

College women value equality in separateness

By Jocelyn Anderson
COLUMBIA NEWS SERVICE

NEW YORK—Deb Roselli Kelly fondly remembers many late night conversations with girlfriends in college. In the dorms, in class, and around the campus, they spent all their time together. They had to.

Kelly graduated from Wheaton College in 1986, the last year it was still a women's college. Although she had to escape to nearby Brown University to enjoy the company of men, Kelly says that today she would still encourage her daughter to attend a single-sex institution.

"Times have changed," she said. "And I hope that doesn't mean women's colleges are obsolete."

Women's colleges, originally founded because women could not attend other schools, are not yet obsolete. In fact, they have changed with the times and are attracting substantial numbers of students even as critics question the need for single-sex education. In many instances, women's institutions are enjoying renewed popularity.

"Women's colleges are enjoying a very positive place," said Jadwiga Sebrechts, president of the Women's College Coalition, based in Washington, D.C. "They are seen as models of how you can give priority to certain populations."

The number of women attending single-sex schools has increased 15 percent in the last 10 years. This year, Mount Holyoke received 2,600 applications for its fall class of 525—the most ever. At Agnes Scott College in Georgia, administrators expect a fall enrollment of 1,000 in the fall, double the population of five years ago.

Even with these strong enrollment increases, many single-sex colleges have folded or become co-ed over the years, so that the percentage of women nationwide attending single-sex schools has stayed static at 15 percent.

Today 77 women's colleges exist in 23 states and Washington, D.C. A decade ago there were 84. In 1960, there were 300. Predominately private, liberal arts institutions, more than half are located in the Northeast. Most are affiliated with a religion, and have student bodies of fewer than 1,000.

But why do people choose single-sex schools? Like small schools in general, the women's colleges get high marks for faculty-student ratios and the leadership opportunities they offer students. In addition to having high graduation rates, women's colleges have produced 30 percent of Business Week's list of 50 rising corporate stars. Hillary Rodham Clinton, Geraldine Ferraro, Gloria Steinem and Alice Walker all attended women's colleges.

"The opportunities for leadership are greater for women at women's colleges," said Cheryl Walker, who graduated from Wellesley College with Clinton and now teaches at Scripps College in California. "I was asked to edit the literary magazine and to read my poetry at Boston's Winterfest. You are chosen to stand out."

That same atmosphere of opportunity resonates with today's undergraduates. They also emphasize the homey environment.

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"My first year I was having professors call me in my dorm room to chat about papers," said Erica Lutes, student body president at Mount Holyoke. "At the end of each semester, we have barbecues at their houses. It's so much more intimate than other schools."

Senior Lia Shimada said she had lacked confidence to speak out in high school, but Wellesley College changed that.

"A big thing has been that I learned how to talk in class," she said. "Wellesley encourages you to find your voice both inside and outside of class."

But the single-sex environment isn't for everyone. Women's colleges have higher attrition rates than co-ed schools, with many students transferring out after one year.

"There is a time in late adolescence, when girls are still trying to figure out who they are," said Sebrechts. "They may worry about what their sexual orientation might be perceived to be, and fear being labeled a lesbian. "Going with the flow of the American idea of college is not going to a women's college."

And so, about 90 percent of today's women's colleges offer cross-registration programs with nearby co-ed schools, allowing women to mingle with the opposite sex but also raising the question of whether these are really still women's institutions. School administrators and faculty emphasize the women-centered environment.

"Gender-related, there are men in the classrooms, but there are probably more women in the science and math courses," compared to what students find at a co-ed school, said Sarah Smedley, media relations manager at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania.

Single-sex loyalists are many. When Mills College trustees tried to admit men to the California campus 10 years ago, students boycotted classes and blocked campus buildings, shutting down the school for two weeks. So far, they have managed to hold off the testosterone influx.

Janet Jakobsen, director of the Barnard Center for Research on Women, said the Mills standoff was a turning point for women's education, one that demonstrated there is a contemporary place for single-sex colleges. Jakobsen recalled her own experience at Dartmouth College five years after it began accepting women in 1922. There were three men for every woman in classes then.

"It was a very unpleasant experience," said Jakobsen. "It taught me that co-education would never be enough. Bringing women into the classroom does not make them equal."

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