

American Higher Education for Women: A Historical Perspective

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The History of Education and Social Change

EDU7100

Dr. Gary Smith

August 11, 2014

Abstract

The history of women's higher education in America is one characterized by behavioral norming and a socio-cultural need for women's education, to both serve pragmatic purposes of domestic efficiency and piety in the American home and to serve the need for a workforce of educators to feed the higher education system from standardized primary and secondary school systems.

Actual legislative support for equality for women in American higher education did not arrive until 1972 after so many other disenfranchised groups' equal protections were articulated. Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 provided a cultural statement for women in higher education more than an actual pathway to professional dominance in the workforce. Regardless of accessibility, American women still face greater social issues of division of labor in the home, reduced pay in the workforce, and the juggling act of trying to excel in both spheres.

Much more is needed in terms of cultural reform to bring American women socio-cultural equality.

Keywords: American higher education, college, university, women

America has always been, in concept, the land of opportunity. This is evidenced by the rapid expansion of the American higher education system such that by 1900, there were more institutions of higher education awarding advanced degrees in America than in all of Europe combined (Cohen and Kisker, 2010). Throughout America's history, the lens of *equal* opportunity has shifted from different ethnic and religious groups. Even though women are at least 50% of all individuals encompassing any one persecuted group, their express right to education was not solidified until Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972. Prior to this shamefully late date of legislative support, women were admitted to various institutions according to the popular demand of the institution, or by invention.

By 1900, the majority of American institutions of higher education were co-educational but before the turn of the century and after, the women's college was cultivated by popular demand not socio-cultural equality. After all, "the ostensible mission of the universities – the quest for knowledge and academic excellence – was always subordinate to the institution's adherence to popular value (Cohen and Kisker, 2010)." The most elite institutions found it socially relevant to educate women, however the education of women was separate from that of men. It is important to note that the segregation of women and certain races was a matter of biology. Women and certain races were considered biologically inferior due to their smaller head circumference until intelligence testing arose as the reliable measure of mental aptitude and capacity (Gould, 1980).

Some institutions were created for women exclusively. These institutions had the express purpose of refining the woman for domestic excellence, or for the purpose of training for the role as school teacher (Jones, 1998). The former was chiefly accomplished through seminaries, many of which became women's colleges, including my alma mater, Mount Holyoke College, which is

regarded as the first women's college in America. The latter was accomplished through Normal Schools.

In the mid-19th century, women's seminaries dominated the higher education landscape. These institutions were steeped in religiosity that articulated the pious role of women in an agrarian and professional society (Masteller, 1998). The curriculum essentially served to perpetuate the stereotype for women in American culture. Their core knowledge resided in the domestic realm, which included ushering the American family into heaven through prudent lifestyle choices and fear-filled dogma.

Normal schools were essentially teachers colleges in which a core knowledge of curricular and instructional principles was developed (Madigan, 2009). This education also served the purpose of standardizing American life as what we seek to know is formed by our social and cultural needs and constructs. Concurrent with the development of normal schools was the behavioral psychology field as it was applied to educational theory. The curriculum of normal schools essentially taught American students how to behave in American schools and in the American workforce under the scaffolding of reward and punishment. This theoretical construct happens to fit nicely with the behavioral norming of the Christian religious text the Bible, in which the Creator is deft at both reward and punishment, according to one's adherence to the ordained prescription for good living.

From 1837 when the first women's college was founded that is still in operation, Mount Holyoke College to the end of the century, the proliferation of women's institutions of higher education continued. Notably, the Seven Sisters, an association of seven women's colleges in the northeastern states of America, promulgated the mission of a liberal arts education for women (Madigan, 2009). This is significant because prior to this initiative, the curriculum for women

was different from that prepared for men. The distinction between a women's seminary or normal school and a women's college is that the women's college acknowledged a biological equality of women. The idea that women were biologically inferior was declining in popular science; perhaps the cultural beast was harder to slay than the scientific theory on the matter. Despite this victory for women's higher education in America, it would be another 100 years before an actual act of Congress acknowledged the unalienable rights of women to education.

Title IX of the American Educational Amendment of 1972 broadly prevents discrimination based on gender in education programs that receive federal funding (Title IX, 2014). In practice, this legislation requires institutions to devote equal funding to each gender's institutional activities. To have legislative controls over higher education was a foreign concept in America until the 20th century but by mid-century, a flurry of legislative action defined equality in several realms of American culture. While I did not live during this time, I have always found it interesting to consider to the stringent gender stereotyping of the 1950s, a necessary dimension of restoring family culture in a post-war society, in the context of the 1960s when cultural-behavioral norming was met with a social backlash of music, sex, riots, and all sorts of other social evolutions.

I see it in my own family, my mother's generation laid waste to mental illness and substance addiction. All three siblings were "tainted" by the times, according to my grandmother, who did everything in her power to maintain behavioral norming in the 1950s when she was raising her children as a single mom, left to raise three children after her husband went to the Korean War and came back only to divorce her and pronounce homosexuality (yes, this is my crazy life). My grandmother somehow still managed to get a master's degree, with which she pursued the typical career of secondary instruction. None of her children obtained an

advanced degree, or even a college degree, making me the first since her to pursue higher education.

Legislation that promotes the efficacy and continued improvement of online higher education benefits women in the workforce and leadership positions. The fact is that women's suffrage did not ever result in an equal social arrangement for women and men in America. While women have risen in the workplace, men have not made similar leaps in commanding the domestic sphere. While the socioeconomic shift of having both man and woman working outside the home has resulted in more involvement by men in the domestic roles, women still carry a disproportionate percentage of the domestic chores while also working for a fraction of the man's dollar in the workplace. In other words, the American woman plays at least two full-time roles, the first of which has always been undervalued monetarily, and the second of which is also undervalued. Why?

The question of why is one that is extremely relevant to my own personal and professional existence. My husband and I went to graduate school at the same time. He is a lawyer and I have been trying to become a college professor within the geographic confines of his professional existence. I have made a great go of it, becoming the chair of one of the life sciences departments in which I have worked, however, my professional existence is deferent to his and my role as mother is also deferent to my professional existence. My husband treats me as an equal and works hard to share domestic chores but this reality still exists for me. It is not his fault but rather the fault of our cultural construct, really the cultural construct of the world, as defined by all major religious texts that have shaped gender relations in all cultures of the world.

I could pursue my career with more defiance to this cultural conundrum but that would probably result in the failure of my marriage, or at least the turmoil for my children for having both parents gone at work most of their waking hours*. This reality exists for many, many Americans. As an adjunct faculty member of several community colleges in Colorado, I have taught hundreds of students, the majority of whom are women who are going to college after having children, or after or during their husband's careers. They work, raise families and are students. The days of carefree studentship, ie the collegiate way, are not familiar to most women in America.

In my ideal world, legislation providing for equal pay for women would be a huge investment in America's future. More women are entering the professional workforce in 2014 than men. These women are responsible for providing for the same families that men provided for in previous centuries. It is only appropriate that the woman's hour in the workplace be worth at least as much as a man's. I will go even so far as to say that a woman's hour should be valued at a higher rate than a man's since there is a greater opportunity cost for women's absence in the home. American children need guidance and support. Much research shows that love and care in infancy and toddlerhood is essential to healthy cognitive development. If women leave the home, the alternate caretakers, likely other women in education professions, need to be paid appropriately to command the professional expertise required for nurturing child development,

* In fact, we tried that experiment for the last five months. I just resigned from my job as a higher education consultant in Denver to become a middle school science teacher because our domestic sphere was falling apart. Prior to that, I had worked part-time as an adjunct professor, which was simple to manage with my domestic responsibilities.

lest the quality of childrearing in America declines, which could have devastating results on future generations' capacity for professional excellence. The woman who leaves the home to work needs to pay someone to raise her family. Therefore she needs additional funds to replace the opportunity of raising one's own children, which is free.

The history of women's higher education in America is one characterized by behavioral norming and a socio-cultural need for women's education to both serve pragmatic purposes of domestic efficiency and piety in the American home and to serve the need for a workforce of educators to feed the higher education system from standardized primary and secondary school systems. Actual legislative support for equality for women in American higher education did not arrive until 1972 after so many other disenfranchised groups' equal protections were articulated. Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 provided a cultural statement for women in higher education more than an actual pathway to professional dominance in the workforce. Regardless of accessibility, American women still face greater social issues of division of labor in the home, reduced pay in the workforce, and the juggling act of trying to excel in both spheres. Much more is needed in terms of cultural reform to bring American women socio-cultural equality.

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