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Women's Education

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Women's Education

Abstract
Evolution of the American educational system has been shaped in multiple ways by concepts of appropriate gender roles and the value of different types of learning. In colonial America, while some schools offered boys and girls the same coursework, other teaching both reflected and reinforced gender divisions (Nash 2005). Some towns limited girls' training to basic reading and arithmetic, assuming that academics would prove less valuable to women than domestic skills such as sewing. Even as public high schools began to open over subsequent decades, they similarly focused the education of girls on cultivating them to become good wives and mothers. Poverty and race also determined girls' educational access. And although laws in some parts of the South banned teaching slaves to read and write, some owners cultivated slaves' literacy to enhance their usefulness or enable them to read the Bible.

Disciplines
Cultural History | Education | History of Gender | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Women's History

Comments
This chapter is published as "Women's Education," Women. Science, and Myth: Gender Beliefs from Antiquity to the Present. Sue Rosser, ed. (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2008): 213-221. Posted with permission.
Evolution of the American educational system has been shaped in multiple ways by concepts of appropriate gender roles and the value of different types of learning. In colonial America, while some schools offered boys and girls the same coursework, other teaching both reflected and reinforced gender divisions (Nash 2005). Some towns limited girls' training to basic reading and arithmetic, assuming that academics would prove less valuable to women than domestic skills such as sewing. Even as public high schools began to open over subsequent decades, they similarly focused the education of girls on cultivating them to become good wives and mothers.

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The post-Revolutionary era provided new justification for educating American women by emphasizing women's responsibility for instilling patriotic duty in their sons and shaping their daughters' character to become good mothers of future citizens. This principle of "republican motherhood" made girls' education less threatening by tying it to maternal influence, the "separate sphere" of the household, and national independence. Reformers such as Judith Sargent Murray argued that girls' intellectual capacity should be nurtured rather than smothered, as a way of giving women confidence and the ability to contribute financially and practically to family, farm, or business success. Such lofty ambitions remained unreachable for many women struggling through a family's immediate economic difficulties, while the ideals of republican motherhood could not apply to African American or native women (Kerber 1980).

By the early 1800s, a large number of private schools had opened, clearly separated by gender in both the subjects of study and the intended purpose of training. Many seminaries prepared boys for professions such as law or the ministry and hence emphasized teaching Greek and Latin. The curriculum at
female academies varied widely. Finishing schools stressed "ornamental" subjects such as needlework and etiquette to guide girls (especially from relatively elite families) toward a proper ladylike future. But in 1821, progressive teacher Emma Willard opened the influential Troy Female Academy in New York state (still open in 2007 as a women's university-prep school). In arguing for women's educational rights, Willard wrote a "Plan for Improving Female Education" that won approval from President James Monroe plus former presidents Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Along with typical feminine instruction in art and behavior, Willard's school offered young women classes not even available to all college-bound boys, such as algebra, chemistry, geography, history, and Greek. Within a decade, enrollment in the Troy Female Academy topped 300 girls. Soon other schools joined in teaching serious subjects to thousands of young women, especially in New England, aiming to make them smart wives, mothers, homemakers, and teachers. Financial troubles forced some academies to close after brief struggles, while the cost of tuition led many would-be pupils to delay or decide against attending. Yet other private schools thrived and soon found new justification for educating women.

Expansion of settlement opened demand for more schoolteachers, as did a sense that literacy was important to the country's future well-being. Women educated to at least certain levels found opportunity for employment as teachers (in part because female teachers could be hired for half a man's pay). Some estimates suggest that as many as one out of every five American-born White women in Massachusetts by the 1850s would have taught school—not usually as a permanent career but at some point in her life. While critics worried whether youthful female instructors could control wild teenage boys, teaching was generally considered acceptable as extending a mother's nurturing instincts. Prominent educational reformer Catharine Beecher, who had co-founded the Hartford Female Seminary in Connecticut in 1823, emphasized that by becoming excellent teachers, women could turn their feminine virtues and moral guidance into valuable service to society. Beecher helped recruit women to teach in frontier schools and supported establishment of teachers' colleges in several midwestern states. Over the years, female teachers across the United States wrote new textbooks, promoted classroom innovations, and worked to earn professional respect.

Racial bias continued to limit educational access for young African American women. During the 1830s, Quaker teacher Prudence Crandall upset her Connecticut neighbors by operating an integrated girls' school. The state then passed a law forbidding the teaching of Blacks from other states. Crandall was put on trial for violating that law, and vandalism and harassment forced her to shut her academy.
Educational conditions during the 19th century varied widely between city and frontier, by class, and between regions. Around the country, pockets of illiteracy remained among segments of the population. Without universally enforced laws for compulsory attendance, high school graduation rates remained relatively low before 1900. In the post-Civil War South, both northern reformers and freed slaves started hundreds of schools for African American boys and girls, but their effectiveness was hampered by poverty, racial tensions, and shortages of teachers. One notable triumph came from Mary McLeod Bethune, daughter of former slaves, who in 1904 founded a Daytona, Florida, school that soon attracted 250 young Black women. Thanks to her energetic fund-raising and devotion, the school Bethune headed for about 20 years thrived, later merging with a Black men's school to remain in existence today as Bethune-Cookman University. For Native Americans, government policy separated girls and boys from their communities, traditions, and tribal knowledge, forcing them to attend boarding schools aimed at assimilation.

Higher Education in Land-Grant Institutions

One of women's first sustained opportunities to pursue substantial degrees beyond high school occurred with the opening of Oberlin as a coeducational college; it issued its first women's degrees in 1842. The principle of coeducation was adopted by the 1860s and 1870s, not by private Eastern universities such as Princeton, Yale, and Harvard, but by state universities, especially in Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, and other midwestern areas, along with Maine and Cornell (Solomon 1986).

To take one example, Iowa State College admitted women from the beginning in 1869. After studying the record of Oberlin and a handful of other coeducational colleges, the board of trustees concluded, "If young men are to be educated to fit them for successful, intelligent and practical farmers and mechanics, is it not as essential that young women should be educated to properly understand and discharge their duties as wives of farmers and mechanics?" (Eppright and Ferguson 1971, 4).

President Adonijah Welch argued that Iowa State would do a service to both women and the nation by helping future mothers build "a wide and cultivated intelligence" suited for running a "well-regulated household" and raising new generations of good citizens. Welch discounted any fears that "enlarged intelligence will divert women's attention from domestic life," saying, "Beyond question these are the employments to which her sympathies naturally and usually point. Among her increased facilities for scientific instruction should stand prominent the study of domestic economy." Furthermore, college
should prepare women to be self-supporting if necessary and “engage in many suitable employments on a footing equal with man,” Welch declared, “because all the faculties of the human mind have, without respect to gender, a natural, unquestionable right to development” (Epright and Ferguson 1971, 8–9).

President Welch’s wife Mary took up the task of creating the new ‘ladies’ course of study” and spent several months in England and at New York’s School of Cooking to prepare her course on Domestic Economy. She taught students to cook systematically vegetables, meat, and other plain dishes. Criticizing recipes calling for a “pinch of salt,” Welch wrote, “A recipe, to be good for anything, should be as definite as a mathematical statement. The same quantities put together in the same proportions should always produce the same results. Guessing is of no more value in cooking than in science” (Ep­pright and Ferguson 1971, 34). Women also took lessons blending theory and manual skill in other practical household management chores, including care of children and the sick. In “scrub lab,” students practiced ironing one man’s shirt per week. But their training was increasingly based on science; by 1904, all female students were required to take two years of chemistry, one year of physics, and one of math. By the 20th century, home economics majors were trained not only to become housewives but also institutional cooking experts, administrators or sales agents with food companies, specialists in development of household technology, household-column journalists, and extension teachers (Stage and Vincenti 1997).

The Seven Sisters and Other Women’s Colleges

While the growing field of “domestic science” created many opportunities for women’s higher education, a separate important trend arose from the creation of all-women’s schools, especially the Seven Sisters (Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley) (Horowitz 1984). In 1837, Mary Lyon established Mount Holyoke in South Hadley, Massachusetts, primarily as preparation for New England schoolteachers. The three-year education plan covered both humanities (English, French, religion and philosophy, geography, history) and sciences (biology, chemistry, math). Holyoke culture emphasized a special connection between students and teachers, intended to reassure parents and potential critics by echoing the mother-daughter link. Holyoke attracted serious, mature women, offering them intellectual discipline and personal growth.

In 1860, Matthew Vassar created the first endowed women’s college, supported by more money than Holyoke for the library and instructional equip-
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Women’s education reached a new peak in 1885 with the founding of Bryn Mawr, where president M. Carey Thomas (herself forced to travel to Europe to obtain her Ph.D.) imported the best ideas of German higher education and opened graduate training for women. Bryn Mawr emphasized ambitious scholarship, with a commitment to innovative modern education.

The final two of the Seven Sisters, Radcliffe (1878) and Barnard (1889), started as the women’s annexes to Harvard and Columbia, respectively. There was no chance of the main institutions admitting women, but teaching by some of the same professors allowed nearby women some access to learning.

A significant number of other small but often influential women’s colleges opened over subsequent decades, especially in Catholic communities or affiliated with Protestant churches. Segregated female collegiate institutes spread rapidly in the South, where gender-role traditionalism reinforced single-sex education. African American women could attend separate historically black coeducational schools, along with some all-women’s colleges, such as Spelman College (1881) in Atlanta.

By 1891, there were over 10,000 American women in college (both coeducational schools and all-women’s institutions), over one third of all students enrolled. In 1881, the first generations of female graduates formed a new organization, the Association of Collegiate Alumnae (ACA), to counter their feelings of isolation. These women had defied traditional definitions of femininity (and often defied their parents and friends) by going to college, but they subsequently discovered few ways outside the home in which such equipment of knowledge might be utilized to advantage. The ACA intended to expand opportunities for women college graduates, especially for work in areas of social reform. This valuable network, renamed the American Association of University Women (AAUW), continued to pursue issues of educational equity into the 21st century.

Impact of Education on Health

Yet concern persisted for years about whether it was appropriate for women to attend college. During the 1870s, Harvard doctor Edward Clarke in particular warned that too much concentrated study risked ruining women’s health. Nineteenth-century physicians defined women’s nature in terms of their reproductive capacity and considered menstruation an especially stressful episode. Analogies compared the body to an economic system with limited resources. Clarke feared that women who tried to compete with men in
devoting equal energy to mental work would drain sustaining energy away from their reproductive organs. Clarke declared that he had seen women collapse and even die from too much mental strain (especially during the crucial period each month) or at least ruin their chances of becoming a good wife and mother. One gynecologist wrote in 1901 that a woman "may be highly cultured and accomplished . . . but her future husband will discover too late that he has married a large outfit of headaches [and] backaches . . . instead of a woman fitted to take up the duties of life" (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 1973, 332-356). Researchers noted with some accuracy that female graduates had lower rates of marriage and childbirth than non-college-attending women, a concern exacerbated by the eugenics movement. One psychologist warned, "Colleges may come to be training stations for the sterile woman—-aunt, maiden, nun, schoolteacher or unmarried woman" (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 1973).

To defend their mission, women's colleges and the ACA conducted research to prove that college women retained good or excellent health (Verbrugge 1988). Women's colleges built large gymnasiums and taught students about proper nutrition, sleep, and dress. A Wellesley graduate described her class as "women who will make the next generation strong, who are strong themselves and able to cope with the struggles of the workaday world" (Verbrugge 1988, 145). Women's colleges soon began fielding basketball, baseball, and rowing teams and encouraging bicycling, golf, and other extracurriculars, saying that sports "develop a young girl's character while she develops her muscles" (Verbrugge 1988, 145). Yet muscles were precisely what critics did not want; too much competitiveness risked making women aggressive and unfeminine. Female sports advocates emphasized moderation and even changed the rules of basketball to minimize dribbling, movement, and ball-stealing.

20th-Century American Women's Education

The early decades of the 20th century brought some significant landmarks in women's education, including greater access to medical, legal, and other professional training (though discrimination in treatment of female students in the classroom and barriers to employment remained). Higher education for American women became increasingly common, though lack of inclusion for poor or minority women remained a problem.

During the years following World War II, social trends favoring the conventional domestic ideal discouraged career ambitions in many women, and those who married and started families at younger average ages frequently delayed or discontinued higher education (Eisenmann 2006). The 1954 Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, declaring separate
schools inherently unequal, set the stage for integration efforts and protests as African American girls and boys sought to attend Little Rock, Arkansas's Central High School and other previously White institutions. After attorney Thurgood Marshall won a legal battle to stop the University of Alabama from turning away Black students, Atherine Lucy enrolled in 1956, only to be expelled three days later for her own safety after threats from rioters.

Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, the feminist movement focused new attention on issues in women's education, including sexual harassment on campus and continued inequities in professional opportunities. As a sign of changing times, most universities that had remained at least partially male-only, such as Harvard, Princeton, and California Institute of Technology, adopted co-education during those decades. Not coincidentally, many women's colleges experienced crises of declining enrollment during the late 20th century, forcing some to admit men; those that escaped closing fought to redefine their social relevance.

New education amendments passed in 1972 included Title IX, a section declaring it illegal to discriminate on the basis of sex in any educational programs or activities receiving federal aid. Over subsequent decades, the aspect of Title IX law that drew the most public attention was the issue of young women's access to athletic opportunities. Subsequent years brought dramatic increases in the number of girls participating in school sports, with tangible benefits for their physical, social, and mental development. Yet problems with enforcement remained, as did controversial accusations that diverting resources to women's teams had forced men's swimming, gymnastics, and wrestling teams to shut down.

Beyond athletics, Title IX covered other forms of educational gender discrimination, including classroom treatment. In 1992, the AAUW issued a report titled *How Schools Shortchange Girls* that accused American school systems of ignoring female gender inequities, such as factors discouraging girls from pursuing math and science (AAUW Educational Foundation 1995). Government agencies such as the National Science Foundation focused attention and resources on creating programs to support and mentor female scientists and engineers, as did many schools and professional organizations. Yet in 2005, then-Harvard president Lawrence Summers downplayed discrimination against women in science and engineering, indicating their underrepresentation might instead be linked to their comparative lack of ability or interest. Those comments spurred a public firestorm contributing to Summers's decision to resign and Harvard's subsequent selection of its first female president, historian Drew Gilpin Faust.

By 1990, women comprised 55 percent of American undergraduates and earned 37 percent of all doctoral degrees. (See also Women's Health Movement; Universities)
References and Further Reading


