

A CHALLENGE TO EXCEL:
CREATING A NEW IMAGE FOR ELITE WOMEN'S COLLEGES IN THE 1970S

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ABSTRACT

A CHALLENGE TO EXCEL:

CREATING A NEW IMAGE FOR ELITE WOMEN'S COLLEGES IN THE 1970S

Vicki L. Hewitt

Marybeth Gasman

When elite men's colleges began to open their doors to women in the late 1960s, elite women's colleges were faced with a dilemma that threatened their institutions' continued existence. These colleges needed to redefine their purpose and communicate a new image in order to remain successful in a challenging environment. To investigate this process, I studied how three elite women's colleges responded to the challenging landscape of the 1970s, particularly the specific challenge of responding to elite men's colleges' conversion to coeducation. These elite women's colleges were successfully able to promote a new image of their institutions that argued for their validity, and the women's movement was an important influence on that process. Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Wellesley decided to remain single-sex colleges for women after the elite men's colleges moved to coeducation, and I argue that they were able to do so because student opinion drastically changed in the early 1970s due to the influence of the women's movement. Despite similar goals, the elite women's colleges and the women's movement have not always supported each other. Although their relationship was strained, women's colleges benefited from the women's movement, not only because it changed students' opinions, but also because the women's movement opened up career opportunities and encouraged women to pursue them. This made it possible for women's colleges to successfully create and disseminate a new image based on the assertion that they best prepared young women for professional careers. This new image,

grounded in an attack on coeducation that also borrowed from the women's movement, made it possible for women's college to justify their continued existence.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Elite women's colleges have always been more anxious about managing the public images of their institutions than other types of higher education institutions. Long before most higher education institutions concerned themselves with issues of image and public relations, women's colleges were making determined efforts to control their images and they exhibited more concern about how their institutions were portrayed in the mass media. This concern stemmed from the fact that images of women's colleges were inextricably bound to questions about the feasibility and usefulness of educating women, and ultimately with of the question of women's place in society.¹

From the beginning, elite women's colleges' concern about their public images was a defensive stance. These institutions were founded against the backdrop of an extensive public debate and a vocal opposition to higher education for women.² The elite

¹ The most important historical work on elite women's colleges is Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984). Although Horowitz's main focus is on the physical architecture and campuses of the women's college as an expression of ideas on women's education, she also addresses the concern the early women's college administrators had for the public image of the colleges. Another work that addresses the specific image problems facing women's colleges is Leslie Miller-Bernal and Susan L. Poulson's *Challenged by Coeducation: Women's Colleges Since the 1960s* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006). General histories of higher education, such as Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965) and Joseph Ben-David, *American Higher Education: Directions Old and New* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972) discuss the American system of higher education as it differs from the European system. Without being able to depend on state support for their institutions, all American higher education administrators need to pay attention to the public image of their institutions in order to garner financial support and attract students and faculty. An interesting parallel to women's colleges is seen in Marybeth Gasman's *Envisioning Black Colleges: A History of the United Negro College Fund* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), which describes concerns of historically black college and university administrators for the images of their institutions.

² In addition to *Alma Mater*, several histories on women in higher education provide important background for studying the elite women's colleges. The most important of these is Barbara Miller Solomon's *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), which describes the opening of higher education to women and the circumstances of the founding of the elite women's colleges. Mabel Newcomer, *A Century of Higher Education for American Women* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1959) and Lynn D. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) also contribute to understanding the early years of higher education opportunities for women. These three works focus on

women's colleges defined themselves in comparison to elite men's colleges. Their explicitly stated goal was to be equal in quality to the finest men's colleges in the nation, although their focus on women guaranteed they could never be viewed as quite the same.³ Their reason for existing was to provide women opportunities that were denied elsewhere. Because women were denied access to the best men's colleges in the country, women's colleges — no matter how excellent in quality — were seen as second-best.⁴

When these elite male colleges began to open their doors to women in the 1960s, elite women's colleges were faced with a dilemma that threatened their institutions' continued existence. The administrators of these institutions had to decide how to respond to both the growing trend towards coeducation and the men's colleges' incursions into their established student base.⁵ The crisis facing these women's colleges was fundamentally one of institutional image. They needed to redefine how they wanted to be perceived as institutions and communicate a new image in order to remain successful in a challenging environment.

To investigate this process, I studied how three elite women's colleges responded to the challenging landscape of the 1970s, particularly the specific challenge of

women students' access to higher education, their experiences in college, and the effect of their education on their lives afterwards, in contrast to the focus on educational institutions in the footnote above.

³ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 29. Sophia Smith, "Codicil for a Woman's College", March 30, 1868, Smith College: Key Founding Documents Origins Collection, Five College Archives Digital Access Project, accessed at <http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/origins/beginnings>. Mariam K. Chamberlain, *Women in Academe: Progress and Prospects* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988), 9, 109. Elizabeth A. Duffy and Idana Goldberg, *Crafting a Class: College Admissions and Financial Aid, 1955-1994* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 106. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 26. Newcomer, 26.

⁴ L. Clark Seelye, *The Early History of Smith College, 1871-1910* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1923), 8. Henry Noble MacCracken, *The Hickory Limb* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 168. These views persisted into the 1970s, as evidenced by Jill Ker Conway and George Mair's comments in Casey Callahan, "Administration discusses coeducation," *The Sophian* (Dec. 2, 1976).

⁵ Leslie Miller-Bernal and Susan L. Poulson, *Going Coed: Women's Experiences in Formerly Men's Colleges and Universities, 1950-2000* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 3-16. Duffy and Goldberg, 105-136.

responding to elite men's colleges' conversion to coeducation. The three elite women's colleges that are the subject of this study – Wellesley College, Smith College, and Mount Holyoke College –were in similar positions in this era and all three underwent a process of self-examination to determine whether to remain women's colleges or convert to coeducational institutions. All three decided to remain institutions for women in the early 1970s. I was particularly interested in how these colleges portrayed their institutions and their mission throughout the decade to outside constituents and how this may have changed in response to the changing milieu. After deciding to remain single-sex, how did these colleges make the argument that they were an important segment of the higher education environment in the United States, and how did they redefine their public image to support that argument?

My object in choosing Wellesley College, Smith College, and Mount Holyoke College is to examine how three elite women's colleges in similar situations reacted to the same external stimuli. These colleges were considered to be among the best women's colleges in the country. All three chose to remain single-sex institutions. All three were also relatively geographically isolated. One of the primary ways that single-sex institutions responded to the push for coeducation was to affiliate with nearby institutions to provide a more coeducational atmosphere. Of the other Seven Sisters schools, Radcliffe, Barnard, and Bryn Mawr took advantage of their proximity to Harvard, Columbia, and Haverford to do just that, while Vassar began admitting men in 1968. Although Smith, Wellesley, and Mount Holyoke pursued this strategy of affiliation to a certain degree as well, geographic isolation from neighboring institutions lessened the impact of this strategy on their campuses.

Many scholars have protested that the elite women's colleges have received too much research attention considering the relatively small role they played in educating women.⁶ Despite this valid criticism, I decided to focus on these three elite women's colleges for several reasons. The first is that the vast majority of the research on the elite women's colleges is on their origins and early years. There has been very little research on their recent history. The second is that research on women's colleges has often focused on the struggles and successes of their students and faculty, and not on the administration of women's colleges, as mine does. And finally, I was most concerned in this study with the changing public images of women's colleges in the context of elite men's colleges' move to coeducation. The elite women's colleges, unlike other women's colleges, had to contend with dramatic new competition in this era as some of the most prestigious men's colleges in the country opened to women. Women's colleges vary in size, scope, and competitiveness, but only the elite women's colleges were directly affected by this change.

What I found is that the elite women's colleges were successfully able to promote a new image of their institutions that argued for their validity, and that the women's movement was an important influence on that process. In Chapter Two, I look at the historical images of women's colleges held by the public. Women's colleges were often seen as inferior to other types of institutions, and I identify four images of them as second-rate, frivolous, dangerous, or irrelevant. Chapter Three investigates how the elite women's colleges reacted to the elite men's colleges' switch to coeducation in the late 1960s. Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Wellesley decided to remain single-sex colleges for

⁶ Linda Eisenmann, "Reconsidering a classic: Assessing the history of women's higher education a dozen years after Barbara Solomon," *Harvard Educational Review* 67, no. 4 (1997). Carol Lasser, *Educating Men and Women Together: Coeducation in a Changing World* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 336.

women, and I argue that they were able to do so because student opinion drastically changed in the early 1970s due to the influence of the women's movement.

Chapter Four examines the relationship between women's colleges and the women's movement, from the founding of the women's colleges up through the 1970s. Despite similar goals, the elite women's colleges and the women's movement have not always supported each other. Although their relationship was strained, I argue that women's colleges benefited from the women's movement, not only because it changed students' opinions, but also because the women's movement opened up career opportunities and encouraged women to pursue them. This made it possible for women's colleges to successfully create and disseminate a new image based on the assertion that they best prepared young women for professional careers. In Chapter Five, I argue that this new image, grounded in an attack on coeducation that borrowed from the women's movement, made it possible for women's college to justify their continued existence. Chapter Six explores how admissions staff incorporated the new image into their materials, despite their ambivalence about its effectiveness on potential students.

I used two conceptual frameworks for my research that stemmed from organizational studies: the concept of image and the concept of leadership as the management of meaning.

Most scholars studying organizational image refer to Howard Barich and Philip Kotler's definition:

We use the term "image" to represent the sum of beliefs, attitudes, and impressions that a person or group has of an object. The object may be a

company, product, brand, place, or person. The impressions may be true or false, real or imagined. Right or wrong, images guide and shape behavior.⁷

An organization's image encompasses all the information an individual has about the organization.⁸ It includes everything from the information the organization deliberately puts in the public sphere to informal interactions between the organization and the individual.⁹ The image an individual holds of an organization tends to be more favorable with more information about the organization, even if the individual disagrees with the organization's actions.¹⁰ Image depends less on specific facts than on the total impression an organization makes on an individual.¹¹

An organization's image is created through the organization's interaction with individuals. Organizations try to control their image, but they can never be completely successful since image creation involves the audience.¹² Individuals actively construct their images of the organization in ways that cannot be fully controlled.¹³ It is important to recognize that images are not perceived exactly as a public relations or marketing department construct them, but instead vary since the audience participates in their creation.¹⁴ As there are multiple perspectives involved in creating an image, it is

⁷ Howard Barich and Philip Kotler, "A Framework for Marketing Image Management," *Sloan Management Review* 32, no. 2 (1991): 95.

⁸ G. A. Marken, "Corporate image — We all have one, but few work to protect and project it," *Public Relations Quarterly* (Spring 1990): 22.

⁹ Grahame R. Dowling, "Developing Your Company Image into a Corporate Asset," *Long Range Planning* 26, no. 2 (1993): 102.

¹⁰ Robert D. Gatewood, Mary A. Gowan, and Gary J. Lautenschlager, "Corporate Image, Recruitment Image, and Initial Job Choice Decisions," *The Academy of Management Journal* 36, no. 2 (April 1993): 424.

¹¹ Ernest Dichter, "What's in an Image," *The Journal of Consumer Marketing* 2, no. 1 (1985): 75.

¹² Mary Jo Hatch and Majken Schultz, "Relations between organizational culture, identity and image," *European Journal of Marketing* 31, no. 5/6 (1997), 359. Minjung Sung and Sung-Un Yang, "Toward the Model of University Image: The Influence of Brand Personality, External Prestige, and Reputation," *Journal of Public Relations Research* 20, no. 4 (2008): 360.

¹³ Dowling, 104. Susanne G. Scott and Vicki R. Lane, "A Stakeholder Approach to Organizational Identity," *Academy of Management Review* 25, no. 1 (2000): 48.

¹⁴ D.F. Treadwell and Teresa M. Harrison, "Conceptualizing and Assessing Organizational Image: Model Images, Commitment, and Communication," *Communication Monographs* 61, no. 1 (1994): 65-66. Sheryl

reasonable to expect that there will be multiple, varying images of the organization. An organization has many images and these vary depending on the aspect of the organization under consideration and the individual holding them.¹⁵ Different groups of individuals may also hold different images of the organization.¹⁶

Although a widely-publicized negative event can do immediate damage, most scholars stress that images are very difficult to change deliberately because the organization has only a modicum of control over them. Since an organization has a multiplicity of images, the overall image of the organization is always in flux and dependent on historical context.¹⁷ Building an image is a lengthy process, although it can be improved or destroyed by an organization's achievements or neglect.¹⁸ The image of an organization may not have much connection to its actual state. Mats Alvesson notes, "The relationship between an image and the reality it is supposed to cover is, at best, ambiguous."¹⁹ An image can be changed for better or worse, without any real improvement being made to the organization.²⁰

Nevertheless, the image of an organization affects many aspects of that organization. A good image has positive effects on an organization.²¹ The image of an organization affects how individuals view that organization and influences the decision-

L. Williams and Mary Anne Moffitt, "Corporate Image as an Impression Formation Process: Prioritizing Personal, Organizational, and Environmental Audience Factors," *Journal of Public Relations Research* 9, no. 4 (1997): 256.

¹⁵ Barich and Kotler, 95.

¹⁶ Gatewood, at al., 425.

¹⁷ Dichter, 76. Dowling, 108. Mats Alvesson, "Organization: From Substance to Image?," in *Organizational Identity: A Reader*, ed. Mary Jo Hatch and Majken Schultz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 164.

¹⁸ Nha Nguyen and Gaston LeBlanc, "Image and reputation of higher education institutions in students' retention decisions," *International Journal of Education Management* 15, no. 6 (2001): 304.

¹⁹ Alvesson, 165.

²⁰ Dichter, 77.

²¹ Sung and Yang, 360.

making process of potential members.²² Image is highly correlated with an individual's intent to continue to associate with an organization in the future.²³ Images of an organization affect how members of that organization define themselves and also the strength of their identification with the organization.²⁴

There have been far fewer studies of image done in a higher education setting rather than from a business perspective.²⁵ However, the concept of image is just as important for higher education institutions to consider as it is for companies.²⁶ Higher education institutions rely on their images to attract and retain students, faculty, and resources.²⁷ Because higher education's products and services are for the most part intangible, a higher education institute's image becomes even more important.²⁸ A higher education institution's image is also relative to the other institutions that constitute its competition.²⁹ Many higher education institutions have a wide set of goals and services

²² Andrea M. Pampaloni, "The influence of organizational image on college selection: what students seek in institutions of higher education," *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 20, no. 1 (2010): 21.

²³ Gatewood, et al., 423.

²⁴ Jane E. Dutton, Janet M. Dukerich, and Celia V. Harquail, "Organizational Images and Member Identification," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 39 (1994): 256.

²⁵ Dean Kazoleas, Yungwook Kim, and Mary Anne Moffitt, "Institutional image: a case study," *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 6, no. 4 (2001): 207. Sue Westcott Alessandri, Sung-Un Yang, and Dennis F. Kinsey, "An Integrative Approach to University Visual Identity and Reputation," *Corporate Reputation Review* 9, no. 4 (2006): 259. Sung and Yang, 357.

²⁶ Stanley M. Grabowski, "Marketing in Higher Education" (Washington DC: American Association for Higher Education, 1981): 11.

²⁷ Kathryn T. Theus, "Academic Reputations: The Process of Formation and Decay," *Public Relations Review* 19, no. 3 (1993): 279.

²⁸ Dennis A. Gioia and James B. Thomas, "Identity, Image, and Issue Interpretation: Sensemaking During Strategic Change in Academia," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1996): 398-399.

²⁹ Pampaloni, 20. Jonathan Ivy, "Higher education institution image: a correspondence analysis approach," *The International Journal of Education Management* 15, no. 6 (2001): 276. Ravi Parameswaran and Aleksandra E. Glowacka, "University Image: An Information Processing Perspective," *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 6, no. 2 (1995): 42. Ugar Yavas and Donald J. Shemwell, "Graphical Representation of University Image: A Correspondence Analysis," *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 7 no. 2 (1996): 76.

they provide and many internal and external constituents, which make it difficult for these institutions to establish a niche that differentiates them from other institutions.³⁰

In many ways, the literature on image for higher education institutions echoes the corporate literature. D.F. Treadwell and Teresa M. Harrison found that higher education institutions have multiple images, even just among their members, and that “while organizational members’ images...were similar, no two were identical.”³¹ Multiple identities may help colleges and universities deal with the many different kinds of stakeholders and constituencies that make up the organization.³² An institution’s public image may differ dramatically from the image of it that administrators and faculty hold.³³ Many images of higher education institutions have developed over their long histories and it is hard to change them.³⁴ Institutional images are built up slowly, and therefore change slowly as well.³⁵

Some scholars have attempted to assess a higher education institution’s image and the affect it has on the institution, although there has not been much agreement on how to measure an image in a higher education setting.³⁶ But, similar to other kinds of organizations, a higher education institution’s image affects it in multiple ways. Institutional image has been found to affect a student’s selection process.³⁷ Student

³⁰ Julie Weissman, “Institutional Image Assessment and Modification in Colleges and Universities,” *Journal for Higher Education Management* 6, no. 1 (1990): 74. Parameswaran and Glowacka, 42.

³¹ Treadwell and Harrison, 80.

³² Michael G. Pratt and Peter O. Foreman, “Classifying Managerial Responses to Multiple Organizational Identities,” *Academy of Management Review* 25, no. 1 (Jan. 2000): 22.

³³ Douglas V. Leister, “Identifying Institutional Clientele: Applied Metamarketing In Higher Education Administration,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 46, no. 4 (1975): 387-388.

³⁴ Weissman, 67.

³⁵ Leister, 396.

³⁶ Sung and Yang, 359.

³⁷ Sung and Yang, 358.

loyalty to the institution was higher when the institutional image was more favorable.³⁸ Treadwell and Harrison also found a positive correlation between image and organizational commitment among students.³⁹ How freshmen perceived others saw their university affected their own attitudes towards their school: “The impact of perceived external prestige was around four times that of university reputation.”⁴⁰ And a university’s image is a significant factor in whether or not a parent would send their children to the school.⁴¹ The image of a higher education institution is an important asset, and assessing and influencing that image has been critical for higher education institutions since at least the turn of the twentieth century.

My conception of elite women’s colleges’ images was informed by this literature. I identify multiple images of the elite women’s colleges in this study. What I mean by the term “image” is a set of public and commonly held ideas about these colleges that can be gleaned from historical sources. How did the general public see these colleges? What connotations did these colleges suggest? What kind of student did people think attended these schools, what did she learn there, and what did she do after graduating? How were women’s colleges seen to compare with other types of institutions? These images do not necessarily correspond to the conditions in any actual elite women’s college. They might be true, false, understated, or wildly exaggerated. What matters is that these images were a part of how people thought about elite women’s colleges and their students.

Consistent with the organizational literature on image, elite women’s colleges were not able to fully control their institutional images since the creation of images

³⁸ Nguyen and LeBlanc, 303.

³⁹ Treadwell and Harrison, 63.

⁴⁰ Sung and Yang, 370-371.

⁴¹ R. Eric Landrum, Rob Turrise, and Clayton Harless, “University Image: The Benefits of Assessment and Modeling,” *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 9, no. 1 (1999): 66.

depends on the interchange between the public, the institutions, and the media. These colleges have existed for many years and they have had many images coexist simultaneously to varying degrees. The importance of any one of these images has waxed and waned over time. It is my argument that women's colleges were able to construct and promote a new image in the 1970s, but this new image did not erase the ones I identify as preceding it. In other words, while the literature argues that it is almost impossible to change or eliminate an image, my research suggests that it is possible to add a competing image into the mix. I believe that all of the images I identify in this study still exist today in the popular conception of elite women's colleges.

The other conceptual framework I used attempts to explain how organizations react to threats, especially to threats to their own legitimacy. My research was supported by interpretive models of organizational change and the concept of leadership as the management of meaning. Unlike adaptive theories of organizational change, which hold that the environment is objective and external to the organization, interpretive models conceive of the organization as a social contract whose members actively enact the organization.⁴² “In contrast to the traditional description of organizations as static structures, we propose that organizations are better understood as dynamic, conscious, and subconscious processes through which meanings are constructed and destroyed.”⁴³ Interpretive models of organizational change claim that leaders can significantly influence how an organization experiences and reacts to a crisis.⁴⁴

⁴² Ellen Earle Chaffee, “Successful Strategic Management in Small Private Colleges,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 55, No. 2 (Mar. - Apr., 1984): 222.

⁴³ Barbara Gray, Michel G. Bougon and Anne Donnellon, “Organizations as Constructions and Destructions of Meaning,” *Journal of Management* 11 (1985): 83.

⁴⁴ Linda Smircich and Charles Stubbart, “Strategic Management in an Enacted World,” *Academy of Management Review* 10, no. 4 (Oct., 1985): 730. Kim S. Cameron, “Organizational Adaptation and Higher Education,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 55, no. 2 (Mar. - Apr., 1984): 127.

Smircich and Morgan argue that modern organizational leadership consists of managing meaning.⁴⁵ Leaders frame and interpret the experiences of the organization to create a desired end. “Leadership rests as much in these symbolic modes of action as in those instrumental modes of management, direction, and control that define the substance of the leader’s formal organizational role.”⁴⁶ In this way, they see leadership as fundamentally symbolic. “Through words and images, symbolic actions and gestures, leaders can structure attention and evoke patterns of meaning that give them considerable control over the situation being managed.”⁴⁷ Building on this definition of leadership, Gioia and Chittipeddi argued that the primary role of the university president in strategic change situations is to construct meaning and frame the process, and that this symbolic work was crucial to initiating change.⁴⁸

Seeing the crisis of elite women’s colleges in the 1970s through an interpretive framework of organizational change provides an explanation for their actions. Instead of seeing their problem as a crisis imposed on them by the external environment, it becomes a crisis of institutional credibility.⁴⁹ According to this framework, it is the function of leaders to interpret these events and provide context, which the elite women’s college administrators and advocates were able to do. They were successful in putting forward a new interpretation of their institutions and their environment, one where women’s colleges had a special relevance. They managed change not by changing their environment but by changing the context and interpretation of their institutions.

⁴⁵ Linda Smircich and Gareth Morgan, “Leadership: The Management of Meaning,” *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 18, no. 3 (1982): 261-262.

⁴⁶ Smircich and Morgan, 263.

⁴⁷ Smircich and Morgan, 263.

⁴⁸ Dennis A. Gioia and Kumar Chittipeddi, “Sensemaking and Sensegiving in Strategic Change Initiation,” *Strategic Management Journal* 12, no. 6 (Sept. 1991): 433, 445-446.

⁴⁹ Chaffee, 222.

There are several theoretical and practical applications of my research. Almost all research on public image has been done in the corporate sector and there have been few studies on image in higher education institutions. In both cases, research on image is mostly prescriptive. There have been few studies that look at an institution's image and how it has changed from a historical perspective. This study contributes to defining the concept of image as it applies in a higher education setting, and it argues that it is possible for higher education administrators to successfully promote a new image of their institutions, even if they cannot fully control the image of their institution as a whole.

It also provides a historical case study on higher education institutions' response to an environmental crisis. Following the concept of leadership as management of meaning, my research supports the theory that leaders can successfully manage change by framing and interpreting the situation to achieve their goals. Studying these institutions' attempts to redefine their public images may help other colleges and universities undergoing similar environmental threats.

Chapter Two: Images of Women's Colleges

That women have an indefeasible right to vote many good people deny; but that they have an indefeasible right to the best attainable education, is a proposition that we have never heard disputed.⁵⁰

The Literary World
July 1, 1873

From the outset of their existence, the elite women's colleges compared themselves to the elite men's colleges that were their models. They insisted that they were the equals of the elite men's colleges that excluded women, and that they were providing an education for women equivalent to what men received at these colleges. However, public opinion about elite women's colleges did not always concur with these self-assessments. Many different images of the elite women's colleges have circulated in American culture that accused them of being second-rate, frivolous, dangerous, or irrelevant. These images combined to bolster the conventional impression that elite women's colleges were inferior to prestigious colleges that admitted men.

Although some seminaries and academies had previously offered women the opportunity for advanced education, the founding of a series of elite women's colleges in the mid-nineteenth century constituted a striking change in women's higher education options. Vassar College, founded in 1861, was the first institution for women that aimed to be equivalent to Harvard and Yale.⁵¹ Before long other private eastern women's colleges were founded on this same pattern, including Wellesley and Smith, both founded in 1875.⁵² Mount Holyoke upgraded its status from a seminary to a college in 1893.⁵³

⁵⁰ "The Liberal Education of Women," *The Literary World; a Monthly Review of Current Literature* 4, 2 (July 1, 1873), 25.

⁵¹ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 29.

⁵² Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 42, 78.

⁵³ Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 30.

Together with Barnard College, Bryn Mawr College, and Radcliffe College, these became known as the “Seven Sisters” after they instituted a conference to address their special concerns in 1926.⁵⁴ These seven institutions formed the elite strata of single-sex colleges for women in the United States.⁵⁵

Before they came into being, the founders of the elite women’s colleges declared their intent to make these institutions the equivalent of the finest men’s colleges in the country. Matthew Vassar’s goal was “to build and endow a College for young women which shall be to them, what Yale and Harvard are to young men.”⁵⁶ Sophia Smith also referred to the men’s colleges in designating the money to found Smith College as “an Institution for the higher education of young women, with the design to furnish for my own sex means & facilities for education equal to those which are afforded now in our Colleges to young men.”⁵⁷ The curriculum of these colleges was consciously modeled on the curriculum at the elite men’s colleges in order to prove that women were capable of doing the same intellectual work as men.⁵⁸

The intentions of the founders to be equal to elite men’s colleges were immediately countered by an antagonistic response from the public. A women’s college could not be as good as a college for men, critics argued. In the first place, women were not capable of the same intellectual achievement as men. “I do, unhesitatingly, even in

⁵⁴ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, xvi. Bryn Mawr, like the other colleges, was an independent institution. Barnard College and Radcliffe College were coordinate colleges to Columbia and Harvard, respectively. The coordinate college idea was based on the example of Girton College, a women’s coordinate college at Cambridge University that opened in 1869.

⁵⁵ The Seven Sisters schools offered increased educational opportunities mainly to middle- and upper-class Protestant white women, especially prior to the 1960s. It is important to note that access to these schools was restricted by class, religion, and race, even as they provided expanded opportunities to women. Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 155.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 29.

⁵⁷ Smith, 1868.

⁵⁸ Chamberlain, 9, 109. Duffy and Goldberg, 106. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 26. Newcomer, 26.

these pages, devoted peculiarly to the gratification of female minds, assert that nothing is more susceptible of demonstration than that women are and always have been intellectually inferior to men. The exceptions best confirm the fact,” journalist Benjamin Park wrote for *Godey’s Magazine and Lady’s Book*, seventeen years before Vassar was founded.⁵⁹ Even after the colleges graduated the first generation of scholars, ideas about women’s inferior intellectual powers continued to be expressed openly in the public realm. “With the intellectual differences between man and woman I have here little to do. That there is difference, both quantitative and in a measure qualitative, I believe, nor do I think any educational change in generations of women will ever set her, as to certain mental and moral qualifications, as an equal beside the man.”⁶⁰ It was commonly accepted that even if women’s colleges educated the most intelligent women in the country, these women would not have the same capacity for learning as students at elite men’s colleges.

At the time these colleges were founded, it was an accepted fact that woman’s smaller brain size meant she could not equal a man in scholarly attainments.⁶¹ Critics of the new colleges argued that women would be incapable of enduring the intellectual strain of a male collegiate education.⁶² Women and men were fundamentally different. “[N]one will deny that woman is more observing and less reflective than man,” William Seymour Tyler, Amherst’s professor of Greek and Latin, said in an address to Mount Holyoke Seminary in 1873. “She sees by intuition what he proves by argument or

⁵⁹ Benjamin Park, “The True Rights of Woman,” *Godey’s Magazine and Lady’s Book* (June 1844).

⁶⁰ S. Weir Mitchell, *Doctor and Patient* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1901), 138.

⁶¹ Louise Michele Newman, *Men’s Ideas/Women’s Realities: Popular Science, 1870-1915* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), 57. Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 4-6. A. Hughes Bennett, “Hygiene in the Higher Education of Women,” *The Popular Science* XVI, no. 34 (Feb. 1880): 522-523.

⁶² Newcomer, 26. Newman, 59.

establishes by demonstration. She has more taste, more feeling, more fancy, perhaps more imagination, but less reason and judgment,” and he concluded that women needed to be educated in a way that took these differences into account.⁶³ Since women were unable to equal men in academic achievement, even the best colleges for women could never equal men’s colleges.

Despite the claims of the elite women’s college founders and administrators, it is clear that the public did not believe that the intellectual standards of a women’s college could match those of a men’s college, or even a coeducational institution. An 1870 editorial in the *Springfield Republican* argued that it would have been better to open Amherst College to women than establish Smith College: “No college exclusively for girls will have, for many years to come, a standard of intellectual vigor and practical result so high as that of the best existing colleges - partly because the demand will not be so exacting. With all its excellencies, Vassar falls short of Cornell and Yale and Harvard, and must do so for a long time, and the new Smith College will mainly repeat the experience of Vassar.”⁶⁴ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps wrote “it has become a commonplace to say that institutions intended for the instruction of women *only* are second-rate affairs,” and denied that the newly-opened Vassar College would be an exception.⁶⁵ According to these authors, women students would not demand as challenging an academic atmosphere as men, so women’s colleges would not attain the same quality as men’s or coeducational colleges.

Harper’s Bazaar recognized the importance of the public opinion in the estimation of women’s colleges’ worth. Even supposing the standards of women’s

⁶³ William Seymour Tyler, *The higher education of women* (Northampton, MA: Bridgman & Childs, 1874).

⁶⁴ Quoted in Seelye, 8.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, “The ‘Female Education’ of Women,” *The Independent* (Nov. 13, 1873).

colleges were equal to men's colleges, public opinion was far from admitting it and this widespread view devalued the degrees women got from those institutions. "Grant, if you please, that Vassar is already better than Harvard, and Wellesley than Columbia, that does not give equal prestige to the women's colleges until the world in general is convinced that they are better. At present the impression is the other way..."⁶⁶ Even if women's colleges were providing the same academic opportunities as men's colleges, it did not matter if the public could not be convinced it was true.

Henry Mills Alden argued that even if women's colleges offered the same degree of intellectual training as men's colleges did, they were still unable to provide the best faculty and the preeminent social and educational atmosphere of a men's college.

In the college for young women there is the same training, so far as text-books are concerned, in mathematics, physics, psychology, and the languages as in the college for young men.... But the atmosphere, the *aura* of aspiration, is not and cannot be the same in the college for women as in that for men. ... The positive conditions are prominently social — the contacts with each other and with their eminent teachers of young men moved by the same masculine aspiration and having the same outlook upon the world, an outlook in which young women cannot participate....⁶⁷

Young men were driven to superior academic performance by encouragement from superior faculty and by competition with each other, with an eye to their future career prospects. Women's colleges could not provide their students with the same advantages.

College men were often the most resistant to recognizing any claims to equality of women's colleges. Henry Noble MacCracken, Vassar's president from 1915-1946, found in his early attempts at public relations for the college that "American men were entirely indifferent to the idea of equality of the intellect.

⁶⁶ T.W.H., "Women and Men: The Undergraduate Point of View," *Harper's Bazaar* (March 3, 1888), 130.

⁶⁷ Henry Mills Alden, "Editor's study," *Harper's Magazine*, July 1903, 315-316.

College women were therefore freaks, amusing when not charming.”⁶⁸ When Vassar women challenged Princeton to a debate competition in 1916, the notion of competing against women was ridiculed in the *Daily Princetonian*.⁶⁹

Men’s colleges were accused of fostering in their students a feeling of superiority to women and women’s colleges that degraded the worth of women’s colleges and made it difficult for them to raise funds. “Alumni of men’s colleges do not endow women’s colleges because their whole education has taught them that thinking is alien to the nature of female human beings, that it is dangerous to try to teach women to think, and that women’s colleges grant this and don’t really try very hard.”⁷⁰ Despite the efforts of their founders and early administrators, women’s colleges were not viewed by the public as the equivalent of men’s colleges.

The early years of the elite women’s colleges provided ample evidence for critics that women were not having the same experience at these institutions that men had at elite men’s colleges. In order to counteract criticism that college took young women out of the natural home life and put them into an unnatural environment, the first women’s colleges emphasized their resemblance to a home. Vassar and Wellesley were based on the seminary tradition established at Mount Holyoke. All of these institutions built large seminary buildings, where the students lived, worked, and studied together.⁷¹ *Godey’s Lady’s Book* praised the Vassar plan: “It is plain that the independence which young men may, in college life, enjoy without injury, would be pernicious to young girls. ... *The home life* is an essential element in woman’s education, necessary for the best

⁶⁸ MacCracken, 168.

⁶⁹ Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 51, 146.

⁷⁰ W. Beran Wolfe, “Why Educate Women?,” *Forum*, March 1929, 165.

⁷¹ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 48, 93. Smith’s plan of small cottages to house students was also meant to provide a more home-like environment. Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 75-78.

development of her mind, and the perfection of her character.”⁷² Concentrating students into one building made it easier to supervise them. Matthew Vassar said, “What I regard as an essential element of our Institution is the perfect *Control* of the pupils during the period of their instruction in the College.”⁷³ Grouped together under one roof for almost all of their time, students at the first women’s colleges were required to abide by many rules and regulations that did not apply to male college students.⁷⁴

The colleges also established links to earlier female educational traditions by emphasizing traditional accomplishments such as the fine arts and manners. Sara Delamont has labeled the early phase of women’s higher education the “era of double conformity.”⁷⁵ Women were expected to equal the intellectual achievements of men, while at the same time retaining the dress, manners, and deportment of fashionable ladies.⁷⁶ This connection to the seminary and finishing school tradition of women’s education belied the colleges’ claims of equality with men’s institutions in the public eye. The founders and first presidents emphasized that study of the fine arts, especially drawing, painting, and music, would be offered at their institutions.⁷⁷ “[T]he separate [women’s] college aims at a rounded refinement, at cultivating a sense of beauty, at imparting simple tastes and generous sympathies. To effect this, pictures are hung on the walls, statues and flowers decorate the room, concerts bring music to the magnified

⁷² Editors’ Table, “Vassar College To Be Opened this Year,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine*, January 1864, 93.

⁷³ Quoted in Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 36.

⁷⁴ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 22. Geraldine Joncich Clifford, “‘Shaking dangerous questions from the crease’: Gender and American higher education,” reprinted in Judith S. Glazer, Estela M. Bensimon, and Barbara K. Townsend, *Women in higher education: A feminist perspective* (Needham Heights, MA: Pearson Custom Pub., 2000), 156.

⁷⁵ Sara Delamont, “Gender and Higher Education,” in *The Sage Handbook of Gender and Education*, Christine Skelton, Becky Francis, Lisa Smulyan, eds. (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2006), 181.

⁷⁶ Delamont, 181. Seelye, 20-22.

⁷⁷ Seelye, 12. Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 35, 73, 84.

home, and parties and receptions are paid for out of the college purse,” Wellesley president Alice Freeman Palmer told the public.⁷⁸ This concern for students’ aesthetic and social development was not present at men’s colleges and served to blur the public’s estimate of the level of scholarship at women’s colleges.

In order to make enough money to stay afloat, the first women’s colleges frequently had to resort to admitting students who were less than adequately prepared, which also harmed their reputations. Both Vassar and Wellesley established preparatory departments where students who could not pass the entrance examinations could gain the knowledge they needed in order to do so.⁷⁹ In 1874, Vassar had almost 100 preparatory students, out of a total student population of 275.⁸⁰ Smith was determined to adhere strictly to the admissions standards of men’s colleges without establishing a prep department, and paid for it with a low initial enrollment.⁸¹ When Smith opened in 1875, only 14 women enrolled.⁸² Feeling that the effort it had gone through to secure the location of the college was a waste, the town of Northampton unsuccessfully pressured the college to lower the standards of admission.⁸³ L. Clark Seelye, the president of Smith, recommended to the founders of Bryn Mawr that it hold to strict standards of admission as well, because these preparatory departments were harming the prestige of women’s colleges in general.⁸⁴

Women’s colleges were generally not able to attract the same quality of faculty as men’s colleges. In their early years, the faculty of women’s colleges was chosen not so

⁷⁸ Alice Freeman Palmer, “A Review of the Higher Education of Women,” *Forum*, September 1891, 28.

⁷⁹ Solomon, 49. Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 40-41, 83.

⁸⁰ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 91.

⁸¹ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 78.

⁸² Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 78.

⁸³ Seelye, 34.

⁸⁴ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 107.

much for talent as for moral character. “[N]o board of trustees would consider it sufficient that a candidate was an accomplished specialist. She must be this, but she should be also a lady of unobjectionable manners and influential character...” Alice Freeman Palmer explained.⁸⁵ At Vassar, the academic quality of the female faculty was less important than their willingness to keep order and enforce the rules of the college.⁸⁶ Seelye advised Bryn Mawr to hire both men and women for their faculty, as he had found it difficult to get and keep qualified women as faculty at Smith.⁸⁷ He agreed that “It does seem very important, especially in a women’s college, that manners and morals as well as learning should determine to a great extent a teacher’s fitness for the position.”⁸⁸ M. Carey Thomas, who toured Vassar, Smith, and Wellesley in preparation for opening Bryn Mawr, found that in none of them “are there many professors who can lay claims to original scholarship, or who are fit to guide the students in original work.”⁸⁹ Critics of women’s colleges in their early years could point to the restrictive rules, emphasis on fine arts and manners, preparatory departments, and inferior faculty as proof that they were not equal to men’s colleges.

In addition to being seen as second-rate intellectually to their male peers, women’s colleges acquired another public image around the turn of the century that implied they were frivolous compared to men’s colleges, one that equated them to a country club. By that time the colleges had expanded and the students attending them had changed from serious, middle-class students eager to use their learning as teachers to

⁸⁵ Palmer, 28.

⁸⁶ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 62.

⁸⁷ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 107.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 107.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 115.

upper-middle-class girls biding their time until marriage.⁹⁰ Seelye reported at Smith in 1895 “each year the wealthier classes are more largely represented in the colleges for women.”⁹¹ He and other administrators were concerned that instead of providing opportunities for women that they were denied elsewhere, women’s colleges were increasingly serving privileged women who had no serious plans for their education and were only there for the social life college provided.⁹² A pleasant extracurricular lifestyle had developed at the elite women’s colleges, and by the turn of the century, these activities were frequently shown in the press.⁹³ Articles on the colleges showed students engaging in outdoor sports and in May Day and Tree Day festivities, without much emphasis on scholarly accomplishments.⁹⁴ These portrayals of elite women’s colleges as full of fun and games instead of serious intellectual study may have made these colleges more palatable and non-threatening to the American public.⁹⁵

By the early twentieth century, the elite women’s colleges had gained a reputation for being stylish and socially prestigious. Even by 1890, Horace Davis thought California women eschewed UC Berkeley for the elite Eastern women’s colleges because “the women’s colleges are thought to be more stylish, and we all know there is an aristocracy even in education.”⁹⁶ Edna Yost opined that the social prestige of being affiliated with one of the elite women’s colleges was one of the primary factors that attracted students to

⁹⁰ Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 28-29. Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 147. Solomon, 94-97.

⁹¹ Seelye, 89.

⁹² Solomon, 71, 94-97.

⁹³ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 279. Solomon, 97.

⁹⁴ Carolyn Halsted, “What a Girl Does at College,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, December 1901. Jeannette A. Marks, “Outdoor Life at Wellesley College,” *Outing, an Illustrated Monthly Magazine of Recreation*, May 1898. “The Girls of Wellesley and Bryn Mawr,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal* (June 1901).

⁹⁵ Shirley Marchalonis, *College Girls: A Century in Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 36-41.

⁹⁶ Horace David, “Collegiate Education of Women,” *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*, October 1890.

them, and in fact the Seven Sisters had to shift to competitive admissions by the 1910s as a result of increased demand.⁹⁷ By 1937, the women's colleges were described as exclusive clubs "turning away their thousands."⁹⁸ Mildred McAfee Horton pointed out that the country club reputation of the women's colleges made it harder for them to solicit money when fundraising: "[T]his reputation of being primarily a place for poor little rich girls — long fostered by silly publicity in the press and on the screen — has put...fundraisers on the defensive. Why should the public support country club playgrounds, delightful places for spoiled little girls whose families want them to meet nice college boys and spend four happy years before their marriage? The implication is that women's colleges are not real colleges."⁹⁹ The socially exclusive aura of the elite women's colleges combined with an emphasis in the media on the privileged lifestyles of their students to contribute to the widespread opinion that the educational offerings of these schools were not to be taken seriously.

The elite women's colleges were also accused of being dangerous to their students in ways that neither men's colleges nor coeducational institutions were thought to be. Critics charged that these colleges made their students sexually and politically radical. Women's colleges were seen as places that unsexed women and made them ignore their fundamental duty to marry and have children. Some thought they encouraged women to adopt extreme political opinions, such as socialism, communism, and women's rights.

The earliest women's colleges were accused of "masculinizing" their students with higher education. This was one of the public objections to Mount Holyoke when it was still a seminary in 1837. "In place of all which is most attractive in female manners,

⁹⁷ Edna Yost, "The case for the co-educated woman," *Harper's Magazine*, July 1927, 199. Newcomer, 136.

⁹⁸ Eunice Fuller Barnard, "Women and Colleges," *The New York Times*, May 2, 1937, SM8.

⁹⁹ Mildred McAfee Horton, "Myths About Women's Colleges," *New York Times*, February 5, 1950.

we see characters expressly formed for acting a *manly* part upon the theatre of life. ... Under such influences the female character is fast becoming masculine, and all that is elegant, all that is attractive in woman is sacrificed....”¹⁰⁰ Vassar took these criticisms seriously, and its second president John H. Raymond assured both the trustees and the public that Vassar’s education has not made its students “mannish.”¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, in 1920 Helen Bennett accused the women’s colleges of producing the largest number of “masculine women,” as opposed to coeducational schools.¹⁰² Lynn White, president of Mills Colleges in the 1950s, pointed out that the problem was with designating character traits as masculine or feminine. “The women’s colleges...are set up in such a way as to develop in their students those qualities of self-confidence, directness, and initiative which too many people think of as masculine traits, but which are in fact human.”¹⁰³ Nevertheless, women’s colleges were seen as unsexing women and making them more like men.

Women’s colleges were also seen as harmful to the reproductive systems of their students. Dr. Edward Clarke provided an influential twist to the argument that women were intellectually inferior to men in a widely-read book of 1873.¹⁰⁴ He declared that women might be capable of the same intellectual work as men, but that they should not pursue it due to the harmful effects on their reproductive system.¹⁰⁵ Dr. Clarke’s

¹⁰⁰ E.A. Andrews, “General View of the Principles and Design of the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary,” *The Religious magazine and family miscellany*, April 1837, 186.

¹⁰¹ J. H. Raymond, “The Vassar Course of Study,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine*, July 1870, 40. Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 59.

¹⁰² Helen M. Bennett, “Seven Colleges - Seven Types: A Study of College Girl Characteristics,” *Woman’s Home Companion*, November 1920, 17.

¹⁰³ Lynn Townsend White, “Do women’s colleges turn out spinsters?,” *Harper’s Magazine*, October 1952, 48.

¹⁰⁴ Solomon, 56-57.

¹⁰⁵ Edward H. Clarke, *Sex in Education; or, A Fair Chance for the Girls* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1873). Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 18. Newcomer, 28.

argument appeared to be supported by research on the early graduates of women's colleges showing they were less likely to marry and have children.¹⁰⁶ Women's colleges continued to argue that women were capable of the same intellectual efforts as men, and they took many steps to fight the perception that they were unhealthy. All of them instituted required physical exercise for their students, and most had a woman doctor on the premises to care for the students' health.¹⁰⁷

By the turn of the century, eugenicists accused women's colleges of encouraging women to marry later and have fewer children, or to pursue professional careers and not marry at all. One frequently mentioned consequence was "race suicide," where the number of children born to the native, educated, wealthier classes would decline and eventually be overtaken by the birthrates of immigrants and the poor.¹⁰⁸ Eugenicists influenced by Social Darwinism believed that the "better" classes of society, meaning educated white middle-class Protestants, should breed more in order to improve the quality of the human race. Henry R. Carey accused the women's colleges of "sterilizing the fittest," and warned that, "The women's colleges as leaders in the community will be held responsible for educational policies which have long tended to cause race deterioration, which have diminished the supply of leaders, which have caused women to thwart their deepest natures, which have reduced the supply of intelligent wives trained for their jobs, available for their equals among men, which have educated women who possess a cultural and biological heritage, only to cut off both in the next generation, and

Solomon, 56. Sue Zschoche, "Dr. Clarke revisited: Science, true womanhood, and female collegiate education," *History of Education Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (1989): 549, 553.

¹⁰⁶ Solomon, 56.

¹⁰⁷ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 25-26, 40, 80, 111. Newman, 57. Seelye, 20-22.

¹⁰⁸ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 279-280. Elaine Kendall, *Peculiar Institutions: An Informal History of the Seven Sisters Colleges* (New York City: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), 128. Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Going Coed*, 5-6. Newcomer, 30. Rosenberg, 11. Solomon, 119.

which have been a potent factor in the development of the American centrifugal home.”¹⁰⁹ Another article opined, “Separate colleges for women, in the United States, are from the viewpoint of the eugenicist an historical blunder.”¹¹⁰ In the eugenicist’s viewpoint, women’s colleges were responsible for their students ignoring their obligations to society.

As new theories about psychology and human sexuality spread in the early twentieth century, women’s colleges were not only accused of causing students to forego marriage, but also of turning their students into lesbians. Prior to the 1910s, there was nothing suspicious about separate female institutions or close female friendships.¹¹¹ The women’s colleges in the late nineteenth century frequently hosted all-female dances, where some of the women dressed as men.¹¹² Administrators at women’s colleges noted the students’ habits of “smashing” or “crushing” on each other, but they were more concerned about the afflicted student’s wellbeing.¹¹³ No one suggested that such behavior was abnormal.¹¹⁴

The new research on sexuality changed all that. Havelock Ellis suggested that homosexuality could be an acquired characteristic, and segregation in a single-sex environment could cause it.¹¹⁵ According to him, a small percentage of homosexuals were naturally “inverted,” but the rest were seduced into the lifestyle.¹¹⁶ Previously it had

¹⁰⁹ Henry R. Carey, “Sterilizing the Fittest,” *The North American Review* 228 (November 1929): 519.

¹¹⁰ Roswell H. Johnson and Bertha Stutzmann, “Wellesley’s Birth-rate,” *Journal of Heredity* 6 (May 1915): 251-252.

¹¹¹ Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” reprinted in *Disorderly conduct: Visions of gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 74.

¹¹² Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 162-163.

¹¹³ Solomon, 99-100. Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 65-68, 166-167.

¹¹⁴ Solomon, 99-100. Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 65-68, 166-167.

¹¹⁵ Christina Simmons, “Companionate Marriage and the Lesbian Threat,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 4, no. 3 (1979): 56.

¹¹⁶ Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly conduct: Visions of gender in Victorian America* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 276-277.

been assumed that female sexuality required a man to awaken it.¹¹⁷ “Time was when Victorian minds took for granted that woman’s sexual emotions did not need to be considered until the divinely appointed male came along to arouse them. To-day we are facing the disconcerting truth that intense homosexual friendships of an undesirable nature form a problem that is admittedly disturbing some of our best women’s colleges and unadmittedly disturbing the others; and that though some girls come out of this relationship and adjust themselves successfully to life, others do not.”¹¹⁸

This public perception changed how students, faculty, and administrators behaved on women’s college campuses. In the 1920s, the self-contained atmosphere of the women’s colleges broke down.¹¹⁹ The intense female friendships at women’s colleges began to be seen as unnatural. “No lover could show greater devotion to a sweetheart than a freshman can exhibit for a girl of an upper class.... We say it is harmless sentimentalizing, but it is not a healthy state of mind.”¹²⁰ One “ex-feminist” blamed both the women faculty and students at the women’s college she attended for ruining several classmates’ chances for a heterosexual future:

‘Crushes’ abound in college groups in every degree of innocence and harm. ... I refer...to a friendship between women so intense that no emotionality is left for the true love life. As a phase abandoned with adolescence, it is probably harmless, but in half a dozen cases I could cite, persisting after college, neither woman has married or had normal social contacts or friendships with men.¹²¹

The *Atlantic Monthly* declared, “[O]ne of the most harmful tendencies fostered by the isolation of the women’s college is the impetus it gives toward homosexual

¹¹⁷ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 282.

¹¹⁸ Yost, 196.

¹¹⁹ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 283-285.

¹²⁰ Madeline Doty, “What a women’s college means to a girl,” *The Delineator* (March 1910).

¹²¹ An Ex-Feminist, “The Harm My Education Did Me,” *The Outlook*, Nov. 30 1927.

relationships.”¹²² Smith-Rosenberg points out that in this era, charges of lesbianism were also used to discredit professional women, including faculty and administrators of women’s colleges.¹²³

The sense that close female friendships were abnormal or could become that way pushed students at women’s colleges to search for more heterosexual social opportunities.¹²⁴ Students successfully campaigned for the right to socialize with men from nearby colleges.¹²⁵ Extracurricular activities on campus were forsaken so that students could have the opportunity to develop heterosexual relationships outside of the college.¹²⁶

As Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz documented, the new fear of lesbianism in women’s colleges also changed the physical structures of the colleges. In earlier years, the private rooms of women students had been used for socializing among friends.¹²⁷ After World War I, new residence halls built on the women’s colleges made the private bedroom spaces more Spartan and provided public rooms for socializing on the lower floors where the students could be monitored.¹²⁸ The emergence of fears concerning the elite women’s colleges influence on the sexual lives of its students resulted in changes that transformed the colleges.

Women’s colleges were also seen as influencing their students’ political beliefs in radical directions. The first generations of graduates had been highly involved in the

¹²² Bessie Bunzel, “The Woman Goes to College,” *Century* 117 (November 1928), 29.

¹²³ Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly conduct*, 281.

¹²⁴ Solomon, 162. Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in 20th-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 90.

¹²⁵ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 283-292.

¹²⁶ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 283-285.

¹²⁷ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 169.

¹²⁸ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 307-318.

reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹²⁹ As the political climate changed after World War I, the reform efforts at women's colleges were scorned as socialist or pacifist.¹³⁰ Despite the fact that political agitators were decidedly in the minority, the women's colleges were still tainted in the nation's mind by an association with radical causes. In 1921, Vice President Calvin Coolidge wrote an article implying that elite women's colleges were hotbeds of radicalism because they invited pacifists, socialists, and other radical speakers to campus.¹³¹ He accused the women's colleges of being "the object of adroit attacks by radical propagandists to an extent creative in some colleges of an element of radicalism decidedly hostile to our American form of government, to the established personal right to hold property and to the long-recognized sanctions of civil society."¹³² When Sarah Gibson Blanding became Vassar's president in 1946, "one of the first questions she had to answer, from honestly worried parents, was: 'If I send my daughter to college, is she going to come home a Communist?'"¹³³ Women's colleges were seen as politically and sexually dangerous to their students in ways that other higher educational institutions were not.

After the first generations of college women proved they could successfully master the traditional curriculum and women started attending college in greater numbers and not always for professional reasons, women's colleges began to be criticized for their insistence on upholding equal standards with the elite men's colleges. Intellectual equality with men was said to be irrelevant for most women, since they would marry

¹²⁹ Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 4-8. Solomon, 109. Chamberlain, 110.

¹³⁰ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 282.

¹³¹ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 282. Kendall, 177-178. Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Challenged by Coeducation*, 6. Solomon, 166. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 156. Calvin Coolidge, "Enemies of the Republic: Are the Reds Stalking Our College Women?," *The Delineator* (June 1921).

¹³² Coolidge, 4.

¹³³ Dorothy Roe Lewis, "Stop Worrying About Mary," *Colliers* (Nov. 23, 1946).

instead of pursuing careers. The elite women's colleges were told they should offer classes to prepare women for their futures as wives and mothers. In earlier times, girls had been educated while remaining in the home, so they "were learning at the same time, half-unconsciously, how to cook, to sew, to bring up children, to control servants, to take care of the sick — in a word, to be unselfish, skillful homemakers."¹³⁴ But now that girls were being sent to colleges, these skills needed to be taught.

At the heart of the debate over what women's colleges should teach was the question of what was the purpose of women's higher education. Should it prepare women for their traditional roles as wives and mothers, or was its goal to fundamentally reshape women's place in society by encouraging women to eschew their traditional roles? For eugenicists the answer was clear. The elite women's colleges were urged to instruct their students in domestic sciences.

The study courses in the higher of our women's colleges, such as Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, and Vassar, compare favorably with those of our exclusively male institutions. And there lies the danger. ... Women's colleges do little toward instruction of their students in the things which must inevitably, or, rather, should inevitably, be most important in the lives of their maturity. Which among such institutions gives attention to homemaking, the upbringing of children, the inculcation of idealistic standards in the generations yet to come?¹³⁵

Some even counseled that it was the responsibility of women's colleges to actively encourage their students' marital prospects. "Domestic science in its broadest sense...must be taught, and must become, like mathematics, compulsory for freshmen, if girls of college type are to learn it at all. The frequent visits to the college grounds of eligible young men must in future be definitely encouraged. The glorification of wifhood and motherhood, and of love in its fine, old-fashioned sense, will have to be

¹³⁴ "Is a College Education The Best for Our Girls?," *The Ladies' Home Journal* (July 1900), 15.

¹³⁵ Edward Marshall, "Are Our Women Either Idle or in a Frenzy?," *New York Times* (1911), SM8.

preached, month after month, both by visiting speakers and by the faculty.”¹³⁶ For many critics, the reason elite women’s college graduates failed to marry was because they are not “prepared psychologically and technically for the jobs of cooking, sanitation, nursing, and child rearing...”¹³⁷ Incorporating these skills into the curriculum would encourage students to fulfill their traditional roles after graduation.

By the turn of the century, most higher education institutions for women, both coeducational and less prestigious women’s colleges, had integrated domestic science into the standard curriculum.¹³⁸ The *Ladies’ Home Journal* applauded the “Three Thousand Sensible Girls” who were preparing for homemaking in the smaller women’s colleges, and called the fact that the most prominent Eastern women’s colleges had not adopted domestic science deplorable.¹³⁹ The elite women’s colleges continued to resist, afraid that any change to their curriculum would be viewed negatively, as a recognition that women could not perform at the same intellectual level as students at the elite men’s colleges. M. Carey Thomas, president of Bryn Mawr, was one of the most vocal opponents. “I am...astounded to see the efforts which have been made within the past few years...to persuade, I might almost say to compel, those in charge of women’s education to riddle the college curriculum of women with hygiene, and sanitary drainage, and domestic science, and child study.... [B]ecause women have shown such an aptitude for a true college education and such delight in it, we must be careful to maintain it for them in

¹³⁶ Henry R. Carey, “Career or Maternity?,” *The North American Review* 228 (December 1929), 737.

¹³⁷ Robert J. Sprague, “Education and Race Suicide. Women’s Colleges Have Heavy Responsibility for Disappearance of Old American Stock in the United States—Reforms That Are Needed,” *Journal of Heredity* 6, no. 4 (May 1915): 162.

¹³⁸ Solomon, 85.

¹³⁹ “Three Thousand Sensible Girls,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal* (May 1900), 16.

its integrity.”¹⁴⁰ Elite women’s college administrators for the most part resisted adding domestic science to the curriculum without addressing the question of what use their graduates would make of their education.

Most agreed with Thomas and appealed to the idea of the liberal arts as preparation for life, not for any specific profession.¹⁴¹ “[I]t would prove a serious defect in the higher education of women if it were shaped merely with reference to a particular vocation,” L. Clark Seelye, the president of Smith wrote in his report for 1904-1905. “An undue prominence to marriage and maternity may prove as pernicious as if they were neglected.”¹⁴² When Virginia Gildersleeve took over as president of Barnard College in 1911, she defended the liberal arts curriculum for women. “A college course is as good for the average woman as for the average man. It at least makes the world a much more interesting place to live in. Even if Greek and geology do not help a woman to cook a better meal—and I am not sure that they do not—this is no reason to condemn a college education.”¹⁴³ In this way, administrators argued that their graduates were prepared for whatever they chose to do after graduation.

In addition to charges that their curriculum was inadequate for women’s specialized needs, elite women’s colleges were criticized as irrelevant for not adequately preparing their graduates to deal with the male-dominated society they would encounter upon graduating. Women’s colleges were sometimes portrayed as female utopias, where women ruled as students, administrators, and faculty. Shirley Marchalonis, who studied

¹⁴⁰ M. Carey Thomas, “Present Tendencies in Women’s College and University Education,” in *Up from the Pedestal: Selected Writings in the History of American Feminism*, ed. Aileen S. Kraditor (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), 94-95.

¹⁴¹ Solomon, 83. Clifford, 155.

¹⁴² Seelye 127.

¹⁴³ “Miss Gildersleeve Now Heads Barnard,” *The New York Times* (Feb. 17, 1911).

fictional portrayals of women's colleges in the early years of their existence, compared their campuses to the transformational "green world" of Shakespeare, a "[s]eparate experience and separate woman's space, coded, self-contained, and different — a woman's world in which her chief duty and obligation, at least for a while, was to focus on herself."¹⁴⁴ Although the fictional women's colleges were positive experiences for students, these separate spaces for women were perceived as threatening by outsiders.¹⁴⁵

Even in the early years of women's colleges' existence, there was public speculation on the effects of isolating young women together without enough male supervision. Early descriptions of Wellesley College led the *New York Times* to ask, "what effect such education of girls in large numbers together, under teachers of their own sex, is to have upon the social life and practical companionship of women, and how far it is to modify the prevailing tone of feminine society, which depends generally so much for its motive upon the presence of men."¹⁴⁶ By 1958, the *Times* wondered if women's colleges were obsolete, noting that many educators recommended coeducation rather than single-sex education. The objections to women's colleges noted were that "to segregate women in separate colleges to be taught mainly by other women is, in the present age, unhealthy and unsound. It isolates women from the normal life of society; it inhibits their personal growth; it confines them to a narrow, cloistered and unreal world when they should be part of the main stream of the society for which they are being educated."¹⁴⁷ In contrast to coeducational colleges, which supposedly reflected the real

¹⁴⁴ Marchalonis, 24-25

¹⁴⁵ Marchalonis, 24.

¹⁴⁶ "The College Life of Girls," *The New York Times* (Nov, 16, 1879).

¹⁴⁷ Harold Taylor, "Are Women's Colleges Obsolete?," *New York Times*, 1958.

world, women's colleges were seen as artificial environments that did not adequately prepare students for life after college.

Critics blamed women's college administrators and faculty for giving students unrealistic ideas about how the world worked. "[I]t is the influence of women teachers and directors wholly out of touch with the world as it is, and with human nature as it is created, which is largely responsible for the problem of the highly educated woman. When all is said and done, it still remains the fact that girls from colleges have to live in the world as it is and not in a world such as a woman college president would perhaps like to make it."¹⁴⁸ Some students themselves felt that the women's colleges did not adequately prepare them to face life after college. One graduate found that her college experience encouraged her to have career ambitions that she could not fulfill: "[W]e are women and we are not taught to look forward to a career.... So these awakened longings, these aspirations, have no result."¹⁴⁹ The special focus on women's aspirations and development they experienced during their time at college did not reflect the reality they encountered when they left.

Some advocates for coeducation argued that coeducation was better for women than separate colleges not only because it more accurately reflected the real world, but also because it would accustom women to deferring to men, as they would have to do in later years. "To [feminists], a coeducational college appears largely opportunity for continuing the domination of the male. Under coeducation, woman is denied the joys of leadership and its opportunities.... The 'co-ed' may learn to overcome the handicap; the girl isolated in a separate college ignores it for four years of comfortable, easily-won

¹⁴⁸ R. Le Clerc Phillips, "The problem of the educated woman," *Harpers* (Dec. 1926).

¹⁴⁹ Doty.

superiority and then rudely disillusioned, is inexpert in meeting the real situation.”¹⁵⁰ One mother, who described herself as a graduate of an elite women’s college, wrote an article about how she sent her daughter to a coeducational college instead. “The real reason I selected a small coeducational college for Janet was because I believe such an institution affords the best training a girl can get in learning how to *take a secondary place in life*....Because of my training, I married with that idea [that I would continue my career]. As a consequence, *I’ve spent years in learning that the world in which I live is still controlled by men*.... [A coeducational college] should automatically create situations which would teach her how to take a secondary place in this man-controlled world.”¹⁵¹ Criticism that the curriculum and atmosphere in women’s colleges did not adequately prepare students for their future lives shows that the public was concerned about how the higher education of young women would affect the traditional family structure and the social order.

Larger issues of the purpose and effect of higher education have always affected the public images of women’s colleges for women. Women’s colleges were subject to public criticism for many issues that other institutions did not have to address. Although elite women’s colleges tried to establish themselves as the equals of the finest men’s colleges in the country, in many ways they were seen as second-rate, frivolous, dangerous, and irrelevant. The combined weight of these images influenced the public impression that women’s colleges were in many ways inferior to those for men. When the elite men’s colleges opened their doors to women in the 1960s, the images of women’s

¹⁵⁰ Jessica B. Peixotto, “The Case for Coeducation,” *Forum*, 1923.

¹⁵¹ May F. McElravy, “It’s a Man’s World,” *Better Homes and Gardens* (June 1940). Emphasis in the original.

colleges that were already established inevitably influenced how their administrators could react to the new environment they faced.

Chapter Three: Women's Colleges in a Coeducational World

The future of the women's college is very uncertain. Created to provide 'separate but equal' education for women who were rebelling against Victorian mores, their feminist premise exists no longer.¹⁵²

*Olive Evans, The New York Times
Jan. 9, 1969*

Women's colleges came under pressure throughout the 1960s as students expressed an increasing preference for coeducation in higher education. By the end of the decade, many of the most prestigious single-sex institutions were either considering coeducation or had already decided to open to both sexes. The public images of women's colleges identified in the previous chapter continued to influence the belief that men's colleges were superior, making it more difficult for women's colleges to attract students. The example of Vassar, the only Seven Sister college that came to admit men as undergraduates, demonstrated to other elite women's colleges the perils they faced in making the change to coeducation. Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Wellesley all studied the question, but by the end of 1971 all three had decided to remain single-sex. One of the reasons they could reject coeducation was an overwhelming change in student opinion that encouraged them to think single-sex institutions might still have a place in the higher education landscape. The change in student opinion was due to the growing influence of the women's movement.

Women's college attendance rose throughout the beginning of the 20th century, but after the Second World War, opportunities for women in higher education changed

¹⁵² Olive Evans, "For Colleges, the Major Is Coeducation," *The New York Times* (Jan. 9, 1969).

drastically.¹⁵³ The GI Bill offered the opportunity to attend college to many who previously would not have attended.¹⁵⁴ However, the vast majority of the program's beneficiaries were men, since fewer women were eligible.¹⁵⁵ As a result, colleges were dominated by returning veterans. Many coeducational colleges again put quotas on the number of women they would accept so they could focus on the returning servicemen.¹⁵⁶ The number of women attending college dropped, and would not return to pre-war levels until the 1970s.¹⁵⁷ Patricia Graham notes that because the "democratization of higher education" following the GI Bill affected mostly men, women had more opportunities to obtain higher education at the end of the 19th century than they did in the middle of the 20th century.¹⁵⁸ In 1920, women earned almost half of the baccalaureate degrees in the country, but by the mid-1950s that number had dropped to 24%.¹⁵⁹

There was a widespread belief in the post-war era that educating women beyond high school was not important and was usually a waste of time. Women were marrying and having children at younger ages, often not going to college or dropping out before graduating.¹⁶⁰ About half of women who graduated high school in 1962 were married before they turned 20, and 60% of women who started college dropped out before

¹⁵³ Solomon, 141.

¹⁵⁴ Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Going Coed*, 8.

¹⁵⁵ Deborah M. Olsen, "Remaking the Image: Promotional Literature of Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Wellesley Colleges in the Mid-to-Late 1940s," *History of Education Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 4 (Winter, 2000): 421. Solomon, 189.

¹⁵⁶ Chamberlain, 6. Linda Eisenmann, *Higher Education for Women in Postwar America, 1945-1965* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006): 46-49. Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Going Coed*, 8. Olsen, "Remaking the Image," 421-422.

¹⁵⁷ Chamberlain, 6.

¹⁵⁸ Patricia Albjerg Graham, "Expansion and Exclusion: A History of Women in American Higher Education," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1978): 759-760.

¹⁵⁹ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 42.

¹⁶⁰ Solomon, 194-195.

graduating.¹⁶¹ Many parents felt that educating their daughters was less important than educating sons, since girls were not expected to use their education after they got married.¹⁶² Despite the fact that the number of women attending college increased steadily after the initial drop in the postwar period, women were treated by administration and faculty as “incidental students” likely to drop out at any time.¹⁶³ Paula Fass identified this as the “paradox” of women’s education in this period: “women were receiving more education than they seemed to need.”¹⁶⁴

Many thought women attended college only to find a husband. The *Philadelphia Daily News* recognized that many women went to college, but they were “not responding to the siren call of intellectualism and have no overweening desire for a career. These girls are going to college because that’s where more and more of the boys are these days.”¹⁶⁵ The article also quoted administrators at coeducational University of Michigan and Syracuse University who questioned whether places should be given to women since men needed higher education to find jobs. A professor of education at Indiana University called the college campus “frankly the world’s best marriage mart.”¹⁶⁶

Students agreed with this assessment. A survey of high-school and college students conducted in the mid-1960s found that a high proportion believed that a college education was very important for men, but only half of the women and one-quarter of

¹⁶¹ “What should a girl do about college?,” *Changing Times* 16, no. 4 (Apr 1962), 35. Martin and Marcia Abramson, “Sex on Campus - Why Most Girls Go to College: Man,” *Philadelphia Daily News* (stamped April 10, 1964), Office of the President, Thomas C. Mendenhall Files, Series IV Administrative Issues, Box 3, Smith College Archives.

¹⁶² “What should a girl do about college?,” 35.

¹⁶³ Eisenmann, *Higher Education for Women in Postwar America*, 5.

¹⁶⁴ Paula S. Fass, “The Female Paradox: Higher Education for Women, 1945-1963.” In Lester F. Goodchild and Harold S. Wechsler, eds., *The History of Higher Education, Second Edition* (Old Tappan, NJ: Pearson Custom Publishing, 1997), 400.

¹⁶⁵ Abramson, “Sex on Campus.”

¹⁶⁶ “Triumph of the Fair Co-Ed,” *Newsweek* (Sept 23, 1957).

men believed it to be just as important for women.¹⁶⁷ Surveys of high-school and college students in the mid-60s found that “the largest proportion of young people in college today think that the husband-hunting motive is the one most important reason for a woman to go to college.”¹⁶⁸ The surveys also found that as they progressed through college, women students’ interests changed from careers to home and family.¹⁶⁹

Since the majority opinion was that women attended college to meet their future husband, many wondered what the purpose of the elite women’s colleges could be. More than ever, women’s colleges seemed to be irrelevant. “Women’s colleges, unlike the Negro colleges, have won their revolution. They have proved conclusively that women can undertake and even flourish in the work that men take on — if they want it.”¹⁷⁰ Most observers doubted that women did want to challenge men academically. After all, the majority of women in higher education were concentrated in traditionally female fields of study. In the mid-1950s, three out of five women students in coeducational institutions were in nursing, home economics, or secretarial programs.¹⁷¹

Women’s colleges — especially the elite women’s colleges that held to the highest intellectual standards instead of focusing on traditional women’s fields — continued to be attacked for promoting feminism and careerism among its graduates.¹⁷² One strategy women’s colleges used to counter these attacks was to change their hiring patterns. Women’s colleges in the postwar era began replacing retiring faculty women with men who had wives and families that would provide proper heterosexual role

¹⁶⁷ Patricia K. Cross, “College Women: A Research Description,” April 1968, Origins and Governance Records, Series 7: Policy Documents and Studies, Box 4, Mount Holyoke Archives, 4.

¹⁶⁸ Cross, 9-10.

¹⁶⁹ Cross, 11.

¹⁷⁰ George Keller and Gene R. Hawes, “Where the girls are,” *Esquire* 61 (June 1964), 119-123.

¹⁷¹ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, xx.

¹⁷² Olsen, 424-430.

models for their students.¹⁷³ In this way, women's colleges hoped to appease critics who said their campus environment was unnatural and not representative of the real world. As a result, there were fewer women as administrators and faculty on women's college campuses in the 1960s than there had been a generation earlier.

Although the women's colleges continued to resist making fundamental changes to their curriculum, they did try and alter their public image. In one of the only historical surveys of women's colleges' self-presentation, Olsen studied the promotional admissions and fundraising literature of Smith, Mount Holyoke, and Wellesley in the 1940s and 50s, and documented how the tone of these publications subtly changed to place more emphasis on graduates' future roles as wives and mothers. These changes led to criticism, particularly from alumnae and faculty who wished to see the high intellectual standards and accomplishments of these colleges celebrated.¹⁷⁴ But these changes in faculty composition and publicity show that elite women's colleges continued to be sensitive to criticism that their institutions were potentially dangerous or irrelevant.

Elite women's colleges retained other traditions that seemed antiquated and highbrow compared to coeducational schools. In this era *in loco parentis* was still official policy, and women's colleges continued to see themselves as responsible for student's morals as well as their education. Gloria Steinem reminisced that when she attended Smith in the 1950s, men were only allowed on the first floor of the dorms, and could only visit until curfew at 10:15 p.m.¹⁷⁵ In the early 1960s at Wellesley men were permitted in students' dorm rooms on Sunday afternoons only, "on the condition the door be left

¹⁷³ Chamberlain, 114-115. Olsen, 426-427.

¹⁷⁴ Olsen, 450-453.

¹⁷⁵ Andrea Feld, "Steinem Recalls College Experience," *The Sophian* (April 12, 1974).

fourteen inches ajar.”¹⁷⁶ These protective rules remained in effect at elite women’s colleges until the late 1960s, after most other schools had abandoned them.¹⁷⁷

These colleges also concerned themselves with their students’ deportment through “gracious living,” extracurricular events where upper-class social customs were perpetuated. Needless to say, comparable etiquette training was not a feature of men’s colleges or coeducational schools. A brochure on residential life at Mount Holyoke describes these customs around 1965:

Skirts are a must for dinner, except for Sunday supper, which is a casual affair. Both Wednesday evening and Sunday noon dinners are occasions for ‘Gracious Living,’ when girls dress up more than usual. Candlelight in the dining room and demitasse served in the living room help to set a festive mood for entertaining parents or dates. ... On most Friday afternoons—and every day during exams—afternoon tea is served.¹⁷⁸

The point of gracious living was to instill upper-class manners into students, providing an education that extended beyond the classroom. Although most of the students shared a similar well-to-do social and economic background, the colleges were making new efforts to expand admissions using scholarships funds.¹⁷⁹ For some students, these events were a chance to absorb the poise and manners that would help them cross class lines. “[O]ur coffee-sipping was intended to make us better wives for the Harvard men we were supposed to marry, whose bosses we would entertain with our (often newly learned) upper-class manners, so that our husbands, in turn, would eventually become the boss.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ Nora Ephron, “Women,” *Esquire* 78 (Oct. 1972), 57-58.

¹⁷⁷ Martha Weinman Lear, “But Where Are The Chaperons?,” *New York Times* (Feb. 23, 1964).

¹⁷⁸ “Residential Life at Mount Holyoke,” marked circa 1965, Admissions Office, Series E, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

¹⁷⁹ Keller and Hawes, 122.

¹⁸⁰ Rona Jaffe, “Seven-sisters schools: shortcut to the top?” *Harpers Bazaar* (August 1979), 26.

The elite women's colleges were also reluctant to admit girls they thought would not be able to adjust to the social atmosphere. "[M]ore than one college has hesitated to give full scholarship to an admittedly brilliant girl from a working class family because she might not make friends easily or might prove socially inept. This stems partly from the tradition that it is an important function of the higher education of women to turn out ladies, and for this end it is safer to begin with girls from wealthy or well-educated families."¹⁸¹ Even as they expanded admission to new kinds of students, the women's colleges still concerned themselves with their students' social as well as intellectual development. These customs and rules were under attack by the end of the 1960s, but the persistent images of the elite women's colleges as second-rate, frivolous, dangerous, or irrelevant contributed to the growing trend to coeducation.

Between 1960 and 1970, higher education institutions of all types were affected by the increasing preference of students for coeducation. Many of the best men's colleges in the country opened their doors to women, or planned to, and many women's colleges did the same. There was a sense among colleges that staying single-sex would be untenable in the future, that it would be impossible to attract enough students to stay in business, no matter how good the educational offerings were. This represented another challenge to women's colleges. As the elite men's colleges moved to coeducation, public images of women's colleges ensured that they would not be able to make the same change as easily.

The shift to coeducation affected all single-sex institutions, not just the elite ones. The elite men's colleges move to coeducation provided a reason for other single-sex

¹⁸¹ Newcomer, 240.

schools to do so.¹⁸² In 1960 there were 298 women's colleges in the country. By 1972, only half of these remained women's colleges. One hundred and nineteen had begun accepting men, and the other 33 either merged with nearby institutions or closed.¹⁸³ By 1986, only 90 women's colleges were left in the country.¹⁸⁴ Likewise, there were 261 men's colleges in 1960, but by 1972 only 101 remained, and the vast majority of those were religious seminaries.¹⁸⁵ According to Duffy and Goldberg, the change of elite men's colleges to coeducation "completely altered the competitive landscape, even for colleges that had always been coed. It almost seemed as if no student was going where he or she used to go anymore."¹⁸⁶ These institutional changes permanently changed the higher education environment in the United States.

Many colleges engaged in cooperative and coordinate arrangements before the coeducational trend took off in the 1960s. Radcliffe emerged as the most popular of the women's colleges in the post-war period, and this was widely attributed to the fact that Harvard and Radcliffe students took classes together.¹⁸⁷ Others of the Seven Sisters, including Bryn Mawr, Barnard, Mount Holyoke, and Smith, initiated coordinate programs with men's colleges and coeducational institutions nearby. These cooperative arrangements were seen as a way for small colleges to avoid duplication in less-popular academic programs and faculty, and in library and scientific facilities.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸² Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Going Coed*, 12.

¹⁸³ Duffy and Goldberg, 108.

¹⁸⁴ Auden D. Thomas, "Preserving and Strengthening Together: Collective Strategies of U.S. Women's College Presidents," *History of Education Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 4 (November 2008): 569.

¹⁸⁵ Duffy and Goldberg, 108.

¹⁸⁶ Duffy and Goldberg, 13.

¹⁸⁷ M.J. Arlen, "The Girl with the Harvard Degree," *New York Times* (Jun 10, 1962).

¹⁸⁸ "Triumph of the Fair Co-Ed," 65.

By 1969 the trend was no longer for coordinate education, but for complete coeducation at almost all institutions.¹⁸⁹ The trend was initiated by students, both current students at these institutions and prospective students whose views on their college preferences were polled. “[M]ore and more college men and women are now asking for an end to the single-sex campus and they are rebelling against it once enrolled there.”¹⁹⁰ Polls of high school students found that 80% of students in the top two-fifths of their class, both men and women, preferred coeducation.¹⁹¹ In a 1967 poll, 82% of Princeton undergraduates voted in favor of Princeton admitting women.¹⁹² The *Daily Princetonian* put the following in bold type:

All-male universities just do not rate anymore when it comes to getting an education —intellectually, socially, emotionally, or otherwise. These schools deprive their students of important facets of a normal college education. Their men miss a whole set of personal relationships vital to their development. More and more of the superior high school graduates are fast realizing that fact.¹⁹³

In many cases faculty supported students in their push for coeducation.¹⁹⁴

Many reasons were given for this new student inclination for coeducation. Some thought that students were influenced by the civil rights movement, and felt a moral preference for integration over segregation in gender as well as race.¹⁹⁵ “Their demand for sexual integration has something of a civil rights fervor. ... It maintains that the proper educational climate can only be created by boys and girls together—sharing everything in communal totality.” In contrast to the 1920s when students began leaving campus on weekends to pursue social opportunities with the opposite sex, now there were

¹⁸⁹ Evans.

¹⁹⁰ Fred M. Hechinger, “The Cry Is for Boys and Girls Together,” *New York Times* (Feb 23, 1969), E9.

¹⁹¹ Nicholas Gage, “Where the Boys Are - To Keep Bright Girls, Many Women's Colleges Decide to Enroll Men,” *Wall Street Journal* (March 31, 1970), 1.

¹⁹² “Princeton Men Vote for Coeds,” *New York Times* (Nov 19, 1967).

¹⁹³ “Princeton Responds to Coeducation at Yale,” *Mount Holyoke Choragos* (Nov 21 1968).

¹⁹⁴ Evans.

¹⁹⁵ Hechinger, “The Cry Is.”

complaints against this “suitcase syndrome” as weakening the college community.¹⁹⁶ In addition, the majority of college students in the 1960s were coming from coeducational public high schools, instead of single-sex private schools.¹⁹⁷ These students were accustomed to learning together, and the elite colleges’ single-sex environment was unfamiliar.¹⁹⁸ Coeducation felt natural to them, and single-sex classrooms seemed like an anachronism.

For the elite men’s colleges the decision to move to coeducation was a pragmatic one based on the preferences of their students.¹⁹⁹ Male colleges moved to coeducation in order to attract the best male students, who increasingly demanded a coeducational environment.²⁰⁰ Yale’s dean of admissions predicted that moving to coeducation would attract more men to the college, and that it “certainly will give us some really superb boys who would otherwise have written Yale off just because there were no girls here.”²⁰¹ Men’s colleges viewed admitting women mainly as a benefit to their male student body. Adding women was intended to liven up the social and intellectual atmosphere.²⁰² The needs of the women students they planned to admit came secondary to the benefits they anticipated for the men. As a result, these colleges made facilities changes to accommodate their new female students, but did not consider making changes to the gender composition of the faculty or the curriculum.²⁰³

¹⁹⁶ Hechinger, “The Cry Is.”

¹⁹⁷ Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Challenged by Coeducation*, 28. Duffy and Goldberg, 58-59.

¹⁹⁸ Evans.

¹⁹⁹ Duffy and Goldberg, 109-116.

²⁰⁰ Duffy and Goldberg, 86.

²⁰¹ William Borders, “Yale Besieged by Female Applicants,” *New York Times* (Nov 24, 1968).

²⁰² Duffy and Goldberg, 113-114.

²⁰³ Duffy and Goldberg, 116. Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Going Coed*, 312.

Most of the elite men's colleges established quotas on how many women they would accept, generally a small minority compared to the men.²⁰⁴ Only 275 girls were accepted for the first coed freshman class at Yale, out of 2,800 applicants.²⁰⁵ Yale promised its alumni and trustees there would be no reduction in the number of men admitted in order to accommodate women students. According to Yale President Kingman Brewster, Jr., "Much of the quality that exists at Yale depends on the support of people who don't believe strongly in coeducation."²⁰⁶ Many alumni of these schools were opposed to admitting women in equal numbers out of fear that their sons would not be admitted.²⁰⁷ In order to appease these fears, administrators promised not reduce the number of spots for men students and as a result could only admit a token number of women.

Yale admitted not only women freshman, but also upper-class students as transfers, and the elite women's colleges provided the bulk of these students. Wellesley and Smith combined provided Yale with the largest block of transfer students into the first coed class. Out of the 1,500 women transfer students who applied, 370 were accepted.²⁰⁸ Many of these women were thrilled to be transferring, not just to be pioneer women students at Yale, but also as a rejection of the women's colleges they left behind. "I don't even know why I went to a girls' school anymore," said Andrea Silverberg, a

²⁰⁴ Duffy and Goldberg, 130-131. Edward B. Fiske, "About Education: Coeducation Widens in Ivy League Colleges," *New York Times* (May 12, 1976).

²⁰⁵ Jonathan Lear, "How Yale Selected Her First Coeds," *New York Times* (Apr 13, 1969), SM52.

²⁰⁶ Joseph B. Treaster, "Coeds Find Life at Yale Falls Short of Expectations," *New York Times* (Apr 14, 1970), 49.

²⁰⁷ Vivian Gornick, "Why Radcliffe women are afraid of success," *New York Times* (Jan 14, 1973).

²⁰⁸ John Darnton, "Campus Revolution Brings a New Note to Yale: Soprano," *New York Times* (Apr 30, 1969), 49.

Wellesley transfer to Yale. “It was an experience, I’m glad I had it, and now I want to go back.”²⁰⁹

Articles on the first coed classes at Princeton and Yale made it clear that for both incoming freshmen and transfer students, admission to the newly coeducational elite men’s colleges was an enviable prize, while attending an elite women’s college was distinctly second-best. It was far easier for men’s colleges to attract women students than it was for women’s colleges to attract men.²¹⁰ “Whereas a girl accepted at Princeton is considered exceptional, lucky, anointed (“I wasn’t unhappy at Goucher, but how could I resist Princeton?”), a boy in a T-shirt from a women’s college may be suspect, even ludicrous.”²¹¹ In 1969 a journalist at Wellesley noted graffiti in one of the student dorms elevators. “[T]here is a sign that reads: ‘Cheer up, it’s spring.’ Underneath, someone has scrawled: ‘You can say that, you got into Yale.’”²¹² The public images of the elite women’s colleges — as second-rate, frivolous, dangerous, and irrelevant — contributed to the sense that the newly coeducational men’s colleges were superior. This difference in prestige meant that women’s colleges that chose to go coed would face difficulties that men’s colleges would not. This was exemplified by the experiences of the only Seven Sister to turn fully coeducation: Vassar.

Among the elite women’s colleges, Vassar took the lead in considering how to respond to the coeducational trend. Vassar functioned as a test case for the other colleges, pursuing first coordinate and then full coeducation by admitting men in the fall of 1970. Vassar’s experiences served as an instruction and a warning for the other elite women’s

²⁰⁹ Darnton. Ms. Silverman attended a coeducational high school.

²¹⁰ F.M.H., “Now Gather All Good Men of Vassar.”

²¹¹ Ann Marie Cunningham, “Do Women’s Colleges Need Men,” *Mademoiselle* (Feb 1974), 123.

²¹² Darnton.

colleges, demonstrating that moving to coeducation would prove more hazardous for them than for men's colleges.

At the end of 1966, Vassar and Yale made an unexpected announcement of a joint plan to study whether or not their institutions should merge.²¹³ This news was described in the press with jocular matrimonial metaphors. "It is, after all, a pleasant prospect to acquire women of unimpeachable academic reputation — and with a nice dowry in the form of a \$37 million endowment of their own."²¹⁴ Vassar students were delighted with the prospect of merger. "Jubilation replaced academic solemnity on the campus of Vassar College here today over the prospect of a possible merger with Yale University some 80 miles away in Connecticut."²¹⁵ An alumna of the class of 1968 remembered hanging a banner made from sheets out of the dorm building that announced, "Girls Schools Are Dead / Vassar Move to Yale!"²¹⁶ A *New York Times* article on the possible merger was accompanied by a photograph of smiling Vassar students carrying another homemade banner that said, "On to New Haven!"²¹⁷

The announcement of the Vassar-Yale proposal stimulated discussion on the problems elite women's colleges were facing in an era of increasing coeducation. "The predicament of running a women's college in the splendid, genteel but no longer acceptable isolation of the all-female country club is not Vassar's problem alone."²¹⁸ However, several circumstances combined to make the impact of the trend to coeducation

²¹³ Fred M. Hechinger, "Yale and Vassar Plan a Study That May Bring Joint Operations," *New York Times*, (Dec. 17, 1966).

²¹⁴ Fred M. Hechinger, "Education: Vassar-Yale — An Academic Courtship," *New York Times* (Dec 25, 1966), 5E.

²¹⁵ Douglas Robinson, "Suddenly, 'Boola-Boola' Is Vassar's Favorite Song," *New York Times* (Dec 18, 1966), 58.

²¹⁶ Lucinda Franks, "Whatever Happened to Vassar?," *New York Times* (Sept. 9, 1979).

²¹⁷ Leonard Buder, "College as a Consumer," *New York Times* (Feb. 5, 1967).

²¹⁸ Fred M. Hechinger, "If the Ladies Go It Alone," *New York Times* (Nov. 26, 1967), E11.

more severe for Vassar. Vassar was more isolated than the other elite women's colleges. As the only one of the Seven Sisters without a prestigious men's college nearby, Vassar could not pursue the option of student exchanges and administrative coordination that other women's colleges were already initiating. Vassar also found it hard to attract faculty because of its remote location. "Girls' schools pay well, but they carry less academic prestige, cannot offer the facilities and scholarly fellowship that major universities do."²¹⁹ These considerations made Vassar's situation more urgent than was the case at the other elite women's colleges.

Vassar broke off the merger negotiations because of concerns over the costs of relocating and giving up their campus.²²⁰ The *Yale Daily News* reported, "Yale's gentlemen suitors have been jilted. All we can do is take it like men...."²²¹ After the merger negotiations broke off, both Vassar and Yale initially planned to establish coordinate colleges of their own, rather than move to full coeducation.²²² But in July 1968, Vassar's trustees decided to admit men because it would be easier and quicker to implement.²²³ Many students and faculty supported the decision.²²⁴ A few did not, like Janet Stanton, a Vassar freshman, who thought that after going coeducational, "Vassar will be a second rate school. We'll have to refuse qualified women and take unqualified men."²²⁵

President Alan Simpson disagreed, arguing that the rationale for the Seven Sisters was outmoded:

²¹⁹ "Colleges: New Haven, Here We Come," *Time* (Dec. 30 1966).

²²⁰ Hechinger, "If the Ladies Go It Alone."

²²¹ "Yale and Vassar Will Not Affiliate," *New York Times* (Nov. 21, 1967), 1.

²²² M.A. Farber, "More Colleges Go a Courting," *New York Times* (Jan 12, 1968), 59.

²²³ "Vassar to Take Men in '70," *New York Times* (Oct 29, 1968), 45.

²²⁴ M.A. Farber, "Vassar Going Coed; Plans Williams Link," *New York Times* (Oct. 2, 1968), 1.

²²⁵ Farber, "Vassar Going Coed."

Just about all of us Seven were founded between the fifties and seventies of the last century to give women the same kind of education men were getting. There wouldn't have been a Radcliffe if Harvard had been prepared to admit girls. ... My own feeling is that you can't be as distinguished as places like Vassar have been without going coeducational. Even where you have contiguity and an effort to exchange classes, you find that the students are still dissatisfied with anything short of complete integration.²²⁶

But as soon as men arrived as Vassar undergraduates in September 1970, complaints about coeducation's effect on the campus began. In the first year of coeducation, men students were elected to almost all of the leadership positions on campus, despite the fact that men were outnumbered by women more than four to one.²²⁷ Protests by male students over food, library hours, and campus conditions were remedied, where the same complaints made earlier by women students had been ignored.²²⁸ There were complaints that men dominated the classes at Vassar.²²⁹ "Boys are monopolizing class discussions," conceded one sophomore, "but they are better at arguing."²³⁰ Kate Millett, visiting Vassar on behalf of the growing Women's Liberation movement, observed, "The guys have taken over. Ninety-one of them are in charge of 1,600 Vassar women, voted in to office by the girls themselves."²³¹ The presence of male students was seen as having immediate, undesirable consequences for the Vassar community.

By 1974, complaints about coeducation prompted the Trustees to begin a two-year study reevaluating coeducation at Vassar.²³² Some of the complaints were that the college was spending too much money on athletics, which it argued was needed to attract

²²⁶ Israel Shenker, "Simpson Says Vassar May Quit the 'Seven Sisters'," *New York Times* (Oct 11, 1969), 35.

²²⁷ "Report of the Seven College Conference," Nov. 13-14, 1970, President's Office, Box 32, Wellesley College Archives. Franks.

²²⁸ Marilyn Bender, "Never Underestimate the Power of Men at Women's Colleges," *New York Times* (Apr 22, 1970), 75.

²²⁹ Cunningham, 183.

²³⁰ "Education - The New Campus Rebels: Women," *Newsweek* (Dec. 10, 1973), 124.

²³¹ Kate Millett, "Libbies, Smithies, Vassarites," *Change* 2, no. 5 (Sept-Oct 1970), 45.

²³² Cunningham.

men students, and that proportionately more financial aid was being given to men students. There were also complaints that only the pronoun “he” was used on application forms.²³³ Alison Bernstein, the youngest member of the Board of Trustees, who graduated Vassar in the Class of 1969, said, “No other women’s college has gone into attracting men with the zeal that Vassar has. It’s hard to tell how much coeducation was really due to economic necessity and how much to educational philosophy. A school cannot reverse a whole history of image-making, and I don’t see why we can’t find men who are interested in Vassar as it was.”²³⁴

The problems that Vassar experienced in the wake of coeducation provided a cautionary example for the other elite women’s colleges. Even more crucial was evidence that Vassar’s prestige was slipping.

Despite both Vassar’s president and admissions department maintaining that the quality of male students was equal to the women, no one believed it.²³⁵ The first men students at Vassar were widely portrayed as not only incompetent, but effeminate.²³⁶ “Perhaps the most invidious rumor about Vassar is that a disproportionate number of homosexual males have sought out the college for an education free of the ‘macho’ atmosphere in athletics and social life that characterizes some coeducational colleges.”²³⁷ Vassar male coeds were described as “peppered with characters who swung through the campus like bespangled high-wire artists at a three-ring circus. The most noticeable was a group that flounced about in glittery shirts, high-heeled boots and rainbow-colored

²³³ Cunningham.

²³⁴ Cunningham.

²³⁵ Alan Simpson, “Coeducation at Vassar,” *College Board Review* (Winter 1971-72), 18. Cunningham.

²³⁶ Janie Gaynor, “Men of Vassar,” *Esquire* (Sept. 1974), 100.

²³⁷ Iver Peterson, “Coed Status Pleases Vassar Despite Problems,” *New York Times* (Nov 19, 1974), 93.

Afros.”²³⁸ This emphasis on Vassar’s male students’ perceived effeminacy and homosexuality served to reinforce the idea that no “normal” man would choose to attend a former women’s college.

By 1974, Vassar administrators admitted that the school was having trouble attracting high-quality male students and could not expand as much as it had originally intended.²³⁹ Richard Stephenson, the director of admissions, said, “I’m convinced that whatever our problems are now, Vassar would be in a hell of a lot more trouble if it weren’t coed. We couldn’t continue in isolation, we had to be more like the real world. Smith, Bryn Mawr and all the others could stay women only because they’re close to men’s colleges. But not Vassar.”²⁴⁰ In 1975, Vassar had to accept almost 75% of its applicants, and for the first time in its history, it was dropped from the “most selective” list in the Comparative Guide to American Colleges.²⁴¹ Vassar’s experiences demonstrated to the other elite women’s colleges that pursuing coeducation would not be as easy for them as it was for men’s colleges.

As the first elite women’s college to become coeducational, Vassar served as a test case and a cautionary tale for the others as they weighed their options. But the overall atmosphere seemed to predict that the coeducation trend could not be stopped. Vassar’s defection prompted those Seven Sisters who had close ties to male colleges to take advantage of the proximity. Radcliffe and Harvard, who had combined classes since World War II, moved to formalize a merger.²⁴² All of the Seven Sisters initiated exchanges to bring men to their campuses. “One change is certain for the student on the

²³⁸ Franks.

²³⁹ Peterson.

²⁴⁰ Peterson.

²⁴¹ Merrill Sheils with Frederick V. Boyd, “The Troubled Sisters,” *Newsweek* (Nov 29, 1976), 66.

²⁴² Shenker.

female campus. Before long, she will be a coed,” the *New York Times* said, referring to the integration of their classrooms, if not their institutions.²⁴³ By 1976, 88% of all women’s colleges offered their students cross-registration options at another institution.²⁴⁴

The elite women’s colleges not only had students pushing for a move to coeducation. Coeducation was generally supported by most male faculty at women’s colleges, who openly expressed their desire to teach men.²⁴⁵ All of the Seven Sisters experienced problems attracting and retaining top faculty, almost always defined as male.²⁴⁶ “The getting and keeping of good faculty members is peculiarly difficult. Although the Seven have worked unceasingly to acquire some of the finest of America’s second-rank professors, and a few of the first rank, they have not been able to attract, or else to hold, many of the more brilliant. The pay and prestige is higher at the great universities, and a large number of the best instructors wonder why they should struggle to educate women who, unlike men, will for the most part become busy housewives rather than world leaders or faithful disciples in academe.”²⁴⁷ Small men’s colleges and coeducational schools faced a similar dilemma in the 1960s. Faculty members wanted to be in universities, engaging in research, rather than at small liberal arts colleges devoted to teaching.²⁴⁸ “Moreover, in a science and research-oriented academic era, it is harder to attract ambitious faculty members to institutions which still bear the stamp of

²⁴³ Marilyn Bender, “Issues, Not Clothes, Count With Students at Clinging Ivy League,” *New York Times* (Oct 21, 1968), 52.

²⁴⁴ “Percentage of Women Professors Is Four Times National Average in Women’s College Survey” (Washington, DC: Women’s College Coalition, Feb. 8, 1976), 1.

²⁴⁵ Caroline Bird, “Women’s Colleges and Women’s Lib,” *Change* 4, No. 3 (April 1972), 64.

²⁴⁶ Hechinger, “Yale and Vassar Plan.”

²⁴⁷ Keller and Hawes, 119-123.

²⁴⁸ Hechinger, “Education: Vassar-Yale — An Academic Courtship.”

feminism.”²⁴⁹ For male faculty at women’s colleges, opening the doors to male students would provide a welcome boost in status. Many administrators at women’s colleges worried about whether they could continue to attract top scholars if they refused to go coeducational.

They were also concerned about whether students would continue to apply to their schools. The preference of high school students for coeducation was not just noted in surveys. Men’s colleges’ move to coeducation meant that the women’s colleges that remained single-sex faced a shrinking pool of applicants.²⁵⁰ Applications to women’s colleges fell alarmingly in the late 1960s.²⁵¹ In 1968, for the first time since the baby boom, applications to the Seven Sisters dropped, even though applications to the Ivy League held steady. Administrators believed that the drop was due to students’ preference for large, coeducational universities.²⁵² Other reports showed that coeducational institutions were now attracting more high-achieving women than top men.²⁵³ Several of the Seven Sisters found that, unlike in the past, an increasing percentage of students who were admitted but chose not to attend were choosing a coeducational institution instead of another prestigious women’s college.²⁵⁴ These changes contributed to the sense that women’s colleges would have difficulty attracting students if they did not go coed.

²⁴⁹ F.M.H., “Now Gather All Good Men of Vassar.”

²⁵⁰ Pauline Tompkins, “What Future for the Women’s College?,” *Liberal Education* 58, no. 2 (1972), 298.

²⁵¹ Norma Rosen, “Mount Holyoke forever will be Mount Holyoke forever will be For Women Only,” *New York Times* (Apr. 9, 1972).

²⁵² Fred M. Hechinger, “More Negroes Accepted by Ivy League Colleges,” *New York Times* (April 14, 1968).

²⁵³ “Report on the Cedar Crest Conference on Undergraduate Education for Women,” held July 8-10 1969, Commission on the Future of the College, Box 3, Wellesley College Archives.

²⁵⁴ Ely Chinoy, “Coeducation at Smith College: A Report to the President and the College Planning Committee,” December 1969, Faculty Planning Committee Records – Coeducation Materials, 1967-1971, <http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/coed/>, 15.

In response to the growing trend, Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Wellesley initiated studies on the question of adopting coeducation. All three considered a range of different options, from expanding residential and classroom exchange programs with neighboring institutions to admitting men as undergraduates. The question arose first at Smith, perhaps because it had the largest number of male faculty and administrators. The Faculty Planning Committee addressed the question of coeducation at Smith in 1966-67 by surveying faculty, current students, prospective students, and alumnae for their opinions on the matter.²⁵⁵ The Committee reported in May 1968 that “so marked is the faculty’s preference for some form of co-education at Smith that the cumulative effect might almost be described as overwhelming.”²⁵⁶ They also found that the most frequently cited cause for dissatisfaction among current Smith students was the lack of coeducation, and that coeducation made an institution more attractive to potential students.²⁵⁷ The Committee recommended intensifying exchange efforts and introducing full coeducation by admitting men as soon as possible.²⁵⁸

An Augmented College Planning Committee was established to further study the question. Ely Chinoy, the chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, was commissioned to make a study of whether or not coeducation was desirable and feasible at Smith.²⁵⁹ He concluded that coeducation was certainly desirable, and that it was feasible as well, if the capital funds required could be raised.²⁶⁰ But when the Committee made its final recommendations to the trustees and the faculty in April 1971, it advised

²⁵⁵ Thomas C. Mendenhall, “President’s Report,” *Smith College Bulletin* (December 1969), 14.

²⁵⁶ Mendenhall, “President’s Report,” (December 1969), 2.

²⁵⁷ Mendenhall, “President’s Report,” (December 1969), 2-3.

²⁵⁸ Mendenhall, “President’s Report,” (December 1969), 5.

²⁵⁹ Mendenhall, “President’s Report,” (December 1969), 15.

²⁶⁰ Ely Chinoy to Thomas C. Mendenhall, Oct 29, 1969. Faculty Planning Committee Records – Coeducation Materials, 1967-1971, <http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/coed/>

that Smith should stay a college for women only, and that men should only be admitted on an exchange basis, not as degree students.²⁶¹ “It is the conclusion of the Committee that at the present time, when the status and roles of women in American society are being re-examined with a view to their improvement, an important option that should remain open to women is attendance at a college of the highest caliber in which women are unquestionably first-class citizens. ... [I]t would be desirable for Smith to continue to be such a college, at least for the immediate future.”²⁶²

Mount Holyoke and Wellesley had similar experiences. Mount Holyoke established a Fact-Finding Committee on Coeducation in 1969 to study the possibility of admitting men and present its conclusions to the trustees without making recommendations. In the surveys made by the Committee, the students were almost evenly split between pursuing exchange programs with other institutions and going fully coeducational as their first choice option, where a slight majority of the faculty favored exchanges over full coeducation.²⁶³ The final report of the Committee was submitted to the trustees on June 1970.²⁶⁴ Based on the report, the trustees made the final vote to remain a single-sex college in November 1971.²⁶⁵

Wellesley established a Commission on the Future of the College in the spring of 1969 that contained representatives from the administration, alumnae, faculty, students,

²⁶¹ Thomas C. Mendenhall, “President’s Report,” *Smith College Bulletin*, 1970-1971, 13.

²⁶² Ely Chinoy, “Smith College and the Question of Coeducation: A Report with Recommendations Submitted to the Faculty and the Board of Trustees by the Augmented College Planning Committee,” April 1971. Faculty Planning Committee Records – Coeducation Materials, 1967-1971, <http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/coed/>

²⁶³ Irma L. Rabbino, Press Release, Dec. 4 1970. Origins and Governance Records, Series 8: Coeducation, Box 6, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

²⁶⁴ “Report to the Trustees of Mount Holyoke College from the Fact-Finding Committee on Coeducation,” June 1970, Origins and Governance Records, Series 7: Policy Documents and Studies, Box 4, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

²⁶⁵ “Mt. Holyoke Keeps All-Women Status,” *New York Times* (Nov 7, 1971).

and trustees.²⁶⁶ The Commission submitted its final report to the Board of Trustees on March 1971, recommending that men be admitted to Wellesley as degree candidates, and that the College take immediate steps to attain the legal capacity to grant men Wellesley degrees.²⁶⁷ The final report was accompanied by a dissenting letter from Wellesley's president Ruth Adams, dated March 3, 1971. "Wellesley has a historical commitment to the education of women, a commitment that, in these times of heightened consciousness on the part of women, is perhaps more consequential than for many prior years. . . . I believe that the climate of thought concerning the translation of women's institutions to co-educational colleges has changed in the past year, due in some part to the better elements of the women's liberation program.... The value for women of colleges devoted particularly to their needs receives today wider support."²⁶⁸

On April 16, 1971, the board of trustees "voted unanimously to reaffirm the primary commitment of Wellesley College to the education of women," and supported exchange programs to bring men to campus, but they turned down the recommendation to grant degrees to men.²⁶⁹ By the end of 1971, all three colleges had studied the option of full coeducation and had rejected it.

On these three campuses, the climate changed dramatically on the question of coeducation between the time their committees first began to study the issue and the final decisions were made. The most influential change was in the opinion of students. Before the fall of 1970 students at all three colleges generally supported coeducation. In an

²⁶⁶ "Report to the Trustees, Commission on the Future of the College," March 1971, Commission on the Future of the College, Box 2, Wellesley College Archives, v.

²⁶⁷ "Report to the Trustees, Commission on the Future of the College," March 1971, Commission on the Future of the College, Box 2, Wellesley College Archives, 15.

²⁶⁸ President Ruth Adams to the Board of Trustees, March 3, 1971, Commission on the Future of the College, Box 2, Wellesley College Archives.

²⁶⁹ Nelson J. Darling, Jr., "Action on the Report of the Commission on the Future of the College," April 16, 1971, Commission on the Future of the College, Box 1, Wellesley College Archives.

editorial entitled “Coeducation Now,” the Mount Holyoke student newspaper argued that the school had to make the move to admit men: “It should be obvious by now that coeducation has taken a high priority at most of the eastern prestige schools traditionally segregated by sex. It may be extremely difficult, perhaps even sacrilegious, for some to consider giving up Mount Holyoke’s claim to fame as ‘the oldest continuing institution of higher learning for women in the United States,’ but that ‘sacrifice’ may be necessary if we also hope to continue to claim that we are a top-notch institution.”²⁷⁰ The first two student surveys at Smith found almost 70% of students in the fall of 1967 supported coeducation, and 51% still favored it in April 1969.²⁷¹ A Wellesley editorial proclaimed support for coed as late as November 1969.

We believe in full coeducation, with a large influx of men during the first year. ... [W]e feel that a fully coeducational institution is necessary to create a realistic atmosphere for education. In the future, we do not want to live in a female society divorced from that of men. ... We do not believe that men’s and women’s intellectual pursuits should be differentiated. Coeducation implies true equality.²⁷²

But there was a marked change of student opinion in the fall of 1970. In November, the Smith student newspaper published another editorial, this time rejecting coeducation. “A woman’s college enables us to seek our identity as human beings and gives us a different perspective and deeper understanding, together with renewed confidence, in our sex’s abilities and capacities. Also, at Smith a woman is not a second-class citizen. Out there whether in society or a co-ed campus, we are.”²⁷³ A final student survey in December 1970 at Smith found that 60% of students wanted to stay a women’s

²⁷⁰ Julie Van Camp, “Editorial: Coeducation Now,” *Mount Holyoke Choragos* (Nov 21 1968).

²⁷¹ Chinoy, “Coeducation at Smith College.”

²⁷² “Editorial: Changing the Course,” *Wellesley News* (Nov 6 1969).

²⁷³ A.J.C., “Editorial,” *The Sophian* (Nov. 12, 1970).

college.²⁷⁴ A poll of Mount Holyoke students in October 1971 showed that 75% favored staying a single-sex institution with increased opportunities for exchange.²⁷⁵

The change in student opinion was attributed to the growing popularity of the women's movement, which received an enormous amount of media attention beginning in January 1970.²⁷⁶ "You don't have to be a Mount Holyoke alumna to guess that the vote [to stay single-sex] reflects, in some part, new pride and self-recognition of minority (women—as who does not know?—are a 51 per cent minority) and ethnic groups. New self-consciousness of women is a gift also of Women's Lib, a national phenomenon touching every level and class. Between two and three years ago, as I know from experience, this could not have been said."²⁷⁷ Smith's Augmented Planning Committee report recognized the shift in students' opinions and attributed it to "the increased concern for the status and role of women in American society. This has led to increased recognition of the possibility that a college devoted primarily to the education of women may play an important and constructive part in American education, and to more widespread student interest in participating in such a college."²⁷⁸ Not only current students were affected by the change, but prospective students as well. Women's college administrators noted that the number of applications they received began to recover. In the 1971-72 academic year, the number of applications to women's colleges went up, after five years of declines.²⁷⁹ The women's movement changed current and prospective

²⁷⁴ Nina McCain, "Women's Colleges Turning Off from the Rush to 'Coeducation,'" *The Boston Globe* (Feb. 27 1971).

²⁷⁵ "Board of Trustees Unanimous Vote: Education for Women," *Mount Holyoke Now* (Nov. 1971).

²⁷⁶ Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation: A Case Study of an Emerging Social Movement and Its Relation to the Policy Process* (New York: Longman Inc., 1975), 148.

²⁷⁷ Rosen, "Mount Holyoke forever will be."

²⁷⁸ Chinoy, "Smith College and the Question of Coeducation."

²⁷⁹ Rosen, "Mount Holyoke forever will be."

students' opinions about attending a women's college, and thus made it possible for women's colleges to consider staying single-sex.

Another factor that went into the decision to stay single-sex was a desire to protect the academic prestige of their schools. All three of the colleges were greatly concerned about keeping the high educational quality of their institutions. The experiences of Vassar and of women who attended the newly coeducational former men's colleges seemed to confirm that a change to coeducation could have a negative effect on their institutions. When Wellesley's Commission on the Future of the College met with faculty in small groups to discuss coeducation, one of the questions that arose was, "What quality of men could Wellesley attract?"²⁸⁰ The same questions arose at Mount Holyoke. "Could M.H.C. attract men students as effectively as competing former sister colleges? What type of man would accept a M.H.C. degree when he should also be capable of earning one from Yale, Harvard, or Princeton? Do we want him?"²⁸¹ These colleges worried that changing to coeducation would force them to admit men students who could not meet their academic standards because the top men students would not want to attend a former women's college.

The three colleges were also concerned that changing to coeducation would have a negative effect on women students, faculty, and administrators. Wellesley traditionally had the highest proportion of women faculty and administrators.²⁸² Its Commission on the Future of the College noted, "When a women's college adopts co-education the administration often becomes almost entirely male. Women apparently don't run things

²⁸⁰ Meetings with Faculty and Students, Oct. 7 1969, Commission on the Future of the College, Box 1, Wellesley College Archives.

²⁸¹ Peggy Steiner to David Truman, Oct. 13, 1969, Origins and Governance Records, Series 7: Policy Documents and Studies, Box 4, Mount Holyoke Archives.

²⁸² "Report to the Trustees, Commission on the Future of the College."

except at women's colleges."²⁸³ As part of their work, the Wellesley Commission visited other colleges, including Vassar, Sarah Lawrence, Bryn Mawr, and Swarthmore, and found on these visits that in coeducational settings women students took a back seat to men in most activities.²⁸⁴ One student member of the Wellesley Commission initially favored coeducation, but changed her mind in the course of these visits. "What we found is that the girls are called 'coeds,' the men are presidents of student government and there is hardly equality.... Many of us would like to see Wellesley become coeducational if there were real equality, but that's not possible in this society."²⁸⁵ The fact that men took over leadership positions at former women's colleges in both the administration and the student body was a concern for all three of the colleges.

Economic factors also contributed to the decision. All of the colleges estimated that substantial capital funds would be needed to make the change to coeducation, in addition to annual operating expenses. The Chinoy report estimated that coeducation would necessitate increasing the size of the student body by 300-700 students. That would require an additional \$10 million in capital funding beyond the current Smith development campaign, which was already trying to raise \$45 million.²⁸⁶ When asked to determine priorities for their institution, faculty and administrators at the colleges did not rank coeducation as one of their top priorities. The faculty at Smith College strongly supported admitting men, but even they did not rank it among their top three funding priorities for the institution. In a survey made in the spring of 1968, Smith faculty listed faculty salaries, student scholarships, and funding for the library as their top funding

²⁸³ "Minutes of the Commission on the Future of the College," July 11, 1969, Commission on the Future of the College, Box 1, Wellesley College Archives, 2.

²⁸⁴ Minutes of the Commission on the Future of the College.

²⁸⁵ McCain.

²⁸⁶ Thomas C. Mendenhall, "Report of the President," *Smith College Bulletin*, 1969-1970.

priorities over coeducation.²⁸⁷ A survey of Wellesley faculty in October 1970 found similar results to those at Smith: improving faculty salaries, teaching and research facilities, and student financial aid topped their list of priorities.²⁸⁸

Mount Holyoke's Fact-Finding Committee on Coeducation anticipated needing to expand the student body to transition to coeducation, and estimated that adding 100 male students would require capital of almost \$2 million and additional operating expenses of almost \$200,000 per year.²⁸⁹ In comparison, an alternate plan of increasing exchange options did not require anything near that estimate. "Should the Eleven-College Exchange prove truly viable, or should a similar exchange program prove workable among the Valley Colleges, residential exchange enrollment of male students appears to offer some degree of solution to most of the problems coeducation presents to an established women's college which can be justly proud of a distinguished reputation and strong and loyal alumnae support."²⁹⁰ Mount Holyoke already struggled to find financial aid for its students, and many felt it could not justify spending money to attract male students when qualified women would be turned away.²⁹¹

The final factor that contributed to these colleges' decision to stay single-sex was the opposition to coeducation of an important group of constituents: alumnae. Most alumnae of these colleges were strongly opposed to their institutions becoming coeducational and they made their opinions known, even though the colleges did not

²⁸⁷ Ely Chinoy. "Faculty Attitudes Toward Coeducation," Spring 1968, 13. Faculty Planning Committee Records – Coeducation Materials, 1967-1971, <http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/coed/>

²⁸⁸ "Summary of Initial Results of Faculty-Administration Questionnaire," Oct. 1970, Commission on the Future of the College, Box 2, Wellesley College Archives, 3.

²⁸⁹ "Report to the Trustees of Mount Holyoke College from the Fact-Finding Committee on Coeducation," 220.

²⁹⁰ "Report to the Trustees of Mount Holyoke College from the Fact-Finding Committee on Coeducation," 224.

²⁹¹ "Report to the Trustees of Mount Holyoke College from the Fact-Finding Committee on Coeducation," 27-29.

conduct large-scale surveys of alumnae on the topic out of fear of angering them.²⁹² “I am completely outraged by the news in today’s Times,” wrote in one alumna when the news that Mount Holyoke was considering the question was announced. “Why do the Big Seven of the Women’s Colleges want to ruin their identification, their personalities, their excellent work by taking in men and becoming just one more coeducational college? ... How could the Trustees do this to us?”²⁹³ More than two-thirds of the alumnae who were polled in the Mount Holyoke alumnae magazine in the fall of 1969 supported staying a women’s college.²⁹⁴ The limited number of alumnae polled by Ely Chinoy at Smith revealed that half of them felt that the disadvantages of going coeducational outweighed the advantages, and 25% predicted alumnae giving would decrease as a result.²⁹⁵ Sixty-seven percent of Wellesley alumnae disagreed that women’s colleges were no longer viable, and 58% favored increasing recruitment of women before males were recruited.²⁹⁶

Another meaningful statistic for administrators was that women’s college graduates were enthusiastic about sending their daughters to their alma mater, but would not send their sons if the colleges were to go coed. Of Smith alumnae, 80% said they would encourage a daughter to attend a coed Smith, but only 39% would urge a son to go.²⁹⁷ At Mount Holyoke, “there was much willingness to encourage a daughter to attend a coeducational Mount Holyoke, but much greater uncertainty about the encouragement

²⁹² William Trombley, “Some Women’s Colleges Buck the Coed Trend,” *Los Angeles Times* (Sept. 2, 1972).

²⁹³ Marion Nash Groves to Meribeth Cameron, December 22, 1968, Office of the President: David Bicknell Truman, Coeducation Subject Files, 1960-1978, Mount Holyoke Archives.

²⁹⁴ “Board of Trustees Unanimous Vote: Education for Women.”

²⁹⁵ Ely Chinoy, “Coeducation at Smith College,” 43.

²⁹⁶ “Summary of Results of Alumnae Questionnaire,” Sept. 1970, Commission on the Future of the College, Box 2, Wellesley College Archives.

²⁹⁷ “Tabulations Record Alum Response to Coeducation,” *The Sophian* (Sept. 18, 1969).

of a son and even a degree of opposition rather than willingness.”²⁹⁸ These responses from their own alumnae confirmed the difficulty of attracting men students to former women’s colleges.

Administrators were aware that making a radical change to their institutions that alumnae opposed could lead to a reduction in financial contributions as well as goodwill. Mount Holyoke faculty worried that “alumnae support could be reduced by a change to coeducation, and...major sources of endowment are more likely to respond to a distinctive college with a distinctly announced purpose than to one more coeducational college, and that an embryonic one.”²⁹⁹ Ely Chinoy at Smith noted that more than 80% of donations to the college came from alumnae, who were most strongly in favor of staying a women’s college.³⁰⁰ For these elite women’s colleges, it seemed becoming coeducational would require massive additional financial resources while at the same time alienating their donor base, and would almost inevitably lead to a loss of academic prestige.

Concerns about the effects of coeducation, economic factors, and alumnae response all played a role in the decision to remain single-sex institutions. Yet the determining factor was the change in student opinion and the rise in their applications that gave them hope they could still attract talented women students to a women’s college in a predominantly coeducational atmosphere. That this change in student opinion was due to the influence of the women’s movement is ironic, because feminism and women’s colleges had a long and uneasy history. Nevertheless, the women’s movement provided women’s colleges with new reasons for existing in the early 1970s, and in the context of

²⁹⁸ Rabbino, “Press Release.”

²⁹⁹ “Board of Trustees Unanimous Vote: Education for Women.”

³⁰⁰ Chinoy, “Smith College and the Question of Coeducation,” 19.

a revitalized feminist movement, women's colleges were able to successfully argue that they were an important option for women even in an overwhelmingly coeducational higher education environment.

Chapter Four: The Women's Movement and Women's Colleges

As living in a dark and airless tenement makes the victim susceptible to tuberculosis, so the higher education renders women susceptible to the germs of feminism.³⁰¹

*Mr. and Mrs. John Martin,
The New York Times
August 29, 1915*

The women's movement revitalized women's colleges and provided justification for their existence in a world that was predominantly coeducational. But although the women's movement was deeply concerned about both the equity and content of higher education, it focused almost completely on coeducational institutions. The women's movement for the most part either ignored women's colleges or criticized them for predictable reasons. Women's college administrators were also wary of being identified too closely with the women's movement. Despite the tension between them, the women's movement had beneficial effects on women's colleges in addition to attracting renewed student interest.

The women's movement reemerged in the 1960s after decades of relative quiescence following the achievement of women's suffrage in 1920.³⁰² This "second wave" of feminism targeted higher education as a major concern but focused on coeducational institutions rather than women's colleges.³⁰³ The women's movement encompassed many differences in philosophy and tactics but it is usually seen as having two major factions: a liberal faction that worked to end discrimination against women

³⁰¹ Mr. and Mrs. John Martin, "The Woman Movement and the Baby Crop," *New York Times* (Aug. 29, 1915).

³⁰² Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 4-7.

³⁰³ Judith Hole and Ellen Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 316-318.

within the legal framework, and a radical faction which grew out of the student protest movements and in some cases advocated extreme measures of social change.³⁰⁴ Both of these factions addressed the issue of women in higher education in different ways. The liberal faction focused on achieving equity for women students, staff, and faculty at coeducational institutions, while the radical faction pushed for inclusion of women in the curriculum, particularly through the new discipline of women's studies. Although much of the vitality of the women's movement had dissipated by the mid-1970s, by then it had fundamentally changed both private lives and public opinion in lasting ways.

The liberal faction of the women's movement grew out of the President's Commission on the Status of Women in 1961.³⁰⁵ It was led by large national organizations committed to working within the existing political framework to accomplish their goals, like the National Organization for Women (NOW), founded in 1966, and the Women's Equity Action League (WEAL), founded in 1968.³⁰⁶ NOW and WEAL fought to eradicate political and legal inequalities that affected women in many areas, including higher education.³⁰⁷ These organizations achieved a series of significant political victories in the 1960s and 1970s that led to an end of discriminatory admissions policies and more equitable hiring practices at colleges and universities.

These liberal feminist organizations focused on coeducational higher education institutions, simply because they constituted a vast majority by this time. Investigations prompted by the women's movement found that women were not treated with any measure of equality on coeducational campuses. A survey made by the American

³⁰⁴ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 75-80, 95-96.

³⁰⁵ Rupp and Taylor, 174, 180.

³⁰⁶ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 83. Rupp and Taylor, 174, 180.

³⁰⁷ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 75-78, 83. Rupp and Taylor, 180.

Association of University Women in January 1970 found that “[a]t every level—student body, administration, faculty, and trustees—women are under-represented or placed in positions with little power in decision-making.”³⁰⁸ Women made up only 22% of faculty in higher education, and women faculty were found mostly in the lowest ranks and less prestigious departments, particularly those stereotyped as “women’s areas” like nursing, library science, and education.³⁰⁹

The Women’s Equity Action League began an aggressive campaign in the late 1960s that targeted higher education institutions for practicing sex discrimination in hiring and admissions, using an executive order signed in 1967 that prevented institutions holding federal contracts from engaging in sex discrimination.³¹⁰ In 1970 alone, 43 colleges and universities were charged with discriminating against women in employment, having discriminatory admissions quotas against women in both undergraduate and graduate programs, and using inequitable pay practices that compensated men better than women for the same work.³¹¹ WEAL filed complaints against more than 300 institutions in the early 1970s.³¹² Federal contracts were delayed at more than 40 institutions, including Harvard and the University of Michigan, in response to complaints of sex discrimination.³¹³

³⁰⁸ Ruth M. Oltman. “Campus 1970: Where Do Women Stand? Research Report of a Survey on Women in Academe,” (Washington D.C.: American Association of University Women, December 1970), 24.

³⁰⁹ Oltman, 17.

³¹⁰ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 81, 88-89. Betsy Wade, “Women on the Campus Find a ‘Weapon,’” *New York Times* (Jan. 10, 1972).

³¹¹ Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Going Coed*, 15. Bernice R. Sandler, “‘Too Strong for a Woman’: The Five Words that Created Title IX,” in *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Gender in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 4.

³¹² Chamberlain, 15. Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Going Coed*, 15. Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 88-89.

³¹³ Susan B. Miller, “Female Academicians Claim Careers Curbed by Male Chauvinists,” *Wall Street Journal* (June 30, 1971). “Newest Campus Crusade: Equal Rights for Women,” *US News and World Report* (Dec 13, 1971), 79.

Congressional hearings on the education and employment of women began in the summer of 1970.³¹⁴ These hearings convinced higher education institutions that sex discrimination would be taken seriously by the federal government, and many institutions initiated their own internal studies to address these issues on their campuses.³¹⁵ The result of the hearings was the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, signed into law on July 1, 1972.³¹⁶ Title IX banned sexual discrimination in education, and covered hiring faculty and staff, admission of students, and student experiences on campus, such as separate curfew rules for men and women. Until Title IX was passed, discriminatory admissions quotas against women persisted in many undergraduate and graduate coeducational institutions.³¹⁷ “Just about the only things that can legitimately be kept separate are locker rooms and bedrooms,” *Newsweek* jocularly reported after Title IX was passed.³¹⁸ Title IX was a great victory for the liberal faction of the women’s movement in addressing problems of equity in higher education.

While the liberal faction of the women’s movement focused in general on eliminating legal impediments to equality for women, the radical faction focused on women’s private lives and experiences.³¹⁹ The radical faction grew out of the Civil Rights Movement, the New Left, and the campus protests of the 1960s.³²⁰ Students on college campuses in the 1960s staged massive protests concerning both student concerns at individual institutions and larger issues in American society, particularly the Vietnam

³¹⁴ Sandler, 7.

³¹⁵ Sandler, 8-9.

³¹⁶ Sandler, 10.

³¹⁷ Chamberlain, 17. Margaret A. Nash, *Women’s Education in the United States, 1780-1840* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 115. Sandler, 8-10.

³¹⁸ “Education - The New Campus Rebels: Women,” 124.

³¹⁹ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 86.

³²⁰ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3, 6, 52, 279, 283. Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 84-88.

War.³²¹ On their own campuses, students demanded an end to parietal rules that restricted students from having visitors in their dorm rooms, and pushed for coed dorms and lifting restrictions on drugs and alcohol beyond what was legal in the state.³²² They also pressed for a greater voice in campus governance and for the increased enrollment of minorities.³²³ Pervasive media coverage of student activism gave it a significant presence in American culture at the time, although even at the height of student protests in 1969, only a small minority of college students had ever participated in a campus protest.³²⁴ But student protestors in the 1960s were responsible for ending many forms of discrimination against women students on campus, especially parietal rules that usually had more stringent requirements for women than for men.

The radical feminist movement emerged at the end of the decade out of these student protest movements.³²⁵ In many cases, women involved in them had come to realize that while working alongside men in these organizations, there was an implicit understanding that men were the leaders and women were to be relegated to supportive and auxiliary roles.³²⁶ “Until recently a woman who attempted to assert herself politically or personally within The Movement was likely to run head-on into a virulent male chauvinism.”³²⁷ When women tried to call attention to their marginalization in groups supposedly dedicated to equality, they were ridiculed.³²⁸ By the end of the 1960s many youth organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

³²¹ Solomon, 201.

³²² Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Going Coed*, 11. Solomon, 203-204.

³²³ Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Going Coed*, 11.

³²⁴ Horowitz, *Campus Life*, 223, 234.

³²⁵ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 84-88.

³²⁶ David Barber, *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 107. Horowitz, *Campus Life*, 242. Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 95, 104.

³²⁷ Peter Babcox, “Meet the Women of the Revolution, 1969,” *The New York Times* (Feb. 9, 1969).

³²⁸ Barber, 143, 231. Echols, 48-50. Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 131.

and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) were fragmenting.³²⁹ Women who had been involved in these groups began to organize around their own concerns.³³⁰ They created women-only discussion groups and engaged in consciousness-raising, where they shared experiences of oppression in their own lives in order to understand them as systematic political and societal, rather than simply personal, problems.³³¹ In the realm of higher education, the radical faction of the women's movement also agitated for change to the curriculum, most notably by advocating for women's studies.

The radical women's movement emerged for the most part in a university setting, and one of their first acts was to challenge the traditional university curriculum. Women in the movement called attention to the fact that the curriculum centered on men and their actions, where women's history, accomplishments, and stories were largely absent.³³² Women's studies classes emerged in the early 1970s, usually outside of the formal administrative structure of the institutions, through informal seminars held in dorms or during interim sessions, and taught by graduate students, non-tenure track faculty, or staff.³³³ The first instructors often had a background in political activism.³³⁴ They saw these classes as both providing a necessary corrective to a male-dominated curriculum and as "the vanguard of the women's movement on the campus."³³⁵ From the beginning,

³²⁹ Barber, 146-167. Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 96, 135.

³³⁰ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 96.

³³¹ Susan Brownmiller, "Sisterhood Is Powerful: A Member of the Women's Liberation Movement Explains What It's All About," *The New York Times* (March 15, 1970). Jo Freeman, "Political Organization in the Feminist Movement," *Acta Sociologica* 18, 2/3 (1975), 235-236.

³³² Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 90, 205, 265.

³³³ Sheila Tobias, "Women's Studies: Its Origins, Its Organization, and Its Prospects," *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1978): 91.

³³⁴ Marilyn J. Boxer, "For and about Women: The Theory and Practice of Women's Studies in the United States," *Signs* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1982): 662-663.

³³⁵ Paul Lauter and Florence Howe, "The Women's Movement: Impact on the Campus and Curriculum. Current Issues in Higher Education, 1978" (Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education, 1978), 8-9.

the discipline of women's studies was tied to the women's movement and its goals.³³⁶

The women's studies courses and programs that emerged clearly showed the influence of the women's movement, particularly with their twin goals of studying the issues of women's oppression and advocating for change.³³⁷

There was considerable opposition to accepting women's studies into the curriculum. The male-dominated faculty resisted women's studies as a discipline.³³⁸ "Observers of limited sympathy also call it consciousness-raising for fem libbers, a trivial fad and man-hating for academic credit."³³⁹ Many faculty members were suspicious of the discipline's ties to women's liberation and the idea of research tied to political goals.³⁴⁰ It was not until the early 1980s that women's studies was accepted as a legitimate field of research.³⁴¹ By that time, there were more than 300 women's studies programs and more than 30,000 courses in women's studies in colleges and universities across the United States.³⁴²

Despite important successes, the women's movement lost momentum by the mid-1970s due to ideological disagreements, organizational weaknesses, and the emergence of a strong oppositional movement against the Equal Rights Amendment. Differences in ideology between the liberal and radical factions, as well as between the many differing

³³⁶ Boxer, 661.

³³⁷ Boxer, 661, 667.

³³⁸ Winifred D. Wandersee, *On the Move: American Women in the 1970s* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1988), 114. Jo Freeman, "Women's Liberation and Its Impact on the Campus," *Liberal Education* 57 (Dec 1971): 475.

³³⁹ Catharine R. Stimpson, "The New Feminism and Women's Studies," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 5, no. 7 (1973): 43.

³⁴⁰ Wandersee, 123.

³⁴¹ Leslie Bennetts, "Education: Women's Viewpoints Gain Respect in Academe," *New York Times* (Dec 2, 1980).

³⁴² Boxer, 662.

groups within the radical faction, led to schisms and antagonism within the movement.³⁴³ Liberal feminists pushed for the elimination of legal inequalities for women within existing political, economic, and social structures. In contrast, radical feminists coming out of the New Left intellectual milieu supported the overthrow of these structures.³⁴⁴ Another source of tension was the intense publicity focused on the movement in the early 1970s. In January to March of 1970, according to Jo Freeman, “[w]omen’s liberation became the latest fad. Virtually every major publication and network in the country did a major story on it.”³⁴⁵ The coverage culminated at the NOW August 26, 1970 strike to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment.³⁴⁶ Freeman believes the relentless media pressure aggravated ideological differences within the movement.³⁴⁷

Another source of tension for the early feminist movement was the issue of lesbianism. Lesbianism was divisive for liberal feminists because heterosexual women were afraid that women would be labelled as lesbians for being involved in the movement. “Historically ‘lesbian-baiting’ had been the most effective way of keeping ‘uppity’ women in their place, and the threat of being labeled a lesbian was a powerful control over even the most dedicated feminist,” notes Wandersee.³⁴⁸ She also reports that women protestors at the 1968 Miss America pageant stoically withstood all kinds of abuse from onlookers, only to burst into tears upon being called lesbians.³⁴⁹ The New York Times asked “Is the issue of lesbianism splitting the women’s movement in New

³⁴³ Barbara Ryan, *Feminism and the Women’s Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement, Ideology and Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 54-56. Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 227-239.

³⁴⁴ Echols, 15, 199.

³⁴⁵ Freeman, *The Politics of Women’s Liberation*, 148.

³⁴⁶ Freeman, “Political Organization in the Feminist Movement,” 228.

³⁴⁷ Freeman, *The Politics of Women’s Liberation*, 150.

³⁴⁸ Wandersee, 65.

³⁴⁹ Wandersee, 65.

York?” and suggested that the presence of highly-visible groups of lesbians in the 1972 Women’s March for Equality would alienate “uncommitted” women from the movement.³⁵⁰

Many feminist leaders saw this as a deliberate tactic to discredit feminism. Ti-Grace Atkinson said, “If men succeed in associating Lesbianism with the women’s movement, then they destroy the movement,” and Aileen C. Hernandez, the national president of NOW, called these attempts to discredit feminism “sexual McCarthyism.”³⁵¹ Betty Friedan thought lesbians were infiltrating the movement in order to delegitimize it, and tried to drive many lesbians out of NOW.³⁵²

Lesbianism was also a divisive issue for radical feminists. Many radical feminists saw lesbianism as the logical extension of their ideology, and there was pressure on all women to sever relations with men.³⁵³ Many radical feminists who “remained practicing heterosexuals identified with that culture and its ideology and considered themselves failed or incomplete feminists.”³⁵⁴ Disagreement over lesbianism and separatism from men was one factor that led many small radical feminist groups to splinter and disintegrate.³⁵⁵

In addition, the small group organization style that radical feminists adopted ultimately prevented the movement from making much progress. “In their effort to keep the movement egalitarian and leaderless, groups engaged in backbiting and ‘trashing’

³⁵⁰ Enid Nemy, “The Movement...Is Big Enough to Roll With All These Punches,” *New York Times* (Oct 2 1972), 46.

³⁵¹ Judy Klemesrud, “The Lesbian Issue and Women’s Lib,” *The New York Times* (Dec. 18 1970).

³⁵² Freeman, “Political Organization in the Feminist Movement,” 232-233.

³⁵³ Freeman, *The Politics of Women’s Liberation*, 137.

³⁵⁴ Ellen Willis, “Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism,” in *The 60s Without Apology*, ed. Sohnya Sayres (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 112.

³⁵⁵ Ryan, 54.

other members who displayed an interest or talent for leadership.”³⁵⁶ The energy of the radical feminist movement began to dissipate as groups attacked each other.³⁵⁷ At the same time, the breakdown of these smaller radical groups pushed women into NOW and other liberal feminist groups.³⁵⁸

Resistance to the women’s movement was sparked by the campaign to pass the Equal Rights Amendment. After Congress passed the amendment in 1972, conservative opponents of the ERA began a crusade to oppose its ratification by the states.³⁵⁹ At first states were quick to ratify the ERA, but after 1973 the pace of ratifications slowed drastically, ultimately resulting in the amendment’s failure to be adopted in 1982.³⁶⁰ The failure to ratify the ERA and the success of the opposition movement it generated contributed to the instability of the women’s movement. By the middle of the decade, the women’s movement had won many important victories, but its political strength had fragmented.³⁶¹ In November 1976, a Harper’s Magazine cover story declared a “requiem for the women’s movement,” noting that there was no longer any consensus on the movement’s goals.³⁶²

Despite its decline as a political force, the women’s movement had an astonishingly rapid effect on changing Americans’ attitudes towards gender roles, especially in the first half of the 1970s.³⁶³ These changes were most dramatic among

³⁵⁶ Freeman, “Political Organization in the Feminist Movement,” 237.

³⁵⁷ Ryan, 54.

³⁵⁸ Wandersee, 41.

³⁵⁹ Jane J. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 13.

³⁶⁰ Mansbridge, 13.

³⁶¹ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 263-264.

³⁶² Veronica Geng, “Requiem for the Women's Movement,” *Harper's Magazine* (Nov. 1976).

³⁶³ Karen Oppenheim Mason, John L. Czajka, and Sara Arber, “Change in U.S. Women's Sex-Role Attitudes, 1964-1974,” *American Sociological Review* 41, no. 4 (Aug., 1976). Andrew Cherlin and Pamela Barnhouse Walters, “Trends in United States Men’s and Women’s Sex-Role Attitudes: 1972 to 1978,” *American Sociological Review* 46, no. 4 (Aug. 1981). Leonie Huddy, Francis K. Neely, and Marilyn R.

young people. The number of students who agreed that women were an oppressed group doubled in just two years, according to a survey conducted among college students in the early 1970s.³⁶⁴ A large majority of students favored greater sexual equality and the idea that talents were gender neutral.³⁶⁵ “A 1970 survey of college freshmen indicated that half of the men and more than one-third of the women endorsed the idea that ‘the activities of married women are best confined to the home and family.’ Five years later only one-third of the men and less than one-fifth of the women took the same position.”³⁶⁶ Even though many younger women in the late 1970s and 1980s resisted the label “feminist,” they embraced many of the women’s movement’s fundamental values.³⁶⁷ Because of the changes it inspired in public opinion and private lives and its success in eliminating many barriers to women’s full participation in politics, the workforce, and education, the women’s movement of the 1960s and 70s is generally considered one of the most successful social movements of the twentieth century.

Despite the women’s movement’s concern about higher education, the movement as a whole did not take much note of the elite women’s colleges. The twin goals of equity and women’s studies were pursued by the liberal and radical factions of the women’s movement primarily at coeducational institutions. This was in part because the women’s movement tended to emerge on coeducational campuses where, as Berenice Sandler put it, “the enemy was clearer.”³⁶⁸ Women’s colleges were for the most part ignored by the women’s movement or criticized in predictable ways — as second-rate compared to

Lafay, “Trends: Support for the Women’s Movement,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (Autumn 2000).

³⁶⁴ William H. Chafe, *Women and Equality: Changing Patterns in American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 139.

³⁶⁵ Chafe, 139.

³⁶⁶ Chafe, 139.

³⁶⁷ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 274-275.

³⁶⁸ Bird, 63.

men's colleges, as frivolous and socially exclusive, or as irrelevant to an educational scene now dominated by coeducation. These criticisms not only echoed conventional public opinion, but also demonstrated the strained relationship between organized feminism and the elite women's colleges that had existed since the colleges opened in the late 19th century. In addition to these criticisms, the women's movement specifically condemned women's colleges for their responses to Title IX and the Equal Rights Amendment. Individual feminists who were alumnae of women's colleges added personal complaints about their experiences as undergraduates.

Despite having similar goals of improving the lives of women in the late nineteenth century, the first wave feminist movement and the elite women's colleges did not support each other as one might expect. The expansion of higher education opportunities for women was one of the feminist movement's main goals.³⁶⁹ But for the most part feminists advocated for coeducation, pushing for acceptance into the elite men's colleges instead of separate schools for women.³⁷⁰ There was a belief "among a large sector of the feminist community, that the coeducational institution was the healthiest form of educational experience for men and women," and that coeducation would promote better friendships and relationships between the sexes.³⁷¹ "Those most active in demanding a college education for women favored co-education and insisted that the colleges already established should be opened on equal terms for both sexes," Smith's first president L. Clark Seelye observed.³⁷² Coeducation was seen as promoting

³⁶⁹ Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 19. Solomon, 41, 46.

³⁷⁰ Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Going Coed*, 4. Solomon, 41, 47.

³⁷¹ William Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union: The Feminist Reform of Sex and Society* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 65, 76-78. Leach commented in an endnote, "To my knowledge, feminists during this period never supported single-sex colleges and universities for women with the same vigor they supported coeducational ones."

³⁷² Seelye, 7.

political, economic, and social equality, and many feminists believed separate women's colleges would always be intellectually inferior to colleges that educated men.³⁷³

Women's college administrators in the early years were also apprehensive about associating their institutions with feminism or the suffrage movement.³⁷⁴ They were careful to distance their colleges from feminism, especially since opponents of higher education for women tended to link it to support for radical feminist causes.³⁷⁵ Although women's colleges existed to expand opportunities for women, they were highly dependent on men for financial support and to pay for their female relatives to attend.³⁷⁶ Especially since large numbers of early women graduates did not marry and single women in the workforce were so inequitably compensated, colleges were more dependent on alumnae family members than on alumnae for financial support.³⁷⁷ These founders and administrators wholeheartedly supported higher educational opportunities for women, but as Margaret Nash pointed out, that did not necessarily lead to support for legal, political, or economic equality.³⁷⁸

Women's colleges in the 1970s also found themselves at odds with the women's movement, especially over Title IX and the Equal Rights Amendment.³⁷⁹ Women's colleges were disturbed to discover that the original draft of Title IX would have severely undermined their legal status and only a last-minute provision exempted them and other

³⁷³ Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 23, 27. Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Going Coed*, 4. Solomon, 43, 47.

³⁷⁴ Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 194.

³⁷⁵ Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 19, 194.

³⁷⁶ Kendall, 127.

³⁷⁷ Kendall, 127-128. The difficulty the elite women's colleges had in fundraising continued well into the twentieth century (see Horton, 152). Historically black institutions faced similar problem raising money among alumni (see Gasman, 20).

³⁷⁸ Nash, 1.

³⁷⁹ Marcia K. Sharp, "Bridging the Gap: Women's Colleges and the Women's Movement," *Initiatives* 53, 4 (Dec. 1991): 4-5.

single-sex institutions from Title IX's requirements.³⁸⁰ This realization made them hesitant to embrace other legal changes supported by the women's movement that might also have a negative effect on their institutions. As a result, feminists charged women's colleges with opposing the ERA because it might negatively affect their single-sex status.³⁸¹ "Women's colleges were not major players in the key legislative and political battles for women's equity."³⁸² For their part, women's colleges were dismayed that arguments about educational equity tended to focus on Title IX and coeducation.³⁸³ "Thus, while women's colleges and other women's advocates are working towards the same goal — to provide the best possible educational experiences for women — the fact that they are not using the same approach has tended to divide women's colleges from natural and important allies."³⁸⁴ Women's colleges' need to support the legality of their single-sex status put them on the opposite side of these issues from feminists.

Feminist alumnae also accused women's colleges of not being advocates for social changes that benefitted women. Some alumnae felt their institutions had not given them the tools they needed to challenge the system themselves. Gloria Steinem attended Smith in the 1950s, and she recalled of her classroom experience, "The women's rights movement of the past was a joke; it was never referred to as anything but a joke if it was referred to at all in any courses I took."³⁸⁵ She compared women's colleges negatively to historically black colleges and universities: "Black colleges had been the think tanks of the civil rights movement, but women's colleges hadn't taught us how to fight for

³⁸⁰ Thomas, "Preserving and Strengthening Together," 580.

³⁸¹ Liva Baker, *I'm Radcliffe! Fly Me!: The Seven Sisters and the Failure of Women's Education* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), 189.

³⁸² Sharp, "Bridging the Gap," 5.

³⁸³ Letter to Member Presidents from Marcia Sharp, Aug. 16, 1978, President's Office, Box 20, Wellesley College Archives.

³⁸⁴ Letter to Member Presidents from Marcia Sharp, Aug. 16, 1978.

³⁸⁵ "Steinem: Marriage and Marginal Women," *The Sophian* (Apr. 19, 1974).

ourselves much less for other women.”³⁸⁶ Nora Ephron, who was graduated from Wellesley in 1962, remembered it as a place that encouraged a stifling ladylike conformity. “How marvelous it would have been to go to a women’s college that encouraged impoliteness, that rewarded aggression, that encouraged argument.”³⁸⁷ These alumnae blamed their alma maters for not encouraging feminism in their students.

Some alumnae saw the reluctance of elite women’s colleges to support women’s liberation as a function of class. Caroline Bird thought that although these colleges might applaud the goals of the women’s movement, they found their tactics *déclassé*, and displayed a “well-bred disregard for the *de facto* subordination of women.”³⁸⁸ Gloria Steinem believed the education she and others had received at elite women’s colleges helped to distance them from the concerns of other women, “separated from the world and their sisters by class.”³⁸⁹ One Wellesley alumna argued that Wellesley served the male establishment “by turning out women who will serve men in a variety of useful roles. . . . Wellesley is an elite college which perpetuates elitism.”³⁹⁰ These alumnae thought that the fact that these were not just women’s colleges, but women’s colleges that had traditionally served the upper classes, led these institutions to reject the women’s movement as vulgar and unrefined.

But many feminist alumnae also recognized the beneficial influence of their alma maters, even as they criticized them. Many cited these colleges as the first place that took them seriously as individuals.³⁹¹ This acknowledgement of their skills and intelligence

³⁸⁶ Gloria Steinem, “Reunions: When College Never Ends,” *Ms.* (Sept 1981), 35.

³⁸⁷ Nora Ephron, *Crazy Salad: Some Things About Women* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 31.

³⁸⁸ Bird, 64.

³⁸⁹ Steinem, “Reunions,” 35.

³⁹⁰ Janet Conn, “Whom Does Wellesley Serve?,” *Wellesley News* (Oct. 30, 1969).

³⁹¹ Marilyn Bender, “Smith’s First Woman President Anticipates a ‘Great Adventure,’” *New York Times* (Mar 18, 1975), 42.

gave them the necessary confidence to organize a major social movement. Betty Friedan recognized this when she spoke at Smith, her alma mater, in February 1975: “In my education, whether there was that much conscious effort or not, there was something of the affirmation of the personhood of women that has been the best of Smith and that still remains alive at Smith....My ability to do battle for my sisters in the world is in large part [due to] my education by you....It cannot be an accident that so many of us who have given ideology and leadership to the women’s movement came from this College.”³⁹² The women’s movement in general, and individual feminists in particular, for the most part ignored or criticized women’s colleges in the 1970s. But women’s colleges continued to be ambivalent about the women’s movement as well.

Women’s college administrators were wary of pursuing a closer identification with the women’s movement due to their complicated relationship with feminism. They were reluctant to be identified as feminist institutions.³⁹³ This reluctance had two aspects: fear of being connected in the public mind with lesbianism and unwillingness to incorporate women’s studies. However the women’s movement had several positive effects for women’s colleges, including increasing support for women presidents, encouraging research on the effectiveness of single-sex learning environments, and new support from students.

A large part of women’s colleges’ ambivalence towards the feminist movement was a fear of being labeled not just feminist, but lesbian institutions, echoing the public image of women’s colleges as sexually dangerous that had existed since the early twentieth century. One of Mount Holyoke’s trustees implied this was enough of a reason

³⁹² “Betty Friedan Speaks....,” *Smith Alumnae Quarterly* (April 1975), 10-11.

³⁹³ Tompkins, 302.

to become coeducational: “[T]here is a great danger that we should automatically be labeled as abnormal. I can remember a time when extreme feminism and worse seriously distorted Mount Holyoke’s reputation and I have witnessed the long struggle to overcome this handicap. The distortions would return, some of them ugly, if Mount Holyoke remains a female institution.”³⁹⁴ In his view, remaining a women’s college in the face of the coeducational trend would be enough to bring back and intensify accusations that women’s colleges fostered lesbianism.

Administrators’ concerns about the public image of women’s colleges as encouraging lesbianism intensified throughout the 1970s as the gay liberation movement inspired students to form lesbian student groups on campus. Popular opinion continued to associate women’s colleges with lesbianism. “[T]here were already too many people who assume that women’s colleges attract an excessive number of lesbians, an assumption that does not seem to be borne out by fact.”³⁹⁵ In 1973, Wellesley was pestered by reporters with a false lead that they had established an all-lesbian dorm.³⁹⁶ After hearing from a concerned alumna that a prospective applicant was put off when a student guide mentioned lesbians on campus, Wellesley’s director of admission Mary Ellen Ames responded that the whole community, including the lesbian student group, was concerned that their college’s image might be affected by an association with lesbianism.³⁹⁷ The admissions directors of the Seven Sisters (minus Vassar) addressed the issue of lesbian

³⁹⁴ Roger W. Holmes to Robert G. Wiese, Jan. 27, 1971, Office of the President: David Bicknell Truman, Coeducation Subject Files, 1960-1978, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

³⁹⁵ Grace and Fred M. Hechinger, “Homosexuality on Campus,” *New York Times* (Mar 12, 1978).

³⁹⁶ Suzanne Gordon to Barbara Newell, Sept. 6, 1973, President’s Office, Box 60, Wellesley College Archives.

³⁹⁷ Mary Ellen Ames to Mrs. Carl M. Mueller, Dec. 4, 1974, President’s Office, Box 11, Wellesley College Archives.

groups on campus at their annual meeting in May 1975.³⁹⁸ Since women's colleges had a long history of being criticized for encouraging lesbianism, the open appearance of lesbian groups on campus disconcerted administrators and threatened the image they wanted to convey about their institutions.

Fears of being associated with lesbianism also affected how the women's movement was received by students at women's colleges. When the radical women's movement emerged in the late 1960s, women's colleges were not unaffected. By 1970, there were Women's Liberation groups on all three campuses.³⁹⁹ But by 1972, feminist activism on all three campuses had quieted. "In spite of continued discrimination in some areas, student women's rights activists within the colleges are quiet this year. There is interest in the women's movement, but the rash of consciousness raising sessions, the social ferment, the cries of sisterhood that brought Kate Millett and Gloria Steinem to these campuses in recent times seem to have abated."⁴⁰⁰ The change was attributed to a greater seriousness among students and an increased focus on professional success and careers.⁴⁰¹ After the initial burst of enthusiasm, the women's movement became the concern of just a small minority of students on women's college campuses throughout the rest of the decade.

This minority often berated their fellow students for not taking more of an interest in feminist concerns. The organizers of Smith's Women's Weekend in 1974 characterized the Smith student body—and the administration—as apathetic on the

³⁹⁸ Elizabeth G. Vermey, Minutes of Six College Admissions Directors, May 19, 1975, President's Office, Box 12, Wellesley College Archives.

³⁹⁹ Nancy Winbury, "Women's Liberation," *Choragos* (Feb. 5, 1970). Holly Fitzsimmons, "The Women's Liberation Movement at Smith," *Smith Alumnae Quarterly* (April 1970). Kathy Madden, "'Silent Radicals' Group Here," *Wellesley College News* (Oct. 16, 1969).

⁴⁰⁰ Polly Longworth, "Women at the Five Colleges," Supplement to *Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly* (Spring 1972), 8.

⁴⁰¹ Longworth, 8.

subject of feminism: “Many feel that by coming to a women’s college they have circumvented the issue of women’s concerns. This feeling might be reinforced by the administration’s attitude that feminist activities are neither necessary nor important at a women’s college.”⁴⁰² A student who transferred into Smith because of a newspaper article on the comeback of women’s colleges became disillusioned once she arrived:

I was impressed by the article and genuinely believed that these isolated enclaves of the rich had suddenly become havens for women deeply and actively concerned with the women's movement. But, for the most part, I was wrong. The good press on these colleges was more a reflection of active public relations than of the mood on campus or the actual convictions of the students. Although others, like me, entered the school with hopes for student activism, I now know that the prevailing feeling at the college was boredom with the whole movement.⁴⁰³

Four years later, a disappointed feminist student at Wellesley named Beth Loomis wrote “Wellesley College is not a mighty bastion of women’s rights,” and “Wellesley’s feminism is careerism, and careerism now means plunking women into traditional male roles.”⁴⁰⁴ The minority of students at these women’s colleges who were seriously interested in the women’s movement in the 1970s did not feel this interest was supported by the administration or by most of their fellow students.

Like the women’s movement in general, one of the reasons students felt feminism was not embraced by most women’s college students was fear of being identified as homosexual. This was intensified by the historical image of women’s colleges as sexually dangerous to students. Since they might already be seen as suspect for choosing to attend a women’s college, many students no doubt felt embracing feminism would intensify this suspicion. Loomis thought the reason for Wellesley students’ avoidance of feminism was

⁴⁰² Nancy Rubenstein, “Apathy at Women’s Weekend,” *The Sophian* (Nov. 21, 1974).

⁴⁰³ Janis Ruden, “A Segregated Experience,” *Harper’s Magazine* 251 (Oct 1975), 6.

⁴⁰⁴ Beth Loomis, “The Passive Feminist,” *Wellesley News* (Nov. 12, 1976).

concern over being labeled lesbians.⁴⁰⁵ The editors of the *Sophian* attributed the low turnout for their event to “the unfounded suspicion that the event was sponsored by and for the gay community.”⁴⁰⁶ In 1975, gay students active in Smith’s Women’s Resource Center were asked not to advertise or be vocal about their activities, in order to avoid associating the center with lesbian activity.⁴⁰⁷ A year later, they formed a separate Lesbian Alliance, disassociating themselves from the Center after charges that the active lesbians in the Center “caused the Center to cater philosophically to those of lesbian orientation, to the point of alienating or intimidating other interested students.”⁴⁰⁸ Just as the issue of supporting lesbians became a source of friction for the women’s movement in general, the same issue prevented women’s college students from embracing the women’s movement. The popular image of women’s colleges as threatening to students because of lesbians on campus contributed to this fear.

Another source of resistance to the women’s movement at women’s colleges came from the faculty, and it was expressed most forcefully against incorporating women’s studies into the curriculum. None of these three elite women’s colleges had a women’s studies program until the 1980s.⁴⁰⁹ Faculty and administrators were strongly opposed to accepting women’s studies as an academic discipline. Many expressed this opinion as an issue of academic quality. Virginia Ellis, an associate professor of English at Mount Holyoke, said she did “not want to see a women’s studies program at Mount Holyoke because it might lead to a study of the second-rate.”⁴¹⁰ The Mount Holyoke

⁴⁰⁵ Loomis.

⁴⁰⁶ “Editorial: Women or Girls?,” *The Sophian* (Nov. 8, 1973).

⁴⁰⁷ Melissa Miller, “Gay/straight split explained,” *The Sophian* (Oct. 16, 1975).

⁴⁰⁸ “Women’s Resource Center redefining [sic] Purpose,” *The Sophian* (Nov. 18, 1976).

⁴⁰⁹ “Alice in Campusland,” *Ms.* (Sept. 1979), 71.

⁴¹⁰ Rosen, “Mount Holyoke forever will be.”

faculty favored adding some course content on women, but not making fundamental changes to the curriculum. “We agree that some courses dealing specifically with the problems and achievements of women have an appropriate place here, but we do not favor a major shift in the curriculum’s content, spirit, or broad aims in the interests of women’s studies alone.”⁴¹¹

Thomas Mendenhall at Smith compared women’s studies to the domestic science courses that earlier critics of women’s colleges had urged them to adopt, saying that Smith had always refused special courses for women. “Although in the early years many colleges, including Mount Holyoke and Wellesley, had courses in cooking, sewing, and housekeeping, Smith has resolutely refused to offer such aids for the homemaker.”⁴¹² Smith faculty also recommended adding courses on women’s studies, or material on women to existing courses, but no major or department.⁴¹³ Despite the participation of both Smith and Mount Holyoke, the overwhelming majority of women’s studies courses in the 5 College Exchange during the 1970s were offered by the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.⁴¹⁴

The Vice Chair of the Commission on the Future of the College at Wellesley, Mary Lefkowitz, traced the reluctance to incorporate women’s studies courses back to women’s colleges’ commitment to providing an education that did not differ from the elite men’s colleges. “[I]nstitutions like Wellesley and Bryn Mawr (and their administrations and faculties) have prided themselves, on being ‘equal’ (and no different

⁴¹¹ “Board of Trustees Unanimous Vote: Education for Women.”

⁴¹² Thomas C. Mendenhall, “The Report of the President,” *Smith College Bulletin* 1972-1973, 7.

⁴¹³ “A Report to the Faculty on Women’s Education: Some Curricular and Environmental Considerations,” Feb. 22 1974, Office of the President, Jill Ker Conway Files, Series III Academic Programs, Box 3, Smith College Archives.

⁴¹⁴ Sheryl Roth, “Women Expand with Time,” *The Sophian* (Feb. 13, 1975).

from) the best men's colleges."⁴¹⁵ She found it difficult to conceive of a way Wellesley could incorporate material on women's role in society into its curriculum. "The special courses on women's civil rights movements, literature by women, and the sociology of women offered at a number of coeducational schools seem intended to provide counseling services as well as factual information to students often in desperate need of advice and moral support."⁴¹⁶ Ruth Adams, who became president of Wellesley after a distinguished career as a physicist, was also unsure about the place of women's studies in the curriculum. "I hope the courses in 'Women Studies' are not limited to a testimony that women can and have performed nobly. Frankly, I would find a course in 'Women in Science' ludicrous."⁴¹⁷ All three women's colleges were reluctant to significantly change their curriculum by adding an official program on women's studies.

In some cases the objections of the faculty extended not just to women's studies, but also to identifying their institutions with research on women, even if it meant turning down lucrative grants. When Jill Ker Conway proposed to take advantage of available funding and establish a research program on women at Smith, objections from faculty meant the plan had to be abandoned.⁴¹⁸ Conway, a consummate fundraiser, then modified the proposal and received a \$350,000 grant for a more informal research project on

⁴¹⁵ Dr. Lefkowitz was also Associate Professor of Greek and Latin at Wellesley. Memo from Mary Lefkowitz to Ruth Adams, July 6, 1970, President's Office, Box 37, Wellesley College Archives, 2.

⁴¹⁶ Mary Lefkowitz, "Final Report on the Education and Needs of Women," Sept. 1970, President's Office, Box 37, Wellesley College Archives, 5.

⁴¹⁷ Memo from Ruth Adams to Phyllis J. Fleming, Aug. 10, 1971, President's Office, Box 37, Wellesley College Archives.

⁴¹⁸ Memo to Members of the Faculty from Ad Hoc Committee to Design a Research Program on Women, April 16, 1976, Office of the President, Jill Ker Conway Files, Series IX Committees & Boards, Box 8, Smith College Archives. Margaret A. Olivo to Ad Hoc Committee, April 26, 1976, Office of the President, Jill Ker Conway Files, Series IX Committees & Boards, Box 8, Smith College Archives. From group of faculty to Ad Hoc Committee, April 26, 1976, Office of the President, Jill Ker Conway Files, Series IX Committees & Boards, Box 8, Smith College Archives. Ad Hoc Committee to Design a Research Program on Women to Jill Ker Conway, January 21, 1977, Office of the President, Jill Ker Conway Files, Series IX Committees & Boards, Box 8, Smith College Archives.

“Women and Social Change” from the Mellon Foundation. One of the women active on the project said that Conway’s efforts led to her being “perceived by the conservative faculty as a threat to Western civilization on this campus.”⁴¹⁹ Wellesley’s Commission on the Future of the College also advised against establishing a center for research on women. When President Barbara Newell ignored this recommendation and accepted a Carnegie grant of \$195,000 to do so, the decision created ill will and an uncooperative attitude from the faculty that lasted for years afterwards.⁴²⁰ In both cases presidents of women’s colleges were caught between their commitment to fundraising efforts for their institutions and the reluctance of faculty to identify strongly with the women’s movement.

Despite the reluctance of women’s colleges to fully embrace the women’s movement, the movement had several positive effects on women’s college campuses. One was the demand for more women as faculty and administrators, especially as presidents. Over the course of the 1970s, a woman president became a necessity for an elite women’s college. When a man succeeded to the presidency of Bryn Mawr in August 1969, only three of the Seven Sisters were headed by women: Barnard, Radcliffe, and Wellesley.⁴²¹ Along with the trend to coeducation, the *New York Times* speculated that the primary cause was the difficulty of attracting top faculty: “Women’s colleges have been painfully aware of their problems of attracting and holding good faculty members, especially in the professional-school and research-oriented sciences. They are anxious to

⁴¹⁹ Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, “What do women want? Feminism and its future,” *Harper’s Magazine* (Oct 1981), 47.

⁴²⁰ Minutes of Women’s Studies Meetings, March 18 and 20, 1980, President’s Office, Box 8, Wellesley College Archives. “Wellesley to Study Status of Women,” *Boston Sunday Globe* (Aug. 4, 1974).

⁴²¹ Fred M. Hechinger, “In the College Presidency, More and More a Man’s World,” *New York Times* (Aug. 24, 1969).

avoid any of the stigma of the old finishing school and they want a break with the tradition of either motherly or mannish lady teachers. Given these goals, the trustees, many of whom have business, industry and law backgrounds, are probably convinced that professors, and particularly the men, may be reluctant to work under female chief executives.”⁴²²

A backlash against men as presidents of women’s colleges accompanied the women’s movement. By the time Ruth Adams announced her retirement in 1971, Wellesley students, faculty, trustees, and alumnae all supported hiring a woman as her replacement.⁴²³ A Smith *Sophian* editorial on Mendenhall’s retirement recommended hiring a woman president, too: “[I]t seems that only a woman president is consistent with the concept of a women’s college.”⁴²⁴ Jill Ker Conway took over the office as Smith’s first woman president in July 1975.⁴²⁵ By the fall of 1978, all of the Seven Sisters, even coeducational Vassar, had female presidents.⁴²⁶

The women’s movement’s push for equity in higher education also led indirectly to women’s colleges supporting research on single-sex education and its benefits for students. When the presidents of these colleges consulted a law firm in 1974 to investigate the possible effects of the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment on single-sex colleges, the law firm advised them that it would be a good idea to find research “demonstrating the value of women’s education in a predominantly female setting and

⁴²² Hechinger, “In the College Presidency.”

⁴²³ “Faculty, Student Majority Wants Woman President,” *Wellesley News* (Dec. 2, 1971).

⁴²⁴ Editorial, “Woman for President,” *The Sophian*, April 19, 1973.

⁴²⁵ Bender, “Smith’s First Woman President.”

⁴²⁶ Sheila Fisher, “Why Choose a Women’s College in These Days of Coed Everything?,” *Vogue* (Sept. 1978), 502.

the fact that this does not involve invidious discrimination.”⁴²⁷ In response to that recommendation, the three college presidents investigated ways to directly support research on women’s colleges in order to defend their legal position.⁴²⁸ These efforts were for the most part unsuccessful, but by the end of the decade, there were several pieces of independent research that boosted their claims of providing a better educational environment for women.

The most valuable ally women’s colleges had in the 1970s was M. Elizabeth Tidball. Tidball first presented her research arguing that women’s colleges were responsible for producing more high-achieving women graduates than coeducational institutions at the Conference on the Undergraduate Education of Women at Cedar Crest College in 1969.⁴²⁹ Before this, no one had researched the differential effects of single-sex or coeducational learning atmospheres. Tidball continued to publish additional research supporting women’s colleges throughout the decade, including articles asserting that women’s colleges produced more graduates who went on to earn research doctorates than coeducational schools, and that the higher numbers of women faculty at women’s colleges led to a more supportive environment for women students.⁴³⁰

Single-sex education also received a boost from research by Matina Horner, who became Radcliffe’s president in 1973. Horner, a professor of psychology, argued that

⁴²⁷ Choate, Hall & Stewart to Barbara Newell, David Truman, and Thomas C. Mendenhall, March 22, 1974, Office of the President, Thomas C. Mendenhall Files, Series V Administrative Offices, Box 1, Smith College Archives.

⁴²⁸ Barbara Newell to Thomas S. Mendenhall, David Truman, and Mr. Katz, Jan. 27, 1975, President’s Office, Box 88, Wellesley College Archives.

⁴²⁹ “Report of Conference on the Undergraduate Education of Women, Cedar Crest Coll., Allentown, Pa. July 9-10, 1969,” New York: Phillips (Ellis T.) Foundation (Oct. 1969), 4.

⁴³⁰ M. Elizabeth Tidball and Vera Kistiakowsky, “Baccalaureate Origins of American Scientists and Scholars,” *Science* 193, No. 4254 (Aug. 20, 1976): 651-652. M. Elizabeth Tidball, “Of Men and Research: The Dominant Themes in American Higher Education Include neither Teaching nor Women,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 47, No. 4 (Jul. - Aug., 1976): 387.

Radcliffe women's fear of success was the result of coeducational classes with Harvard. Although Radcliffe attracted the top women students in the country, students who attended single-sex colleges like Wellesley and Smith usually attained higher positions after college than Radcliffe graduates.⁴³¹ Alexander Astin's 1977 book *Four Critical Years*, based on longitudinal surveys of college students, also found evidence that women students at women's colleges increased in self-esteem and leadership abilities compared to women at coeducational institutions.⁴³²

Tidball's work was challenged by other researchers, who claimed that women's colleges did not encourage non-traditional areas of study and that the socioeconomic class of the students was more important than attendance at a single-sex college in determining achievement.⁴³³ But research by Tidball and others was embraced by women's colleges as providing an empirical foundation to claim they offered a better learning environment for women students. Significantly, one of Tidball's major themes was that women's colleges encouraged career and professional success in their graduates. Wellesley, Mount Holyoke, and Smith administrators all used this research to justify their claims that a single-sex college was better for women.⁴³⁴ This early research on the effects of a single-sex college education provided the basis for the new image of women's colleges developed by the elite women's colleges in the 1970s.

⁴³¹ Gornick.

⁴³² Alexander W. Astin, *Four Critical Years* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1983. Orig. 1977), 232-233.

⁴³³ Mary J. Oates and Susan Williamson, "Women's Colleges and Women Achievers," *Signs* 3, No. 4 (Summer 1978): 803-804.

⁴³⁴ Jill K. Conway, "Coeducation and Women's Studies: Two Approaches to the Question of Woman's Place in the Contemporary University," *Daedalus* 103, No. 4, (Fall 1974): 240. Callahan. Jill Conway, "Yes: They Teach Self-Confidence," *New York Times* (Nov. 13, 1977). Jill Conway, "Viewpoint 2: Women's Place," *Change* 10 (March 1978), 9.

The women's movement also changed the attitudes of students towards women's colleges. As shown in the previous chapter, the upsurge in applications to women's colleges in the early 1970s was widely attributed to the influence of the women's movement. After a decline between 1968 and 1971, Mount Holyoke saw a 12% increase in applications following its decision to remain single-sex. "The rebirth of the women's movement helped in awakening students, counselors and parents to the special circumstances of women in our society and provided fresh impetus to the reasons for a college for women," wrote Clara Ludwig, Mount Holyoke's director of admissions.⁴³⁵ Smith's admissions director Mary Reutner said that now high school students were "not just coming to Smith because it's a status college, but very consciously because it's a women's college."⁴³⁶ In 1978, a survey of Mount Holyoke freshmen found that the fact that Mount Holyoke was a women's college had a positive effect on their decision to attend.⁴³⁷ In the wake of what had been seen as an unstoppable surge in student preferences for coeducation, women's colleges in the 1970s were relieved to discover their single-sex status was newly attractive to students because of the women's movement.

Even though women's liberation student groups on these campuses foundered, students now expressed support for women's colleges in ways that were influenced by feminism. Many students felt positively about their choice to attend a women's college. Mary Hughes, Mount Holyoke's student body president said in 1973: "Things are really changing around here. More people are here now because it's a women's college instead

⁴³⁵ Clara R. Ludwig, "The Recruitment Riddle and Admissions Today," *Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly* (Spring 1973).

⁴³⁶ Chris Kenrick, "Co-ed Tibe Ebbs," *Christian Science Monitor* (Dec. 28, 1973).

⁴³⁷ Report of the Board of Admissions, October 1978, Admissions Office, Series C Reports, 1970-71-1983/84, Folder 11, Mount Holyoke Archives, 2.

of despite it. Students coming back from a junior year at a co-ed campus have been saying, ‘we never realized we had it so good.’”⁴³⁸ In comparison to coeducational colleges, students believed they had more opportunities for leadership at a women’s college. The editor of the *Sophian* doubted that she would have achieved the same leadership position at Harvard.⁴³⁹ And students at all three colleges began to attribute their academic success to having attended a women’s college. “Did I miss a full living experience in a more natural environment?” Smith senior Miriam Stuart wondered. “But if I’d gone to a coed college would I have gotten into medical school?” The positive testimonials of current students substantiated women’s college’s claims to provide a uniquely supportive environment and demonstrated the influence of the women’s movement.

The women’s movement also legitimized groups of women associating together in a way that had a positive effect for women’s colleges. “The general feeling is that the women schools are enjoying a new popularity because women now feel comfortable with each other. It is not a negative thing, like getting away from men. Rather it is a running toward; they feel they can fulfill their potential more there.”⁴⁴⁰ Jill Conway thought, “The effect of the feminist movement on students has been to make it clearly acceptable to be identified with a women’s college....It is now seen as dignified and strong to share in the lives of other women.”⁴⁴¹ Elsewhere Conway argued that this “‘female sociability’ was a necessary prerequisite to female intellectual endeavor,” and that it created “a network of friendships with other talented women that is a source of support throughout their lives

⁴³⁸ Kenrick.

⁴³⁹ Bender, “Smith’s First Woman President.”

⁴⁴⁰ Georgie Anne Geyer, “The Movement Has Given Way to an Interest in Jobs,” *New York Times* (Dec. 28, 1975).

⁴⁴¹ Harrison, 45.

and a powerful force for the creation of female identity.”⁴⁴² Although the image of women’s colleges as encouraging women to form same-sex relationships resurfaced due to the public’s association of lesbianism with the women’s movement, women’s colleges were able to also promote their schools as places where women could form supportive bonds and networks as a result of feminism.

Despite the ambivalent relationship between them, the women’s movement had many positive effects for women’s colleges. In addition to those above, the women’s liberation movement helped women’s colleges by both opening career opportunities for women and inspiring young women to pursue professional opportunities. Administrators of women’s colleges needed a new image to sell these institutions to young women with modern feminist views. They created an image of the women’s college as a place where individual women could best prepare for professional and career success, based on research on the effects of sex-segregated education. The fact that this image was effective was due in part to the women’s movement.

⁴⁴² Jill K. Conway, “Perspectives on the History of Women’s Education in the United States,” *History of Education Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1974). Conway, “Yes: They Teach Self-Confidence.”

Chapter Five: Creating a New Image for Women's Colleges

Women's colleges over 100 years ago were founded as a means of liberating women from that enforced position of inferiority that had, until then, excluded them totally from higher education. It may be an ironic twist to find, in this era of Women's Liberation, that some women's colleges are tacitly supporting the movement by offering their capacity to be different rather than, in their original charter, to aspire to be just like men's colleges.⁴⁴³

Fred M. Hechinger, *The New York Times*
March 14, 1971

In response to the challenging higher education environment of the 1970s and the influence of the women's movement on college-aged women, women's college administrators created an image of the women's college as a springboard to professional success. This image was based on a new justification for the existence of women's colleges that centered on a condemnation of coeducation. The dissemination of this image by women's college administrators in a variety of media caused the image to successfully take root in the public consciousness. The image of women's colleges as a pathway to career success conflicted with the way many faculty and administrators saw their mission as liberal arts colleges, prompting some criticism. But this criticism could not stop the trend. Women students' interest in careers expanded throughout the 1970s, fueled by expanding opportunities, the women's movement, and a worsening economy. To attract these students, women's colleges advertised themselves as the best way intelligent young women could prepare for the job market. By the end of the 1970s, women's colleges had a new public image: as the place for serious women students to prepare for successful professional careers.

⁴⁴³ Fred M. Hechinger, "Coeducation: The Girls Are Having Second Thoughts," *New York Times* (March 14, 1971), E9.

The 1970s was a challenging decade for elite women's colleges, not only because of increased competition for the best women students due to the elite men's colleges switch to coeducation, but also due to difficult economic circumstances that affected all small liberal arts colleges. Most private liberal arts colleges needed new ways to attract and retain students because the number of traditional college-aged young people in the country was declining, along with the percentage of high school graduates who chose to attend college.⁴⁴⁴ After most schools had expanded to meet the burgeoning enrollments of the 1960s, the contraction in the student market in the 1970s meant that many colleges needed to continue to enroll more students in order to be financially viable.⁴⁴⁵ Colleges that had borrowed money to expand their facilities in the 1960s now had a hard time repaying in the 1970s.⁴⁴⁶ The tougher economic climate of the 1970s, as the economy slowed down and inflation increased, affected the entire higher education industry.⁴⁴⁷

Private liberal arts colleges also saw increasing competition from the public sector. Most of the new colleges built in the 1960s to handle the surge in enrollments were public institutions, many of them two-year schools that provided access to more students for less money.⁴⁴⁸ The quality of these public schools was rising as well.⁴⁴⁹ As a result, private colleges in the United States were now playing a smaller part in the higher education landscape. In 1955, private colleges were 40% of higher education institutions and enrolled 26% of students.⁴⁵⁰ By 1970, 24% of institutions were private, and they

⁴⁴⁴ Edward B. Fiske, "Education Feeling No-Growth Pains," *New York Times* (Jan. 15, 1975).

⁴⁴⁵ Duffy and Goldberg, 3-11.

⁴⁴⁶ Duffy and Goldberg, 19-20. Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Challenged by Coeducation*, 8.

⁴⁴⁷ Duffy and Goldberg, 20-22. Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Challenged by Coeducation*, 8.

⁴⁴⁸ Chamberlain, 120. Duffy and Goldberg, 11-13.

⁴⁴⁹ Duffy and Goldberg, 21. Lasser, 12.

⁴⁵⁰ Duffy and Goldberg, 11.

enrolled only 7.6% of students.⁴⁵¹ With many American families experiencing hard economic times, public colleges and universities seemed like a better and more realistic option for students than expensive private schools.⁴⁵²

The difficult economic situation in the 1970s was also a factor in encouraging women to pursue careers. Due to the influence of the women's movement, career opportunities opened up to women throughout the decade and it became socially acceptable for women to focus on preparing for a career in college. Stacey Jones' research on the "transformation" of women's higher education between 1965 and 1975 documents how social norms changed quickly for this generation of women, who suddenly rejected the traditional homemaking role and moved into new career fields.⁴⁵³ "The stated aims of college and university women shifted en masse from good marriages to good jobs."⁴⁵⁴ She cites the opening of former men's colleges to women as one of the triggers that increased societal support for women making this choice, because it "precipitated a rapid breakdown of long-standing gender divisions in colleges and universities."⁴⁵⁵ Jones is careful to point out that this change is not solely due to the women's movement, but instead to a confluence of several different causes, such as rising levels of education and employment among women throughout the 1950s and 60s, and the prominence of the civil rights movement.⁴⁵⁶ But there is no denying that the women's movement played a vital role in expanding access to educational and professional opportunities in the 1970s. Although the number of women in the workforce

⁴⁵¹ Duffy and Goldberg, 11.

⁴⁵² Duffy and Goldberg, 20-21.

⁴⁵³ Stacey Jones, "Dynamic Social Norms and the Unexpected Transformation of Women's Higher Education, 1965-1975," *Social Science History* 33:3 (Fall 2009): 274.

⁴⁵⁴ Jones, 248.

⁴⁵⁵ Jones, 266.

⁴⁵⁶ Jones, 249, 266.

had been steadily increasing since the end of World War II, the women's movement helped to make it more acceptable for women to focus on professional opportunities instead of or in addition to traditional roles.

One of the outcomes of increased societal support for women's career opportunities is that women moved rapidly into the professions during the 1970s. Between 1970 and 1979, the percentage of women earning degrees in law increased from 5.4 % to 28.5%; in medicine, it increased from 8.4% to 23%. The percentage of women earning bachelor's degrees in business and management increased from 12.8% to 30.5%.⁴⁵⁷ A College Research Center survey of women's college seniors found that "[o]ne-third of the class of 1973 expressed a long-term preference for a professional or business life, as compared to 16% in 1968...."⁴⁵⁸ Smith College's vocational office statistics from 1974 showed that its students were turning away from graduate study in the liberal arts and education in favor of attending professional schools in medicine, law, and business management.⁴⁵⁹ More and more women students in the 1970s were looking for undergraduate schools that could prepare them for professional graduate programs or corporate leadership.

Contemporary observers remarked on the obsession of college students in the 1970s, both men and women, with preparing for careers, since it was a vivid contrast to the rebellious college students of the 1960s. "[S]tudents want quality education but quality education that will lead to good, solid jobs," John O'Neill, the vice president of Mills College, told the *New York Times*. "The women especially are very serious about

⁴⁵⁷ Wandersee, 120.

⁴⁵⁸ "The Case for Women's Colleges," *Intellect* (March 1974), 345.

⁴⁵⁹ Barbara Basser, "V.O. Statistics Show Trend Toward Business," *The Sophian* (April 12, 1974).

seeing a payoff for education in career terms.”⁴⁶⁰ The difference was attributed to the worsening economic climate of the 1970s: “The epidemic of workaholism on campus . . . stems from the economic realities of the present. The number of job opportunities is dwindling while the number of seekers, including women in unprecedented numbers, is increasing. More than ever, grades are passkeys to law, medical, or business school.”⁴⁶¹ In order to compete for students, many colleges felt forced to restructure their curriculums to include more professional and career preparation.⁴⁶²

The elite women’s colleges were affected by this trend. Smith’s Dean of Students Helen Russell agreed that students’ attitudes in the 1970s had moved to being more job-oriented. “I hear from my counterparts in the various colleges that now the job market is open to women, they are much more interested and thinking in much greater depth about a career. This was not true 15-20 years ago.”⁴⁶³ The percent of Wellesley’s entering freshmen intending to study business increased from 1% in 1973 to 7.8% in 1978.⁴⁶⁴ Smith’s Office of Career Development also documented the rapidity of the change: “in 1959, there were four Smith alumnae in teaching for every one in business; in 1979, there were four Smith alumnae in business for every one in teaching.”⁴⁶⁵ By 1981, a Smith freshmen felt that the education she received at Smith would best prepare her for an executive position in business. “[T]he message we’re getting from Smith is that if you’re not the head of a corporation, you’re not a successful woman.”⁴⁶⁶ This is profoundly

⁴⁶⁰ Geyer.

⁴⁶¹ Franks.

⁴⁶² Evan Jenkins, “Colleges Shift to Hard Sell in Recruiting of Students,” *New York Times* (March 31, 1974).

⁴⁶³ Stefanie Suszko, “Dean Russell Reflects on 34 Years,” *The Sophian* (March 9, 1978).

⁴⁶⁴ Mary Ellen Ames to Barbara Newell, Oct. 12, 1978, President’s Office, Box 12, Wellesley College Archives.

⁴⁶⁵ Harrison, 53.

⁴⁶⁶ Harrison, 48-53.

different message than the one students received from the elite women's colleges before 1970.

In order to attract top women students in the face of competition from the newly coeducational elite men's colleges, elite women's college administrators began to propagate the image of women's colleges as the best way for women to achieve career success. This new image marked a significant change in how elite women's colleges justified their existence. The elite women's colleges had always prepared students for professional careers, most notably as teachers, but these schools had never argued that this was their primary purpose or that they offered better preparation for careers than other types of institutions. Before the elite men's colleges opened their doors to women, the existence of the elite women's colleges was not challenged. Elite women's colleges argued that they provided the equivalent of the education at an elite men's college to women. Although their claims of being equal in quality to men's institutions were not always recognized, their place in the higher education landscape was seen as legitimate. But after the elite men's colleges opened to women in the late 1960s, elite women's colleges were asked to justify the existence of their institutions. If women students could now attend Yale and Princeton, what was the need for Smith and Wellesley?

When confronted with this question prior to 1970, when the women's movement went mainstream, women's college administrators usually said that single-sex institutions were valid because women's lives fundamentally differed from those of men. Not only did women differ from men in their classroom behavior, but their "emotional makeup" was so completely different that it necessitated a different educational style.⁴⁶⁷ A Smith professor argued in 1969 that Smith should stay a women's college in order to

⁴⁶⁷ Lawrence A. Fink, "It's Good But Is It Necessary?," *Smith Alumnae Quarterly* (April 1969), 13. Evans.

“investigate and implement an educational program uniquely suited to women as a different type of the species than men.”⁴⁶⁸ And after college, women’s different “life style,” meaning their family responsibilities and limited involvement in the workforce, also meant they required a different education from men. “The case for the women’s colleges — once based mainly on the feminist claim that women were just like men — is now being argued by some who warn that this is simply not true, that the different life styles, needs and aspirations of women should not be overlooked,” the *New York Times* said in 1969.⁴⁶⁹ Although the elite women’s colleges had traditionally argued that they were as good as men’s colleges, in the face of competition from newly coeducational elite men’s colleges, they at first argued that it was the differences between men and women that justified separate education.

But after deciding to stay single-sex in the early 1970s, women’s college administrators began to articulate a new rationale for their institutions that reflected the influence of the women’s movement as well as new research on the outcomes of single-sex higher education. Women’s college administrators no longer argued for legitimacy based on differences between men and women, since this idea was increasingly under attack by feminists. Instead they portrayed women’s colleges as institutions where women could focus on personal achievement as a prerequisite to achieving professional success. Justifications based on the differences between the sexes disappeared, and were replaced by the contention that women’s colleges were places where women could obtain the best education, oriented to the goal of career success instead of traditional female roles, and in an environment free from society’s pervasive sexism.

⁴⁶⁸ Fink.

⁴⁶⁹ Hechinger, “The Cry Is for Boys and Girls Together.”

Elite women's colleges had previously emphasized their similarity to elite men's colleges to make the argument that they provided a high-quality education, but now they emphasized their differences. Their argument that women's colleges could better serve women was based on the feminist idea that sexism permeated society, and by extension the classroom. The president of Chatham College said, "One need not embrace the Women's Liberation Movement to subscribe to the notion that there is indeed a barrier against women in many channels of opportunity. Women still have a long way to go before we can say in all honesty that they are free to compete as individuals. This fact alone affects the continuing possibilities of single-sex women's colleges."⁴⁷⁰ Other advocates of single-sex schools argued, "As long as society discriminates, women's colleges are in a strong position to prepare young women for leadership, for an assertively female role."⁴⁷¹

Many of the arguments made in support of women's colleges after 1970 were based on criticisms of coeducational learning environments for women students. Women's colleges argued that single-sex institutions were better for women just because of the absence of male students. All of the specific arguments they made that follow — that women could take on leadership roles in single-sex institutions, that women had more role models in a women's college, that women could choose their majors without regard to sex-stereotyping — were based on the premise that the presence of male students negatively affected female students in an educational setting. Therefore, women's colleges could provide a better environment for women students not through

⁴⁷⁰ "The Case for Women's Colleges."

⁴⁷¹ F.M.H., "Are Coed Schools the Wrong Approach?," *New York Times* (Apr. 22, 1973), 171.

any intentional educational program or philosophy, but simply by continuing to exclude men.

There were three major components to the argument that women's colleges were better for women students than coeducation. Women's college administrators argued that women's colleges encouraged leadership abilities in their students because there were no men students to dominate leadership roles as they inevitably would in a coeducational environment.⁴⁷² "It is significant...that when a woman on a co-educational campus becomes an editor or the president of a student body, it is front page news in the New York Times or an equivalent document," Mount Holyoke president David Truman told the American Alumni Council Conference. "It is not front-page news when a woman becomes the editor of the student paper on a women's college campus, or the president of the student body, or the chairman of the student academic policy committee, or a member of a faculty committee, or any other position of leadership."⁴⁷³ Smith's president Jill Ker Conway claimed that students in women's colleges "take on managerial and leadership roles in greater numbers and on different terms than is possible in society at large."⁴⁷⁴ Mount Holyoke's brochure boasted, "It is obvious that in a college for women all of the leadership positions in student government and extracurricular activities are filled by women, from class presidents and newspaper editor to captains of intercollegiate athletic teams and member of the Board of Admissions. Time and again Mount Holyoke alumnae point to these experiences as having given them confidence in their work after

⁴⁷² Oltman.

⁴⁷³ David Truman, "The Single Sex College — In Transition?," paper presented at the American Alumni Council Conference on May 4, 1970, Series 8: Coeducation, Box 6, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

⁴⁷⁴ Conway, "Yes: They Teach Self-Confidence."

college.”⁴⁷⁵ Women’s college administrators boasted that the absence of men on campus meant that women students had more opportunities for leadership roles, which better prepared them for professional careers.

Based on M. Elizabeth Tidball’s research, they also argued that women’s colleges contributed to the success of their students through their high ratio of female faculty to serve as role models.⁴⁷⁶ “The striking record of women’s colleges in the production of female professionals suggests that there is no substitute for the female scholar as an influence upon intellectually promising young women,” the *New York Times* reported. “By contrast, co-educational institutions, despite affirmative action, have shown little progress toward faculty sexual balance.”⁴⁷⁷ Although faculty and administrators at women’s colleges were at best evenly split between men and women, this was much better than the situation at coeducational colleges, as shown in the previous chapter. Women’s colleges emphasized the presence of women faculty and administrators as role models of career success for women students to emulate.

Women’s college administrators also argued that students in women’s colleges were free to choose their majors without worrying if the area of study was appropriately feminine. “[W]omen students in an all-female student body choose their areas of academic specialization without reference to sex-stereotyping.”⁴⁷⁸ Women’s college advocates believed that the presence of men students in the classroom inhibited women from choosing non-traditional fields of study in coeducational environments. Smith president Jill Conway stated that one-third of Smith students majored in math and

⁴⁷⁵ “Why a College for Women?,” Admissions Office, Series E – Publications, through 1970s, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

⁴⁷⁶ Gene I. Maeroff, “Women’s Colleges Regain Appeal,” *New York Times* (Nov. 19, 1978).

⁴⁷⁷ Annette K. Baxter, “On Women’s Colleges,” *New York Times* (Jan. 21, 1978).

⁴⁷⁸ Callahan.

science, which was a much higher percentage than women students in coeducational environments.⁴⁷⁹ The higher enrollment of women students in traditionally “male” subjects was also seen as an important way to prepare women for professional success in high-status, male-dominated fields.

In addition to making these specific arguments against coeducation, women’s college administrators were also able to point to the widely-publicized dissatisfaction of the new women “coeds” at Yale and Princeton. Only a few months after the first class of women arrived at Yale, *Newsweek* declared, “the bloom is definitely off the rose. . . . The girls make no bones about the fact that they are having a hard time fitting into Yale’s tradition-bound, all-male atmosphere.”⁴⁸⁰ The new women students found it difficult to get men to accept them as intellectual equals.⁴⁸¹ Some of Yale’s male upperclassmen were openly unwelcoming. “These men tend to think of the coeds as guests in their clubs and complain that they are ‘too demanding’ and ‘ought to keep their places.’”⁴⁸² They felt isolated, lonely, and like “token” females in a male institution.⁴⁸³ Most of the media coverage was sympathetic to the women students. “Anything short of a fifty-fifty goal carries the underlying assumption that it is not as important to educate women as it is men,” said one New York Times article.⁴⁸⁴

As that article implied, part of the problem at the newly coeducational men’s colleges was simple demographics. Women students were initially outnumbered seven to one on Yale’s campus.⁴⁸⁵ Before Title IX did away with admissions quotas in 1972,

⁴⁷⁹ Fisher.

⁴⁸⁰ “Girl and Boy at Yale,” *Newsweek* (Dec. 15, 1969).

⁴⁸¹ Treaster.

⁴⁸² Treaster.

⁴⁸³ McCain.

⁴⁸⁴ Harriet H. Coffin, “Women of Yale,” *New York Times* (July 15, 1971).

⁴⁸⁵ Treaster.

women students pushed administrators to even out the number of women accepted to the newly coeducational schools. One group at Yale petitioned the university's trustees asking for the selection of students "“on qualifications alone, not on the basis of their sex.””⁴⁸⁶ In the short term, women's colleges saw their transfer rates increase, and attributed it to the fact that women in the newly coeducational colleges were dissatisfied with their treatment there.⁴⁸⁷ Smith's dean, Alice B. Dickinson said, "The word came back loud and strong from our students who had transferred to men's colleges that they were living in a man's world and were not treated as equals."⁴⁸⁸ These widely publicized criticisms of the female experience at the newly-coeducational elite colleges supported women's college administrators' statements that women's colleges were better for women students than coeducation.

Several high-profile research studies in the 1970s on coeducational institutions indirectly supported women's colleges' claims as well. The report by the American Association of University Women, "Campus 1970: Where Do Women Stand? Research Report of a Survey on Women in Academe," showed that women students in coeducational institutions were much less likely than men to hold the powerful student leadership positions. The only exception was at women's colleges.⁴⁸⁹ And the results of the Brown University report, "Men and Women Learning Together: A Study of College Students in the Late '70s," were widely reported. Brown studied the consequences of its own move to coeducation by merging with its sister school Pembroke in 1971. In addition to surveying Brown students, the report also surveyed students at five other

⁴⁸⁶ Treaster.

⁴⁸⁷ Kenrick.

⁴⁸⁸ "Education: New Campus Rebels: Women," 124.

⁴⁸⁹ Oltman, 9.

highly-selective institutions.⁴⁹⁰ The study found that women college students' intellectual self-confidence decreased over the four years of college, while men college students' self-confidence increased. "In general, women enter Brown with a higher level of achievement than men and exit with a lower achievement level."⁴⁹¹ Researchers found that women adjusted their post-graduation plans downwards during their four years in college.⁴⁹² The study also found that students' academic self-confidence was correlated to contact with their professors, and "when the classes were predominantly male, women's academic self-confidence declined."⁴⁹³ Articles written in support of women's colleges used both of these reports in addition to Tidball's research to bolster their argument that women's colleges were better for women than coeducation.

Advocates for women's colleges spread the idea that women's colleges were better able to prepare women for success than coeducational institutions in a variety of ways. For Mount Holyoke and Wellesley, the publicity garnered by the announcement of their decision to remain single-sex institutions provided a forum to introduce this new narrative. Mount Holyoke justified its decision in its announcement that it was staying single-sex by not only highlighting the way women's colleges develop their students' abilities, but also denigrating the capacity of a coeducational institution to do the same: "[I]n such a college the woman student has an unequalled chance to discover and develop fully her qualities of leadership as well as academic capacities, her confidence in those capacities and a respect for those of other women, a sense of herself as a full individual, an awareness of her range of roles and choices, and to do so unrestricted by the various

⁴⁹⁰ "The new case for women's colleges," *Glamour* (June 1982), 247.

⁴⁹¹ Quoted in "The new case for women's colleges," 247.

⁴⁹² Bales and Sharp, "Women's Colleges – Weathering a Difficult Era with Success and Stamina," 55.

⁴⁹³ "The new case for women's colleges," 247.

social, psychological, and cultural pressures exerted in fully coeducational institutions.”⁴⁹⁴ In other words, women’s colleges could educate women more effectively because they were better able to shield their students from sexism that was inescapable in coeducational institutions.

After Mount Holyoke announced its decision to stay a women’s college, the *New York Times* ran a feature article on the college. The students interviewed were scornful of the ability of the formerly all-male colleges to offer an environment as valuable as that of a women’s college:

They tell me that in each of the men’s colleges that has gone coed the women have been swallowed up. So that any anticipated effects of women’s minds or life-styles or sensibilities or special concerns or anything—have all sunk beneath the hardened crust of the male college. They have no doubt that the small numbers in which women are admitted to male colleges has much to do with this. They say also that a recent bill introduced by Representative Edith Green of Oregon to force coed schools to admit students on a “sex-blind” basis, was crushed under the combined pressure of coed college presidents (all male).⁴⁹⁵

Most of the students and administrators interviewed agreed that a women’s college offered a better educational environment than the former men’s colleges.

Wellesley’s administrators explicitly stated that coeducation was a bad choice for women. “Coeducation has failed,” President Barbara Newell announced in 1973 when Wellesley publicized its decision to remain single-sex:

Women coeds receive conflicting signals on the ‘femininity’ of intellectual vigor and do not take full advantage of college. The current trend toward coeducation has increased, rather than lessened, male domination of American higher education.... It is naive to believe that any movement for educational equity for women can come out of such colleges and universities. This leadership will have to be sustained by colleges like Wellesley, which not only resist the trend toward coeducation but affirm the need for equal education for women.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁴ “Board of Trustees Unanimous Vote: Education for Women.”

⁴⁹⁵ Rosen, “Mount Holyoke forever will be.”

⁴⁹⁶ Bill Kovach, “Wellesley Says It Won’t Go Coed,” *New York Times* (March 9, 1973). 43.

Newell later appeared on the Today show as well to discuss Wellesley's decision to remain a women's college.⁴⁹⁷ Wellesley's dean Alice Ilchman also supported this theme in *Newsweek* that year. "At Wellesley, the education of women is No. 1, 2 and 3 on the agenda," she is quoted as saying. "At Berkeley, where I used to teach, it was item 103 if anything."⁴⁹⁸ In discussing their decision to remain a school for women, Wellesley's administrators made it clear that keeping men out of the classroom was the key to providing quality education for women.

The most prominent forum for Smith to articulate these views was the announcement in 1975 of the appointment of Jill Ker Conway as president — Smith's first female president in its 100-year history. This newsworthy occasion gave Conway a chance to reiterate the message that women's colleges were still a valuable part of the higher education landscape: "Maybe in a generation or so we will have coed institutions that provide role models and peer groups with real sharing for women but that is far away," she said. Given the financial constraints on education, it seems unlikely to her that any institution except one privately endowed for women will be able "to pursue some of the scholarly concerns about women."⁴⁹⁹ Conway proved to be a prolific supporter of women's colleges, writing everything from opinion pieces to scholarly articles in their support.⁵⁰⁰ She also appeared on *Firing Line* with William F. Buckley, Jr. and John William Ward, the president of Amherst College, to discuss "The Future of Private

⁴⁹⁷ Barbara Newell to Anne B. Eidlin, July 12, 1973, President's Office, Box 58, Wellesley College Archives.

⁴⁹⁸ "Education: The New Campus Rebels: Women," 124.

⁴⁹⁹ Bender, "Smith's First Woman President."

⁵⁰⁰ For examples of Conway's writing in support of women's colleges, see Conway, "Coeducation and Women's Studies: Two Approaches to the Question of Woman's Place in the Contemporary University," "Yes: They Teach Self-Confidence," and "Viewpoint 2: Women's Place."

Colleges.”⁵⁰¹ The publicity these women’s colleges attracted by hiring their first woman president and announcing their decisions to remain single-sex gave them a forum to criticize coeducational institutions and promote single-sex education for women.

Women’s colleges were also aided in their efforts to craft a new image by an organization that emerged in response to the threat posed by the coeducation crisis. The Women’s College Coalition (WCC) grew out the Association of American Colleges, when several women’s college presidents, “[d]esperate to boost student enrollments,” organized to address the public relations crisis they were all facing. The original and most important goal of the WCC was to generate positive publicity for all women’s colleges, and one of its first acts was to contract with a public relations firm.⁵⁰² Unlike the elite Seven Sisters, the WCC represented women’s colleges of all types and because of the diversity of these institutions, the goals for publicity were necessarily vague: “to present women’s colleges — to both the general public and the higher education community and constituency — as institutions that are lively, uniquely valuable, and very much in keeping with the goals and aspirations of today’s women.”⁵⁰³

In her study of the WCC, Auden Thomas noted the organization’s struggle to address all of the different perceptions the public had about women’s colleges. “The media messages generated by the WCC reflected the colleges’ varied needs, countering public perceptions of women’s colleges in general as either too socially restrictive—as at the College of New Rochelle—or hotbeds of lesbianism—an uneasy issue with which

⁵⁰¹ William F. Buckley, Jr. (Interviewer), Jill Ker Conway and John William Ward (Interviewees), *Firing Line*, “*The Future of Private Colleges*,” taped Nov. 23, 1976. Transcript published by the Southern Educational Communications Association. Retrieved from the Hoover Institution at Stanford University web site: <http://hoohila.stanford.edu/firingline/programView2.php?programID=718>.

⁵⁰² Thomas, “Preserving and Strengthening Together,” 572.

⁵⁰³ Marcia K. Sharp to Dr. Samuel H. Magill, Jan. 6, 1976, Office of the President, Jill Ker Conway Files, Series XIV, Box 10, Smith College Archives.

Smith College struggled for many years.”⁵⁰⁴ The diversity of institutions and constituents meant the WCC had an even more difficult job than the elite women’s colleges in crafting their publicity approach. “[T]he WCC carefully crafted press releases that pitched women’s colleges as progressive institutions for women while simultaneously avoiding strident feminist tones that potential students and their parents might find off-putting.”⁵⁰⁵

Although they aimed to publicize a wide variety of women’s colleges, the WCC media blitz supported the elite women’s colleges’ new image as places to prepare for professional success. WCC press releases informed the media that the percentage of women professors in women’s colleges was four times the national average, and that the colleges’ fastest-growing majors were in the traditionally male-dominated fields of Business Administration, Biology, and Economics.⁵⁰⁶ By the end of the 1970s, the WCC had also moved into advocacy work and research efforts.⁵⁰⁷

These publicity efforts by the elite women’s colleges and the WCC produced a fundamental change in the media narrative about women’s colleges during the 1970s. At first the change was tentative. The *Boston Globe* reported, “Women’s Colleges Turning Off from the Rush to ‘Coeducation’” in February 1971, while the *New York Times* reported, “The Girls Are Having Second Thoughts” the next month: “Given the present status of women, it is in the women’s college that women can be assured never to be second-class citizens. Even amid enthusiastic reports from recently converted former

⁵⁰⁴ Thomas, “Preserving and Strengthening,” 573.

⁵⁰⁵ Thomas, “Preserving and Strengthening,” 572.

⁵⁰⁶ “Percentage of Women Professors Is Four Times National Average,” 1-2.

⁵⁰⁷ Rhoda M. Dorsey, “Letter to Member Presidents,” Jan. 10, 1978, Office of the President, Jill Ker Conway Files, Series XIV, Box 11, Smith College Archives. “A Study of the Learning Environment at Women’s Colleges: Highlights of the Study” (Washington, D.C.: The Women’s College Coalition, 1981).

single-sex colleges there are complaints that women are not finding it easy to compete with men for positions of student leadership. . . . In many academic disciplines, women still tend to play a subordinate role in the classroom and in scholarly competition.”⁵⁰⁸

“Are Coed Schools the Wrong Approach?,” the *New York Times* asked in April 1973:

Coeducation is still male-dominated, even on formerly women’s campuses that have taken men students. The top posts still go to the men, while the women are the vice presidents and secretaries. . . . Just a few years ago American women’s colleges appeared doomed as single-sex institutions. The trend was toward breaking tradition and enrolling men as well as women. But now the trend is dying out. Some of the most prominent women’s schools have tried coeducation and have found it wanting.⁵⁰⁹

The next month the *Times* reported that women’s colleges were “defying [the] trend and gaining applicants.”⁵¹⁰ An article on Vassar published in November 1974 quoted

Wellesley president Barbara Newell on women’s colleges and noted that Wellesley had an 18% increase in applications the previous year.⁵¹¹

The comeback narrative was in full swing by the mid-1970s. “[W]omen who dismissed these schools scornfully a few years ago admit that they have spun around 180° on the subject,” said *Mademoiselle* in February 1974.⁵¹² *Time*, *Vogue*, *Seventeen*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Glamour*, and *McCall’s* all both ran stories on women’s colleges’ new relevance, and women’s colleges were described as having regained appeal, bounced back, and made a comeback.⁵¹³

⁵⁰⁸ Hechinger, “Coeducation: The Girls Are Having Second Thoughts.”

⁵⁰⁹ F.M.H., “Are Coed Schools the Wrong Approach?”

⁵¹⁰ Josephine Bonomo, “All-Women Colleges Defying Trend and Gaining Applicants,” *New York Times*, May 13, 1973.

⁵¹¹ Peterson.

⁵¹² Cunningham.

⁵¹³ “Education: The Women Come Back,” *Time* (Sept. 1, 1975), 502-503. Gene I. Maeroff, “Why Women’s Colleges Are Bouncing Back!,” *Seventeen* (April 1979), 166. Jaffe, 26. “Is a Women’s College Right for You? 6 Ways to Tell” *Glamour* (Nov. 1979), 324. Bruce Chadwick, “Women’s Colleges Make a Comeback,” *McCall’s* (April 1980), 56-57.

By the end of the 1970s, magazine articles aimed at young women asked “Is a Women’s College Right for You?” The reasons given to consider a women’s college included the higher percentage of women on the faculty, professional courses, dual-degree programs in science, engineering, and business, and leadership opportunities in extracurricular activities.⁵¹⁴ Other articles asked if the Seven Sisters were a “shortcut to the top,” and emphasized the career planning offices, seminars, and internships available.⁵¹⁵ Many articles cited Tidball’s research on women achievers.⁵¹⁶ By 1979, even the president of NOW agreed that women’s colleges were better for women: “It is a sad commentary on sex discrimination in higher education that even in 1979, women’s colleges are still needed because women are not always treated fairly in co-educational institutions.”⁵¹⁷ By the end of the 1970s, women’s colleges had successfully promulgated an image of themselves in the mass media as the best preparation for women to achieve professional career success, based in large part on an indictment of coeducation.

Although this new image helped to attract students and provided a justification for women’s colleges’ existence in the 1970s, support for it was not unanimous. Promoting the elite women’s colleges as places to prepare for career success was at first opposed by some faculty and administrators who were adamant that, in keeping with their elite status, the liberal arts should be emphasized over professional preparation. As shown in Chapter Two, the elite women’s colleges had traditionally opposed modifying the curriculum out of fear that women would be seen as unable to master the same work as men. They had generally avoided the subject of how their students would use their college training,

⁵¹⁴ “Is a Women’s College Right for You? 6 Ways to Tell,” 324.

⁵¹⁵ Jaffe. Fisher.

⁵¹⁶ Chadwick, 57. Melissa Behm, “A Women’s College Can Do More for You,” *Seventeen* (Oct. 1974), 30.

⁵¹⁷ Maeroff, “Why Women’s Colleges Are Bouncing Back!,” 166.

especially since the late 19th and early 20th century, when they were widely criticized for refusing to incorporate home economics and domestic science into their curriculum.

Mount Holyoke's 1971 faculty committee on the principles of the college emphasized the role of the liberal arts, saying "ours is not the task of preparing students professionally for what comes after..."⁵¹⁸ Smith president Thomas C. Mendenhall said that both men and women's liberal arts colleges "have stoutly maintained that they are non-specialized and pre-professional and would deny having any specific vocational goals for their students."⁵¹⁹ Even as career opportunities expanded for women in the 1970s, many elite women's college faculty and administrators were opposed to promoting their institutions as useful in preparing for a career.

However, when new sources of funding became available in the 1970s to establish career training opportunities on their campuses, some administrators were willing to accept it despite the potential conflict with a commitment to liberal arts.⁵²⁰

Administrators at elite women's colleges frequently encountered faculty opposition to adding new programs or courses that seemed to focus too narrowly on professional objectives. But in most cases, these programs were put in place despite faculty objections.

When Mount Holyoke received a grant of \$100,000 from the Mellon Foundation to "find more effective ways to encourage its women students to aspire to careers in new fields," faculty members were outraged.⁵²¹ They indicted the college for accepting a grant that presented "a major issue in long-term academic policy, conceivably with critical

⁵¹⁸ "Report from the Ad Hoc Committee on the Principles of the College," Sept. 27, 1971, Series 8: Coeducation, Box 6, Mount Holyoke College Archives, 2.

⁵¹⁹ Mendenhall, "The Report of the President," 1972-1973, Smith College Bulletin, Smith College Archives, 8.

⁵²⁰ Thomas, "Preserving & Strengthening Together," 576.

⁵²¹ "Ad-Hoc Committee on Communications and Decision-Making: Final Report," October 1975, Series 7: Policy Documents and Studies, Box 5, Mount Holyoke Archives, 34.

implications for the College's commitment to the liberal arts," especially since faculty had not been consulted in advance.⁵²² Despite the furor, Mount Holyoke initiated a course on management with the grant funds, but then found "[t]hat terminology did not meet with faculty approval." To placate faculty, the name was changed to "Program on Study of Complex Organizations," but the precedent of accepting grant funding to create career-oriented programs was established.⁵²³

Faculty at Smith reacted in a similar way when a course on accounting was added to its economics department offerings with the approval of President Jill Ker Conway: "Some of the faculty [saw] it as a Trojan horse to turn Smith into a trade school."⁵²⁴ In spite of the objections of faculty, Smith administrators made other changes to the liberal arts curriculum in response to student demands, especially if external funding for these programs could be secured. By 1980, Smith had opened a summer management institute for professional women in corporate leadership.⁵²⁵ Conway later said:

[Smith] is seen by the corporate world as a resource for providing absolutely first-rate management trainees. ... Women entering highly selective women's colleges score out as much less interested in service careers and much more interested in the high-status, high-achieving careers. I'm not inclined to be overly sad about this. I'd like to see a higher proportion of males doing social work.⁵²⁶

Many administrators encountered faculty disapproval in trying to bring new revenue sources and new programming at their institutions that supported their new image as places to prepare for professional success.

In some cases, students pushed to add programs that would give them professional training in the face of faculty opposition. Wellesley was the site of similar debates over

⁵²² "Ad-Hoc Committee on Communications and Decision-Making: Final Report," 40.

⁵²³ Mrs. Bishop to Barbara Newell, Nov. 5 1974, President's Office, Box 86, Wellesley College Archives.

⁵²⁴ Bender, "Smith's First Woman President."

⁵²⁵ Joanne Fay, "Management Program Will Benefit Smith Women in Professional Field," *The Sophian* (Feb. 25, 1980).

⁵²⁶ Harrison, 45.

adding a course on journalism to the English department in 1978. The *Wellesley News* noted that the course had been “repeatedly been challenged by those who question its validity as part of a liberal arts curriculum.” The *News* chided faculty for not responding to students’ need to prepare for professional careers.

It is incumbent upon Wellesley to keep pace with that trend. Failure to accommodate this need will ultimately harm the institution itself. Wellesley has built a reputation by training women who succeed in the ‘real’ world. This reputation could be lost if Wellesley stubbornly refused to provide the preparation students desire, placing its graduates at a disadvantage when they are thrown into competition against peers from other institutions.⁵²⁷

By the late 1970s, students at the elite women’s colleges had embraced the message that attending these institutions would increase their chances of professional success, and they actively campaigned for opportunities to expand the curriculum to include professionally-oriented courses. Although some faculty opposed expanding programs and curricular offerings to support the new image of women’s colleges as the best way to prepare for professional careers, student support and the need for the additional financial resources they could provide took precedence over these objections.

Administrators at the elite women’s colleges successfully created and disseminated an image of their institutions as the best place for women to prepare for professional and managerial careers in the 1970s. This new image was necessary because these institutions were under pressure to find ways to attract students and justify their existence after the elite men’s colleges opened their doors to women. It was inspired by criticisms of coeducation that originated in the women’s movement, in research and scholarship, and in the experiences of women in the newly-coeducational colleges. And it was successful because of changing social norms influenced by the women’s movement

⁵²⁷ Editorial, “Beyond Liberal Arts,” *Wellesley News* (Dec. 8, 1978).

that made it acceptable for women to focus on careers instead of traditional roles. In contrast to the administrators, however, admissions staff were on the front lines of using the new image to create a message that would appeal to potential students, and in some cases they were ambivalent about its appeal to the young women they sought to enroll.

Chapter Six: Using the New Image in Admissions

Of course, academic excellence is a Wellesley plus, but would anyone say that a student cannot get a top education at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Wesleyan, Williams or Dartmouth? Do we have proof that a Wellesley education is as good or better than the education offered at these institutions?....[T]he main factor which distinguishes Wellesley from these competitors: its focus on women and their needs, and equity for women in our society. If we cannot persuade 16-year-olds of the importance of this, we might as well give up....⁵²⁸

Albert Holland to President Barbara Newell
June 13, 1973

Although administrators and advocates developed the new image of elite women's colleges as incubators for professional success, the task of using this new image in ways that would appeal to potential students fell to admissions staff. The new image provided a justification for the existence of women's colleges, but it would not mean much if it could not also draw in enough academically-talented students to maintain the institutions' prestige. Although by the end of the 1970s the new image of women's colleges had been successfully spread through the mass media, this did not automatically make the job of attracting students easier for admissions staff. They experienced the decade as one of intensifying pressure just to maintain their institutional standing. The new image was gradually incorporated in admissions publications of the elite women's colleges throughout the decade, but it was not wholeheartedly embraced by admissions staff. Admissions staff was in closer contact with the young women this image was meant to appeal to, and they were not all convinced it would be effective in drawing students to attend.

Although the elite women's colleges were in an especially challenging position, most colleges and universities experienced difficulties attracting students throughout the

⁵²⁸ A.E. Holland to Barbara Newell, June 13, 1973, President's Office, Box 11, Wellesley College Archives.

1970s, with the effect that new tools to market and advertise institutions came into play that were previously scorned. Sophisticated marketing techniques are now used throughout higher education, and the fact that many of these techniques emerged in the 1970s was not coincidental. The expansion of professional administrators and corporate-derived management techniques in higher education, along with the need to remain financially viable in the face of threats to their enrollment levels, combined to place pressure on institutions to use any available means to attract students. For the elite women's colleges, continuing to attract students despite competition from former men's colleges added an additional challenge. Incorporating new marketing techniques was resisted at most elite colleges, including women's colleges, at first. But by the end of the decade, increasingly aggressive marketing techniques were seen at almost all institutions.

The administrative staff of higher education institutions expanded dramatically in the twentieth century. Up until the end of the nineteenth century, higher education administration consisted solely of a president, usually drawn from the faculty, the board of trustees, and the faculty itself.⁵²⁹ Henry Noble MacCracken described the activities of his predecessor James Monroe Taylor, who was president of Vassar College from 1886-1914:

Like the other heads of small colleges in that day, Dr. Taylor had for years performed all the duties of president, dean, professor of philosophy, (and in his case psychology as well) public relations, admissions, records, business manager, and treasurer. He wrote all the college correspondence with his own hand. He toured the schools and recruited students, visited graduates and called on rich men to beg funds. He chased trespassing young men off the grounds.⁵³⁰

⁵²⁹ Francis E. Rourke and Glenn E. Brooks, "The 'Managerial Revolution' in Higher Education," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (Sept. 1964): 4. Sandra L. Schmidt, "Marketing Higher Education: Past, Present and Future," *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 1, no. 2 (1988): 3.

⁵³⁰ MacCracken, 21.

Before the 1880s, higher education institutions focused only on students' intellectual needs.⁵³¹ When the new elective system of organizing the curriculum was introduced at that time, administrative offices for record-keeping and student life became necessary, and then grew and expanded.⁵³² Colleges and universities began to take on increasing responsibility for the social and vocational needs of students, which resulted in even more expansion after the turn of the century.⁵³³ By the 1960s, higher education administration had become a distinct and specialized field, in sharp contrast to the informal way higher education institutions were previously managed.⁵³⁴

During the 1960s, several factors led higher education institutions to adopt management tools from the business world. As a result of the influx of students in that decade, higher education institutions expanded in size and complexity.⁵³⁵ As colleges and universities began receiving federal funds for research and student aid, more records and data analysis were needed to account for these funds.⁵³⁶ The emergence of new computer technologies and means of collecting and analyzing data also contributed to the growth of managerial administration.⁵³⁷ In addition, management and marketing emerged as new academic fields after World War II, and professors in these areas came to realize their expertise could also apply to the higher education environment.⁵³⁸ However, the shift to

⁵³¹ H. E. Hawkes, "College Administration," *The Journal of Higher Education* 1, no. 5 (1930): 250-251.

⁵³² Rourke and Brooks, 5. Hawkes, 249-250.

⁵³³ Hawkes, 250-251.

⁵³⁴ Rourke and Brooks, 5-6. Robert L. Randolph, "Administrative Design and Functional Need," *The Journal of Higher Education* 32, no. 9 (1961): 515. Paul L. Dressel and Lewis B. Mayhew, *Higher Education as a Field of Study: The Emergence of a Profession* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1974): 16-18.

⁵³⁵ Robert Birnbaum, *Management Fads in Higher Education: Where They Come From, What They Do, Why They Fail* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 23. Rourke and Brooks, 5-6

⁵³⁶ Birnbaum, v-vi. Rourke and Brooks, 5-6

⁵³⁷ Birnbaum, 24. Rourke and Brooks, 5-6

⁵³⁸ Birnbaum, vi, 7-8. Rourke and Brooks, 5-6

business-inspired management techniques inspired some faculty resistance and led to increased tensions between administration and faculty.⁵³⁹

Although an expanded and specialized administration and the use of business management techniques were well established in higher education by the 1970s, the active marketing of higher education institutions continued to be resisted.⁵⁴⁰ “The methods used by modern businesses to create an atmosphere conducive to public acceptance of its products and services are often considered incompatible with the ideals, and beneath the dignity, of the educational institution.”⁵⁴¹ But the higher education environment in the 1970s pushed many institutions to make greater efforts in this direction. Enrollment declines and budget cuts forced many higher education institutions to enhance their public relations and marketing efforts in order to survive in an increasingly competitive environment.⁵⁴² Demographic predictions that the number of high-school graduates would decline in the late 1970s and early 1980s, coupled with fears that a higher percentage of students were either choosing not to attend college, or choosing lower-cost public institutions over private ones, particularly concerned private liberal arts colleges.⁵⁴³

The harsh admissions climate of the 1970s forced many higher education institutions to embrace marketing tactics they had once scorned, including direct mail, radio commercials, no-need scholarships, and rebates for students who helped to enroll

⁵³⁹ Birnbaum, 8. Algo D. Henderson, “The Desired Influence: Improving Communication between Administration and Faculty,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 38, no. 6 (1967): 304-311.

⁵⁴⁰ A. R. Krachenberg, “Bringing the Concept of Marketing to Higher Education,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 43, no. 5 (May 1972): 369-370.

⁵⁴¹ Donald Faulkner, “College Public Relations: The Principles Which Underlie an Effective Promotional Program,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 32, no. 2 (1961): 84.

⁵⁴² Michael Mulnix, “College Students as Consumers: A Brief History of Educational Marketing,” *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 2, no. 2 (1990): 132. Schmidt, 3, 6.

⁵⁴³ Philip Kotler, “Applying Marketing Theory to College Admissions.” *A Role for Marketing in College Admissions* (1976): 54.

others.⁵⁴⁴ “The country’s formerly staid higher educational establishment, in an effort to sell its product in an ever more competitive market place, has turned to the kinds of strategies once reserved for peddling toothpaste, dog food, beer and cigarettes.”⁵⁴⁵ A specialized body of academic literature on how to market higher education institutions appeared, and by the end of the decade, marketing was seen as critical to the survival of any higher education institution.⁵⁴⁶

The elite women’s colleges felt the effects of increased competition in admissions, and for them it was exacerbated by new competition from the former men’s colleges. Their admissions officers worried that the elite women’s colleges would be seen as less desirable and easier to get admitted to — and that would lead to them becoming less prestigious.⁵⁴⁷ “Declining numbers not only affect the composition of the student body but are fatal to the drawing power of the institution. Able students tend to seek out only those institutions which are most sought-after and are hardly likely to apply where application numbers are dwindling.”⁵⁴⁸ Since highly-qualified women students now had more elite colleges open to them, admissions staff foresaw a potential vicious circle where their applications numbers declined until they were no longer able to maintain their prestige.

Despite the comeback narrative prevalent in the mass media, admissions staff at the elite women’s colleges felt they had increasing difficulty attracting students

⁵⁴⁴ Jenkins.

⁵⁴⁵ Gene I. Maeroff, “Colleges Now Are Recruiting For More Than Athletic Reasons,” *New York Times* (Nov. 28, 1976).

⁵⁴⁶ Mulnix, 139-140. Philip Kotler and Sidney J. Levy, “Broadening the Concept of Marketing,” *The Journal of Marketing* 33, no. 1 (1969): 11, 15.

⁵⁴⁷ “Report of the Board of Admissions,” Oct. 1968, Admissions Office Series C. Reports, Mount Holyoke College Archives, 14. “Report of the Board of Admissions,” July 1970, Admissions Office Series C. Reports, Mount Holyoke College Archives, 20.

⁵⁴⁸ “Report of the Board of Admissions,” Oct. 1968.

throughout the decade. Mount Holyoke's director of admissions predicted the admissions process in the 1970s "will find us all working harder and harder just to stand still, and no one in a college admissions office dares to think of the eighties when the birthrate for the 17- and 18-year-olds will decline."⁵⁴⁹ Mary Ellen Ames, admission director at Wellesley, cited lack of time as one of the serious problems facing her department, despite being fully staffed. "There seems never enough time to accomplish the wide range of our activities in the field and to meet our responsibilities in the office.... This is always a major problem and perhaps insurmountable. We have a large staff and they are always very, very busy and work very hard, and yet it seems that we are constantly pushed and hardput to accomplish what must be done."⁵⁵⁰ By the end of the 1970s, the pressure had only increased. "When one considers what we must do today to produce a class compared to ten years ago, however, the picture is awesome," Ludwig reflected. "The pace gets more frantic every year."⁵⁵¹ Even though applications to Mount Holyoke were up, she was pessimistic about the future.⁵⁵² Although the elite women's colleges were able to continue to attract students in the face of increased competition, the admissions staff took the brunt of the increased time and effort this challenge required.

In addition to time and effort, a change in mindset was needed, too. Despite their distaste for the word, by the mid-1970s the elite women's colleges were actively recruiting students, not just choosing the most qualified from a flood of applicants. Mary Ellen Ames at Wellesley said that beginning in 1970 her office "instituted an intensive

⁵⁴⁹ Ludwig, "The Recruitment Riddle and Admissions Today."

⁵⁵⁰ Mary Ellen Ames, "Summary in Outline Form of the Annual Report of The Admission Office," 1972-1973, President's Office, Box 3, Wellesley College Archives, 3.

⁵⁵¹ "Report of the Board of Admissions," October 1978, 36.

⁵⁵² "Report of the Board of Admissions," October 1979, Admissions Office Series C. Reports, Mount Holyoke College Archives, 23.

recruiting program which included greatly increased high school visiting, more contacts with guidance counselors on and off the campus, more appealing publications, more participation in College Fairs and College Nights.”⁵⁵³ Smith’s admissions director, Lorna Blake, noted that even though her office staff had tripled since 1959, they were kept busy making visits to expand Smith’s reach. “I spend my time...in other ways which might surprise my better-known predecessors. They probably never used the word ‘recruit’ and, ugly as it is, I find I am using it more and more to describe one aspect of my job.”⁵⁵⁴ Clara Ludwig admitted in 1975 that Mount Holyoke was actively recruiting students: “And of course Mount Holyoke is not alone among selective colleges in its intensive recruiting program. All colleges today are running hard.”⁵⁵⁵ These admissions offices had been accustomed to choosing the best candidates from a surplus of applications, but they were required to take more active measures to draw students in the 1970s.

One of the problems was that the students these colleges wanted to admit had the most choice in where to attend. “The question is how the bright, able young people who can pay their own way are going to distribute themselves among the selective colleges,” Clara Ludwig said.⁵⁵⁶ A survey of Wellesley’s entering freshmen found that “[a]pplicants accepted by Wellesley apply largely to schools of comparable academic standing. We are competing for students with the most competitive colleges.”⁵⁵⁷ To try to expand their reach, the elite women’s colleges turned to new technologies. The College Board initiated its Student Search Service (SSS) in 1971, allowing colleges to buy names and addresses

⁵⁵³ Mary Ellen Ames, “Wellesley College Admissions – Past, Present and Future,” July 8, 1976, President’s Office Box 3, Wellesley College Archives, 3.

⁵⁵⁴ Lorna Blake, “Admission at Smith — 1975,” *Smith Alumnae Quarterly* (Nov. 1975), 15-17.

⁵⁵⁵ “Report of the Board of Admissions,” July 1975, Admissions Office Series C. Reports, Mount Holyoke College Archives, 35.

⁵⁵⁶ Trombley.

⁵⁵⁷ “Results of Findings Received from Students Accepted for the Freshmen Class, Class Entering - Fall 1971,” Feb. 23, 1972, President’s Office, Box 2, Wellesley College Archives.

of the students that took college entrance exams. The program expanded rapidly throughout the decade. Only 125 schools bought names during the first year of the program; by 1980, almost 900 did so.⁵⁵⁸ Mount Holyoke began using SSS in 1972-73, and justified their use of it in 1975: "Mailing publications to lists of names obtained through some means, known in the commercial world as 'direct mail advertising,' is an admissions technique that has just started to be used within the last few years by selective colleges. This year we sent a total of 10,826 such letters."⁵⁵⁹ By 1975, Smith and Wellesley were using SSS as well.⁵⁶⁰ Twelve percent of the class that enrolled at Wellesley in the fall of 1976 had been found through SSS.⁵⁶¹ By using this service, elite women's colleges hoped to reach new populations of qualified students who might not have applied in the past.

Although the elite women's colleges tried to maintain their dignity in the admissions process, they acknowledged that the prevailing atmosphere made it difficult. Admissions directors walked a thin line between a "warm and friendly approach" and a "hard sell," and worried about the ethics of their profession.⁵⁶² The admissions officers of the Seven Sisters met in 1976 to discuss their common concerns, one of which was the fact that the admissions process was affected by schools who were willing to go to greater lengths to attract students:

Some institutions use increasingly promotional gimmicks to market their product in our consumer society. It was pointed out that, even though the seven colleges

⁵⁵⁸ Erik Larson, "Freshmen Wanted," *Wall Street Journal* (Apr 15, 1980), 1.

⁵⁵⁹ "Report of the Board of Admissions," July 1975, Admissions Office Series C. Reports, Mount Holyoke College Archives, 6.

⁵⁶⁰ Mary Ellen Ames, "Annual Report to the President, Board of Admission, 1973-1974," Aug. 27, 1974, President's Office, Box 3, Wellesley College Archives, 8. Blake, "Admission at Smith — 1975."

⁵⁶¹ Mary Ellen Ames, "Annual Report, Office of the Board of Admission," 1976-1977, President's Office, Box 3, Wellesley College Archives, 6.

⁵⁶² Mary Ellen Ames to Barbara Newell, Sept. 10, 1973, President's Office, Box 3, Wellesley College Archives. Ames, "Annual Report, Office of the Board of Admission, 1976-77," 6.

do not subscribe to these tactics, they still cannot help being somewhat affected by them. Recruitment brochures, for instance, have assumed greater importance as a means to display institutional ‘wares’ and thus influence the decision of prospective students.⁵⁶³

But in many cases, changing admissions materials to appeal to potential students by incorporating modern marketing techniques led to criticism from other college constituents. One Smith administrator objected to a plan to send out an additional mailing to applicants:

I may be stodgy but I am uneasy about sending out 2400 high-powered press releases, advertisement or communications to individuals 1500 of whom will presumably be turned down by us a few weeks later. I should assume that we would exacerbate the disappointment of such individuals (including their alumnae relatives in a certain number of cases) and, therefore, generate ill-will. I also find this promotion-Madison Avenue approach distasteful because it certainly implies to everyone that we’re fairly desperate for customers in a commercial way.”⁵⁶⁴

New admissions materials were frequently critiqued for not emphasizing the educational atmosphere of the schools. “The whole impression that I get from this is that they don’t do anything on the campus about an education,” Wellesley College president Ruth Adams complained upon seeing a draft for a new brochure.⁵⁶⁵ She also recommended cutting a Bob Dylan quote that admissions staff surely hoped would appeal to a younger audience.⁵⁶⁶ Along with administrators, sometimes alumnae complained about the portrayal of their alma mater in admissions materials. An alumna who saw a Smith recruiting film protested to President Mendenhall: “I think that Smith comes out of that film looking like a summer camp....I was really embarrassed by the film. It conveyed nothing of the good points of the Smith College I know, and successfully

⁵⁶³ Grazia Avitabile, “Concerns of Our Admissions Officers,” Report of the Seven College Conference, Nov 19-20, 1976, President’s Office, Box 87, Wellesley College Archives, 1.

⁵⁶⁴ PWL to TCM, Jan 17, 1968, Office of the President, Thomas C. Mendenhall Files, Box 1, Smith College Archives.

⁵⁶⁵ Ruth Adams to Suzanne Gordon, Sept. 22, 1969, President’s Office, Box 6, Wellesley College Archives.

⁵⁶⁶ Adams to Gordon, Sept. 22, 1969.

projected a most unattractive, unserious image. I am worried that that is what we are using to recruit future students.”⁵⁶⁷

Criticism also came from the faculty. When she took office in 1975, Jill Ker Conway found the admissions materials Smith was using “shouted ‘OLD-FASHIONED AND STUFFY,’” but when she changed them to be more attractive to students, faculty were enraged.⁵⁶⁸ In her opinion, faculty felt there was a “taboo on marketing Smith.”⁵⁶⁹ Mount Holyoke faculty also recommended the admissions office emphasize their college’s intellectual atmosphere to potential applicants.⁵⁷⁰ Although admissions staff at the elite women’s colleges incorporated more sophisticated recruiting and marketing techniques to attract students throughout the decade, these were sometimes challenged by other constituencies in the colleges.

One of the primary ways the colleges tried to interest potential students in their institutions was through admissions publications. Over the course of the 1970s, the admissions materials at all three elite women’s colleges incorporated the new image of these colleges as the best place for women to prepare for professional careers. Before 1970, none of the colleges included sections in their admissions brochures on the benefits to students of attending a women’s college. When they did address the issue, they reassured students that one advantage to attending a women’s college was *not* having to concentrate on career preparation. Smith’s picturebook from 1962-63 included a statement from President Mendenhall: “In a predominantly feminine community, learning can be pursued more consistently for its own sake rather than with a preoccupation over

⁵⁶⁷ Nancy J. Weiss to Thomas C. Mendenhall, Jan.23, 1973, Office of the President, Thomas C. Mendenhall Files, Series V, Box 1, Smith College Archives.

⁵⁶⁸ Jill Ker Conway, *A Woman’s Education* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 107-108.

⁵⁶⁹ Conway, *A Woman’s Education*, 107-108.

⁵⁷⁰ “Report from the Ad Hoc Committee on the Principles of the College,” 7.

career opportunities.... By the nature of our society, women tend to follow their interests rather than to concentrate on skills they will need as breadwinners.”⁵⁷¹ Mount Holyoke’s view book argued that a college education was good for future wives. “Wives and mothers profit as much as any other group from college work, for they are more interested and more interesting, more efficient and more versatile as a result of their college years. And they are often valuable financial assets to their husbands as well! Many young women work during the first years of marriage, while their husbands do their military service or complete necessary graduate work.”⁵⁷² The idea that women’s college graduates might pursue careers beyond a few early years of marriage, and that women’s colleges were the best place to prepare for that career, was not presented in their publications.

Throughout the 1970s, the elite women’s colleges revised their admissions materials to focus on the benefits for students of attending a women’s college. Smith’s new brochure in 1972-73 emphasized its leadership opportunities and lack of sex-stereotyping in student majors. “Since Smith is a college predominantly for women, its students are given every opportunity to participate and lead in classroom discussions, laboratory work, and non-academic programs. At Smith, there are no pressures to choose traditionally ‘feminine’ fields.”⁵⁷³ A redesign the following year made the message even clearer: “Any college can offer preparation for a career. Smith offers young women the special opportunity of using their full potential. Its graduates leave with more than a degree: they leave with the self-confidence and the self-knowledge they have developed

⁵⁷¹ “Introduction to Smith College,” 1963-1964, Publications, Admissions Picturebook, Smith College Archives, 4.

⁵⁷² “Mount Holyoke College,” marked c. 1959, Admissions Office, Series E, Mount Holyoke College Archives, 23.

⁵⁷³ “The Possibilities of Smith,” 1972-73, Publications, Admissions Office, Smith College Archives.

at a women's college."⁵⁷⁴ In place of a photo of Gloria Steinem, the new brochure showed a student in a hard hat at a construction site.⁵⁷⁵ Smith's 1977-78 brochure said Smith was "Where Women Achieve:" "Smith has always encouraged its students to integrate the traditional role of woman with that of achiever. Smith alumnae have consistently demonstrated leadership in all spheres and at all levels....Celebrated Smith alumnae include Julia Child, Betty Friedan, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Sylvia Plath, Margaret Mitchell, and Gloria Steinem."⁵⁷⁶

One of Mount Holyoke's admissions pamphlets from 1974 was entitled "For Women: A Challenge to Excel." They created it to target students who dismissed Mount Holyoke because it was a women's college.⁵⁷⁷

Women are still struggling today under stereotypes of femininity that imply the existence of differences in ability between sexes and sanction the acquisition of so-called feminine traits....A college for women is in a unique position to explore the implications of the distinctive nature of women's education, to avoid reinforcing false stereotypes, and to examine the total experience of students on campus — not just in the classroom — in the belief that constructive diversion and involvement in non-academic activities extend one's intellectual and emotional reach.⁵⁷⁸

They went even further in 1977 with a pamphlet entitled "Why a Women's College?" They issued a press release to announce the pamphlet's publication and offered copies free of charge.⁵⁷⁹ The pamphlet gave a number of reasons students should consider attending a women's college: the high achievement of graduates, freedom to choose majors in non-traditional subjects, lack of "prejudice and role restrictions," and plentiful

⁵⁷⁴ "The Possibilities of Smith," 1973-74, Publications, Admissions Office, Smith College Archives.

⁵⁷⁵ "The Possibilities of Smith," 1973-74.

⁵⁷⁶ "Where Else But at Smith," 1977-78, Publications, Admissions Office, Smith College Archives.

⁵⁷⁷ "Report of the Board of Admissions," October 1974, Admissions Office, Series C. Reports, Mount Holyoke College Archives, 9.

⁵⁷⁸ "For Women: A Challenge to Excel," 1974, Admissions Office, Series E. Publications, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

⁵⁷⁹ "Who Me? Attend a Women's College?," Dec. 16, 1977, Origins and Governance Records, Series 8: Coeducation, Box 6, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

leadership opportunities.⁵⁸⁰ The pamphlet featured quotes from students and alumnae echoing these themes. One current student said, “You see women being leaders in high school as editors of the paper and so on, and they assume that they will go on to coed schools and continue to be the leaders, and I don’t think that’s what happens,” while another opined, “Women who go to women’s colleges do better later in what are predominantly male worlds.”⁵⁸¹ The pamphlet argued attending a women’s college was the most important factor in their students’ future success, even if they did not choose to attend because it was a single-sex institution. “The fact that Mount Holyoke is a college for women is not the primary consideration for most of those who choose to attend... There seems to be a general feeling that for women who are serious about their education, a college for women is the place to go.”⁵⁸²

The pamphlet proved to be an immediate success for Mount Holyoke. “Such a pamphlet has been talked about for years and looking back now it is hard to understand why it seems such an arduous and difficult undertaking.... No one of our immediate competitors has issued a pamphlet of this kind so that it has filled a real need and has stirred up considerable interest among counselors who genuinely wish to suggest women’s colleges to students but who find it difficult to be persuasive.”⁵⁸³ It was the first promotional piece by a women’s college that directly addressed the question of the benefits to a student of attending a women’s college. “It has met with a good deal of success and envy from other women’s colleges,” said Michael Feinstein, Mount

⁵⁸⁰ “Why a College for Women.”

⁵⁸¹ “Why a College for Women.”

⁵⁸² “Why a College for Women.”

⁵⁸³ “Report of the Board of Admissions,” October 1978, 5-6.

Holyoke's director of publications.⁵⁸⁴ When Mount Holyoke's applications increased in 1978 by 11%, and then again in 1979 by 5%, its admissions publications, especially the "Why a College for Women" brochure, were cited as one of the main reasons.⁵⁸⁵

Despite the fact that the new image of women's colleges as the best career preparation for students was incorporated into their marketing materials, admissions staff was aware that other perceptions of women's colleges continued to circulate in the public realm. Since the public image of their schools directly affected their work, admissions staff at all three colleges took active measures to investigate how their institutions were seen by prospective students. Mount Holyoke admissions staff regularly surveyed admitted students who chose not to attend. They concluded that in order to appeal to students in a buyers' market, it was no longer enough to provide the best education. "If a college wishes to attract the top students in each senior class, it must offer more than facilities, more than a good library and an excellent faculty, it seems. It must be attentive to the intangibles of atmosphere, reputation, and impression, and it must cultivate the total sum of these intangibles, the image of its life-style."⁵⁸⁶

In some cases they found they were still combating the image of elite women's colleges as socially prestigious places where rich girls went to have fun instead of get a serious education:

Wherever possible, I would certainly like to get away from the 'Seven Sisters' image which is associated in most reporters [sic] minds with white gloves and teas and preparation for service in the Junior League. Wellesley is not an elitist school — what we are trying to do is to provide an excellent education to a

⁵⁸⁴ Michael D. Feinstein, "Annual Report," June 13, 1978, Public Relations Office, Series B. Annual Reports, Mount Holyoke College Archives, 1.

⁵⁸⁵ "Report of the Board of Admissions," October 1979, 22.

⁵⁸⁶ "Full report of results from questionnaire for withdrawn applicants to MHC freshman class entering in fall 1969," July 1969, Origins and Governance Records, Series 7: Policy Documents and Studies, Box 4, Mount Holyoke College Archives, 12.

diverse group of students whose income level and social, geographical, political, and hairstyles range as widely as possible.... If we are asked about our 'elitist' or 'rich' image one can say that this is no longer an accurate representation of the Wellesley College campus.⁵⁸⁷

A survey Mount Holyoke conducted of students who were sent their brochures but chose not to apply found that many of them saw the school as a place for rich society girls, and believed the brochures supported that image.⁵⁸⁸ "There is a mystique surrounding girls scho[o]ls that I feel the 7 should try [to] break. Many of my friends...feel they are snobbish glorified finishing schools," responded one of these students.⁵⁸⁹ Despite the elite colleges' success in developing and using a new image, older images continued to linger.

Admissions publications were careful to emphasize the benefits to students of attending a women's college, rather than openly portraying their institutions as feminist. However, admissions staff at the women's colleges sometimes found emphasizing leadership, achievement, and future career success to be a liability. Some students and families associated this with sympathy for the women's liberation movement. An admissions staff member at Wellesley described meeting prospective students who were "turned off of Smith after hearing a recent grad who was too women's lib oriented."⁵⁹⁰ After talking to a member of the admissions staff at Grinnell about how to recruit more students from the Midwest to Wellesley, Mary Lefkowitz reported, "His impression is that relatively few families in Iowa (esp.) wish to send their girls onto politically

⁵⁸⁷ Suzanne Gordon to Barbara Newell, Nov. 7, 1973, President's Office, Box 60, Wellesley College Archives.

⁵⁸⁸ "Report of the Board of Admissions," Nov. 1976, Admissions Office, Series C. Reports, Mount Holyoke College Archives, 31.

⁵⁸⁹ "Report of the Board of Admissions," Oct. 1977, Admissions Office, Series C. Reports, Mount Holyoke College Archives, E-10.

⁵⁹⁰ Marilyn Kimball, "Regarding Emphasis on Wellesley as an Institution Focused on Women," May 22, 1973, President's Office, Box 11, Wellesley College Archives.

‘dangerous’ campuses.” He attributed a drop in Grinnell admissions to student strikes and protests. “When Wellesley was a safe place to send one’s little girl, its appeal among conservative families would have been greater. But now Wellesley has taken an active role in the women’s movement, which is considered a radical stance even at Grinnell, where there are no women’s studies courses and only 20% (untenured) women on the faculty. Unfortunately we can’t have it both ways.”⁵⁹¹ In surveys of students who did not apply to Mount Holyoke in 1976, some said that it appeared to be a militant women’s liberation school, while others complained that it was not feminist enough.⁵⁹²

There was concern among admissions staff that, despite the lack of explicit support for the women’s movement, the new image of women’s colleges was feminist enough that it would not attract students and might instead be driving them away. The admissions staff at Wellesley were concerned enough about this issue to write a substantial memo to President Barbara Newell on the subject in 1973. One of the reasons staff members felt the image would not be effective was that the high school students they encountered were not receptive to appeals they saw as feminist. They pointed out that approximately 90% of the entering class came from coeducational high schools. “At the time we meet prospective students in their high schools they are generally ignorant of the inequalities in life which they will face and even unaware of those which they have already encountered.... The lack of respect which high school age girls have for members of their own sex is one of the main reasons that they are not impressed by the idea of attending a woman’s college.”⁵⁹³ Another staff member doubted that advertising

⁵⁹¹ Mary Lefkowitz to Mary Ellen Ames, Feb. 15, 1975, President’s Office, Box 11, Wellesley College Archives.

⁵⁹² “Report of the Board of Admissions,” Oct. 1977, E-9, E-10.

⁵⁹³ Kimball.

Wellesley by emphasizing feminism and future professional success would work. “I don’t think anyone can convince most sixteen year olds that they will be happy in an environment where there is nothing but girls who do nothing but study, plan liberation strategies, and think only of careers and not marriage.”⁵⁹⁴ Although Wellesley’s embrace of feminist ideals was limited, admissions staff were concerned that it was enough to push young women away.

Another fear was that the college was not doing enough to justify its new feminist image. “My other concern is whether Wellesley really has any right to emphasize strongly its focus on women when we seem to be doing very little more than other colleges in this respect. Unless we carefully document just what special things we are doing, we will turn off prospective students before they get here and will turn off more militant students after they arrive.”⁵⁹⁵ If young women were attracted to Wellesley because they perceived it as a feminist institution, they might negatively affect enrollment numbers by transferring to other schools if disappointed.

The concerns of the admissions staff show that their view of the institution’s image from the practical standpoint of appealing to potential students varied from the administration’s need to justify the existence of their institutions. Admissions staff needed to appeal to potential students in an era of mounting enrollment pressures in order to maintain the prestige of their institutions. The new image of women’s colleges as places women could prepare for successful professional careers may have attracted publicity for these institutions, but admissions staff were ambivalent about how it could

⁵⁹⁴ Patchebole Ojo, “The Image of Wellesley College to Prospective Students,” May 22, 1973, President’s Office, Box 11, Wellesley College Archives.

⁵⁹⁵ Mary Ellen Ames to Barbara Newell, June 4, 1973, President’s Office, Box 11, Wellesley College Archives. Kimball.

help them meet their goals. Although all of the elite women's colleges used the new image in their admissions materials, admissions staff found it sometimes worked against them in trying to attract young women. In incorporating the new image into their presentation of their schools, admissions staff were required to balance between presenting an image that was too feminist and one that was not feminist enough in order to appeal to potential students and maintain their institutional prestige.

Chapter Seven: Conclusions

Is a women's college meant to prepare women for life? For what kind of life? For the security-card condominium, or the barrio, or the underground fallout shelter? Is it meant to instill the white, male, Western tradition of knowledge and values or something quite different? Is it meant to teach obedience or dissatisfaction? Is it conceived as a kind of convent, a relief and escape from the heterosexual pressures of high school, or is it to be an experience in female community as a positive and an empowering value in itself? Is a women's college, by implication, feminist? Should it be feminist? What would this mean?⁵⁹⁶

Adrienne Rich, Lecture given at
Scripps College
Feb. 15, 1984

In many ways, this is a success story. By the beginning of the 1980s, women's colleges were once again seen as a viable sector of the higher education landscape. Enrollment had increased over the past decade by 25%, and applications to women's colleges had increased every year since 1975.⁵⁹⁷ Of the group, the elite women's colleges were naturally in the best position, helped by their established wealth and prestige. Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Wellesley all had sizeable endowments and were consistently named among the best liberal arts colleges in the country.⁵⁹⁸ Smith College President Jill Ker Conway declared the decade of the 1970s was a vote of confidence in women's colleges: "The fear that coeducation would erode the viability of women's colleges had been laid to rest by the continuation of a strong applicant pool and the success of our fund-raising. . . ."⁵⁹⁹

As the necessity of marketing higher education institutions became widely accepted by the end of the decade, the elite women's colleges were even seen to have

⁵⁹⁶ Adrienne Rich, "The Soul of a Women's College (lecture given at Scripps College, Feb. 15, 1984)," *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, NY, 1986), 192.

⁵⁹⁷ Bales and Sharp, 53.

⁵⁹⁸ Miller-Bernal and Poulson, *Challenged by Coeducation*, xx.

⁵⁹⁹ Jill Ker Conway, "President's Report," 1979-1980, Smith College Bulletin, Smith College Archives, 22.

something newly desirable: market differentiation: “What bodes best for women’s colleges is the fact that they have a clearly defined purpose.... The most successful small private colleges today, women’s or coeducation, are the ones that have a distinct identity and mission. In the parlance of the business world it’s called market differentiation....”⁶⁰⁰ And although many women’s colleges had closed or reorganized throughout the decade, the reasons for that were now not attributed to the superiority of coeducation. “In retrospect, the evidence is fairly strong that institutional size and location were the critical factors behind virtually all the private-college closings, including those at women’s colleges. But at the time, much of the attention centered on those changes in status that seemed to comment on the validity of single-sex college for women.”⁶⁰¹ Women’s colleges had managed to re-establish their legitimacy as a vital part of higher education in the United States.

One of the primary reasons elite women’s colleges were able to successfully survive the decade was that they created and disseminated a new image of women’s colleges as the best way for women to prepare for professional careers. Many images of women’s colleges already existed in the public realm, but most of them implied that women’s colleges were inferior to other kinds of higher education institutions. In contrast, this new image argued that coeducation, which had become the primary challenge to women’s colleges’ prestige, was not as good at preparing women for professional success in a new era of career opportunities. Women’s college administrators were able to draw on currents of thought from the women’s movement to

⁶⁰⁰ Excerpt from an article by Gene Maeroff from the *New York Times*, reprinted in *Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly* (Winter 1980).

⁶⁰¹ Marcia K. Sharp, “Women’s Colleges: Equity and Optimum,” *College Board Review* 111 (Spring 1979): 19.

develop this new image. Although they were not able to completely control the images that circulated about their institutions, they were able to propagate a new image that appealed to enough students and prospective students to make it a success.

If there is a shadow to the success story of elite women's colleges in the 1970s, it is the conflicted relationship between the women's movement and women's colleges. Although individual feminists benefitted from their experiences at women's colleges, the movement as a whole did not. While the women's movement undoubtedly contributed to the revitalization of women's colleges by changing the attitudes of students and making careers a viable option for young women, women's colleges had to walk a fine line between embracing feminism as a way to attract potential students and distancing themselves from feminism in order to maintain a broad appeal. The new image of women's colleges as a key path to career success was a convenient way for women's colleges to both incorporate aspects of the women's movement and keep it at a distance.

Women's colleges limited their use of feminist themes and ideology in order to mitigate the potential negative impact these could have on their institutions. The idea that women's colleges could be conduits to professional success was based on the liberal feminist ethos of personal achievement and not on radical feminist attempts to make fundamental changes to the social order. By promoting this new image, women's colleges could argue that they were not irrelevant; that, in fact, they were vital to women's achievement. But they could also continue to resist attempts to integrate women's studies into the curriculum and other radical feminist goals. The new image focused on individual students' personal career success, rather than altering the curriculum or

advocating for social and political goals that might have alienated potential students, parents, or donors.

In doing so, women's colleges unwittingly fed into the "superwoman" ideal of the 1980s. The media image of a "superwoman" who could easily balance family and career success was attributed to the women's movement, but this media image ignored the fundamental changes in society that feminists were advocating for, putting the responsibility instead on individual women.⁶⁰² This image "too often defined the successful woman in terms characteristic of an intensely consumer-oriented, individualistic, and competitive society that almost completely negated the true meaning and intent of feminism."⁶⁰³ Career counselors at these women's colleges in the early 1980s recognized that the superwoman image was unrealistic. A staff member in Smith's Office of Career Development complained that even though more opportunities were open to their graduates, the corporate culture had not changed to make life easier for women. "I have to tell you that I believe the women's movement has failed us completely. Whose interest does it serve for a visionary feminist to present a fantasy of a world where people easily share responsibility for child rearing, where corporations are sensitive to these issues? It's just not happening in the real world at all."⁶⁰⁴ Although women's colleges made it possible for individual women to succeed, they did not advocate for changes that would improve the position of women in society. Their embrace of the women's movement was always limited and self-serving.

⁶⁰² Wandersee, 148.

⁶⁰³ Wandersee, 173.

⁶⁰⁴ Harrison, 54.

This was a fundamental criticism of elite women's colleges made by the women's movement in the 1970s.⁶⁰⁵ Feminists accused these colleges of being essentially conservative and not supportive of the larger goals of the women's movement. Under the circumstances, however, it is more accurate to see these colleges as acting pragmatically in a difficult time. In the 1970s elite women's college administrators made necessary compromises between embracing aspects of the women's movement that helped their cause and distancing themselves from what might prove damaging. Any organization with multiple goals and constituencies trying to ensure its own survival in a challenging environment has to do the same. Even institutions devoted to what some still perceive to be a radical act — the higher education of women — cannot afford to be too radical under those circumstances.

Many topics explored in this dissertation propose avenues for future inquiry. My research suggests that university administrators can successfully create and disseminate a new image of their institutions. However, elite women's colleges in the 1970s were aided in this task by the coincidence of the women's movement. Elite women's colleges benefitted from the women's movement in many ways. The women's movement was responsible for changing the attitude of students to single-sex education, making it acceptable for women to pursue careers as well as or in place of homemaking, and providing ideological justifications for single-sex education. So while the elite women's colleges in the 1970s were able to reframe their public images, it might not be easy for other institutions to do the same. It would be interesting to examine similar cases where other institutions attempted to change their public image. Although these changes are possible, the right combination of circumstances might be needed to make them

⁶⁰⁵ See Baker and Kendall, in particular.

successful. It may be that the success of the elite women's colleges in the 1970s was in many ways unique.

It would also be interesting to examine how non-elite women's colleges responded to the same challenges. Many non-elite women's colleges closed their doors in this era; 298 women's colleges existed in 1960, and by 1982 only 113 remained.⁶⁰⁶ The elite women's colleges not only had more resources than other women's colleges, they also had national reputations which might have made it easier to create a new public image. Smaller colleges with fewer resources might not have been able to accomplish a similar feat. How did the institutions that survived the decade address the problem of their public image? Did they also try to create an image of themselves as the best way to prepare students for professional careers, and were they successful? Was this an image that appealed to their traditional student base or did they have to attract new kinds of students? It would be interesting to see if there are parallels with elite women's colleges or if their experiences were dissimilar.

These questions can be broadened to include minority-serving institutions and all colleges with a distinctive mission. A narrow institutional focus could easily prove to be a liability if it fails to attract students and families. How have these other kinds of schools tried to control and change their public images? What kind of advantages does elite standing give to schools? Which components make the most difference: a large endowment, national reputation, influential alumni and supporters? Mission-distinctiveness was thought to be an institutional asset for the elite women's colleges at the beginning of the 1980s. Has that proven to be true for them and for others?

⁶⁰⁶ "The new case for women's colleges," 246.

Another point that emerged in my research was the lack of consensus among the colleges' many constituents about their institutional images. Students, alumni, administrators, staff, and faculty all had different views on how best to portray their institutions. Sophisticated marketing techniques were just beginning to emerge in the 1970s and much more attention is now paid to these issues. What has changed since then? How do institutions currently try to manage their images and how do their many constituencies interact in the process of institutional image management? The literature on managing institutional image is in a large part proscriptive. How does the process actually work in individual institutions?

The public images of higher education institutions influence the choices available to these institutions when they need to make strategic decisions about their future. When elite men's colleges opened their doors to women, elite women's colleges were constrained by public images that had existed since before they were founded, which asserted that even the finest colleges for women in the country could not be the equal of colleges for men. These images made the question of how they should respond to the sudden rise in the popularity of coeducation in the late 1960s a more dangerous one for women's colleges than for men's colleges. Women's colleges did not have a clearly advantageous option. Remaining a single-sex institution seemed as dangerous for their existence and their reputation as turning to coeducation.

However, due to the timely concurrence of the women's movement, these elite women's colleges were able to reframe the debate around coeducation to their advantage. The women's movement changed the opinions of their students and prospective students about the desirability of attending a single-sex institution. It also opened up professional

career opportunities to women and made it socially acceptable for young women to pursue careers instead of or in addition to traditional roles. The women's movement also articulated criticisms of sexism in society at large and in higher education that women's colleges could use to condemn coeducation. Although the women's movement for the most part ignored and criticized women's colleges and women's colleges distanced themselves from the women's movement, the women's movement provided women's colleges with the means to create a new justification for their existence. Administrators were able to reframe elite women's colleges as the key to professional and career success for young women, and in the process prove that the management of meaning is a crucial component of their role.

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