Women in Higher Education: From Refining Schools to Redefining Rules

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Abstract

The following exploratory paper provides an overview of female students and the development of general opportunities in higher education for them. The paper includes the history of social attitudes that have kept women marginalized; primarily, attitudes of male faculty, including two Harvard presidents, reflect the oppressive atmosphere that women have historically encountered in trying to find equal opportunity in higher education. Aspects of student life for women in higher education include the development of all-women’s colleges as well as coeducation, and the process of consciousness raising in issues of gender and racial equality. A brief analysis of Title IX as a turning point in equal rights for women in higher education is also provided, as well as foresight for building community for women, especially minority women.

Keywords: women, higher education, women’s colleges, women’s liberation, minority women, social oppression
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Introduction

The story of women in higher education is one that begins with the inception of higher education in the United States. As most know, women’s story also begins with their forced absence from colleges. Throughout this document, the author explores, examines, and discusses the progression of women in higher education, from the first women’s colleges to contemporary issues. Although women are now a prominent population on most U.S. campuses, they only achieved that through decades of struggle and a dynamic and ever-changing social landscape.

Understanding the history of women in higher education, as well as the struggles and challenges they have faced in the past and will face in the future, is essential to understanding student life. Oppression and lost opportunities permeate all aspects of a female student's college experience; she cannot be separated from her sex, in the eyes of many, and that has very real implications for female students.

By the end of this paper, the reader will understand that negative attitudes toward female students have not disappeared. The opening of women's colleges and the enactment of Title IX were not antidotes to negative societal attitudes. However, the amount of progress in the journey towards equality will become obvious, albeit marred by the realization that misguided principles still affect female students before, during, and after their college careers. It should also be noted that this paper reflects on the rationale some people use to promote gender inequality. Overt tactics and biased thinking have diminished considerably over time, but it is not to say that they have been eradicated from the lives of female students.
Literature Review

The Creation of the “American Woman”

In 1783, it was decided by Yale that Lucinda Foote, twelve-years-old, was just as bright as the young men her age. Due to her biological sex, though, she was disqualified from attending the college or even being considered to attend. “The colonial view of woman was simply that she was intellectually inferior-- incapable, merely by reason of being a woman, of great thoughts... Her place was in the home, where man had assigned her a number of useful functions” (Rudolph, 1990, p. 308). In spite of the aforementioned event, post-Revolutionary War thinking began a trend of shifting cultural views. Rudolph (1990) states that Enlightenment and reason were responsible for part of the change, as well as “sheer necessity” (p. 308). Women were especially necessary as the settlers moved westward, where the frontier required productivity from all members.

Benjamin Rush, a physician from Philadelphia, had a hand in creating the image of the “American woman.” Rush asserted in 1787 that Americans should not view women in terms of European women. The culture was different, and the available opportunities were also different. Without the aid of women, Americans would waste precious resources; as Rudolph states, “[the men] needed the assistance of wives who knew how to help their husbands to make their fortunes” (p. 309). Unlike European women, American women needed to be able to teach the family’s children since opportunity was not necessarily always close by. Most importantly, the American woman was expected to prepare her sons for participation in the open government of the fledgling country. This rationale helped establish education for women even though it did not automatically lead to open access to higher education. American women, however, desired full equality, and through a series of movements, they began to pave the road.
The First Women’s Colleges

Early schools for women were established in the East, and female seminaries began appearing in the early 1800s. These institutions were forerunners to full-fledged women’s colleges and coeducation. Wesleyan Female Seminary opened in 1837, primarily as a refining school for rich families’ daughters (Taggart, 2008). Its credibility as an institution of higher education was questioned, although in comparison to other finishing schools, Wesleyan Female Seminary offered high-quality coursework (Taggart, 2008). Additionally, in 1837, Oberlin College became the first coeducational college, enrolling four women in its freshman class. Women were offered the traditional B.A., as well as a Ladies Course which was recognized on the graduates’ diploma (Rudolph, 1990). However, in line with resistance to reformation, very few other colleges adopted coeducation prior to the Civil War.

“Separate but equal” was the phrase of choice during the beginning of women’s higher education. Like coeducation, women’s colleges were slow to be received by society. They were often viewed as inferior to men’s colleges. Catherine Beecher criticized women’s colleges, saying that “not one of them, as yet, secured the real features which constitute the chief advantage of [colleges]. They are merely high schools” (Rudolph, 1990, p. 312). In 1852, in reaction to criticism and shortcomings of the women’s colleges, the American Women’s Education Associated formed. The function of the AWEA was to guide education for women towards reputable degrees. Rudolph (1990) mentions that the first women’s college to resemble a “good man’s college” was Elmira Female College, which opened in 1855 and bestowed its first degrees in 1859. Even with the headway made by AWEA and strong local colleges, though, wider acceptance of women’s education would come later.
The American Civil War brought about a significant change in the attitude of American society, which was reflected in the many changes in higher education. There were two major catalysts in the growth of women’s education: land-grant colleges and state universities, which were many times coeducational, and new women’s colleges “which contributed heavily toward elevating the standards and the reputation of collegiate education for women” (Rudolph, 1990, p. 314). Institutions which were ready to accept women on a coeducational basis were located primarily in the West; the University of Iowa moved to coeducation in 1855, followed by the University of Wisconsin in 1863. Other states with coeducational institutions were located in Indiana, Missouri, Michigan, and California.

Again, the influence of the “rugged West” was notable in the shift towards coeducation in the West. Rudolph (1990) describes the Western woman as “neither pampered nor fragile, perhaps she was not even as feminine as she might be; but she was a person in her own right who had commanded the respect of her menfolk by assuming responsibility and working hard” (p. 314). Class bias had already begun receding in the colleges, as more men from lower classes were accepted; education for the common person was becoming normal, and in the West, women were proving to be just as capable as the common person. Class and gender bias were more pronounced in the East, however, where decades of tradition still laid claim to many Americans’ social ideals. Private colleges held fast, and states in New England and the Mid-Atlantic did not have state universities. Land-grant institutions in the East “were overwhelmingly attached to the long-established men’s colleges” (Rudolph, 1990, p. 315). The preceding reasons hampered women’s ability to access colleges in the East, and even women’s seminaries were reluctant to take on college-level work. Eastern society, furthermore, still viewed women as inferior, as home life was much different in the cities than it was out on the frontier. The South was not in a strong
position to promote coeducation either. Women were provided for, although they were still considered inferior; chivalry had made womanhood something of a luxury (Rudolph, 1990). The Southern belles had no need for further education, in the South’s eyes. Beyond that, poverty gripped the South after the Civil War, making any educational progress extremely difficult.

The war managed to put women into new roles, though. Like WWII would during the 1940s, the Civil War challenged society’s views of women, drawing them from the home (Rudolph, 1990). These situations quashed critics’ long-held viewpoints, serving as inspiration to the women themselves. It should be mentioned that while higher education in the East was primarily concerned with men’s needs alone, there were several institutions which were nonetheless established. Cornell was the first Eastern college to establish coeducation, and Vassar, Smith, and Wellesley had women’s colleges. In 1865, Vassar College opened, a “generously endowed liberal arts college for women” which was to be an institution for women in line with what Harvard and Yale provided to young men (Horowitz, 2008, p. 15). Vassar had 400 female students, and their faculty was outstanding in representing women’s push for equality. Smith and Wellesley would open in 1875, the other two in the trio of prominent women’s colleges, and by then, there would be “9572 students in women’s colleges and 3044 female students in co-educational institutions” (Horowitz, 2008, p. 16). These fine institutions demonstrated not only that women were capable in institutions of higher education, but that institutions were capable of serving women.

**Science as foundation for segregation**

Although the creation and rise of coeducation and women’s colleges was good in the sense that any progress is good progress, why institutions chose to “channel” female and male students into different areas is still of interest. Horowitz (2008) asserts that, even today, some
claims as to why women needed separate education are misogynistic and easy to cast aside, but other claims are founded on “science” and more difficult to refute. The 1870s were a time in which women were challenged, and their presence at colleges was questioned. Education was necessary for practical reasons, but “male authorities declared in the name of science that higher education posed a danger to women’s health” (Horowitz, 2008, p. 11).

In 1872, Luke Owen Pike, an anthropologist, reasoned that there were clear, scientific differences between the sexes beyond the obvious. In *Popular Science Monthly*, he argued that he only wished “to assign woman her true position according to the laws of Nature” (Horowitz, 2008, p. 12). Pike challenged education reformers, stating that their agendas of progress were rooted in philosophical foundations that disregarded the great works of Darwin. As a scientist, he asserted that his position was rooted in “observation and experience” (Pike, 1872 as cited in Horowitz, 2008, p. 12). As it turned out, *Popular Science Monthly* became a regular sounding board for other “scientists” to discuss women as a scientific topic. As Horowitz (2008) notes, “most authors typically insisted they were neutral observers” (p. 12).

Herbert Spencer drew from scientific principles such as evolution, the persistence of force, and equilibrium to construct his understanding of the world. He “saw natural and human history as a single continuum,” and noted that the universe itself moved from simplicity to complexity, “from homogeneity to heterogeneity, [and] from uniformity to differentiation” (Horowitz, 2008). Biology was no different, and Spencer considered man to be its highest creation, the most complex and differentiated being. However, when Spencer used the term *man*, he did not use it in the then-common way to mean “all of mankind.” Spencer considered the male human to be the highest creation, with woman being a completely separate being which had evolved in a distinctly different way. He postulated that the different needs of the female being
caused them to mature earlier, leading to arrested mental development. Since female brains were smaller, they were unable to hold as much knowledge as the male. These factors, Spencer went on to say, meant that women were not fully developed in ways of intellect and emotion. Western European men, on the other hand, “had fully developed brains and mental capacities” (Horowitz, 2008, p. 14).

Misguided though he may have been, Spencer still promoted higher education for women as a way to diminish the differences between the sexes. However, he cautioned that women needed to pursue education in such a way that it preserved their physique, since reproduction was still their primary purpose of existence. The editor of Popular Science Monthly, Edward Livingston Youmans, “proposed that women shape a higher education for themselves” and made his distaste for coeducation known (Horowitz, 2008, p. 15). He also agreed that women were meant “for maternity, the care of children, and the affairs of domestic life” (Horowitz, 2008, p. 15).

**Women, Higher Education, and Equal Rights into the 20th Century**

“Youmans’s position had powerful saliency in the 1879s because it was a time in which... institutions for the liberal arts were opening their doors to women” (Horowitz, 2008, p. 15). The Morrill Act of 1862 did not specifically state that colleges needed to operate as coeducational, but women were considered part of the “industrial classes” which were intended to be educated at the land-grant colleges and state universities. What this meant varied from region to region, with some states allowing women into normal schools, others allowing them into liberal arts programs and professional schools, and still others let women participate in essentially all aspects (Horowitz, 2008).
Throughout the Civil War, women had been able to make strides by participating in new roles. For example, some women held organized fundraisers in order to raise money to provide for troops’ medical needs. They had also been allies in the abolitionist community, which they hoped would lead the way towards suffrage. The women’s rights movement, by the early 1870s, was beginning to find supporters and take shape, but it was not to say that values were shifting rapidly.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, science was once again used to make claims about women’s place in higher education. This time around, researchers ran studies showing that medical complaints, such as menstrual pain, existed prior to schooling for many women; studies such as these, while seemingly common sense nowadays, served to prove that college was not harming women’s reproductive and overall health (Horowitz, 2008). Women’s colleges published numerous reports to illustrate that their students thrived and succeeded in the college environment.

It was not all smooth-sailing though, for even great reformers resisted women’s education. Charles William Eliot, Harvard’s president and the father of the elective principle, was present in 1899 at the inauguration of Wellesley’s new president, Caroline Hazard. Instead of congratulating Hazard on her new position, Eliot basically told Hazard her institution was useless, a mere indulgence for a daughter’s wealthy parents. He saw little worth in the practical education of women, saying that at least the schools could teach the women religion and “proper behavior” (Horowitz, 2008, p. 26). M. Carey Thomas, another college president, defended women’s colleges against Eliot’s statements, establishing that “women’s education be identical to that of men” (Horowitz, 2008, p. 27). Thomas went on to act as a spokesperson for higher education, standing on the premise that intellect was not gendered (Horowitz, 2008, p. 27).
At the turn of the 20th century, attitudes about women in education were still mixed, even considering the impact institutions in the West had. Psychologist G. Stanley Hall published an article in 1904 based on earlier conclusions by Dr. Edward H. Clarke. Clarke, in 1873, attested that women’s “hysteria”—“a catch-all term for symptoms that could not be understood as resulting from any disease of an organ or other somatic cause”—was aggravated by college education (Horowitz, 2008, p. 17). Additionally, Clarke was one of the first to publish statistics showing that college-educated women were opting to not marry and have children.

Hall went on to say that college-educated women were not only opting out of marriage, but that by doing so, they were “doing great social harm” (Horowitz, 2008, p. 28). They were not having children, while the immigrant population continued to reproduce; in essence, they were carrying out “race suicide,” allowing their race to die out because of education (Horowitz, 2008, p. 29). To complicate matters, Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis school of thinking came into popularity. Partnered with ideas populated by Clarke and Hall, Freudianism caused many college-educated women to rethink their roles, continuing to pursue Bachelor’s degrees, but only those that would allow for a traditional marriage afterward. Science seemed to have the upper-hand in the fight for women’s higher education, but the strength of key female proponents would eventually help realize movements and legislation that changed the landscape.

It is often said that history repeats itself. Parallels may be drawn, then, between the redefinition of the educational landscape in the United States after the Civil War with the movements that happened after World War II and into the Vietnam War era. Increased labor participation by women was a quiet step in the right direction (Goldin, 2006). In the 1960s and 1970s, the women’s movement pushed society to rethink a bulk of its assumptions; these challenges flowed into institutions of higher education. Programs of all types were required by
law to open to female students. These included “male professional strongholds such as engineering” (Horowitz, 2008, p. 29).

Notably, Campbell (2006) highlights a problem that surrounded the women’s liberation movement, which gained momentum during the 1960s. Although in hindsight, historians are able to examine an entire movement, Campbell argues that there is “no clearly defined program or set of policies [that] unifies the small, frequently transitory groups that compose it” (p. 172). Although there is no question that progress had been made, without larger “organizational unity and cooperation,” the movement seemed to exist primarily in rhetoric and state of mind (p. 172). In other words, the women’s movement sought to equalize women, including in terms of higher education. What that meant and what that looked like had little concrete definition, but Title IX was able to clarify some specific guidelines and goals.

**Title IX**

Title IX may be one of the most important and recognizable components of the women’s rights movement, at least in terms of how it affected the educational landscape for female students. As illustrated in earlier sections, many people subscribed to schools of thought which labeled women as inferior and incapable. Although progress had been made after several major wars, radical change was visible only after ground-breaking legal decisions. Title IX was one of those decisions.

1972 saw the passing of Title IX, but its formation came out of the 1960s (Valentin, 1997). Several years earlier, in 1965, Executive Order 11246 was issued, barring federal contractors from “discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin” (Valentin, 1997, p. 1). Three years later, the order was amended to include a clause barring discrimination based on sex. Although Executive Order 11246 (1965) as amended by
Executive Order 11375 (1967) demonstrated the government’s growing commitment to supporting women in social change, it was a part-time lecturer at the University of Maryland that realized the Executive Order(s) could make a very real impact at universities and colleges. Bernice R. Sandler, who was at the time lecturing and serving as a senior scholar at the National Association for Women in Education, made the point that most university and colleges possessed federal contracts, therefore forbidding them from discriminating against the employment of women. Sandler found support in Rep. Martha Griffiths (D-Michigan), who then spoke in front of Congress on the topic of discrimination against women in education (Valentin, 1997).

In the summer of 1970, Rep. Edith Green (D-Ohio) drafted legislation which prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex in education, and went on to hold congressional hearings on both education and employment of women. The subsequent bill was originally supposed to be an amendment of both Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, but, at the urging of African American leaders, the bill was given its own title: Title IX. The technical wording of Title IX enables federal power to strip financial assistance for institutions which implement sex-based discrimination. Although exceptions remained in the bill for areas of education like women’s colleges, the legislation was a major turning point in the quest for a level playing field for female students. It is not to say, though, that Title IX’s passage diffused all negative notions toward women in higher education.

As a follow-up to Title IX, another piece of legislature was passed in 1974. The Women’s Educational Equity Act proposed a series of incentives and guidance for institutions in order to provide equity for women (Valentin, 1997). Valentin (1997) states that the WEEA serves a support role, whereas Title IX serves to punish institutions that break the law, by helping schools identify ways to help female students, as well as providing schools with reasons to do so.
The WEEA essentially provides funding to schools that promoted programs that worked to “overcome sex stereotyping and achieve educational equity for girls and women” (Valentin, 1997, p. 1). Legislation and continued pressure from organizations like the WEAA made it possible for sizable gains in the numbers of female students in every level of higher education, undergraduate and graduate, between the years of 1976 and 1985 (Touchton & Davis, 1991, p. 56).

**Contemporary Issues**

Horowitz (2008) notes that, even today, opponents of equal rights for women still base arguments off ill-founded science. On January 14th, 2006, Harvard’s President, Lawrence H. Summers, said that “innate differences between men and women might be one reason fewer women succeed in science and math careers” (Horowitz, 2008, p. 30). As Higginbotham (2008) says, “I am reminded that [President Summers] does not live in the world that I live in” (p. 119). Higginbotham identifies herself as a sociologist and a professor while Summers is an economist and elite college president; the different worlds the two live in are that of a Black woman and a White man, respectively. As such, Higginbotham argues that Summers cannot “present himself as an expert on women in higher education” (p. 119). Summers’ experiences are framed in the perspective of an affluent White male, meaning he still benefits from “racial, gender, and class privileges” (Higginbotham, 2008, p. 119).

Higginbotham (2008) also presents the problem of treating women in higher education as a singular oppression. She states that the spectrum of women in higher education encompasses racial, sexual, and class oppression, not just that of gender. If institutions ignore intersecting identities, they ignore the factors that influence the differences in women’s educational experiences. Higginbotham goes on to say,
“A gender-only focus ignores the cluster of privileges and disadvantages that any one woman will bring to the table. For example, even if we just look at White women entering graduate programs today, social class matters. We can contrast the experiences of the upper-middle class daughter…with the middle-class daughter of a public school teacher… Differences in material resources are translated into social and human capital that might very well influence what each woman thinks she can do in the world” (p. 121).

Women, in terms of their representation in faculty and their roles as such, still have ground to gain. For example, at the Pacific Northwest’s Western Washington University, the university has some departments with disproportionate numbers of female faculty; these figures represent the need to continue to push against stereotypical expectations (Anderson, 2000). Women that continue to prevail in “stereotypically female” fields, like the humanities and social sciences, elementary education, and biology tend to land careers that are less lucrative than careers in other sciences or engineering. In addition, Higginbotham (2008) says that this is because women still shoulder outdated cultural representations which vary depending on race, social class, and sexuality. Women may still have to “prove” that they have the “right and ability to be in these positions, especially in elite schools” (Higginbotham, 2008, p. 25). In these roles, women often times act in ways that put colleagues’ anxiety at ease, by performing behaviors that align with gender roles. A faculty member in the sciences may strive to be seen as an excellent teacher and possessing good student-faculty interaction, rather than being seen as a professor that runs a lab. One caveat of this type of behavior is that incoming students may receive messages that say women, regardless of their intellect and achievement, are still better off in roles that reflect cultural traditions.

Minority women in higher education

Minority women perspectives are not often discussed in the context of higher education. Even in this paper, it should be noted that the history of women in higher education deals primarily with the history of White female students in higher education. After all, it was only the
European-descended women that were even considered to be capable when settlers moved into the American West. In Welch’s (1992) publication, *Perspectives on Minority Women in Higher Education*, authors often remind readers that campus climates are not ideal. Several of the authors also write that “because they are both female and a member of an ethnic minority group, they have two strikes against them” (Welch, 1992, p. ix). As Higginbotham (2008) says, this is an aspect of women’s experience in higher education often overlooked by those who assume “woman” to be the only defining factor in one’s educational experience.

Issues of equality and access for all women in higher education have prompted scholars to examine what is still broken in the education system. Solutions must come in different forms, and solutions must also come from many different angles. Matthews (1992), in response to issues of minority women’s success on campuses, suggests that institutions must develop strong support networks. Colleges are often times overwhelming to new students, staff, and faculty, but someone from an underrepresented group may feel even more overwhelmed in the system. P. Rosa and E. Smith (as cited in Matthews, 1992) discovered in 1989 that women and minority students reported feeling intimidated by the setting. Their recommendations include building nurturing environments, including aspects such as “womentoring” (Matthews, 1992, p. 10).

Matthews (1992) also cites W. Tierney’s 1988 work in which organizational culture is described as possessing a “sense of family” (p. 10). By creating community on campus and a cohesive “family,” students develop and share in goals and other visions. Each campus has its own unique culture, so it is essential for students, staff, and faculty to understand the challenges and factors on their own campuses in order to develop goals that are meaningful. Overall, in order to combat shortfalls and prejudice women, especially women of color, still encounter in
colleges today, institutions need to guide women toward support networks. Dismissing progress that has already been made as “good enough” is harmful to female students, staff, and faculty.

**Looking to the Future**

Based on findings discussed earlier, it appears that people still rely on “science” and “biology” as evidence for why women are not succeeding in the same ways as men. Perhaps this is because American society roots itself in data and numbers; society cannot explain phenomenon in purely qualitative ways. Furthermore, Campbell (2006) says, “the most overt challenge to cultural values appears in the demand for social or sexual equality, that we dispense forever with the notion that ‘men are male humans whereas women are human females’” (p. 173).

The liberation movement used and continues to use a form of advocacy known as *consciousness raising*, making a group aware of not only problems it faces but of the power it encompasses to fight back, which is distinctly adapted to issues of “feminist advocacy” (Campbell, 2006, p. 173). A problem that women face, judging especially from earlier sections, is again that “woman” is not a label that necessarily unifies. When talking of earlier movements of women’s suffrage, it is most certainly implied “White women’s suffrage,” for example.

*Consciousness raising* generally utilizes small groups, in which there is no defined leader. Instead, the group members express themselves, sharing stories of feelings and experiences. In this setting, “all are considered expert” (Campbell, 2006, p. 175). Institutions must find ways to implement *consciousness raising* in tackling issues of equality, revisiting models from the 1960s and 1970s in which women came together, often without concrete agendas, to share experiences and support each other. It is imperative to remember that college education for women can be “a highly potent driving force for social change” (Tjomsland, 2009, p. 422).
Beyond concepts of liberation, one must also look at specific programs when considering the progress yet to be made. For example, the passage of Title IX was, on a whole, a catalyst in establishing equality for women in higher education. One of Title IX’s most prominent features is the effect it had on college athletics, opening the doors to female athletes. However, as recently as 2007, reports still show that women participate in college athletics at a lower rate than their male counterparts (Cheslock, 2007). Gains in the numbers of female athletes slowed considerable in the early 2000s, so administrators must ask why that has happened. Understanding the trend from angles such as participation in high schools or the overall cultural climate is important in making improvements on many fronts, including athletics.

Conclusion

It can be said that the educational forefathers did not envision a world where women not only went to college, but amassed the bulk of degrees. They most likely expected proper American women to be the epitome of femininity, staying in roles that allowed them to be homemakers and mothers. Strangely enough, neither one of these worlds exists on its own. Women, despite a rich history of advancement, still struggle against society’s constraints in many ways. Female students have incorporated into American higher education, representing the majority of degree-seekers today, yet there are still programs and fields in which women are underrepresented. In order to counter this, it is necessary to find ways in which administration and faculty support women as they build community. Despite society’s slow-to-change negative attitudes, though, there is little reason to believe women will give up in their fight for true equality. Campbell (2006) leaves the reader with one last thought:

“‘What do women want?’ On one level, the answer is simple; they want what every person wants—dignity, respect, the right to self-determination, to develop their potentials as individuals. But on another level, there is no answer... whatever liberation is, it will be something different for each woman...What each woman shares, however, is the paradox of having ‘to fight an enemy who has outposts in your head’” (p. 181).
References


