

**“What History Tells Us:
Remarks for Panel ‘The Challenge of Coeducation’”
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Linda Eisenmann
Professor of Education, Professor of History
Wheaton College, Massachusetts, USA

Because I am the only historian of education on our panel today, I thought it would be useful if I reviewed the history of coeducation in the United States, my argument being that many of the historical issues continue to affect how women and men experience education today.

Before starting, let me offer two caveats. First, I am a specialist in American education, so must leave it to others to find explicit parallels and differences in other national settings. Second, although I will speak to all levels of education for girls and women, my primary scholarly focus is higher education, as found in undergraduate and graduate institutions. Even with those caveats, I believe we will see issues that connect to our current discussion.

My central point about the history of coeducation in America is that it was rarely planned or performed out of concern for women’s educational equity or even women’s interests. Rather, women were seen in utilitarian ways: they could bolster enrollments; they could offer refinement to male classmates; they could be socialized for their role in society; and they could receive education in female-appropriate fields. But generally, the expansion of coeducation in the U.S. – and in many cases, the creation of single-sex institutions – developed in spite of women’s needs, rather than as a way to address them.

Before taking us on a quick historical tour, let me say something about the word “coeducation” itself. For members of our audience for whom English is not the first language, the word “coeducation” likely seems neutral: it simply describes a situation in which women and men are educated in the same setting. Yet, because coeducation was a choice and not the natural approach for many decades in U.S. history, it came to signify adding girls and women to boys’ and men’s educational settings, and in doing so, adjusting women to what was considered “the norm.” Especially in colleges and universities – but also in the earliest schools for younger children – deciding to educate men and women together was just that: a decision that presumed the education of men as primary.

More bothersome is the English word “coed,” a shorthand or nickname for a woman attending college. The term originated in the late-19th century and remained quite popular until the late-20th, although I still hear it occasionally today. It is more derogatory than the basic term “coeducation,” because it denigrates women’s institutional presence, certifying that the institution is organized around men’s needs, and suggesting that women’s participation is

surprising, even problematic. In the mid-20th century, the word “co-ed” became slang for a woman who was unserious, naïve, and suggestible, using college simply to find a man.

I start with these linguistic concepts because they remind us of my main point: rarely were coeducational institutions framed around women’s needs. And even women-only institutions initially were forced to exist in relation to men’s schools.

Historically, thinking about women’s education passed through various stages, some of which appeared once and then came around again. I think of these stages as “couldn’t,” “shouldn’t,” and “if so, then different.” Let me explain.

In the United States, until about the mid-19th century, there was a belief that women simply *couldn’t* manage education the way a man could. In an era when physical attributes were thought to indicate moral and intellectual capacities, women were clearly inferior to men. This extended to the brain itself: since women’s brain size was demonstrably smaller than men’s, they were assumed less capable of advanced learning. Similarly, their biological needs seemed to unfit them for study. In 1873, Harvard-trained physician Dr. Edward Clarke published “Sex in Education; or, A Fair Chance for the Girls,” which used (rather unconvincing) evidence to show that women had insufficient energy to develop both their reproductive systems and their brains. Too much time on education would by default keep them from being womanly, and vice versa. Dr. Clarke’s work, although refutable, pushed several women’s organizations to publish studies showing that woman could indeed manage both functions.

Concern over women’s reproductive function leads into my second category of “*shouldn’t*.” That is, even if people were willing to admit that women could learn, many of their choices seemed inappropriate. Even studies by groups like the Association of Collegiate Alumnae that demonstrated how women could complete college and still pursue marriage and motherhood also revealed that female college graduates married and had children at lower rates than lesser-educated women. At the turn of the 20th century, this prompted a worry over what was termed “race suicide,” arguing that the small families being produced by educated, middle-class women would lead to a nation overrun by newer immigrants who tended to have larger families and, of course, were less well-situated economically.

Another element arguing that women “shouldn’t” be educated was the basic issue of “why.” Since few careers were open to women, and since motherhood was assumed as their major role, why would women need much education? Further, how would schools and colleges know what to teach women beyond basic preparation for being a good wife and mother? This view, although it manifested in different ways over different eras, continually nagged at those who supported education for girls and women.

Here arises my third point – “if so, then different.” As the 20th century progressed, girls were increasingly educated in coeducational settings, and women attended college in growing numbers. Before 1870, only 1 in 6 women attended a coeducational college; yet by 1880, it was 3 in 5, and that is with only about 2% of the age group going to college. Coeducation

became the normative college experience by about 1900, and by the 1950s, 9 of 10 college women studied in a coeducational school.

That leads us to the question of our panel: was acceptance into a coeducational setting the same as gender equality? History would tell us, no. Although access to what men had was usually the goal, results proved disappointing. In fact, women's very success in accessing college created a backlash whereby some schools limited women's enrollment, or enforced stricter discipline on their behavior, or pushed them into sex-segregated curricula. Some institutions created "Ladies' Departments," or home economics and teaching training programs that only women could access. Many schools restricted extracurricular activities to men only; some closed certain courses, or limited the number of honors for which women could compete. As two scholars of this history have noted: "Coeducation alone, without a transformation in consciousness, does not bring gender equity."¹¹

On the positive side, exclusion often led women to create their own programs and environments. In fact, Wellesley College exists and thrives because of this history. Over the last century, women have found ways – in both coeducational and single-sex settings – to enact leadership, develop their skills, and support their interests. But they have often done so at a price, being kept separate, often with insufficient resources, and estranged from the full range of curricular, disciplinary, and career options available to men.

I close by citing a term that I have developed in my own research on college women. I have called women "incidental students" due to the fact that, although they were always present in large numbers – and today constitute well over half of all college and graduate students – educational policies, plans, and practices were rarely conceived with women in mind. Even in what should be neutrally "co-educational" settings, women have been seen as incidental additions whose needs would simply have to fit what was already in place. That, I think, is how the historical story informs our questions about gender equity today. How do we make women's needs non-incidental, and in fact put them in the center of our decision-making?

¹¹ Leslie Miller-Bernal and Susan Poulson, eds., *Going Coed: Women's Experiences in Formerly Men's Colleges and Universities, 1950-2000* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), p. 310.