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## Historical Background and Overview

### Nineteenth-Century Beginnings

Women first gained entry to institutions of higher education in the United States when Oberlin College admitted female students in 1837—more than 200 years after Harvard College was founded for the education of young men. In colonial America there was no precedent for higher education for women. European universities, some of which were established as early as the eleventh and twelfth centuries, were open only to men. From the perspective of the 1980s it is easy to forget that the history of women in higher education is so much shorter than that of men.

It is now 150 years since college education became a reality for women. The pressure for change from the beginning, as now, came from the broader women's movement which raised women's aspirations for a college education. Nevertheless, opportunities for women in higher education remained quite limited until after the Civil War. Up to that time three private colleges in Ohio and two state universities—Utah and Iowa—admitted women. Faced with declining enrollments, several more state universities opened their doors to women during or immediately following the Civil War. The same period saw the emergence of colleges for women offering curricula comparable to that of men. Vassar College, established in 1865, was among the earliest. Smith and Wellesley followed in 1875 and Bryn Mawr and Mount Holyoke in the 1880s.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the enrollment of women in higher education accelerated rapidly, and more and more universities and colleges began to admit women as well as men. In 1870 only 30 percent of colleges were coeducational. By the turn of the century the figure was 70 percent.<sup>1</sup> In 1900 women constituted 30 percent of the student body in higher education. They attended a diversity of institutions, including liberal arts colleges, many of them affiliated with Protestant denominations or Catholic religious orders, institutions founded after the Civil War for southern black youth, and public and private research universities. Also included among them were institutions that called themselves colleges but were really normal schools or seminaries.<sup>2</sup>

The foremost reason for attending colleges and universities during this period was to train for the ministry, the law, medicine, and teaching. Consequently, in 1900 less than 4 percent of the college-age population were enrolled in higher education.<sup>3</sup> Women moved into this educational environment to enter the teaching profession. The public school system, which since the middle of the nineteenth century had been growing rapidly throughout the country, produced a demand for teachers and for educated women who could fill this demand. Formerly, women had taught only at the most elementary levels in the private dame schools. Now they began to teach at higher levels and, although college training was not required in all circumstances, a degree meant better job opportunities. School superintendents, faced with increasing demands for teachers, hired women because they could "afford to teach for one-half, or even less, the salary which men would ask."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, teaching was seen as an appropriate occupation for women, seeming, as it were, a natural extension of the mothering role. In 1880, 57 percent of teachers in the United States were women; by 1918 the figure had grown to 84 percent.<sup>5</sup>

While the rise of women's aspirations and the need for low-paid teachers led to increased college attendance by women, financial exigencies within the colleges contributed to the trend toward coeducation. The private colleges in particular frequently found themselves in a precarious financial situation,<sup>6</sup> and women students represented additional revenues. Even Oberlin, so often lauded for being the first institution to award a bachelor's degree to women, had economic as well as ethical reasons for admitting women students. As a manual labor school founded in 1833, its male students worked on the college farm to help pay for their education. But there was no one to perform domestic chores. When women students were enrolled in the late 1830s, they did the laundry, the cooking, and the waiting on tables that otherwise

would have to be paid for as part of board and room.<sup>7</sup> Most of the elite men's colleges, however, were prosperous enough to hold out against admission of women. Coeducation was further advanced by the establishment of state universities and land grant colleges under the Morrill Act of 1862. Created to promote practical as well as liberal education, these institutions introduced home economics as a course of study in higher education. In the late nineteenth century some prestigious institutions such as Harvard, Columbia, and Brown permitted the formation of independently funded coordinate women's colleges as a compromise between admitting women and maintaining their male preserves.

The entry of women into higher education in growing numbers during the late nineteenth century was not without opposition. It was widely believed that intellectual activity was contrary to feminine nature and harmful to women's health and reproductive capacity. Moreover, it was assumed that women did not have the same capacity as men for advanced education and, moreover, that they would distract males and lower standards in coeducational institutions.<sup>8</sup> Events proved otherwise. Indeed, their rising numbers and successful performance on campus raised new fears at the turn of the century that women would overrun higher education. At the University of Chicago the percentage of women students increased from 24 to 52 percent between 1892 and 1902.<sup>9</sup> During the same period women received over 56 percent of the Phi Beta Kappa awards. Concerned about the feminization of the institution, the administration established segregated classes for freshmen and sophomores, in effect establishing a separate junior college for women. The policy was abandoned after five years when the arrangement proved to be costly and bureaucratically cumbersome. There were similar concerns at Stanford University, where 102 men and 98 women graduated in 1901 and women received a higher number of awards and honors. In 1904 Stanford adopted a policy restricting the enrollment of women to a ratio of three male students to one female student, a policy that remained in effect until 1933.

Although nineteenth-century ideas about the biological and psychological differences between women and men became outmoded, cultural perceptions of appropriate roles and behaviors for women were slower to change. These perceptions, updated but still traditional, continued to influence higher education for women throughout much of the present century. Nevertheless, women continued to enter higher education in ever-increasing numbers.

From 1900 to 1930 the proportion of women receiving a bachelor's or first professional degree increased from 19 to 40 percent.<sup>10</sup> The proportion remained steady during the 1930s, although the actual number of

degrees awarded to both men and women increased. The increase in college attendance during the Depression may seem surprising, but apparently widespread unemployment made college a better option for young men and women, even though most families had less income to spend on college education. In addition, the Depression demonstrated the advantage of having a degree as college graduates in white-collar positions fared better than other kinds of workers.<sup>11</sup>

## World War II and Its Aftermath

During World War II, with many college-age men in the services and some college-age women engaged in war work, the number of male students declined sharply and the number of women students remained at about prewar levels. After 1945 and after the end of the Korean war in 1953, returning veterans supported by the G.I. Bill resulted in a dramatic rise in male enrollments. The huge influx of veterans restricted the number of women who could be accommodated, and men dominated the campus from the late 1940s through the 1950s. Although the enrollment of women and number of degrees earned increased somewhat during this period, women lost ground in relative terms. In 1950 women represented 24 percent of those receiving the bachelor's degree and first professional degree compared with 41 percent in 1940. By 1960 the proportion had increased to 35 percent, but the prewar rate was not regained until 1970.<sup>12</sup> The pattern of early marriage and childbearing that characterized the 1950s kept many qualified young women out of college.<sup>13</sup>

The postwar generation of women students faced many other obstacles as well. As priority was given to veterans, graduate women found that they had to be far better qualified than men to be admitted, and married women who wished to enroll part time found the doors closed. Access to assistantships and other training opportunities were severely limited. In short, women students were being treated openly as second-class citizens.<sup>14</sup> But change was in the offing, and the 1960s saw the start of a new era.

Social pressure toward early marriage and family formation waned and the women's movement followed in its wake, creating a climate of rising aspirations for women. At the same time, the influx of veterans into higher education institutions began to taper off and colleges and universities, with their expanded facilities, became more receptive to other constituencies of students. These conditions brought women into higher education in unprecedented numbers and with them a drive for equal educational opportunity. The time had come for an all-out attack against long-standing inequities, both overt and subtle.

## The Drive for Equity

The first task for the 1970s was to identify and document these inequities. The inequities involved not only women students but women faculty members and administrators as well.<sup>15</sup> During this period scholars and activists alike turned their attention to discriminatory procedures and practices in higher education, their sources and their remedies. Responding to pressures from women's groups, both on and off campus, the federal government passed a series of laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex in educational institutions.

Discriminatory practices in college admissions have already been noted. By 1970 the situation had begun to improve, but nevertheless the general pattern was one of lower enrollment rates for women than for men of comparable ability, especially for those from families of lower socioeconomic status.<sup>16</sup> Patterns of financial support, which in the past had heavily favored men, changed markedly during the 1960s when the federal government, following the launching of Sputnik in 1957, established massive programs of grants and loans for higher education without distinction by gender. Nevertheless, a study of sources of support for college freshmen in 1971, conducted by the American Council on Education, showed significant differences between men and women. Women received a much higher share of college costs than men from parents (61.2 percent compared with 48.9 percent), whereas men to a much greater extent than women relied on their own earnings or savings from employment. Women relied to a slightly greater extent on scholarships and loans than men, although this difference was offset by educational benefits for military service that some men were still receiving.<sup>17</sup> At the graduate level, both men and women received more university and government support, but again women were somewhat more dependent on aid from families, whereas men had more resources based on their own employment and savings. This pattern of financial support helps to explain the difference in enrollment rates between men and women from low-income families. Because women earn less, they are more dependent on family support for higher education and are affected to a greater extent than men by size of family income.

In terms of degree attainment, women have earned a steadily increasing number and proportion of bachelor's degrees since 1900. By 1920 the proportion of bachelor's degrees earned by women was 34.2 percent and by 1970 the proportion had increased to 41.5 percent. Prior to 1920, the number of advanced degrees achieved by either men or women was quite small. Since then the number has increased rapidly. In 1920 the proportion of master's degrees earned by women was 30.2 percent and in 1970, 39.7 percent. The proportion of doctorates awarded to women

was 15.1 percent in 1920 and declined somewhat during the Depression to 13.0 percent in 1940. In the aftermath of World War II this figure sank below 10 percent and did not regain the 1920 level until 1972.<sup>18</sup> There was a similar but less dramatic decline in the proportion of bachelor's and master's degrees awarded to women in the 1950s. The actual numbers of degrees increased throughout, however. The further progress of women in degree attainment during the 1970s and beyond is discussed in chapters 9 and 10.

The fields that women have traditionally chosen as majors in college differ substantially from those of men. They are, of course, closely related to career opportunities open to women. Women have been considerably more likely than men to major in the humanities and arts and less likely to major in the sciences. In the social sciences they have been relatively well represented in some fields, such as psychology and sociology, and less well represented in other fields, such as economics and political science. In professional fields, women have primarily entered education, home economics, library science, social work, and teaching. In the past, they have not been well represented in business administration, medicine, or law. These patterns were accentuated during the 1950s and 1960s, but the wide disparities in the degree distribution between men and women narrowed dramatically during the 1970s. Chapter 9 highlights the substantial increase in the representation of women in the sciences, engineering, and other traditionally male-dominated professions during the last 15 years, while chapter 10 describes recent trends in the social sciences, the humanities, and the conventional women's professions.

Historically, women's colleges have played a critical role in higher education for women, but this role has changed with the passage of time. Originally, they were established to provide access to higher education when admission to colleges and universities was not open to women on the same terms as men. In the 1870s, when many of the women's colleges were established, they represented 60 percent of the total enrollment of women undergraduates in the country.<sup>19</sup> Since that time, the percentage has dropped steadily decade by decade. In the 1950s the percentage dropped below 10 percent, and the decline has continued since then as more and more formerly all male institutions, including Yale and Princeton in the Ivy League, became coeducational. The case for women's colleges today is based on other considerations than access. It is argued that they are necessary to represent the interests of women in higher education, that they provide a more supportive environment for women students, that they produce a higher proportion of women achievers than comparable coeducational institutions,

and that they provide greater opportunities for women faculty and administrators. These issues are discussed at length in chapter 6 on the role of women's colleges. Other aspects of the college environment for women are discussed in chapter 2, which is primarily concerned with the college experience in coeducational institutions; chapter 4, which focuses on the educational needs and aspirations of re-entry women as nontraditional students; and chapter 5, which describes the rise of campus-based women's centers as a new kind of supportive service for women students in the 1970s.

Prior to World War II, little was known about minorities in higher education beyond their enrollment and attendance in predominantly black colleges. Minorities in higher education generally became a matter of public and scholarly concern with the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Attention was focused at first on blacks, but was later extended to include Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Native Americans, and, increasingly, Asians as well. For the most part, the systematic collection of data on minorities did not begin until the early 1970s. Chapter 3 brings together and analyzes the existing data on minority women, as students, faculty, and administrators. Minority viewpoints are also included elsewhere in the volume to the extent that relevant information is available.

The curriculum of higher education for women has been the subject of debate since at least the late nineteenth century. When women's colleges were formed, they consciously adopted the same curriculum as that offered by men's colleges. This was a liberal arts curriculum consisting of Greek, Latin, mathematics, science, philosophy, and literature. The primary purpose was to produce men of mental discipline and culture. It was also designed to provide the background for subsequent professional, business, or public life. For women the focus on cultural subjects was seen as preparation for teaching or for family and community roles. In contrast to women's colleges, coeducational land grant universities put more emphasis on practical subjects and vocational preparation. For men this meant agriculture and the mechanical arts, and for women, home economics. Home economics as a specialized field in higher education was introduced in land grant universities in the 1870s. By 1910 over 100 colleges and universities offered instruction in that field.<sup>20</sup>

During the early decades of the twentieth century, women students turned increasingly to job-related fields of study. They concentrated particularly in teaching, social work, library science, and nursing. These became known as "female-dominated professions," and they have remained so to the present day. However, they are female-dominated

only in terms of the numbers of women employed, not in terms of control of the profession. The situation of women in these fields is described in chapter 10.

The 1970s brought a new and more far-reaching kind of curriculum innovation for women in higher education—the introduction of women's studies. As the scholarly arm of the women's movement, women's studies re-examines women's lives and their role in society from a historical, contemporary, and cross-cultural perspective. In the process, women's studies scholars have introduced new course content and challenged traditional assumptions about women across a broad spectrum of disciplines. The process of integration of the new knowledge into the liberal arts curriculum is still ongoing. The origins, functions, and achievements of women's studies are the subject of chapter 7.

The growth of women's studies teaching and research during the 1970s and 1980s spawned the formation of organized research centers. There are over 50 such centers in existence today, most of them campus-based but some autonomous or affiliated with other nonprofit organizations. They provide institutional resources for the work of individual scholars and create an environment for mutual support and interdisciplinary efforts. Their origins, characteristics, and activities are described in chapter 13.

In the aftermath of World War II, women lost ground not only in their participation as students but also in their representation as faculty members. At the start of the century the proportion of women on college faculties was 20 percent. In the decades that followed, there was a gradual increase to 25 percent in 1940. During the postwar period, the representation of women on college faculties declined to 23 percent in the 1950s and to 22 percent in the 1960s.<sup>21</sup> The prewar high of 25 percent was not regained until the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> The actual number of women faculty members increased steadily throughout the period, but not by enough to keep up with the overall expansion of the faculty and the growth in the number of men. Moreover, women faculty members have always been concentrated in the lower ranks and in the less prestigious institutions. They have also been concentrated in particular fields such as education, social work, home economics, and nursing.

In women's colleges the faculty situation is, of course, somewhat different. In 1940, 72 percent of the faculty of the 22 largest private women's colleges were women. Even there, however, there was a decline after World War II to about 50 percent in 1955.<sup>23</sup> In 1978, according to a recent report of the Women's College Coalition, the figure was 55 percent. Only Catholic women's colleges operated by religious orders are staffed and administered primarily by women.<sup>24</sup>

Chapter 11 provides a picture of trends in faculty representation dur-

ing and since the 1970s and assesses the current position of faculty women. While some gains have been made, particularly in entry-level positions, overall progress has been slow, in spite of intensive efforts by academic women's groups and the supportive activities of women's rights organizations. Affirmative action and legal remedies have played a critical role in these efforts, and that role is the subject of chapter 8. Chapter 12 describes the strategic role of women in professional associations not only in advancing women scholars, but also in advancing women's studies in their respective disciplines.

Prior to the 1970s, women rarely held positions of influence in the administration of higher education institutions, except for women's colleges. In coeducational colleges and universities only a quarter of the administrators were women, and the positions they most commonly held were dean of women, director of library services, director of food services, and dean of home economics or nursing. Somewhat less commonly they held the positions of registrar, director of student guidance, director of student activities, or director of alumni affairs. In 1970 three quarters of the women administrators at Ivy League universities worked in student services. In chapter 14 we examine the efforts that have been made to change this picture and show what progress has been made to date. Chapter 15 focuses on the role of boards of trustees in the governance of institutions of higher education and the nature and extent of women's participation in board functions.

This brief overview of the historical evolution of women in higher education prior to the 1970s is intended to provide perspective and background for the story that follows. It shows how educational opportunities open to women in the past have been limited by the narrow definition of their social role and the restricted career opportunities available. It also reveals the extent to which the post-World War II period was a setback to the advancement of women in academic life. At the undergraduate and graduate levels, in faculty positions and in administration, women lost many of the gains they had achieved in the preceding decades. The 1960s were years for catching up. Only in the 1970s did women begin the rapid strides forward that mark the real progress from the prewar period, progress that is documented in this book.

## Notes

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7. Jill K. Conway, "Perspective on the History of Women's Education in the United States," *History of Education Quarterly* 14 (1974):6.
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9. Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women in Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 58-59.
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11. Jencks and Riesman, *Academic Revolution*, p. 108.
12. W. Vance Grant and Thomas D. Snyder, *Digest of Education Statistics, 1983-84* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 1983), p. 101.
13. Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, pp. 116-123, 187-195.
14. Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, *Opportunities for Women in Higher Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), pp. 35-36.
15. For a good summary statement of the position of women in faculty and administrative positions at this time, see Patricia Albjerg Graham, "Women in Academe," *Science*, September 25, 1970.
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17. Pamela Roby, "Institutional Barriers to Women Students in Higher Education," in Alice Rossi and Ann Calderwood, eds., *Academic Women on the Move* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1973), p. 45.
18. Betty M. Vetter and Eleanor L. Babco, *Professional Women and Minorities*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: Commission on Professionals in Science and Technology, 1986), p. 35.
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20. Antler, "Culture, Service and Work," pp. 25-26.
21. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics*, pp. 382-383.
22. Grant and Snyder, *Digest of Education Statistics, 1983-84*, p. 101.
23. Jessie Bernard, *Academic Women* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1964), p. 55; Newcomer, *A Century of Higher Education*, p. 165.
24. Women's College Coalition, *Profile II: A Second Profile of Women's Colleges* (Washington, DC: WCC, 1981), p. 83.