

Women's Colleges Ensure Diversity, Quality in Higher Education

By Elisabeth Muhlenfeld and Nancy Gray

Over the past few weeks, students packed up their computers and flip flops and headed to colleges and universities across the country. Many of them debated for years which college to attend, often visiting a dozen or more to get a feel for the campus, and applying to eight or ten.

This ritual is a testament to the wonderful diversity of choice that characterizes the nation's colleges and universities, unquestionably a key to the strength of America's world-renowned system of higher education. From private liberal arts colleges to large research universities, from community colleges to technical schools, students today have a remarkable array of options. For women, some of the most distinctive and effective choices are the nation's women's colleges. As leaders of two such institutions, Sweet Briar College and Hollins University, we have witnessed first-hand the difference a single-sex atmosphere can make in the personal and intellectual growth of our students.

We therefore were saddened when Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, Va., announced on September 9 that it would become coeducational. R-MWC has been our friendly rival and distinguished sister institution in Virginia for more than a century. We wish the college well as it moves forward, knowing how difficult this decision to change the mission of the institution in fundamental ways has been. But we also note that R-MWC's decision means that one less option now exists for young women to gain the advantages that come from attending an excellent college focused boldly on women.

Women's college presidents are often asked, "How can you justify women's colleges in this day and age? Women have had complete access to coeducational

institutions for decades.” The answer is simple: Access isn’t everything. Despite the fact that official barriers to women in higher education have been eliminated, coeducational colleges and universities are still struggling to create a level playing field for both sexes.

Duke University, for example, one of the country’s most prestigious institutions, acknowledged in a 2003 study that women were held to unreasonable social expectations on its campus. A climate existed there that was detrimental to women’s physical and mental well-being and inhibited their professional development. Mentoring opportunities were lacking for undergraduate women, females were underrepresented on the faculty, and males dominated classroom discussions and held most leadership positions. The study’s authors emphasized that the atmosphere at Duke was the same at many other coed colleges and universities.

In contrast, as Indiana University’s Center for Post Secondary Research noted in its study, “Women Students at Coeducational and Women’s Colleges: How Do Their Experiences Compare?”, students at women’s colleges are more engaged in productive activities and achieve more from their college experiences than women at coed institutions. Using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement, the study, released in late June, found that academic challenges, support for success, student-faculty interaction, class participation, and leadership development were all greater at women’s colleges than at their coeducational counterparts.

The report concludes, “For more than two decades, proponents of women’s colleges have asserted that such institutions offer female students a more equitable, and therefore higher quality, developmentally powerful learning environment. Our findings

support this claim and plainly indicate that single-sex colleges are not an anachronistic post-secondary option for women.”

Going coeducational may well, over time, bring Randolph-Macon Woman’s College the positive changes predicted by its market research. As the school moves in new directions, we look forward to working with their faculty and staff on collaborative ventures as we have done for many years. But in truth, we feel a sense of loss. The trustees of R-MWC made their decision based on a long and careful study of many factors. But one factor was not at issue: Becoming coeducational will not improve the quality of education for women students. Decades of research suggest just the opposite.

Nearly all women’s colleges must squarely face the challenge of enrolling intelligent young women in sufficient numbers to ensure financial stability. This goal is difficult, but it is attainable, as both Sweet Briar and Hollins know very well. Most high school students today automatically link the idea of “college” with large public universities, and we must strive to ensure that young women and their parents understand how remarkably effective colleges focusing exclusively on women continue to be.

The Indiana University study empirically shows that women’s colleges provide an educational experience that is superior to coeducational institutions on many levels. As a matter of public policy, it is essential that we make certain that strong women’s colleges remain an option for America’s brightest young women.

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