

## Reflecting on Women, Coeducation, and Cultural Change

Nancy J. Vickers

President of Bryn Mawr College

I want to add my voice to the chorus of appreciation to the Yale administration and to the Women Faculty Forum for producing this wonderful two-day event and for offering me this splendid opportunity to join with my colleagues in thinking about how gender matters.

My charge was to think very personally, to look back at my own educational history and experience and then to articulate some lessons learned. I did my undergraduate work between 1963 and 1967 at Mount Holyoke College, a women's college. This was, of course, in the days when the choice of attending an Ivy League university was not available to women. I came to the Yale Graduate School in 1967, and remained here until 1973. You will note that this period encompasses the important year of 1969, the year Yale coeducated. I joined the Yale coeducation effort with energy and conviction. I was an assistant to Master Elias Clark in Silliman College, and I had the pleasure of welcoming the first class of transfer women into Yale. I worked with them through the first

two years of their Yale careers. It was a remarkable opportunity, since they were an extraordinary group of young women. I have the fondest of memories of those days. I was also a member of the University Committee on Coeducation, chaired so ably by Elga Wasserman. There we thought hard about how to introduce women to the world of "a thousand male leaders" and how to set the course for the forward movement of Yale.

When the time came, in 1973, for me to take employment in the tenure-track ranks of another institution, I went directly from Yale to Dartmouth. Dartmouth coeducated, of course, in 1972, so I joined a second Ivy League institution on the roller coaster ride of coeducating itself. I have often thought that the Dartmouth experience was somehow easier, simply because it was so much more straightforward. Yale coeducation had a kind of gentility about it that meant that often we did not come face to face with the full breadth and depth of the resistance we were confronting. At Dartmouth there were banners suspended from dormitory windows telling us all to go away, and the terms of the debate were very clear. I spent fourteen productive and gratifying years at Dartmouth, becoming a feminist literary critic, teaching splendid students, and collaborating with the first cohort of women faculty members. Two or three women had preceded our "first wave," and we joined them in working together to establish a strong women's studies program, to move the institution on women's issues, and, importantly, to move ourselves through the tenure system. We even mounted a successful campaign to add a woman to the Board of Trustees, a Board now chaired by one of those former students, Susan Dentzer.

I then accepted a position at the University of Southern California—which has always educated both women and men—for a ten-year hiatus within my history of otherwise single-sex or coeducating institutions. From there, I moved in 1997 to Bryn Mawr to become its seventh president. As you can see I have had a somewhat curious career, book-ended by women's colleges, centered by engagement in the coeducation of the Ivy League, and committed to women's education throughout. I should note

that this general profile was alarming enough to the student press at Bryn Mawr, when they interviewed me as a potential president, that they felt compelled to inquire as to whether I intended to carry out my “coeducation agenda” there. Though somewhat taken aback by this fresh perspective on my own past, I nonetheless answered with a firm “No.”

All of this personal history is a preamble to saying that I have truly been privileged to be an active participant in an extraordinary demographic change. Indeed I believe one of the most striking achievements of the last half of the American twentieth century to be the dramatic expansion of educational opportunities—opportunities for women, for people of color, for students of modest means, and generally for a fuller range of young people, both American and international, coming to our campuses.

Today we focus on the issue of gender and how gender matters. As I now look back from the position of a sitting president, I have great appreciation for the courage that Kingman Brewster, John Kemeny, and others needed to contemplate and indeed enact the coeducation of their institutions in the face of enormous resistance. But with that grateful backward glance, we also must look forward and question whether we are indeed truly or fully coeducated. Is the job in fact done? I think we have already heard several speakers indicate some of the ways in which it is not. I am going to build on their comments by quoting some women with long Bryn Mawr histories. First Catharine Stimpson, graduate of Bryn Mawr’s class of 1958, the first woman president of the Modern Language Association, and now Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at New York University. At a 1998 Bryn Mawr conference titled “A Women’s Place: Feminism and Education in a New Millennium,” Stimpson commented: “In all the coeducational colleges I have visited, I have never, never, never seen genuine coeducation.” Here she emphatically echoes sentiments expressed by Judith Shapiro, a former Bryn Mawr provost and now the president of Barnard, at her presidential inauguration in 1994. Let me read you Shapiro on “coeducation”:

Is coeducation being used to describe an institution

where men and women are equally likely to study *all* fields, where they are equally likely to hold positions of responsibility and authority in extracurricular activities? Is it an institution where men and women are found in similar numbers at *all* ranks of the faculty and administration? If so then we might indeed have “coeducation”; if not, then I believe we have something else.

Her irony, of course, makes the paradoxical point that in some critical ways true coeducation can only be found at women’s colleges. And her implication gives us pause as we consider the status of women at “recently” coeducated institutions. Should we not, a quarter century later, ask what remains to be done at universities like Yale?

The first thing that struck me on reading the information sheet that was handed to us when we came into this auditorium is the importance of increasing the number of faculty women, a goal which has been on the Yale agenda since 1970. One of my most inspiring Yale teachers, Thomas M. Greene, chaired a committee that year to look at the status of professional women at Yale. In a passing conversation, all those many years ago, he mentioned that the thing he found most troubling in reviewing the data was the gap between the percentage of women Ph.D.s Yale produced and the percentage of tenured women on the faculty. Today those numbers are still not in balance: 45% of Yale’s Ph.D.s each year go to women, yet only 17% of tenured faculty members are currently women.

In order to move such numbers there is indeed a lot of work that administrators and faculty can do and have done. But at the core of it, what truly needs to be addressed are some (not all) of the assumptions that inform decision making in the daily operation of the committees and departments of our most elite research universities. First, you cannot act upon a situation before you see it, and not all of our colleagues see the need to accelerate the entry of a broad range of underrepresented groups into the faculty ranks. Nor do they see the structural impediments inherent in much of “business as usual.” Simply and broadly put, gender

tends to matter more to women than to men, as a glance at those attending this panel should tell you. Since we have not yet succeeded in moving many of our male colleagues, we have yet to expand our own numbers to the critical mass that would render further movement inevitable. Second, even if we were to resolve the question of numbers, we would still need to advance our institutions beyond a posture of assimilating difference into them and toward a posture of fully embracing and representing difference. This is a truly critical shift for we are now surely at the point where we must move past assimilation to cultural change.

My sense, then, is that the compelling work is at the roots of our institutions. Much labor goes on in the branches and the leaves—a good, albeit small, policy change is enacted here; a modification is made there—but the hard and essential challenge remains at the roots. Consider, for example, the worlds of science education and science professions. I have the privilege of being the president of an institution that sends more young women on to pursue graduate study in the sciences, proportionally, than any other institution in the country. Somewhere between 35 and 40 percent of Bryn Mawr women major in the sciences every year; their numbers are equal to, or exceed, those of their fellow students who major in the social sciences and the humanities. So you will understand that I simply cannot accept the argument offered by some, even here at Yale, that women are not well represented in scientific fields because they are not interested in them. I think we must ask—and frankly the Bryn Mawr story is not dramatically different than those of the other women's colleges—what are the women's colleges doing differently? How do they generate persistence for women in science? How can coeducational institutions rise to that cultural challenge? And how can we persuade our colleagues that we must respond lest we deprive our nation and our world of critical energy and talent in this increasingly important sector? And there are other root systems to examine and engage. Consider the campus where women outnumber men in the entering class and yet still harbor a sense that they are less than full participants in the community.

Here the cultural challenge runs deep; it is grounded in the attitudes of alumni, in the social mores of fraternity systems, in the inevitable burden that comes with the benefit of a tradition and a history. Or consider, finally, the graduate student who enters a department in 2001, as I did in 1967, with few or no women faculty members in it. Will she still absorb the unspoken message that the highest levels of accomplishment in her field of choice are somehow not accessible or appropriate to her? I cannot offer handy strategies for the certain and rapid transformation of entrenched cultures, but I can share with you my firm conviction that this resistant terrain persists as our site of most productive engagement.