having a unique environment in which women's interests and needs are given priority. It behooves all of us who are committed to gender equity to study women's colleges so that we can better understand the particular ways in which they have benefited women and so that we can use them as models for the increasingly prevalent coeducational institutions (pp.14-15).

In this paper, I will provide a historical context for the creation of women's colleges, examine their evolution through current day, and close with predictions for their future. This paper will specifically focus on the seven women's colleges that make up the Seven Sisters; Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar and Wellesley. These seven colleges formed a partnership dedicated to the promotion of women's education at 1926 meeting of their presidents (Eisenmann, 1998, p. 364). As leaders within the historic network of women's colleges, an examination of the Seven Sisters provide an excellent context for

understanding the history of and the present state of women's colleges. Examples from additional women's colleges and historical insights regarding men's and coeducational colleges will be integrated to help place these seven institutions within the larger framework of American higher education.

The historical framework will be broken down into three sections. The first section will address the earliest forms of women's colleges that began emerging in the mid 1800s through the 1889, the year Barnard College was founded. This section will include the historical underpinnings of women's college curriculum. The second section discusses the late 1890s through 1969 when Vassar College amended its charter and began enrolling men. The final section will focus on the broader state of women's colleges from the 1970s through the early 1990s. The evolution of women's colleges is an important aspect of the American system of higher education.

II – Women's College History

The Early Days

Educating Women?

When Harvard was founded in 1636, the thought of educating women was in no-one's mind. College was not even seen as the place for most American men. God intended women for marriage in motherhood (Rudolph, 1990, p. 310). Thus, from the beginning educational opportunities were gender dependent. In 1675 New England, based on the ability to sign documents, the literacy rate was approximately 70 percent for men and 45 percent women (Eisenmann, 1998, p. 503). Very little formal school existed and it would be over 150 years before the seminary movement that sparked the formal education of women. There were rigid gender expectations during the colonial era. "Colleges were not for women because colleges

were vocational training schools, training for professions not open to women” (Boas, 1971, p. 9). Cohen and Kisker (2010) stated “women who ventured outside the home were mistrusted” (p. 77). Further, “The colonial view of woman was simply that she was intellectually inferior – incapable, merely by reason of being a woman, of great thoughts” (Rudolph, 1990, pp. 307-308). Even as colleges for women were founded, leading scholars professed that educating women had consequences to their health and reproduction abilities. Edward Clark, a retired Harvard Professor published *Sex in Education* in 1873. In this text he warned that excessive study and lack of proper rest could lead to mental and physical breakdowns in women, and would impact the development of their most valuable asset – their reproductive system (Eisenmann, 1998; Miller-Bernal, 2006). It was these sentiments that early advocates for women's education had to challenge. Two leading pioneers of women's educations were Catharine Beecher and Mary Lyon. Their work promoting education for women laid a rich foundation for women's colleges. Implemented in very different ways, both Beecher and Lyon put their belief in women's education into action.

Academies, Seminaries & Colleges

It is difficult to discern the first women's colleges. Though numerous sources cite Georgia Female College (now Wesleyan) founded in 1839 as the earliest women's college (Boas, 1971; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Rudolph, 1990). However it was predated by numerous seminaries and academies that eventually developed into colleges. For example “Four years before the Declaration of Independence was signed, North Carolina's first woman's college was founded. Salem College in Winston-Salem is the oldest female educational establishment in the country that is still a women's college” (Huaman & Davidson, 2010, para. 1). It should be noted that the original name was Salem Academy. Academies began to flourish in the mid-eighteenth century;

the term seminary began to appear more frequently in the antebellum era (Eisenmann, 1998).

While some seminaries had a religious component, the term did not imply religious study as it does today. The women's college movement was an extension of the female seminaries.

Early Reformers – Catharine Beecher and Mary Lyon

Catharine Beecher and Mary Lyon were early advocates for women's education. They both believed they could change the world and worked to promote popular enthusiasm for women's education. Both women were teachers and founded seminaries.

Beecher founded Hartford Female Seminary in 1823, Western Female Institute in 1833 and Milwaukee Female College in 1850. Both Hartford Seminary and her Western Female Institute failed when her appeal to elite for funding was unsuccessful. When Beecher founded Milwaukee Female College, she sought to combine her passions for recruiting teachers and professionalizing domestic duties. She employed a men's college governance model with faculty having equal status and divided into departments. Beecher's had implementation issues and left before it merged with another institution. Beecher became more well known for her writings and her travels promoting women's education and the ideal of female domesticity. In 1852, Beecher founded The American Women's Education Association with the purpose of providing direction and standards for the women's college movement (Rudolph, 1990). According to Boas (1971), the mission of the American Women's Education Association was three fold, training nurses, training housekeepers, and training teachers (p. 227).

Mary Lyon founded her seminary, Mount Holyoke, in 1837. Mount Holyoke was the first permanently endowed institution of higher education solely for women (Turpin, 2010). Prior to founding Mount Holyoke, she assisted with the founding Wheaton Female Seminary in 1834 (Eisenmann, 1998, p. 459). To make Mount Holyoke affordable, Lyon, offered low teacher

salaries and a students participated in a labor system doing domestic work including cooking and clearing (Turpin, 2010). Additionally, Mount Holyoke had a mission of converting students to Christianity. Unlike Beecher's departmental faculty structure, the Mount Holyoke faculty was responsible for teaching multiple subjects. Lyon did not believe in using class time to instruct students in domesticity. Unlike Beecher who looked to small numbers of wealthy donors for funding, Mary Lyon looked to a large number of commoners. Mount Holyoke was a successful seminary and later became a college. Mount Holyoke had "curriculum as advanced as the best women's seminaries at the time as and as similar to men's colleges as possible given the social opinion of women's lower level of preparation in Latin and Greek" (Turpin, 2010, pp 152-153).

Turpin (2010), identifies three ways in which Beecher and Lyon's visions differed: (a) Tied to the influence of the Republican Motherhood, Beecher believed women were uniquely called to sacrifice for the greater good. Whereas Lyon believed that the responsibility of sacrifice fell equally to men and women. (b) Lyon was focused on the education of poorer women and Beecher reached out to wealthy women whom she believed were more influential. (c) Lyon was an advocate of a liberal arts curriculum for women. While Beecher agreed with the liberal arts she stressed the importance of professional training in tasks such and homemaking and teaching (pp. 138-139). It was a hybrid of Lyon and Beecher's visions that Vassar College employed and later became a model for twentieth century women's colleges. They "offered female students Beecher-style professional training in areas male student avoided, namely homemaking and the education of young children" (Turpin, 2010, p. 158).

Regional Influences

The regional placement of Beecher and Lyon also impacted their ability to influence the creation of strong women's colleges. The elite male colleges of the time were in the North and

so the education systems of the North presented themselves as having a higher quality of rigor (Boas, 1971). Further, the Civil War weakened the Southern education system. Not until Vassar, Smith and Wellesley opened in the 1860s and 1870s did women's colleges take form (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Influenced by the more agrarian lifestyle, in the Midwest and the west, gender roles tended to be less rigid. "Because of such practical and ideological factors, colleges like Oberlin (1833) and Antioch (1852) in Ohio, as well as some universities like Chicago (1892), opened as coeducational" (Miller-Bernal, 2006, p. 3). But just because school allowed women to attend alongside men did not mean that they operated with gender equity. Oberlin kept their female department separate (Boas, 1971). Unlike women's college which sought to model their structure after men's colleges seeking to open up new opportunities for women, many coeducational colleges had coursework that perpetuated the limited opportunities available to women.

Vassar

Matthew Vassar was a successful brewer in Poughkeepsie, New York. His interest in women's college was sparked by his niece who ran a seminary for young women in Poughkeepsie. Upon learning of Vassar's intention of spending a portion of his fortune for the public good, Lydia Booth, Vassar's niece, advocated for her uncle to found a women's college (Bingham, 1986). In the 1850's, the idea for Vassar was born. The early planners at Vassar, Smith, and Wellesley sought to give young women the same level of education that had become standard at men's colleges but they had to prove women could undertake a serious course of study (Rudolph, 1990). It was the influence of Milo Jewett who helped Vassar to bring Booth's suggestion to fruition. Milo Jewett, a Dartmouth graduate with experience running a Southern female seminary was forced to leave the South due to his anti-slavery sympathies (Boas, 1971).

He arrived in Poughkeepsie and bought school formally owned by the niece of Martin Vassar's niece. "Jewett seems to have been one of that shrewd group of men who saw women's education as an opportunity to advance themselves. He had early found in female schools a wider opportunity than was afforded in the more heavily competitive field of masculine education" (Boas, 1971, p. 224). Vassar was chartered in 1861 and opened in 1865 with Jewett as its first president. Students were required to take entrance exams upon arrival in the early years some high school level was offered alongside college work until 1890 (Griffen & Daniels, 2006). As curriculum developed at Vassar and the other Seven Sisters, Women's colleges offered compulsory studies in subjects that only the ambitious few at seminaries had the privilege of the studying.

Smith & Wellesley

Vassar's first course of study was a bit ambiguous but morphed into one that matched what was being taught at men's colleges. Smith and Wellesley both founded in 1885, worked to perfect the women's college model; mirroring the coursework taught to men. Wellesley College was founded by Henry and Pauline Durant. While serving as a trustee of Mount Holyoke, Henry interest in the development of women's education was born. Deeply religious, Durant who was a lawyer and business man turned minister who similar to Matthew Vassar wanted to benefit the world with his wealth.

To the Durants, women were different from men but were not frail creatures who had to be pampered. Henry believed his school could serve as an experiment in women's education, where a community of women would learn to develop socially and physically while advancing their intellectual pursuits. He also wanted high academic standards (Eisenmann, 1998, p. 458).

Durant did however believe in providing top of the line accommodations. While he shared Lyon's desire to serve low and middle class students and he incorporated an element of domestic labor for his students, tuition at Wellesley College was often out of reach the lower classes. Durant also hired an all female faculty including a female president. Similar to both Vassar and Wellesley, the founding of Smith College was connected to an individual's desire to spend their wealth for the common good. The difference in this case was that Sophia Smith was a woman. There are numerous contradicting stories surrounding Smith's passion for creating college and her being pressured to by John Greene, the pastor she sought guidance from regarding the use of her wealth. The final version of her will, completed only a few months before her death did include the plans for the creation of a college. Smith College acknowledges some of the controversy surrounding its founding.

Some scholars question whether Sophia Smith herself conceived this path breaking plan or whether she merely endorsed an idea proposed by Reverend Greene. The wording of the will may likewise be Sophia's own -- or may not be. And while Sophia Smith has been described as yielding and submissive, there is evidence that her interest in women and their academic aspirations was genuine and long-standing (Smith College, para. 13). From the literature (Boas 1971; Turpin 2010; Eisenmann, 1998), it becomes evident that Rev. John Greene wielded a certain measure of power over Smith. In contrast to the single building residency model common at female seminaries as well as at Vassar and Wellesley, Smith was created with a cottage system which a strong collegiate culture was fostered. (Eisenmann, 1998, p. 380). This residency style followed more of a Beecher model but the curriculum was modeled after Lyon's Mount Holyoke without the strong influence on religion and with influences from

the all-male Amherst (Turpin, 2010, p.156). The first president of Smith had previously worked at Amherst where his brother still taught.

Bryn Mawr

The vision of Joseph Taylor an Orthodox Quaker physician, was to create a college that would prepare Quaker teachers. Bryn Mawr was founded in 1885. Pulling from the legacy of Beecher, Taylor placed a strong emphasis on the usefulness of mothers educated in the liberal-arts. It originally closely followed the model enacted by Smith, but soon detached itself from the influence of seminary models and became a leader in putting academic rigor at the very core of women's education (Eisenmann, 1998, p. 57). The shift was led by M. Carey Thomas, Bryn Mawr's first dean and second president. Educated at Cornell, Johns Hopkins and having earned a Ph.D. summa cum laude from the University of Zurich, Thomas was unimpressed with the academics at other women's colleges.

As she visited major eastern colleges for men and women, she was dismayed by what she found: students unprepared for college study and even some of the women teachers at Wellesley, Smith and Mount Holyoke who had never had a single college course themselves (Eisenmann, 1998, p. 58).

To enact her vision, Thomas recruited top scholars, mostly young male German-educated scholars. She also created a graduate school. Bryn Mawr's success and its grounding in academics represented an important breakthrough in women's education.

Mount Holyoke

Founded at Mount Holyoke Seminary in 1837, Lyon increasingly raised admissions standards and coursework rigor until her death in 1849. It was not until 1888, that Mount Holyoke achieved college status. Even during its years as a seminary, Mount Holyoke

challenged the commonly held beliefs about women's academic ability. According to Turpin (2010), Mount Holyoke, however, demonstrated that women could succeed at a curriculum approaching that of men's colleges while distinctive womanhood could be preserved by activities outside the classroom (p. 154).

Coordinate Colleges – Barnard & Radcliffe

Coordinate colleges are institutions that were founded as separated female only colleges connected to established all male colleges. Barnard and Radcliffe, connected to Columbia and Harvard respectively, are examples of coordinate colleges. Radcliffe College evolved into being from a Harvard entity known as the Harvard Annex. The Harvard Annex began in 1878 when young women began paying Harvard professors to provide them instruction in coursework similar to that taught in formal Harvard classrooms (Eisenmann, 1998). Radcliffe College was endowed in 1894. A similar evolution took place at Columbia. In 1889, the Trustees of Columbia voted to create an institution to educate women. "By 1896, both Radcliffe and Barnard had begun building their own campuses; with curricula still based in that of the men's schools, they developed separate, relatively autonomous identities" (Eisenmann, 1998, p. 366)

The End of the Century

The late 1800's were a crucial time for the establishment of women's colleges and the promotion educational opportunities for women. "By 1880, female students in both women's colleges and coeducational institutions comprised 33% of the baccalaureate-seeking population" (Langdon, 2001, p. 7). While it is true that the Seven Sisters were created with the mission of affording female students access to education equal to that of men, it is important to recall the regional differences and the growth of coeducation during these years. According to Miller-Bernall (2006), a majority of women being educated by 1880 were being educated at

coeducational colleges (p. 3). Trinity College in Washington D.C. the first Catholic women's college not to evolve out of an academy was founded in 1900 (Rudolph, 1990). Keeping in mind lens of gender it is important to note the role men played in the expansion of women's colleges. These colleges were founded before women gained the vote. In a time of great gender inequity in our history, women were forced to rely upon the privilege carried by men. This is not to underscore the work of women such as Lyon, Beecher and Thomas who worked within the gender confines of the day to enact change. The following century saw an expansion of sharp decline in women's colleges.

Women's Colleges in the Twentieth Century

The 1950s & 60s

American higher education in the middle of the twentieth century was ripe with changes. Influenced by the passage of the G.I. Bill in 1944, the percentage of women attending colleges dropped during the 1950s, only three percent of those using G.I. benefits were female (Eisenmann, 1998, pp. 505-506). The women who were attending college were mostly attending coed colleges and universities. "By the mid-1950s, nine of ten women attending institutions of higher education were enrolled in coeducational institution" (Miller-Bernal, 2006, p. 7). This shift can be partly attributed to the growing number of coeducational institutions. According the Cohen and Kisker (2010), the percentage of students attending colleges serving only men or women dropped from 25% to 14% between 1945 and 1970 as many single-sex colleges closed or became coeducational. In the 1960's there was unprecedented growth in higher education. Roughly 700 new institutions were founded during the 1960's, established colleges explored opportunities to expand with 40% of single-sex colleges embracing coeducation by 1970 (Miller-Bernal, 2004, p. 9). Colleges wishing to avoid full coeducation considered founding coordinate

colleges. Social movements of the 1960s profoundly impacted higher education. The civil rights movement, anti-Vietnam War protests, the gay liberation movement, and the sexual revolution, created a cultural mood calling for closer ties between genders and races (Miller-Bernal, 2004). It was in this climate that coeducation blossomed. All but one of the Seven Sisters remained single-sex through the 1970s

Coeducation

From June to October of 1968, 64 women's colleges closed or become coeducational (Langdon, 2001). In 1969, Vassar College split from the Seven Sisters when it made the bold decision to become coeducational.

“Vassar had not suffered financially or experienced any obvious problem in the number and academic qualification of its applicants. But by the late 1950's there were signs that Vassar's isolated single sex environment was becoming less attractive to the most active and talented women (Griffen & Daniels, 2006, p. 27).

Vassar College explored numerous ways to remain competitive within the ever-growing market of higher education. One consideration was to have Vassar relocate to New Haven and to become a coordinate college with Yale. A grant from the Ford Foundation was used to conduct a study of both the desirability and feasibility of a coordinate relationship between the two schools (Griffen & Daniels, 2006, p. 29). Fears from alumnae that Vassar students and faculty would be seen as second class in comparison with Yale along with other fears of relocating Vassar opted not to enter into a partnership with Yale. In 1968 the faculty of Vassar voted on the option to become coeducations. Griffen and Daniels (2006), report the vote resoundingly supported coeducation; the vote was 102 pro and 3 cons. Vassar's decision against partnering with Yale, lead the all-male institution to also consider coeducation. Both Yale and Princeton began

admitting women in 1969. “The adoption of coeducation by Yale and Princeton meant that less-prestigious single-sex institutions seeking to maintain or enhance their status would be more inclined to admit women” (Miller-Bernal, 2004, p. xi). The shift towards coeducation continued over the next several decades. “At the same time that the number of women’s college declined – from 233 in 1960 to 90 in 1986- systematic research demonstrated their benefits to women” (Miller-Bernal, 2006, p. 9).

The State of Modern Women’s Colleges – The 1970’s through the 1990’s

In the 1970’s, Radcliffe College negotiated their relationship with Harvard. In 1975, there was an agreement between the two to allow joint admission to both institutions, this followed previous decisions regarding their coordinate relationship including; women being allowed to receive Harvard degrees (1963) and co residence (1971). During its existence as an institution through its current role as an institute with Harvard, Radcliffe has worked to keep women’s issues on the radar at Harvard. Similar to the original partnership that existed between the Seven Sisters, the Women’s College Coalition was founded in 1972. “The Coalition engaged in a strategic planning process, pushing into the tough questions associated with the larger context of women’s education” (Women’s College Coalition, n.d.).

Since the 1970s, researchers have consistently found that women’s colleges positively impact their students. Even after accounting for differing backgrounds, women college’s students experience advantages later in life (Miller-Bernal, 200), including higher incomes at a value of more than \$10,000 annually (Warner, 1993). With the rise of coeducation, research has been conducted on the climate women are facing in coed environments. Researchers have identified that women face a ‘chilly climate’ at coed colleges in that professors more often called on male students, and women are not encouraged to be involved (Miller-Bernal, 2006, p. 9). In

the early years women's colleges were about access, where as in more recent decades they are about equity (Langdon, 2001). "Although women's college graduates account for less than four percent of college educated women they make up 33% of women board members of fortunate 1000 companies in 1992, and 24% of women members of congress" (Warner, 1993).

There have been recent occurrences that have regenerated interest in women's colleges. Warner (1993) identified Hilary Clinton's prominence as one of these occurrences. "During the last three years applications have risen 14% nationwide. At Wellesley alone, the application increased an impressive 15% in 1993, the year Hillary Clinton moved into the White House" (Warner, 1993, p. 160). A more profound event took place after Mills College, a women's college in California, decided to admit men. In 1981, Mary Metz became the president of Mills College. Metz began a decade long study to create a strategic plan for Mills future, goals included, increased enrollment, improved rankings and attracting high achieving students (Sheldon, 2006). Once the plan was in place, enrollment actually declined. In 1989, the Board of Trustees voted to admit men. This sparked an outrage among Mills students. In an act of defiance, students embarked on two-week boycott of classes and campus activities demanding a reversal of the Board's decision; the protesting was successful (Sheldon, 2006, pp 194-195).

III – Present Day Women's College

Today five of the original Seven Sisters still operate as women's colleges. To broaden the opportunities they provide their students, they created valuable partnerships with neighboring coeducational colleges.

Each school is part of an impressive consortium that provides students with expanded curricular and co-curricular offerings. Barnard: Columbia University, Bank Street, Jewish Theological Seminary, and Union Theological Seminary; Bryn Mawr: Haverford,

Swarthmore, and UPenn; Mount Holyoke and Smith: Amherst, and Hampshire Colleges, and the University of Massachusetts Amherst; Wellesley: MIT, Babson, and Olin (Sisters, n.d.)

Today these remaining Seven Sisters are leaders not only among women's colleges but among the greater population of American colleges. Smith, Wellesley and Mount Holyoke are rated among the most highly selective liberal arts colleges in the country (Anyaso, 2009). Women's colleges have continued to help launch women into male dominated fields. In 2000, Smith founded the first accredited engineering program just for women (Anyaso, 2009).

Beyond the remaining Seven Sisters, many other women's colleges are taking an innovative approach to their future. Yet, many women's colleges are exploring new ways to thrive. Many remaining women's colleges are employing the following approaches include reaching out to women with children, providing weekend based programs, adding coeducational graduate programs and networking with area colleges (Biemiller, 2011). In 2007, the Women's College Coalition partnered with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and several leading higher education researchers. Studying NSSE data, (Kinzie, Thomas Palmer, Umbach & Kuh, 2007), compared the experiences of women at coeducational colleges with those at women's colleges. The research identified that women's colleges provide a distinct and positive environment for their students. A sample of their findings include the following; (a) women's colleges students have more opportunities to interact with people of differing economic, racial and social backgrounds, (b) students at women's college scored higher on nearly every measure of engagement, and (c) women's college students report a higher level of academic challenge (Kinzie et. al, 2007). In the conclusion of their study Kinzie et. al, report "single-sex colleges are a vital postsecondary option for women" (2007, p. 163)

Not all women's colleges are finding ways to thrive. Biemiller (2011), reports that seven women's colleges have embraced coeducation over the past ten years (p.A27). The question regarding the future of women's college remains.

IV – Is There a Future for Women's College?

In the 1960s when Vassar College was exploring the possibility of coeducation, their then president, Sarah Blanding made a chilling prediction for the future of women's colleges. "She predicted that of the hundred or more women's colleges now in existence no more than ten will be functioning in the year 2061" (Griffen & Daniels, 2006, p.27). At the rate women's colleges have been evolving into coeducational institutions, Blanding's prophecy may very well come true. If truly only ten women's colleges exist in 2061, I predict that the five remaining Seven Sisters will be in that count. It is difficult to predict which other women's colleges will be standing with them. Looking at both the historic and current trends I argue that distinctive programs such as Smith's engineering program as well as innovative marketing strategies are the key women's colleges sustainability. According to recent surveys, a mere two percent high school females say they would consider attending a women's college (Biemiller, 2011, A27). From my personal work as an admissions officer at a women's college, I found that many high school females had not considered a women's college because they did not know they still existed. Women's colleges must promote their existence and the unique experiences they provide their students.

V – Conclusion

The current research proclaims that the work women's colleges are doing is still relevant in the 21st century. Why then are not more students considering this unique option?

Personally, I believe the greatest hurdle facing women's colleges is how they market themselves to prospective students and greater society. Women's colleges must position with confidence as innovative leaders in the market of higher education. In the same way that the women at Mills challenged that Board's decision to admit men, women's colleges should tap their alumnae networks to challenge the commonly held belief that women's colleges are outdated.

To help continue to demonstrate their place within higher education offerings, research similar to that coordinated by Kinzie et. al, and the Women's College Coalition must continue to be a take place on a regular basis.

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