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Integrating Men's Colleges at the Turn of the Century

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and
Francis R. Walsh

This paper deals with a neglected phase in the history of higher education for women: the resistance to coeducation that erupted in the first decade of this century. Although it was a national phenomenon, events which took place in Massachusetts took on a special significance. Boston's prominence as an educational center, coupled with the fact that it had so many outspoken leaders who were widely quoted, gave the city and the state a unique influence.

The recent interest in women's history has led to the publication of a number of useful studies on the role of women in higher education. These works include studies of women educators, the effect of college on women's career choices, and histories of individual colleges or particular graduating classes.¹ One result of the new scholarship on women's history is to challenge the traditional view of the evolution of coeducation in the United States. For a long time, historians have viewed coeducation as a liberating experience for women. This consensus usually contained the following scenario. At first, men were opposed to a college education for women, citing woman's intellectual inferiority, her delicate health, and the effect on the birth rate, more commonly referred to as "race suicide." But in the end, so the story goes, the men gave in and gallantly admitted women to "their" universities, a step which could only benefit women in their struggle for equal opportunity. That the admission process was both costly to the women and may have undermined women's progress has been ignored. Recent scholarly efforts are beginning to challenge the argument that coeducational colleges have produced an optimal environment for women's achievement.²

Nevertheless, no one has questioned the traditional view that male academics and students quietly, albeit reluctantly, had accepted the inevitability of coeducation by the turn of the century. Based on their assumption that women were easily integrated into most of the major colleges and universities by 1900, a number of historians have gone on to

contrast the sense of mission of the pioneering generation of female college students with the frivolous attitude of their sisters in the post-suffrage era.³ It is clear that an increasing number of college women enrolled in more sex-stereotyped academic programs such as home economics in the two decades after 1910.⁴ David Allmendinger has attributed this change to the fact that a wealthier group of women began attending college after 1910 and that they, along with other women of the second generation of female students, did not experience the sense of daring sustained by the pioneering generation.⁵ There are obviously a number of factors motivating women's choice of a major and a career. Historians have ignored a major reason: the hostile atmosphere experienced by most college women in the opening years of the 20th century.

This paper will focus on the resistance to coeducation in the years between 1890 and 1910. Historians have passed over this significant phase in the history of higher education for women. Lawrence Vesey, for example, in his history of the emergence of the American university stated that the fact that schools in the early 20th century "peacefully accepted sexual diversity suggests that the American struggle over women's rights commanded a relatively low intensity of emotion."⁶ Vesey is correct only in the strictest literal sense: that the battle of the sexes did not break out into open warfare. In fact, coeducation met with real resistance on the part of both male students and their largely male professors. Nor were the anti-coeducationists easily discouraged. At the turn of the century when it looked as though coeducation had been grudgingly but finally accepted, they launched one last major counterattack.

This paper contends that women did attempt to take advantage of the new world of coeducation which opened up at the turn of the century, and in the process experienced resistance so great that it determined their educational course over the next half-century. Feminists had every reason to be optimistic over the future of women's opportunities in higher education as women entered hitherto male colleges in increasing numbers in the last third of the 19th century. In 1870, women had been admitted to 30.7 per cent of all colleges (excluding technical and women's institutions). By 1900, 71.6 per cent of these colleges were coeducational, and there were more women enrolled in coeducational schools than in separate women's colleges. Moreover, the number of women attending coeducational institutions was increasing twice as fast as their male counterparts.⁷

At first, opponents of education for women argued that women were incapable of learning either in a segregated or coeducational setting. Thus, when Emerson visited Vassar in 1867, he omitted the difficult portions of his customary lecture on the assumption that his largely female audience would not be able to understand his ideas.⁸ But women quickly proved that they were capable of handling college work. Although no systematic study exists of female and male scholastic performance in the last quarter of the 19th century, the available evidence indicates that women were winning a disproportionate share of honors. Even at those schools where the threat of

female competition was neutralized by the establishment of a separate institution for women, for example the Harvard Annex (later Radcliffe College), occasional incidents challenged the assumed inferiority of women.

Each year Harvard awarded the Bowdoin prizes for the best essays by its male undergraduate and graduate students. The highest prize, an award of \$100 was to be given only in the case of an especially outstanding piece, while a separate contest was held for the Annex women with a top prize of \$30. In 1888, the judges awarded the \$100 prize to E.B. Pearson for an historical essay. Since Pearson had neglected to list an address, the judges checked the student registry, but to no avail. When they discovered that Pearson was an Annex student, they withdrew the prize and \$75 was given to the runner-up, a man. Pearson, in turn, had to settle for the \$30 Annex prize. What made the matter especially embarrassing was the fact that Professor Torrey, one of the two history judges, had been opposed to the Annex from the beginning because, as he argued, "neither the brains nor the bodies of women were quite equal to severe study."⁹

Professor Torrey's reference to women's bodies represents what became the second line of defense for those who opposed female education. The question quickly arose, "if women were able to compete intellectually with men, what was the cost?" If the brains of female students were unnaturally functioning at the more rapid male pace, they reasoned, surely it must take its toll on women's health. This concern spawned the most influential of the 19th century attacks on the drive to provide women with an education equal to men's, a book by Dr. Edward Clarke, a member of Harvard's board of overseers, published in 1873 under the ironic title, *Sex in Education or A Fair Chance for the Girls*. Within 13 years Clarke's book went through 17 editions. In Ann Arbor, Michigan, a local bookseller claimed sales of 200 copies in a single day, adding "the book bids fair to nip coeducation in the bud." Years later, M. Carey Thomas, the first president of Bryn Mawr, recalled, "we did not know when we began whether women's health could stand the strain of education. We were haunted in those days by the clanging chains of that gloomy little specter . . . *Sex in Education*."¹⁰

Little wonder that Clarke's book posed such a threat. According to his theory, the uterus was connected to the central nervous system, thus any intellectual effort undertaken was at the expense of a woman's reproductive organs. An increasing number of educated women, Clarke predicted, would force America to import future mothers from Western Europe. Unable to produce children, women students faced the inevitable prospects of "monstrous brains and puny bodies; abnormally active cerebration and abnormally weak digestion; flowing thought and constipated bowels." The only solution, Clarke believed, was to recognize that women could not be educated as if they were men. A special curriculum would have to be designed to harmonize with the menstrual cycle in women.

The seriousness with which women treated Clarke's thesis is illustrated

by the fact that one of the first acts of the Associated Collegiate Alumnae, formed in 1882, was to commission an examination of the health of college women. The results demonstrated that 78 per cent of the 705 subjects were in excellent condition. If anything, college women appeared to enjoy better health than the national average. Moreover, there was some evidence that college women were far healthier than their male peers. At this time, for example, men had three times higher absence rates for medical reasons than the women at the University of Wisconsin.¹² Consequently by 1900, it appeared as though women had proven themselves and could begin to reap the fruits of their efforts. Coeducation seemed firmly established in close to three-fourths of the nation's colleges and the question of mixed classes for college men and women was often referred to as a "dead issue."¹³

In fact, the anti-coeducationists were in the process of launching a new attack. Ironically the catalyst for the latest reaction was the success of the coeducation movement. Women's progress was magnified by the fact that it was centered in one college within the university, the college of liberal arts. A study of 13 state institutions in 1907 revealed that women outnumbered the men in the majority of the liberal arts colleges, with the University of Washington reporting a high of 69.9 per cent women. A number of private colleges and universities reported similar statistics.¹⁴

Where men had once feared that education would de-feminize women, there now emerged a new apprehension, perhaps springing out of the failure of the first to materialize, that the presence of a large number of women would feminize the entire system of higher education in America. This was disturbing enough, in and of itself. When coupled with the fact that American men were becoming increasingly alarmed over their own sexual identity, it added a special psychic dimension to the issue. Many men became convinced that their masculine identity was being eroded by a feminizing of their work roles. Some leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt went so far as to paint a picture of national decline, the result of a "general softening of fiber" and "the relaxation of standards." With the disappearance of the frontier, boys, it seemed, required training to become men. The instant success of the Boy Scouts of America in 1910 testified to this need. As Ernest Thompson Seton, the Scouts' organizer noted in the organization's Handbook, "manhood, not scholarship, is the first aim of education."¹⁵

If the primary aim of education was preparation for manhood, the presence of women in the classroom posed a clear and present danger. Little wonder that men like Professor Barrett Wendell of Harvard were so concerned about providing males with a segregated education. It was their last chance to save them. As Wendell noted in his defense of Harvard's monasticism, every effort should be made "to preserve one spot where men, if they choose, may be educated by themselves." The presence of women, according to Wendell, would only destroy "the almost unbroken tradition of Harvard virility." Contact with women, for Wendell, was like a disease seemingly capable of striking down any man, no matter what his



**Mary W. Calkins, who studied at the Harvard Annex, 1886-7,
received Ph.D. from Smith College, 1895. Courtesy of the
Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Library.**

age. Consequently, he opposed allowing Harvard instructors to teach at Radcliffe because of the "mental deterioration . . . which must eventually come from teaching women."¹⁶ That sentiment was repeated in the 1905 Commissioners of Education Report, in which Professor Armstrong summed up the fear of many men over the feminized male student enrollment. "The boy in America is not being brought up to punch another boy's head, or to stand having his own punched in a healthy and proper manner: there is a strange and indefinable feminine air coming over the men; a tendency toward a common, if I may so call it, sexless tone of thought."¹⁷

Although the anti-coeducationists focused their attack on the feminizing influence of sexually integrated education, there was another issue which often lay under the surface, but which was, in the final analysis, more significant: the fear that coeducation would undermine the patriarchal system. As one writer put it, "Coeducation has done more than anything else to rob marriage of its attractions, by divesting the man of most of his old-time glamour and romance. This early contact with the other sex on a footing of equality, which the majority of girl students more than maintain intellectually, has tended to produce that contempt of the much vaunted superiority of man that is as a rule reserved for those post nuptial discoveries which make marriage such an interesting venture."¹⁸ In 1893, for example, Harvard's debating club refused to meet with Boston University when that school refused to drop the female members from its team.

If anything, women appeared to be on more than an equal footing when it came to scholarship. The matter of women's superior classroom performance was a sore point at each of the colleges which re-evaluated its commitment to coeducation in the opening decade of the 20th century. As one anti-coeducationist put it, "We all admit that both in secondary schools and in colleges, the girls hold their own by comparison with the young men." But, he declared petulantly, it is time for women to abandon their "childish rivalry, and turn their attention to those subjects of instruction for which they are in a higher degree qualified than men."¹⁹ But women were unwilling to retire from the field. Many felt that coeducation was the only means by which women could prove their intellectual worth. As one woman noted in 1884, it was unfairly, but nevertheless widely believed that most women's colleges were inferior. "The desire to know our relative position, to become rated as a definitive quantity," she wrote "lies at the root of much of the toil for college degrees." This certification, she believed, could only be fairly made in a coeducational setting.²⁰

The stage was thus set for one final battle to save American manhood—the reaction to coeducation in the early years of the 20th century was a battle not limited to any one geographical region. Among others, Stanford and the University of Washington on the West Coast, the Universities of Chicago, Wisconsin, Kansas, and Western Reserve College in the Midwest, and the University of Rochester, and Wesleyan in the East, all sought one

way or the other to stem the rising tide of women in their Liberal Arts Colleges. A number of colleges seized upon the simple solution of limiting the number of women they accepted. Stanford, for example, restricted its female student body to five hundred. Other schools, unwilling to risk a frontal attack, decided to isolate their women students, either by enrolling them in separate courses or classes, or by herding them into separate women's colleges.

Although no one referred to the separate but equal decision in the 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson Case, the justification for dealing with both blacks and women is remarkably similar. Both would be guaranteed a separate but "equal" course of instruction. In an article on the need for segregating women students Harvard's President Eliot asked: "Are they not essentially different, and do we not all recognize that essential difference, and is not the charm of human life and the greatest happiness of life due to that difference?" To Eliot, both nature and their life circumstances dictated a separate form of education for men and women. In a similar vein, G. Stanley Hall, the noted psychologist and president of Clark University, argued that education should help boys to become more masculine and girls more feminine after the age of twelve.²¹

It is little wonder that so many male academics felt so strongly about the issue. No doubt the "learned professor" who recommended to James Rowland Angell "an uprising of men to force by violence a return of women to their proper sphere" was speaking figuratively. Nevertheless the depth of the hostility toward women in a coeducational setting has all but been ignored by historians. The experience of Tufts College highlights the intensity of that feeling.²² Two years after the establishment of Tufts in 1854, women began to seek admission. Their efforts and those of succeeding women had little effect at first. The trustees of the college did not even discuss the issue until 1882, and the faculty and students were not polled until three years later. The results were hardly encouraging: only 3 of the 13 faculty members who responded favored admitting women while 73 out of 96 students were opposed to the proposition. Finally in 1892, in response to the general movement toward coeducation across the nation, Tufts voted to admit women. In announcing the news, the *Boston Globe* predicted that "before another decade passes the matter will no longer be in controversy."²³

As in other colleges across the country, the rapid increase in the number of women touched off an alarm among the male student body at the school. Between 1895 and 1898, the number of men increased eleven per cent as compared to an increase of 126 per cent for the women. As early as 1894, there were signs that the men were not happy about the decision. At class day that year, the last all-male class of '95 celebrated "its womanless condition."

We thank the Lord we've lived alone
Without a girl upon the throne:
The only class that's now alive
The glorious class of '95.²⁴

The reference to a girl upon the throne, although written in jest, suggests the existence of an underlying fear that women, properly armed with an education, could replace the rightful male occupant. Men certainly made every effort to circumscribe women's position on campus. Anything from running for class office to merely attending class banquets was ruled off limits for women.

By the late 1890s, members of the administration began to echo the students' concern over coeducation: that the college was in immediate danger of becoming a woman's college. It was all right for state supported universities in the midwest to accept women, a college spokesman said, for they had a virtual monopoly over education in their areas. But schools such as Tufts had to compete with a host of other colleges and hence could not afford the luxury of coeducation because "the average young man will not go to a coeducational institution if other things are anywhere near equal."²⁵

The controversy came to a head in 1905 with the appointment of the Rev. Dr. Frederick W. Hamilton, class of 1880, as college president. To Hamilton, the crisis in coeducation was the most pressing educational problem facing the school. It was clear that the issue which most disturbed the students was the problem of competing with women in a classroom situation. Symptomatic of the problem, in Hamilton's first year, all five seniors elected to Phi Beta Kappa were women. As Dr. Hamilton noted, men felt that they were at a decided disadvantage in this setting. "I have known some of the best students," the president declared, "to say that they hesitate to recite or to enter into a discussion in the mixed classes for fear of making themselves ridiculous before the women." On a visit to Tufts the following year, M. Carey Thomas confirmed Hamilton's observation: "I saw about 20 girls and 5 or 6 boys. The boys were huddled together in a corner just as we women used to huddle together in the old days of coeducation at Cornell." As one Tufts trustee sadly noted, the women had done their work too well, if anything.²⁶

In view of the fact that the women were regularly winning the lion's share of school honors, it is ironic to read the *Boston Transcript* explanation of why men were unhappy at Tufts: "The difficulty is simply the tendency of the women to drive out the men. A principle similar to Gresham's Law in the economic sphere—that cheap money drives dear money out of circulation appears to operate in the college world. The weaker sex drives out the stronger."²⁷ In 1909, the strong decided to make a stand, and a five man committee on segregation was established. Not surprisingly, the committee recommended the establishment of a separate college for women on the Tufts campus. News of the decision triggered an outburst of joy among the male students and protests from the women. The school newspaper reported that "great hilarity and celebration" were the order of the day. A huge bonfire was touched off, while the men marched around the campus accompanied by the school band. At chapel on the morning following the decision, the third-year men formed a gauntlet through which the women were forced to walk to the accompaniment of male cheers.²⁸



Kate E. Morris, who studied at the Harvard Annex, 1879-82, received Ph.D. from Smith College, 1882. Smith granted Radcliffe's first Ph.D. to Morris. Courtesy of the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Library.

The drive to segregate college women faltered in the second decade of the 20th century. One reason was that the cost of duplication and additional staffing proved too great for college budgets. Schools such as Wisconsin and Chicago quietly abandoned the effort and even women at Tufts eventually found themselves in classes alongside the men. Equally important, after 1910 men no longer viewed coeducation as a real threat to their dominance. A comparison of two sources, an article published in 1873 by John H. Raymond, president of Vassar College and a book written by historian Arthur Calhoun in 1919, reveals that little had changed in the intervening years. A liberal education, Raymond argued, made a woman into "a fit companion for a wiser and nobler man, than she otherwise would have been. If he be a professional man, she will feel an enlightened sympathy in his intellectual pursuits, and may often find it in her power to render him valuable counsel and effective aid."²⁹ Almost a half-century later, Calhoun could write in a similar vein. Summing up the effects of a college education on women he noted: "her sense of maternal and connubial responsibility is quickened and strengthened and her reverence for that true meaning of the relationship is exalted." There was no question about what Calhoun meant by the "true meaning of the relationship." "College women," he added, "make cheery efficient homes."³⁰

Those women who pursued liberal arts degrees in the early 1900s had little to choose from in terms of career options. While their male peers used a B.A. degree as a launching point for a career in business, law, medicine or other professions, 89 per cent of the women in one survey went into the already overcrowded field of school teaching. More often their education did not prepare them to do anything in particular and there were few role models to suggest new alternatives. "We turn in our sleep and groan," Ruth Benedict wrote, "because we are parasites, . . . we women . . . because we produce nothing, say nothing." In Helen Olin's words, "they were superfluous women."³¹ Not surprisingly, a number of women began to turn to the rapidly developing field of home economics. As early as 1895, it was hoped that this new area would "eliminate competition between the sexes." By 1927, 240 colleges had established degree programs in domestic science or home economics while 243 other colleges and 168 normal schools offered it as an elective.³²

By 1920, it was clear that coeducation posed no threat to men's domination of the work world. Men by that time had also learned to rationalize women's academic achievement while they were students, thus eliminating another source of tension connected with coeducation. As G. Stanley Hall explained, girls outranked boys in "detail, finish, memory, and in formal work generally, while boys lean to more meaty and substantial things."³³ Such easy dismissals of female competence would continue to haunt successful women in succeeding years. In a recent history of the feminist movement, for example, William O'Neill diminishes M. Carey Thomas' achievements by labelling her "imitative." O'Neill claimed that "she reinforced the tendency of women to favor grade-getting and degree winning over creative or scholarly work, to focus on the symbols of

achievement rather than its substance, and thus helped fix the 'good-student' syndrome which has since kept so many educated women from realizing their early promise."³⁴

How did women view their academic experience? Surely many women must have learned that academic success spelled personal failure. The efforts of women to prove themselves stimulated a wave of reaction which, for a time, appeared to threaten the very existence of coeducation in colleges. A poem by Alice Duer Miller in 1915 must have summed up what many women had experienced:

There, little girl, don't read
You're fond of your books, I know
But Brother might mope
If he had no hope
Of getting ahead of you
It's dull for a boy who cannot lead
There, little girl, don't read.³⁵

Thus, by 1920, although the structure of coeducation remained intact, there was little trace of the liberating experience which many women had anticipated earlier in the century. Perhaps, they expected too much. We are coming to recognize that schools alone can do little to reshape a society. But the record should be made clear, far from even attempting to challenge the existing order, American universities took a lead in reinforcing patriarchal values.

Finally, we should note that a status hierarchy emerged during this period which clearly equated prestige with among other things, sexual segregation. Those male schools which were able to protect their virtue by excluding women entirely or by isolating them in educational purdahs called coordinate colleges were applauded. As late as 1962, Professor Frederick Rudolph, in his highly praised historical study, *The American College and University*, declared that coeducation had helped to divide the subjects of the curriculum "into those which were ornamental, dilettantish, and feminine." Rudolph went on to assert that such schools as Yale, Harvard, Columbia, and Amherst successfully "preserved the liberal inheritance of Western Civilization in the U.S. by protecting it from the debilitating, feminizing, corrupting influence which shaped its career where coeducation prevailed."³⁶ In 1918, Thorsten Veblen wrote, "To admit women, once a subservient caste, to all the privileges of higher education would have been to take away from the honorific position of the dominant class." The current backlash to the recent gains garnered by the feminist movement indicates that Veblen's warning is still relevant.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Patricia Aljberg, "So Much to Do: Guides for Historical Research on Women in Higher Education," *Teachers College Record*, LXXVI (Fall, 1975), 481-86; "Expansion and Exclusion: A History of Women in American Higher Education," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 3 (Summer, 1978), 759-73; Jill K. Conway, "Perspectives on the History of Women's Education in the United States," *History of Education Quarterly*, XIV (Spring, 1974), 1-12; Sarah H. Gordon, "Smith College Students: The First Ten Classes, 1879-1888," *History of Education Quarterly*, XV (Summer, 1975), 147-68; Roberta Frankfurt, *Collegiate Women: Domesticity and Career at the Turn of the Century America* (New York, 1977).
2. See, for example, Christopher Jencks and David Reisman, *The Academic Revolution* (New York, 1968) pp. 292-293; Carl Degler, *At Odds* (New York, 1980), pp. 312-313; Peter Filene, *Him Her Self* (New York, 1974), p. 64; Thomas Woody, *A History of Women's Education in the United States* (New York, 1929). Exceptions to this consensus can be found in M. Elizabeth Tidball, "Women's Colleges and Women Achievers Revisited," *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture and Society*, 5 (Spring, 1980), 504-17; Mary J. Oates and Susan Williamson, "Women's Colleges and Women's Achievers," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 3 (Summer, 1978), 795-806.
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5. Allmendinger, p. 122.
6. Lawrence Vesey, *Emergence of the American University* (Chicago, 1965), p. 333.
7. Woody, II, 258-259.
8. Ann Douglas Wood, "How Liberation of Women Can Improve Higher Education," *University*, (Spring, 1972), p. 7.
9. *Boston Post*, March 24, 1888.
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11. Edward H. Clarke, *Sex in Education; or a Fair Chance for the Girls* (Boston, 1873), pp. 23, 41.
12. Louis H. Marvel, "How Does College Life Affect the Health of Women?" *Education*, III (1883), 501. Patricia Aljberg Graham, *Community and Class in American Education, 1865-1918* (New York, 1974), p. 218.
13. Woody, P. 253; Nicholas M. Butler, "Coeducation a Dead Issue," *Journal of Education*, LVI (1902), p. 314.
14. "Tendencies in State Universities," *Education Review* 34 (1907), pp. 512-513.
15. John B. Garber, "Coeducation," *Education*, 1902, p. 240 notes the rising fear of feminization; Ernest Thompson Seton, *Boy Scouts of America: A Handbook of Woodcraft, Scouting, and Life-Craft* (New York, 1910), p. 3.

16. Barrett Wendell, "The Relations of Radcliffe with Harvard," *The Harvard Monthly* (October 1899), p. 7.
17. Report of the Commissioner of Education (1897-1898), I, 631-2 (1905), p. 7.
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24. *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.
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