

# “Demand Something to Fulfill that Need”: Student Consumers, Liberal Arts Education, and the Dilemma of Modern Womanhood at the Seven Sisters Colleges, 1915–1930

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**ABSTRACT** Elite women’s colleges were in flux in the 1910s and 1920s. Some critics argued the liberal arts should be replaced with a “womanly” curriculum. Others sought to combine the liberal arts with some consideration of women’s likely domestic futures. Students took an active role in this debate. Buoyed by discourses that emphasized their status as modern women and their influence as consumers, students fought to shape their educations. This desire constitutes an unexplored aspect of 1910s/20s college life. That women’s college students felt entitled to greater social freedoms is well-documented, but this attitude of entitlement and individualism also led them to claim similar freedoms in charting their lives *after* college, including the ways in which they were trained for married or professional life.

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In October 1926, a junior at Wellesley College, surveying her college’s strict liberal arts curriculum, pleaded with college authorities for “a little mingling of the sand with the star-dust,” and suggested that many aspects of Wellesley life and education would benefit from a more thorough and practical approach (“Discussions,” *Wellesley College News*, October 7, 1926). Three years earlier, a Barnard senior had grumbled of her education that “[t]heoretical knowledge...is worth very little if we haven’t actually used it in solving problems while we are in college” (“After the Conference is Over,” *The New Student*, February 10, 1923). These students were not alone in their discontent. In the early decades of the twentieth century, conventional wisdom held that women’s higher education had to change. Some critics argued that the liberal arts should be replaced with, or severely tempered by, a more “womanly” curriculum akin in some way to the new field of home economics (“Is a College Education the Best for our Girls?” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, July 1900; “Domestic Science in the Schools and Colleges,” *The North America Review*, August 1909).

Others sought a more nuanced evolution of higher education that would prioritize the liberal arts but combine it with some coursework aimed at women’s likely domestic futures (Radke-Moss, 2008; “Three Thousand Sensible Girls,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, May 1900). Elite women’s colleges—especially the northeastern colleges that would come to be known as the “Seven Sisters” (Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley)—were not the exclusive focus of this debate, but as nationally prominent institutions, and among the very few women’s institutions that rejected home economics, they received disproportionate public attention. These criticisms were only sharpened in the post-World War I era as hostility against women’s colleges—damned as irrelevant at best and socially and psychologically harmful at worst—grew increasingly acute (“Enemies of the Republic,” *The Delineator*, June 1921; “Calls Western Education Best for Nation’s Women,” *New York Times*, July 1, 1923; “The Case for Coeducation,”

*Forum*, November 1923; “Why Educate Women?” *Forum*, March 1929; “Spinster Factories,” *Forum and Century*, May 1932).

This curriculum debate is a minor feature in most histories of women’s higher education, and the little attention it receives focuses, almost entirely, on the ways public opinion affected college policy (Gordon, 1992; Horowitz, 1984; Solomon, 1986). Historians have paid less attention to the viewpoints of actual students. A cursory examination of student and alumnae publications makes clear that, by the 1910s, students at all of the Seven Sisters were actively seeking to reshape their educations—not only expressing discontent with the status quo, but forming student curriculum committees and articulating informed plans for change.

Historians such as Paula Fass (1979) and Helen Horowitz (1984) have documented and analyzed new student attitudes that emerged in the mid 1910s and especially in the 1920s. In line with a broader national trend, women’s college students became more focused on an off-campus social life that revolved largely around men. These social activities, and the freedom with which to pursue them, eclipsed not only the homosocial activities, rituals, and traditions that had for two generations been the mainstay of life at the Seven Sisters, but became more important than academic life as well. These attitudes translated into less engagement with and commitment to college life and, presumably, to college education itself.

It is not my intent to challenge the overall structure of that narrative. But in focusing so much attention on the students’ individualism, sense of entitlement to greater social freedoms, and prioritizing of domestic over professional futures, historians have failed to appreciate the important and nuanced ways in which these students *did* remain committed to academic life and the extent to which they expected their educations to prepare them for the futures of their choice.

Certainly, student grumbling about the curriculum was not new, but the aggressive attitude that underpinned the complaints of the late 1910s and 1920s represented a definite change from the more circumspect and deferential approach of previous generations. Buoyed by popular discourses that emphasized their status as modern, newly-enfranchised women, as well as their power as consumer citizens, students envisioned futures that combined professional and domestic pursuits, and called loudly for new courses and areas of study that would better reflect their vision of what a college-educated woman could be (“Thoughtful Selection,” *Smith College Weekly*, April 23, 1913; *Smith College Weekly*, October 20, 1920; ; “Progressive Higher Education,” *The College News*, March 21, 1928). Examining student interest in the curriculum not only illuminates a little-studied area in the history of women’s higher education, it also increases our understanding of this new spirit of individualism and self-determination among students—because that same attitude that led to demands for greater social freedoms was at the root of students’ engagement in curriculum reform as well.

Concurrent with the growing student interest in curriculum reform at the Seven Sisters was an ongoing, and very heated, public debate about what constituted an “appropriate” or “proper” woman’s education. One of the American public’s most enduring preoccupations with women’s colleges has concerned their curricula. After all, it was the announcement that they would offer to young women the same liberal arts program as was taught at Harvard, Yale, or Amherst that had rendered the Seven Sisters so immediately sensational in the first place. But by the 1910s, with college-educated women moving more and more into the professions and their marriage rates falling, a genuine backlash against women’s colleges was underway (Horowitz, 1984; Smith-Rosenberg, 1985). In a 1913 speech, one Columbia professor assailed the women’s colleges as impractical to the point of being harmful, proclaiming:

*The most backward educational institutions in this country today are women’s colleges. They are worse than primary schools. They are dealing with stuff that never counts in life. In fact, they contend at Vassar, which is typical of other women’s colleges, that the further you get from real life and usable knowledge the more cultured you become* (“Churchmen, Scientists,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 21, 1913).

A few years later, a noted industrialist concurred, calling women’s college students, “thoroughly ignorant of the things they should know” (“A.B. See Would Burn all Girls’ Colleges,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1922).

These two men might have been especially hostile, but their general argument found many adherents. In 1927, a more even-tempered critic wrote to the *New York Times* that women’s colleges indeed had a critical role to play in society, but it was not to educate women identically to men. Rather they were to “train their students to be gracious and intelligent wives and mothers” (“Lack of Originality,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1927). Critics pointed to co-educational colleges and universities, especially the large state schools of the South and the Midwest, where home economics was firmly entrenched, and suggested to the women’s colleges that they’d be better off

proceeding in that direction. These schools, they claimed, not only prepared young women to be accomplished and efficient homemakers, they also instilled a pride in traditional “women’s work” (Mina Kerr, “Home Economics in a College of Liberal Arts,” *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, November 1916; Eva vom Baur Hansl, “Parenthood and the Colleges,” *Journal of the American Association of University Women*, January 1922). Even some of the colleges’ presidents, such as Henry Noble MacCracken at Vassar, and William Allen Neilson at Smith, recognized student dissatisfaction and wondered if the time had come for a more “womanly” approach to women’s higher education (Daniels, 1994; MacCracken, 1950; Thorp, 1956).

Students at the Seven Sisters were indeed dissatisfied, and they also were fond of using words like “inefficient” and “impractical” to describe their colleges’ curriculum, but, significantly, both their complaints and their suggestions for change were very different from those voiced in the national, more public, debate. Students did occasionally wonder if a program of study that so completely ignored their likely futures as wives and mothers made much sense, and campus newspapers of the period do contain the odd query about “domestic” training. But there is no evidence to suggest that the dominant feeling on *any* of the campuses was that a more “womanly” curriculum—and certainly not the home economics program popular at so many state universities—ought to replace the liberal arts, or even share equal billing with it.

What frustrated and increasingly angered students was how little say they had in determining their own courses of study within the existing curriculum. Coming of age in the heady late 1910s and 1920s—an era much preoccupied with the possibilities of modern life in general and for the modern woman in particular—students demanded a control over their educations commensurate with the control they now exercised, at least in theory, over their post-collegiate lives. This attitude clashed with the established curricula at all of the Seven Sisters, which in the 1910s mandated study of a wide array of disciplines over a four-year period—an approach that might have made the students “well-rounded” but left them with little time to study a chosen field in any real depth. Many students feared that this would leave them little better prepared for a profession than they had been upon entering college. The frustration expressed by one Bryn Mawr student, exclaiming in 1915 that, “[t]o come through four years of college and still be completely in the dark as to what one’s ‘proper’ job may be seems incredibly stupid,” was typical (*The College News*, March 11, 1915).

Other students felt that the current system not only left them ill-prepared for postgraduate life, but was also so poorly-focused that it could not claim to be much of an education at all. In 1924, a Vassar senior complained of the typical college program, “Most courses make a pretense of having as their aim the development of thinking power, but few live up to it. After four years of this game of brain-stuffing, the student has a college education” (*The New Student*, January 5, 1924). Two years later, a Wellesley junior acknowledged the abstract benefits of so wide-ranging an education, but took her college to task for the superficiality of its curriculum, asking, “does a

group when it is trying to solve a practical problem come to a conclusion of worth by wandering through generalities and indulging in abstractions?" ("Discussions," *Wellesley College News*, October 7, 1926). Even at Radcliffe, where distribution requirements were less draconian than at the other colleges, there was significant unhappiness. A student writing to *The Radcliffe News* in 1921 spoke for many of her contemporaries when she observed:

*Somehow, there seems but little room left for the courses [students] really want to take. As a result, they usually have to do without some knowledge that they hoped to get in their college course* (*The Radcliffe News*, March 18, 1921).

Such concerns were not unfounded. A visitor to Bryn Mawr told students that real world experience was more valuable than even the most intensive academic training ("Mrs. Reed Says..." *The College News*, May 11, 1921). Several years later, a guidance counselor at Barnard expressed to the *New York Times* that, "The college woman who succeeds in business today owes her alma mater very little thanks. She is the victim of one of the most perfect systems of unpreparedness and misguidance ever devised" ("College Girls Held Unfitted for Jobs," *New York Times*, August 27, 1933). For students coming of age in the business-oriented 1920s these comments and others like them were troubling.

Students also voiced dissatisfaction with the lack of attention the colleges paid to actual pre-professional training, though it is unclear exactly what they would have liked to see instead. Certainly the opinion expressed in a 1916 Bryn Mawr editorial—that "College training should undoubtedly help us to be wage-earners"—would have been popular on all of the campuses (*The College News*, November 15, 1916). Another piece suggested "an Introductory Course in Jobs," which would familiarize students with the growing possibilities for women in the workforce and what courses might best prepare them (*The College News*, March 11, 1915). But these were not calls for actual vocational training, as it existed in many other colleges and universities, so much as an expression of general discontent with the current offerings. A request from a Vassar junior for "vocational instruction which will fully prepare and equip the student for some specific kind of work after graduation," was typical of the students' impassioned, but vague, calls for action (*The Vassar Miscellany*, October 30, 1914). Based on comments in the student press and articles in alumnae publications, students wanted their colleges to make available to them more pre-professional resources—such as campus vocational offices and college-sponsored vocational conferences—and they enthusiastically publicized such resources where they existed (*The College News*, December 19, 1917; *Smith College Weekly*, November 30, 1921), but actual vocational training did not much interest them. As with any modern consumer, students wanted to know what options were open to them, so they could then make informed decisions for themselves.

It is difficult to say just how many students at the various colleges were actively engaged with curriculum reform, but the level of coverage devoted to it in the campus press and alumnae publications would indicate that the issue at least

elicited widespread interest. As a 1915 front-page story in the *Smith College Weekly* put it:

*One needs only to ask at the table some day, 'Do you think that Latin or Greek should be required for freshman?' or, 'I think that everyone should be made to take a course in Zoology.' In nine cases out of ten the discussion that follows will be a lively one* ("The Curriculum," *Smith College Weekly*, February 24, 1915).

Interestingly, individual student concern was not limited to their respective colleges. Campus newspapers frequently reported on the issue's progress at other institutions, and especially at other women's colleges. In 1922, the *Smith College Weekly* related in great detail Barnard's proposed new curriculum ("Barnard Students Plan New Curriculum," June 1, 1922). The following year, the *Bryn Mawr College News* reported that students at Mount Holyoke had presented a model of their ideal curriculum to their professors—who had, so it was reported, received the plan with delight ("Kicks and Kicks," January 17, 1923). Such stories kept the community informed, communicated to the faculty and administration that the students were in earnest, and, possibly, put pressure on the curriculum committees push aggressively for change.

By the middle of the 1920s, student curriculum committees could report some successes. Course requirements at all of the colleges had been loosened, at least a little bit, making room for a new system of "specialization," (a predecessor to the modern major) and freeing up more time for student electives. The extent to which real change was due directly to student agitation and committees is another matter. Faculty members at all of the Seven Sisters had also long expressed frustration with the old system, and, by and large, administrators recognized that the colleges would have to adapt some aspects of their curricula if they were to survive in the hostile environment of the 1920s (Daniels; MacCracken; Thorp). Nevertheless, historians should not overlook student engagement with this issue. Contrary to their frivolous reputations—unfocused and immature girls who had lost interest in academic life and could not wait to flee the campus on weekends—numerous students cared enough about their own educations to take concerted and informed action. But, unlike previous generations of students, who were more deferential in both their complaints and in their suggestions for improvement, this generation saw it as entirely right and proper that they should take the lead in bringing about desired changes, and believed they had the right to expect results. A 1920 letter to the *Smith College Weekly* summed up this new attitude very well. After cataloguing the impracticalities of the curriculum, the student explained, "[f]ar be it from anyone to decry the prevalence of liberal arts courses; but there would be more and greater interest in those very courses if they could be used and applied through the medium of practical courses." Foreshadowing later generations' emphasis on the student as paying customer and the university as purveyor of services, this student made clear the connection between the modern woman, the modern student, and the modern consumer. Warning that, "Women are going to need something tangible... they are going to demand something to fulfill that need. If they cannot get what they want at college they will go somewhere

else for it" (*Smith College Weekly*, October 20, 1920), she claimed for her generation the right to chart its own path and put the colleges on notice that the relationship between administration, faculty, and students had forever changed.

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