A Different Class of Students

Women are the majority on many coed campuses today, so women's colleges have had to broaden their appeal and support.

By Jessica Colefati

When it opens its admissions to men this fall, Pennsylvania's Rosemont College will become the latest in a long line of former women's colleges to either go coeducational or shutter their doors. According to one study, just 3 per cent of college-bound women will even consider attending a woman's college. Yet on many traditional coeducational campuses across the country, female students now outnumber their male peers.

Some argue that this combination of factors demonstrates that women's colleges are obsolete, but Pat McGue, who has served for 20 years as president of Trinity Washington University and its woman's college, thinks otherwise. McGue says she has watched Trinity (located in the District of Columbia) transform during her tenure and offers the admissions essays written by prospective students as evidence of why women's colleges still exist and whom they are serving. "Where I come from," one applicant wrote, "based on stereotypes, the typical thing for me to do is become someone's 'baby mama' or housewife. Women all over are subjected to these stereotypes [and] that's why I firmly believe in this college."

McGue says that poor or minority women who see not just college but a woman's college in particular as their ticket to knowledge, empowerment, and success are not the only students who appreciate what women's colleges have to offer. An analysis of data from the National Survey for Student Engagement shows women at women's colleges rate their educational experience higher than women at coeducational schools.

When more than 300 women's colleges existed in the early 1960s, these schools primarily served upper-middle-class, white students. Some famous alumnae of this era include Madeleine Albright, Drew Gilpin Faust, Betty Friedan, Katharine Hepburn, Anna Quindlen, and Martha Stewart. The nearly 50 women's colleges still operating today are among the country's most ethnically and socioeconomically diverse liberal arts colleges, offering generous financial aid packages. Just as women's colleges were founded because women couldn't go to college elsewhere, many of today's women's colleges are surviving—and thriving—by educating specific populations of women who are still underserved.

Though about 20 per cent of Trinity's students were white when alumnae like House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Health Secretary Kathleen Sebelius were students there, 84 per cent of Trinity's current student body is either black or Hispanic. About half of the students hail from the D.C. metro area, and needing to improve their critical reading, writing, and math skills, the college recently rewrote its first-year curriculum to include a greater emphasis on developing these "foundational skills," McGue says. "It's not that these women aren't smart or can't do it," she added. "It's that no one ever sat them down and explained how to do it."

Like Trinity, Nebraska's College of St. Mary once had a primarily white student body. Today, about 20 per cent of the student body at St. Mary's is made up of minority women, but what makes this midwestern women's college stand out is the comprehensive support it provides for single mothers seeking a college education. Women in the Mothers Living and Learning program live with their children alongside other single mothers in on-campus dorms, have access to free meals for their children in the college's dining hall, and can enroll their children in day-care serv-

ices that are within walking distance of the college's campus.

Susan Williams lives in a St. Mary's dorm with two of her children and says the specialized program made for single mothers attracted her to a woman's college. Before transferring to St. Mary's, Williams attended the University of Missouri. At Missouri, she lived in off-campus housing with her children but had little access to additional assistance. "At Missouri, I was basically living on my own, and that didn't work for me. I needed more [emotional and academic] support," says Williams, who is studying to become an occupational therapist. "Women need women's colleges because for some women like me, it's the only way they will see where they can go in life."

Single mothers interested in learning more about their higher education opportunities can now make use of an information clearinghouse created last year by Wilson College. The National Clearinghouse for Single Mothers in Higher Education (www.wilson.edu/wilson/aap/content15.asp?id=2874) provides links to areas of interest such as educational opportunities, financial aid, public policy, parenting skills, personal growth, and women and leadership.

Success via support. When St. Mary's initiated its program for single mothers in 2000, just six mothers and their children were enrolled. Today, the program has grown to include 52 moms and their 38 children, who come from across the country to join the program. Sister Karen, a nun who runs the MLL program at St. Mary's, says she often finds mothers supporting other mothers in ways as simple as an hour of much-needed babysitting. "If one student's baby is out of control and Mom is frazzled, another other mom is often there to knock on her door and say, 'Take a shower. I'll keep an eye on the baby while you take some time for you."

Sister Karen says "This level of support breeds success among these students, students who need to be successful not only for themselves but for their children, too."

Virginia's Mary Baldwin College reaches specialized populations of women like the young, economically gifted students who can attend the college as teenagers or women interested in joining an all-female corps of cadets, but the school also attracts women without the socio-economic means to attend other colleges. Mary Baldwin President Pamela Fox says that 75 per cent of her college's students receive need-based financial aid and that in response to the falling economy, Mary Baldwin students will have access to additional financial aid through the "Boldly Baldwin" program starting this fall.

The package offers 210 need-based first-year students a $1,000 merit award, an undetermined number of upperclassmen additional merit and need-based aid, and 50 students of all grade levels new, on-campus internship positions where, she says, "we will put our own students to work." Fox says the Boldly Baldwin program is just one example of the many ways women's colleges turn to innovative ideas as a means to continue to attract new students. "Women's colleges are ahead of the curve and on the forefront of what women need," Fox says. "We have never seen and we will never be followers. We have to create our own way forward."