

Women's Colleges: An Option

By Heather Ricker-Gilbert and Theresa Leary

As independent educational consultants specializing in college admissions, both of us have heard young women exclaim: "Why would anyone choose to go to an all-women's college? That's a good question. Many people have outdated or incorrect images of women's colleges. The myth that they are finishing schools for girls in "pearls and pumps" is leftover from the days when coed institutions of higher education were few and far between. The idea that women students are isolated from members of the opposite sex also needs to be re-examined. Not only do most women's colleges have consortium agreements with co-ed institutions, but vibrant coed social interaction does exist. In reality, women's colleges are ranked among the top institutions in the country. The bonds of friendship formed turn into the strongest alumnae connections that can be found anywhere.

Although the number of single sex colleges has declined since the 1970's when coed education became virtually universal, the remaining 60 or so women's colleges are among the nation's oldest institutions of higher education and are ardently committed to their mission of providing the best education for women. There are seven women's colleges in Massachusetts: BayPath College; Mount Holyoke College; Pine Manor College; Regis College; Simmons College; Smith College; Wellesley College and one in Connecticut, Saint Joseph College.

Current students will tell you that they chose their school because of academics. They chose it not because it was a women's college, but in spite of it. A recent graduate recalls: "In my process of selecting a college, the fact that Mount Holyoke was an all-women's college was almost incidental. I chose Mount Holyoke because I was impressed with the classes I observed during my visit...Life and learning there seemed to speak to the whole person—academics were important, but so were the arts, spiritual life, physical education...The spirit was cooperative, not competitive."

Bryn Mawr and Mount Holyoke are ranked among the top 25 best Liberal Arts colleges in the country by *U.S. News and World Report*. Thus, women's colleges make up 16% of the top 25 colleges, including the #4 ranking. These rankings are substantiated by the fact that graduates continue toward doctorates in math, science and

engineering in disproportionately large numbers in comparison to coed institutions. According to the *Fiske Guide to Colleges*, “Mt. Holyoke produces more female Ph.Ds in chemistry and biology than any other Liberal Arts college.” At Simmons, students can go directly from their undergraduate studies to a graduate degree program in nursing, physical therapy or information technology either at Simmons or at another affiliated school. In undergraduate education, Smith is known for its engineering program and BayPath College for Forensic Science. According to the Women’s College Coalition, undergraduates at women’s colleges are three times more likely to earn a baccalaureate in economics and one and one-half times more likely to earn baccalaureate degrees in life sciences, physical science and mathematics than women attending coeducational institutions.

Research has shown that once there, women like their single sex colleges and that the attrition rate at women’s colleges is much lower than at co- educational institutions. We both have had clients who have enrolled in one of the “seven sisters” with a lot of doubts but by their sophomore year, these same students say they would never have chosen anything but a women’s college. This satisfaction can be due to the attention from faculty and alumnae mentors. Faculty, 55% of whom are women at single-sex colleges instill confidence in students by believing each student is capable of excellent achievement. With faculty as role models, young graduates end up feeling that their potential is limitless. A young woman from Tolland, Connecticut who enrolled in Smith this coming fall states: “When I was in high school my honors classes had about 17 boys and 7 girls in them; I think that as a result of this the girls sometimes felt outnumbered and intimidated. The class discussion was definitely dominated by the males. I expect to gain more confidence by being at a women's college where both faculty leadership positions and student leadership positions are held by females.” Alex Austin, who has done extensive research in student development, concurs in his book **Four Critical Years**. He writes: “Women’s colleges increase the chances that women will obtain positions of leadership, complete the baccalaureate degree and aspire to higher degrees.”

What about the lack of men at a women’s college? Many all women colleges are part of a consortium with other colleges. This arrangement allows students to attend classes along with cultural and social events at the other schools within the consortium.

For example, Bryn Mawr students can participate in academics and activities at Haverford or Swarthmore; Barnard, in New York, is closely affiliated with Columbia; students at Smith and Mount Holyoke can attend Amherst or Hampshire College or UMASS; and the young women at Wellesley can cross register at MIT or take classes at Brandeis or Babson. Simmons College is part of the Colleges of the Fenway Consortium in Boston. With their ID cards, students have access to libraries and cafeterias. They can attend, and even participate in, theatre, music and sports activities. If you are near a women's college campus on a given Saturday night, you may see busloads of young men and women arriving for an evening or weekend of special events, concerts and parties. That said, studies show that there is a lot less loud partying and binge drinking at women's colleges. One student we spoke with agrees, "While drinking is a reality at any college, it is nice to go somewhere where it doesn't dominate the social scene." Students can decide to go to coed parties or pursue intellectual or cultural activities without distractions. In addition, single sex campuses are safer than coed, with cleaner and quieter dorms. According to the 2001 Time/Princeton Review of "The Best Colleges For You," women's colleges make up: Forty percent of the top 10 nicest dorms in the country, including the #1 ranking; Thirty percent of the top 10 most beautiful campuses; and fifteen percent of the top 20 colleges with the greatest food.

Many of the benefits of attending a women's college come after graduation. Alumnae networks are particularly strong. Graduates bolster each other across generations offering business and social support throughout all the life stages. Mary Ann Delaney Tuttle, an active alumna of Russell Sage College in Troy, New York recalls: My college gave me the confidence to pursue the goals and values that I knew were within me. The self confidence I gained at an all women's college allowed me to pursue a career, work toward a doctoral degree and venture into running for local public office." Indeed, women's college graduates tend to hold higher positions and become leaders in their field. A number of well known public officials are graduates of women's colleges. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton graduated from Wellesley, Representative Rosa De Lauro, from Marymount College in New York, Representative Nancy Johnson, from Radcliffe, and Connecticut's Ella Grasso, who was the first women in the country to be elected a governor in her own right, went to Mount Holyoke College.

There are over 3000 colleges to choose from in the United States. Women's colleges are by no means for everyone, but for some young women today, they may be well worth consideration. There are no "typical" students at women's colleges. The colleges strive to incorporate diversity in all its forms - geographical, cultural, social, and economic. Aspiring athletes, dancers, doctors, teachers, writers, lawyers, business executives and entrepreneurs... The common denominator may be that these young women are serious about their education and like the idea of a collaborative learning environment.

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