

Stopping the “flow of co-eds and other female species”: A Historical Perspective on Gender Discrimination at Southern (U.S.) Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

The interrelated nature of gender and racial constructs in the culture of the southern United States accounts for much of the historical prejudice against coeducation in the region’s institutions of higher education. This essay offers a historical perspective on gender discrimination on the campuses of Southern universities from the attempts to bar women from the state flagship institutions in the 1890s to the efforts to exclude them from the public military colleges in Virginia and South Carolina in the 1990s. It notes the similarity of the arguments employed for and against gender integration and racial desegregation. In both cases, access was only the first battle in the war against unequal treatment. Coeducation did not bring an end to gender discrimination anymore than racial integration ended racial discrimination. Men students often banned women from clubs, activities, and buildings. Faculty ignored their presence in the classroom and/or graded them more harshly. Administrators put quotas on their admissions and imposed restrictions on their mobility. This was not unlike the discrimination experienced by the first black students in integrated classrooms. Although the campus climate in the 21st century is less chilly for both women and African Americans, traditional prejudices seem to justify the continued existence of separate women’s and historically black colleges and universities. Opposition to coeducation on today’s college campuses is more likely to come from women who argue that historic patterns of discrimination remain alive and well.

Introduction

From the attempts to bar women from state flagship institutions in the 1890s to the efforts to exclude women from The Citadel and Virginia Military Institute in the 1990s, universities in the southern United States have proclaimed the deleterious effects coeducation would have on traditional gender relationships. Women, it was alleged, would corrupt and be corrupted by the masculine milieu of the university. Coeducation, one group of South Carolina students asserted, would “alter the spirit and tone of robust manliness of the student body which we believe to be of even greater importance than scholarship.”¹ When women were eventually allowed to matriculate, men students proceeded to ban them from clubs, activities, and buildings. Faculty ignored their presence in the classroom and/or graded them more harshly. Administrators put quotas on their admissions and imposed restrictions on their mobility. In 1923 men at the University of North Carolina objected to the construction of a women’s dormitory since this would “mean the beginning of a flow of co-eds and other female species into the walls of our campus that will never stop until we are all flapperized.”²

¹ Petition to the Board of Trustees, 23 June 1903, College Archives, Special Collections, Marlene and Nathan Addlestone Library, College of Charleston.

² “Shall Co-eds Have Dormitory Built Here? Representative Student Opinion Says ‘No,’” *The Tar Heel*, University of North Carolina student newspaper, editorial, 14 March 1923, 1.

Gender discrimination in the academy was (or is) not unique to the southern United States, of course, but the interrelated nature of gender and racial constructs in southern culture accounts for much of the historical prejudice against coeducation in the region's institutions of higher education. It is ironic that in the 21st century schools founded because women and blacks were barred from the top universities of southern states are now being pressured to become more "diverse"; i.e., open their doors to more men and whites. In the contemporary South, opposition to coeducation is more likely to come from women who argue that historic patterns of discrimination remain alive and well on today's college campuses.

Separate and Equal?

The belief that education should reflect essential biological and social differences led in the 19th century to the establishment of separate colleges for men and women. Except for a few private institutions such as Oberlin College in Ohio and a scattering of public universities in the Midwest and West, single-gender schooling was the norm for higher education until the Civil War (1861–1865). There were no institutions of higher education for blacks in the antebellum South, although a handful of the region's free persons of color were able to earn degrees from Northern schools.³

Educational histories have emphasized the connection between frontier conditions and the adoption of coeducation in the universities of the West.⁴ Because coeducation challenged traditional stereotypes of women's nature and roles, students developed new models of gender relations. In a 2008 history of Alfred University, Susan Rumsey Strong explored the "revolutionary implications of joint study," arguing that the same egalitarian rural conditions that led the small village of Alfred in western New York to see coeducation as "natural" also explained the university community's unwavering support of abolitionist and feminist reforms.⁵ There was little support for abolitionism, feminism, or coeducation in the plantation South despite its rural environment, however.

³ Amy Thompson McCandless, *The Past in the Present: Women's Higher Education in the Twentieth-Century American South* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1999), chapter three.

⁴ Thomas Woody, *A History of Women's Education in the United States*, vol. 2 (New York: Science Press, 1929), 253-253.

⁵ Susan Rumsey Strong, *Thought Knows No Sex: Women's Rights at Alfred University* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 4, 173.

In the southern U.S. the first wave of coeducation was associated with the denominational colleges established for African Americans during Reconstruction. Although the New England teachers who predominated at these institutions held Victorian concepts of gender identities, roles, and relations, they also realized that their graduates were not going to be ladies and gentlemen of leisure. Social mores were traditional; workplace expectations anything but. Men and women were going to have to pull together to lift the race from the degradation of slavery. True freedom required political, economic, and intellectual independence.⁶

Reconstruction legislation led to discussions of gender as well as racial identities, roles, and relations. The fourteenth amendment—like the thirteenth and fifteenth—was enacted to expand the constitution’s definition of full citizenship. The first clause of the amendment was particularly significant, ensuring “due process of law” and “equal protection of the laws” to all persons born or naturalized in the United States. But the fifteenth amendment, by stating that the right to vote could not be denied on the basis of “race, color or previous condition of servitude,” gave a distinctly male tint to citizenship. Many antebellum abolitionists and feminists were disappointed by the inability of post-bellum politicians to see the parallels between racial and gender discrimination.⁷

The egalitarian racial dreams of the Reconstruction Congress were not shared by the white planters who had dominated the politics, economy, and culture of the antebellum South, and they banded together to use whatever means possible to reinstate their control over the freedmen and women of the region. One way to do this was to limit their educational opportunities. The end of Reconstruction and the advent of *de jure* segregation had a devastating effect on public education—at all levels—in the region. Despite the rationale of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), separate was never equal.⁸

Black women, black men, and white women were all impacted by efforts to restore the pre-war hegemony of white men. As the constitutions of southern states were rewritten, efforts were made to ensure that white men—regardless of social background or intellectual capacity—were the sole possessors of the franchise. Poll taxes and literacy tests were introduced, and

⁶ *Black Colleges in America: Challenge, Development, Survival*, edited by Charles V. Willie and Ronald R. Edmonds (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University Press, 1978.)

⁷ Harriet Sigerman, “Laborers for Liberty: 1865 – 1890,” *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States*, edited by Nancy F. Cott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 303 – 305.

⁸ Thomas G. Dyer, “Higher Education in the South Since the Civil War: Historical Issues and Trends,” *The Web of Southern Social Relations: Women, Family, and Education*, edited by Walter J. Fraser, Jr., R. Frank Saunders, Jr., and Jon L. Wakelyn (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985).

public funds for schools were divided unevenly, with white schools receiving the overwhelming bulk of the tax moneys. Women's suffrage was deemed dangerous because it would enfranchise black women as well as their white sisters. The fourteenth amendment notwithstanding, some Americans were perceived as more "equal" than others.

When South Carolina's populist governor, "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman, proposed making the University of South Carolina coeducational in 1893, the *Charleston News and Courier* wrote a scathing editorial in protest. "Our people still believe in manly men and womanly women...[and] co-education after a certain age tends to modify those distinctive qualities which should be the pride of each sex."⁹ Given Tillman's proposal, it is worth noting that his own educational creations—Clemson College founded in 1889 and South Carolina Industrial and Winthrop Normal College established in 1891—reflected the dominant belief in separate spheres (and colleges) for men and women. Winthrop women were to pursue a vocational education in traditional female pursuits as teachers, dressmakers, secretaries, and farmers' wives, while Clemson men would be trained in male occupations as engineers, mechanics, or farmers.¹⁰ Graduates of these institutions might and did marry one another, but putting them in class together as undergraduates was inconceivable. Women would lower the standards and ruin the traditions of the male university; they would distract men from their studies. Even worse, they might become like men. As one opponent of coeducation at the University of Virginia asserted, women would become "familiar, boisterous, bold in manners...rudely aggressive, and ambitiously competitive with men."¹¹

This antipathy to coeducation at southern public institutions was closely connected to regional racial attitudes. The first women to attend classes on the University of South Carolina campus were African Americans who enrolled in the normal school established there during Reconstruction. When Reconstruction ended, the student body once more became all white and all male.¹² The only public institution in the state that was coeducational in the 1890s was the Colored Normal, Industrial, Agricultural and Mechanical College in Orangeburg. This

⁹ Clipping in Co-education file, Special Collections, Marlene and Nathan Addleston Library, College of Charleston.

¹⁰ Daniel Walker Hollis, *University of South Carolina: College to University*, vol. 2 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1956), 160-161.

¹¹ Mary Gathright Newell, "Mary Munford and Higher Education for Women in Virginia," in *Stepping Off the Pedestal: Academic Women in the South*, ed. Patricia A. Stringer and Irene Thompson (New York: MLA of America, 1982.), 33.

¹² Karen Petit, "USC's First Dean of Women Looks Back," *Carolina Heritage: A Pictorial History of the University of South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: Garnet and Black Yearbook/Magazine Network Staff, 1976), 26-27.

connection of coeducation with African Americans may help explain Governor Tillman's determined efforts to force the University of South Carolina to admit women in 1893, when he had no such plans for making Winthrop or Clemson coeducational. Apparently, Tillman hoped to further humiliate the institution he had already reduced from a university to a liberal arts college. Certainly, he enjoyed the angst his proposal elicited from his planter enemies.

Separate institutions for blacks and women made it easier to shape the curriculum around racial and gender expectations. Even philanthropic organizations such as the Rockefeller Fund and the Southern Education Board directed funds for black schools to industrial training. White women's colleges also faced pressure from trustees and parents who wanted their daughters' education to complement rather than duplicate that of their future husbands. Southern concepts of the "lady" further inhibited efforts to expand educational opportunities for black and white women. As North Carolina journalist Nell Battle Lewis entitled a 1925 essay for the *Raleigh News and Observer*, "Negro Slavery Throws Dark Shadow Across the South to Keep Southern Women from Securing Their Freedom." Plantation culture, she wrote, portrayed women as either queens or concubines. Neither needed a higher education.¹³

Racial prejudices could also privilege white women. Efforts by southern legislators to disenfranchise southern blacks coincided with attempts by educators to expand collegiate opportunities for white women. Southern reformers such as Charles McIver in North Carolina played the race card to argue for the creation of public colleges for white women. Why should the state subsidize "the education of white men, negro men, and negro women" and not white women?¹⁴ McIver's campaign resulted in the creation of the North Carolina Normal and Industrial School for white women in 1891. It may be simply coincidental, but Mississippi, the state with the largest African American population in the country and the first southern state to rewrite its Reconstruction constitution to disfranchise black men, was also the first state to create a publicly funded college for women in 1884 and to establish a separate Morrill Land-Grant university for African Americans in 1878.

Given the poverty of the region, there could be no justification for separate universities for white men, white women, and black men and women except for the desire to maintain

¹³ Nell Battle Lewis, "Negro Slavery Throws Dark Shadow Across the South to Keep Southern Women From Securing Their Freedom," *News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), 3 May 1925.

¹⁴ Charles D. McIver, "The Education of the White Country Girl: The Great Problem of the South," typescript of speech in Charles D. McIver Papers, University Archives, Jackson Library, University of North Carolina-Greensboro.

traditional racial and gender relationships. As historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown explained in his classic work on ethics and behavior in the old South, southern honor (of white men) required the subjugation of women and blacks.¹⁵

Governor Ben Tillman was successful in forcing coeducation on the University of South Carolina, but students, faculty, and administrators did all they could to discourage women's attendance. The prestigious literary societies and the student government association amended their constitutions to bar women from membership, the administration refused to provide campus housing, and faculty looked with disdain on their presence in the classroom.¹⁶ At the University of North Carolina, where graduate students were first admitted in 1897 and upper-level undergraduates in 1898, women students were not pictured in the school annual for nearly a decade. In 1923, the student body overwhelmingly opposed the construction of a women's residence hall. As the president of the YMCA explained, the provision of housing for women would "mean the beginning of a flow of co-eds and other female species into the walls of our campus that will never stop until we are all flapperized."¹⁷ Trustees and legislators were often even more opposed to women's presence than students and faculty. One Georgia legislator voted against appropriations to the University in 1919 because the administration had hired a dean of women for the entire institution instead of just for the School of Education.¹⁸

The campus climate of the state universities became less "chilly" as coeducation became more common, but traditional gender expectations continued to shape the curricular and extracurricular experiences of students. Men predominated in the STEM fields and in pre-professional programs; women, in the humanities, nursing, and K–12 teaching. Social regulations were typically gendered. Sororities and fraternities were particularly keen to replicate the culture of the Old South. The university remained very much a gentleman's club.¹⁹

The civil rights and women's movements contributed to the demise of both single-gender and single-race colleges. When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* in

¹⁵ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

¹⁶ Nell Crawford Flinn, "Co-Education From the Standpoint of a Co-Ed," *The Carolinian* 17, No. 8 (May 1905): 253 – 255; Faculty Minutes, 6 November 1906, University Archives, University of South Carolina.

¹⁷ "Shall Co-eds Have Dormitory Built Here? Representative Student Opinion Says 'No,'" *The Tar Heel*, University of North Carolina student newspaper, editorial, 14 March 1923, 1.

¹⁸ Thomas G. Dyer, *The University of Georgia: A Bicentennial History, 1785 – 1905* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 193 – 194.

¹⁹ McCandless, *The Past in the Present*, chapter 4.

1954 that separate educational facilities for the races were inherently unequal, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, and South Carolina all had state laws requiring the segregation of their private and public universities.²⁰ Faced with court cases from qualified African Americans, the University of Florida integrated in 1958; the University of Georgia, in 1961; the University of Mississippi in 1962, and the University of South Carolina and the University of Alabama in 1963.

The same civil rights legislation that was used to force the admission of blacks to historically white universities in the region was also used to challenge the single-gender admissions policies of publicly supported colleges in the region. The Woman's College of North Carolina became coeducational in 1964 and changed its name to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Georgia College and State University admitted men in 1967. The University of Virginia became coeducational in 1970 and its coordinate college, Mary Washington, became a separate, coeducational institution in 1972. Winthrop became coeducational in 1974. Mississippi University for Women and Texas Woman's University opened their graduate and professional programs to men in the 1970s.

The connection between the politics of race and gender was apparent in the desegregation battles of the mid-20th century. The 1963 integration of Clemson led S.C. Senator John D. Long to demand an end to coeducation—by this he meant the return to all male status—at any historically white school that accepted black males. “Now, you brave South Carolina protectors of womanhood...I'm asking you to place a barrier between our white women and colored men to keep them from being insulted. The plan I propose would take the heart out of the integration movement. They want to amalgamate the races and this would stop that.”²¹

Clemson remained integrated—by race and by gender—but the South Carolina State House debate that followed the admission of Clemson's first African American student (Harvey Gantt) in January 1963 reflected the complex interrelationship of race and gender in higher education polity. Indeed, if we consider their initially small numbers, the ostracism the pioneers often experienced, and the difficulty of their assimilation as “the other,” the experiences of the first women on the male campus in the 1890s and the first black students on the white campus in

²⁰ William H. Robinson, “Desegregation in Higher Education in the South,” *School and Society* 88, No. 2174 (7 May 1960):238.

²¹ M. Ron Cox, Jr., “Integration with [Relative] Dignity”—Clemson's Desegregation and George McMillan's Article at Forty,” unpublished paper, University of South Carolina at Lancaster, March 2003. Quotation is from *The State* newspaper, 26 April 1963.

the 1960s were remarkably similar. So, too, were their motives for choosing an integrated institution. Henri Monteith, the black woman who integrated the University of South Carolina in the fall of 1963, explained that USC “was close to my home, it offered the courses that I wanted to take...and it would be cheaper than having to board somewhere [else].”²² These were the exact same reasons given by the women who applied to the newly coeducational South Carolina College in the 1890s. These women and/or African Americans integrated their campuses because the state universities offered unique educational programs at a low price in a convenient location. Arguments about the relative abilities of the sexes or the races were more likely to come from white men, who claimed that the admission of women or blacks would destroy the “spirit and tone of robust manliness.”

The last state-supported universities to admit women were the Virginia Military Academy (VMI) in Lexington, Virginia, and The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina. Much of the opposition related to the perceived impact that coeducation would have on the schools’ military traditions. Concerns about the social disruption that would result from women’s entrance resembled those voiced earlier by opponents of racial integration. And—to focus on The Citadel—the campus experiences of the first blacks and first women were unfortunately equally unpleasant. When the Civil Rights Movement led to the desegregation of South Carolina’s public institutions of higher education, The Citadel integrated its corps of cadets. The first black graduate, Charles Foster, enrolled in 1966. As Pat Conroy illustrated in his quasi-fictional account of his own undergraduate years, *The Lords of Discipline*, many whites were determined to keep the institution “pure” and did everything they could to make life difficult and indeed dangerous for black students.²³

Over time, incidents of racial hazing lessened but did not disappear. In October 1986, five white upperclassmen entered the room of a sleeping black knob, Kevin Nesmith, and burned a paper cross. Although the five were put on restriction, Nesmith resigned from the corps, citing repeated racial harassment.²⁴ One faculty member, hired by the school in 1987 as the first woman in her department (the first woman professor, Aline Mattson Mahan, was appointed

²² Pat McNeely, “Student Respects Business Rights,” *The State* (Columbia, SC), 28 June 1963.

²³ Pat Conroy, *Lords of Discipline* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980).

²⁴ Tom Turnipseed, “Storming the Citadel: Hazing Incident Rallies Foes of Racism and Terror,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 7 January 1987.

associate professor of psychology at The Citadel in 1974²⁵), credited the bad publicity resulting from the incident to her appointment. “The Citadel had got this horrible national reputation ...and...they were anxious to prove that they were progressive....I think they hired me because I’m wonderful of course, but they really, really, really wanted women and black professors of any gender to come in and be treated well.”²⁶

Women faculty and staff and even women graduate students were one thing; women in the corps of cadets, quite another. This was the last bastion of manhood. As Pat Conroy wrote in an essay on Charleston, “The Citadel is Charleston’s shrine to southern masculinity, the primacy of the testes and the South’s reverence for things military. There is still a strong nostalgia in the city for young men dying for lost causes.”²⁷ Many Citadel administrators, alumni, and students thought that the admission of women to the nation’s service academies was a bad thing; it had altered training methods and physical standards to the detriment of the armed forces. West Point, The Naval Academy, and the Armed Forces Academy had become “soft” as a result. Only The Citadel and its counterpart VMI preserved the “adversative system” necessary to make men out of boys.²⁸

Thus, despite the fact that the last state-supported colleges for women, Mississippi University for Women and Texas Woman’s University, were forced to admit men to their undergraduate programs in 1982 and 1995 on the grounds that their single-gender admissions policies violated the 14th Amendment,²⁹ The Citadel and VMI were determined to retain their all-male corps of cadets. The measures they adopted to protect their single-gender status were similar to those earlier employed by southern universities to avoid the admission of women and blacks. Apparently unconcerned that “separate but equal” had been ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954, VMI proposed a Virginia Women’s Institute for Leadership (VWIL) to operate at Mary Baldwin, a private women’s college located nearly 30 miles away.³⁰ The Citadel shut down its day program for veterans when two women applied. When Shannon

²⁵ “1st Female Citadel Professor Dies,” *Post and Courier* (Charleston, SC), 27 February 2004.

²⁶ Holly Presnell, Interview with Dr. Jane Bishop, The Citadel, 7 September 2004; tape and transcript in possession of the author.

²⁷ Pat Conroy, “Shadows of the Old South,” from *GEO Living*, 1970, http://www.patconroy.com/patconroy/shadows_of_the_old_south.htm.

²⁸ Jeremy N. Jungreis, “Holding the Line at VMI and The Citadel: The Preservation of a State’s Right to Offer a Single-Gender Military Education,” *Florida State University Law Review* 23 (1996): 795 - 836.

²⁹ *Mississippi University for Women et al. v. Hogan*, 458 U.S. 718 (1982).

³⁰ “VMI’s Mary Baldwin plan approved by federal judge,” *Post & Courier* (Charleston, SC), 1 May 1994.

Faulkner sued to be admitted to the corps, the school proposed a women's leadership program similar to the one put forward by VMI, at Converse, a private woman's college almost 200 miles away.³¹

Despite repeated references to earlier desegregation rulings in the various court cases challenging the single-gender admissions policies at The Citadel and VMI, opponents of coeducation denied the parallels. The "prohibition against 'separate but equal' treatment," one Citadel sympathizer contended, "has never applied to gender...This is because race and gender are fundamentally different...we instinctively cringe at the notion of separate bathrooms for the races, but not at the existence of men's and women's rooms."³² The author seemed unaware that fifty years earlier few had cringed at the notion of segregated restrooms.

In the spring of 1996, the Supreme Court agreed to rule on the constitutionality of VMI's admissions policy. Although The Citadel was not a party to the suit, lawyers acknowledged that the ruling would affect its admission policies as well. In a seven to one decision the Supreme Court ruled "the Constitution's equal protection guarantee precludes Virginia from reserving exclusively to men the unique educational opportunities VMI affords." Significantly, the Court concluded that neither VMI's "goal of producing citizen-soldiers" nor its "adversative method of training" was "inherently unsuitable to women."³³ Nor did it consider the parallel program for women at Mary Baldwin equal to that provided for men at VMI. In fact, the Court pointedly compared VWIL to programs established fifty years earlier to keep blacks out of the flagship universities of the region.³⁴ The ruling resulted in the adoption of coeducation by both VMI and The Citadel. Neither school was required to change its name or mission, however.

The Citadel admitted its first four women in the fall of 1996. All did not go well. Two of the women withdrew from the college the first semester, alleging they had been physically and mentally harassed. Although fourteen cadets were later disciplined for hazing the women, the administration initially contended that their mistreatment was not related to their gender. In fact, the commandant of cadets claimed "the women were so well accepted that male cadets treated

³¹ Susan Faludi, "The Naked Citadel," *New Yorker*, 5 September 1994, 75.

³² Kristin Caplice, "VMI and The Death of Single-Sex Study," reprinted in *The Brigadier* (cadet newspaper of The Citadel), 14 April 1995.

³³ *United States, Petitioner v. Virginia et al. and Virginia, et al., Petitioners v. United States*, 116 S. CT. 2264, June 26, 1996, 28, 23, 80.

³⁴ *United States, Petitioner v. Virginia et al. and Virginia, et al., Petitioners v. United States*, 116 S. CT. 2264, June 26, 1996, 28, 23, 80.

them like any other first-year students... [who] also had their shirts set afire after being doused with nail polish remover.”³⁵

One of the most interesting arguments in the various court cases surrounding coeducation at publicly funded universities dealt with the perceived difference between historically white and/or historically male institutions and those that were historically black and/or historically female. The latter were often described as affirmative action remedies compensating for centuries of discrimination. As one of the students who opposed the admission of men to Texas Woman’s University explained, “[I]t is an issue of power. Men have it, women don’t.... White men don’t need an institution to ‘focus’ on themselves, they can do that anywhere they want.... Let’s not forget that the argument of separate is not equal does not make sense in a vacuum.”³⁶

Much has changed in the last three decades. Women now make up the majority of students in undergraduate programs everywhere in the country. They earn the majority of bachelor’s and master’s degrees awarded and are closing the gap in numbers of professional degrees. The flagship universities of every southern state have significant enrollments of African American and other minority students. In a coeducational and multicultural world do we need special institutions or programs for women or people of color? Or, to paraphrase George Orwell, are some people still more equal than others?

Equity in admissions and enrollments has not necessarily translated into equitable campus experiences. As Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, President of Sweet Briar, a women’s college in Virginia, put it: “Access isn’t everything. Despite the fact that official barriers to women in higher education have been eliminated, coeducational colleges and universities are still struggling to create a level playing field for both sexes.”³⁷ Muhlenfeld cited findings from *The Women’s Initiative*, a 2003 report on the status of women at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. The authors concluded that women undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and staff all faced—although undergraduates more often than the other groups—“pervasive and debilitating stereotypes and prejudicial expectations about what they can accomplish.”³⁸

³⁵ Sybil Fix, “Women at The Citadel: What Went Wrong?” *Post & Courier* (Charleston, SC), 9 March 1997; “24 Women Accepted At Citadel for Fall,” *New York Times*, 31 January 1997.

³⁶ Dawn Tawwater-King, “A Place of Our Own,” *Denton NOW* 1:6 (October 1994): 1.

³⁷ Elisabeth Muhlenfeld and Nancy Gray, “Women’s Colleges Must Be an Option,” 14 September 2006. <http://www.roanoke.com/editorials/commentary/wb/wb/xp-82587> .

³⁸ The Women’s Initiative, Duke University, http://web.duke.edu/womens_initiative/index.html, 7.

The Duke study reported that undergraduate women felt “intense pressures to conform to strict norms of femininity.” This included downplaying their intelligence, capabilities, and aspirations when in the presence of men. Sexism, racism, and homophobia in the peer culture created “an environment where women and other groups are often reminded of their need to prove their worth.”³⁹ As Judith Shapiro, President of Barnard College, wrote in a September 2003 letter to *The New York Times*, “If women at Duke University feel that they must hide their intelligence to succeed with men, then true coeducation remains an unrealized goal, despite the historic struggle that allowed women to gain admission to former men’s institutions.”⁴⁰

Critics of coeducation contend that “support for success, student-faculty interaction, class participation and leadership development [are] all greater at women’s colleges than at their coeducational counterparts.”⁴¹ Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) offer similar reasons for choosing a predominantly black institution over a predominantly white one. In a 2009 article, Daryl C. Hannah answered the question “Are HBCUs Still Relevant?” with an enthusiastic “yes.” Having decided to attend Morehouse College over the University of South Carolina (USC), Hannah wondered how his life might have been different if he had attended USC. “Would I have the same confidence in my abilities working in corporate America, which is overwhelmingly run by white men, had I not attended a school that demanded I view myself as equal?... Attending Morehouse challenged me to view myself not solely as a Black man but as a leader.” Comments from readers echoed his conclusions. “I believe HBCUs are still relevant in this day and age for the simple fact that racism is still alive, and it’s institutionalized.”⁴² So, proponents of women’s colleges would add, is sexism.

Thus, colleges founded to educate women and/or African Americans argue that their continued existence is necessary if the United States is ever to overcome historical patterns of gender and racial discrimination. Although the Supreme Court ruled against the plaintiffs’ request for increased funding to HBCUs as a remedy for past inequities in the Mississippi case of *United States v. Fordice* (1992), Justice Clarence Thomas noted that “It would be ironic ... if the institutions that sustained blacks during segregation were themselves destroyed in an effort to

³⁹ The Women’s Initiative, 14.

⁴⁰ Judith Shapiro, “Women on Campus: Still Not Truly Equal, Letter to the Editor, *The New York Times*, 28 September 2003.

⁴¹ Muhlenfeld and Gray, “Women’s Colleges Must Be an Option”; see also, Elia Powers, “Staying Single Sex,” *Inside Higher Education*, 5 March 2007 <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2007/03/05/sweetbriar>

⁴² Daryl C. Hannah, “Are HBCUs Still Relevant?” *DiversityInc*, 5 February 2009; <http://www.diversityinc.com/public/5041.cfm>

combat its vestiges.”⁴³ Significantly, the HBCUs in *Fordice* were joined by the predominantly female Mississippi University for Women (MUW) in arguing that the merger of HBCUs with historically white institutions or of MUW with historically male institutions would decrease rather than increase diversity in public education.

The State of Mississippi wants its three historically black colleges (HBCUs) and its historically female college (MUW) to expand and diversify enrollments. The landmark Ayers lawsuit, filed in 1975 but not settled until 2001, provided \$503 million to be distributed among Mississippi’s three HBCUs with the proviso that the recipients first “achieve and sustain for two years a White enrollment of 10 percent in order to trigger funding.”⁴⁴ MUW, although coeducational since 1982, was criticized by the Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) for its low levels of male enrollments (approximately 15 percent). MUW’s president, Claudia Limbert—wishing to increase the number of males in the student body and concluding that men would not attend a college “for women”—engaged a consulting firm to find a new, more male-friendly nomenclature. When the MUW Alumnae Association protested, Limbert severed ties with the 118-year old organization and founded her own association, The MUW **Alumni** Association [my emphasis]. The former alumnae association renamed itself Mississippi’s First **Alumnae** Association [my emphasis] and created its own web site and newsletter. It vehemently opposed changing the name and mission of the university.⁴⁵

Early in 2009 Limbert’s consultants came up with three alternative names—Reneau (after Sallie Reneau, an early Mississippi suffragist who died before the college was founded) University, Welty-Reneau (after Eudora Welty, the Mississippi novelist who attended the college for two years and hated it) University, and Waverly (after a nearby plantation) University—and proceeded to “test” them with adolescents. The “winner” was Waverly University. For students of literature the name recalls Sir Walter Scott’s historical romance about 18th-century Scotland; for local residents, the aura of the Old South. Neither conjures up images of independent, progressive women. The consultants’ findings were subsequently shared with the MUW Leadership Committee, consisting of representatives of the staff, faculty senate, student

⁴³ *United States v. Fordice*, 505 U.S. 717 (1992).

⁴⁴ “Leaders Resign Themselves to Settlement in Mississippi Desegregation Case,” *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 10 May 2001; “Ayers Case Ends After Supreme Court Refuses to Hear Appeal,” *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 4 November 2004.

⁴⁵ Unofficial Community Site of a Proud Graduate of Mississippi University for Women, accessed 22 May 2009, <http://www.muwalumni.com/>

government association, foundation, and the alumni association (not Mississippi's First Alumnae Association). Additional names were added to the mix, including Callaway (after a well-known golf resort) University, Magnolia (after the "Magnolia State") University, and University of North Mississippi (after the geographic location). Of all the recommendations, the Leadership Committee favored Reneau and Waverley. While conceding that these names were "gender neutral," the Committee nonetheless worried about the "'snob appeal' contained in the names, and connotations of the 'old South' and its often racist culture." Once the new name is agreed upon, the proposal will be presented to the Mississippi state legislature for approval. Will legislators replace a name associated with the first public efforts to provide women an education for leadership with one that recaptures the aura of the Old South in order to attract more men students?⁴⁶

The comparison between MUW and The Citadel is interesting. Both of these public universities were forced to become coeducational so that men in the case of MUW and women in the case of The Citadel could have equal access to their special programs and leadership training. Today males make up approximately 16 percent of MUW's student body; females, approximately 6 percent of The Citadel's. Surveys of males at MUW and of females at The Citadel reveal similar levels of loyalty to their institution. Yet only MUW has been pressured to change its enrollment mix and its mission.⁴⁷

The fiercest resistance to coeducation in the last decade has come from alumnae of and students at private women's colleges in the region. The devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 led Tulane to abolish H. Sophie Newcomb College and create a coeducational Newcomb-Tulane undergraduate division. Randolph-Macon Woman's College, facing declining enrollments and increasing budget deficits, announced its decision to become coeducational in 2006. In both cases, legal suits were filed seeking to reverse the changes.

H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College for Women in New Orleans was unique among women's colleges in the 19th century. Josephine Louise Newcomb founded the college in memory of her daughter in 1886 and eventually contributed \$3 million to the institution. A coordinate college of Tulane University, Newcomb was the first degree-granting college for

⁴⁶ Kristin Mamrack, "Reneau, Waverley Favored by MUW Group," *The Dispatch* (Columbus, Starkville, and the Golden Triangle, MS), 12 June 2009.

⁴⁷ "Top Ten Reasons I Support An Identity Campaign For MUW & Not A Name Change," MUW Alumni: The Unofficial Website, <http://www.muwalumni.com/>; Diette Courrégé, "Citadel: Time Brings Change," *Post & Courier* (Charleston, SC), 10 May 2009.

women established within an American university and served as a model for northern coordinate colleges such as Barnard and Pembroke. In part because of its large endowment, Newcomb was among the earliest schools awarded a “standard college” designation by the Southern Association of College Women. It stood as an exception to the “poor sister” status of most women’s and coordinate colleges. For over a century Newcomb jealously protected its independence from Tulane as its women students were increasingly integrated into the Tulane campus. In the view of Newcomb alumnae, President Scott Cowen of Tulane used the ruse of Hurricane Katrina “to renege on the agreement with Mrs. Newcomb, dissolve the college...even though the administration has continually stated that there was no financial reason for this drastic move.”⁴⁸ Immediately nieces of the donor filed suit (and were later joined by a great-great-great-niece) asking the court to “[o]rder the Tulane Board to honor the condition and charge in Mrs. Newcomb’s will by reopening and operating Newcomb College and restoring its endowment.” Tulane conceded that the dissolution saved little money and that it would not improve the status of women students who “enjoyed a better college experience and stronger allegiance to their college than the men of Paul Tulane.” In response to the suit, Tulane contended that it was indeed fulfilling the donor’s desire to educate young women at the university, and that no where in the will did the donor insist that this education occur on a separate campus.⁴⁹

The situation at Randolph-Macon Woman’s College (R-MWC) involved a much more dramatic change in the campus experience of its students. Told that the institution could not survive if it did not admit men to its undergraduate programs, the trustees voted in September 2006 to change the name of the institution to Randolph College and to become coeducational in July 2007. Students and alumnae, furious at a decision that seemed to ignore support for the college’s single-gender status, formed a not-for-profit corporation, Preserve Educational Choice (PEC), Inc., “to pursue all reasonable avenues to preserve the 115-year tradition of Randolph-Macon Woman’s College (R-MWC) as an institution for women.”⁵⁰ PEC prepared a critique of the arguments presented to the trustees in favor of coeducation and provided *20 Reasons Why*

⁴⁸ Clarence L. Mohr, “Coming Together (and Falling Apart): Tulane University and H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College in the Postwar Decades,” *Louisiana History* 49 (Winter 2008): 53-92; “The Facts,” Save Newcomb College, http://newcomblives.com/main/?page_id=73

⁴⁹ “Legal Q & A,” Save Newcomb College, http://newcomblives.com/main/?page_id=45 ; John Pope, “Newcomb Plaintiff Pushes for Fast Action,” *The Times-Picayune*, 1 June 2009.

⁵⁰ Alumnae of Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, Timeline of R-MWC History, <http://www.rmwc-alumnae.org/timeline.html>

You Should Change Your Vote. The solution to the college's financial difficulties was simple: "stop using tuition grants as a substitute for an effective marketing program; stop apologizing for being a woman's college; and start selling the unique benefits of education at a woman's college." Education at a coeducational Randolph College, the authors argued, would be inferior to that at an all-woman's R-MWC. They cited findings from Duke University's 2003 *Women's Initiative* that undergraduate women at the elite coeducational institution were forced to play down their intelligence to attract men. And just as 19th-century opponents of coeducation argued that the admission of women would lower academic standards, the 21st-century opponents of coeducation at R-MWC contended that the admission of men would do the same. "There is," the report noted, "an alarming demographic trend nationally for a decreasing percentage of men of college age to attend college at all, and those who do are less interested in academic performance than their female classmates at the same institutions. Thus...the college will have to stoop to lower levels of academic quality in the applicant pool than if it offered those same slots to women, and that once these men arrive on campus they will constitute a drag on the intellectual atmosphere."⁵¹ Although the PEC has not been successful in getting the trustees to reverse their position, the group's efforts have revived discussions of gender discrimination on the contemporary coeducational campus.

Conclusion.

Has the need for separate women's colleges or special women's leadership programs "gone with the wind"? Recent articles in higher education journals note that male rates of enrollment, persistence, and graduation consistently lag behind those of their female peers.⁵² Are "we...all flapperized?" Are males the ones needing special attention and programming on our campuses? Have we finally achieved gender equity in higher education? Rosalind Rosenberg, in a 1988 essay on coeducation, argued that the growing numbers of women in the student body, faculty, and staff of coeducational universities "creates a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for realizing the egalitarian vision of coeducation's early advocates." Equity means more than student parity in admissions. The academy must also incorporate "the concerns, the insights, and

⁵¹ Preserve Educational Choice, Inc., *20 Reasons Why You Should Change Your Vote: An Analysis of the Arguments Used for Coeducation*, Submitted October 12, 2006 to the Trustees of Randolph-Macon Woman's College.

<http://www.rmwc-alumnae.org/PDF-Files/timeline/2006/10-12-06-TwentyReasons.pdf>

⁵² Elizabeth Redden, "Lost Men on Campus," *Inside Higher Ed*, 22 May 2009.

[Http://www.insidehighered.com/layout/set/print/news/2009/05/22/men](http://www.insidehighered.com/layout/set/print/news/2009/05/22/men)

the aspirations born of women's differing experiences." As long as "the world the woman student enters continues to be a world shaped predominantly by men," women—regardless of their numbers—will continue to experience discrimination.⁵³ But that was twenty years ago; what about the present? A 2006 study of campus climate at my own coeducational institution (66.3 percent female) in Charleston, SC, indicated that the vast majority of women students (95.3 percent) rated the campus "comfortable" or "very comfortable" for women. Yet when their responses were examined more carefully, the study revealed that "72.2 % reported hearing students ... [and] 39 % heard faculty or staff making insensitive or negative remarks about women." Of the 33 percent of women "who said they had experienced discrimination or harassment...gender was second only to race as the perceived cause of the ill-treatment."⁵⁴

Speakers at the 2nd Conference on College Men, meeting at the University of Pennsylvania in May 2009, noted the negative influence of traditional stereotypes of masculinity on today's campuses. Male students felt pressured "to be unemotional, calm, cool under pressure, to be competitive, aggressive, self-assured; to *not* be gay, feminine or vulnerable."⁵⁵ Such pressures, as the Duke University Women's Initiative revealed, continue to be especially strong in the South because of historic conceptions of gender identities, roles, and relations dating back to the antebellum period. We may dance the Charleston, but we are not yet "all flapperized."

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⁵³ Rosalind Rosenberg, "The Limits of Access, The History of Coeducation in America," *Women in Higher Education in American History: Essays from the Mount Holyoke College Sesquicentennial Symposia*, edited by John Mack Faragher and Florence Howe (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988). Essay reprinted at <http://beatl.barnard.columbia.edu/learn/documents/coeducation.htm>.

⁵⁴ Von Bakanic, "Little Ado about Something: The Gender Climate at the College of Charleston," *Cheek: The Magazine of Women's and Gender Studies at the College of Charleston* III (Spring 2008 – 2009): 5 – 6.

⁵⁵ Frank Harris, quoted in Redden, "Lost Men on Campus."

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Published by the Forum on Public Policy

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