

“Keep the Damned Women Out”: The Struggle for Coeducation in the Ivy League, the Seven Sisters, Oxford, and Cambridge¹

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My subject is the flood of decisions for coeducation at elite colleges and universities in the United States and the United Kingdom in the period 1969–74. Why did so many very traditional, very conservative, very elite, very old colleges and universities decide to embark on such a fundamental change? What happened, and how well did coeducation work in its early incarnations?

In the United States, coeducation happened because it was in the strategic self-interest of all-male institutions like Princeton and Yale to admit women. By the late 1960s, these schools were beginning to see their applications decline, along with their yields. The high school students they called the “best boys” no longer wanted to go to all-male institutions, and the key issue was their ability to continue to attract those “best boys.” (Harvard had begun to pull away from Princeton and Yale in the competition for the best high school students.) Coeducation became the means for places like Princeton and Yale to shore up a first-rate applicant pool and enrolled student body. It was not the result of a high-minded moral commitment to opening educational opportunities to women, nor was it the result of deep thinking about how to educate women. Rather, it was about what women could do for previously all-male institutions—about how women would help these schools renew their hold on the “best boys.” Women played the instrumental role of improving the educational experience of men, and therefore, it is not surprising that going coed did not always well serve the women who were admitted to the early coed classes.

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A related point: The protagonists in this story are men. Save for Mary Ingraham Bunting, the president of Radcliffe College, every strategist, every decision-maker, every person leading the charge for coeducation was male. Coeducation resulted not from organized efforts by women activists but from strategic decisions taken by powerful men.

Why did coeducation happen when it did? Changes in application patterns were a trigger, but the larger context of the 1960s set the stage. Thanks to the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, the student movement, and the women's movement, colleges and universities by the end of the 1960s looked quite different than they had at the beginning of the decade. The composition of student bodies began to change to include a large number of public school students as well as students from less advantaged families, Catholics and Jews, and even African Americans. Admitting women followed logically. Men and women students demonstrated together, protested together, and registered black voters together, so not going to school together seemed increasingly outmoded. All of this, of course, bears on why high school students changed their minds about the attractiveness of all-male schools.

It would be difficult to overestimate how tough it was to make coeducation happen. There was fierce opposition from alumni, as well as significant resistance from many faculty and students. Some examples illustrate the point.

As for alumni, let's start with the title of my book, "*Keep the Damned Women Out.*" It comes from a 1970 letter from a Dartmouth alumnus to the chair of the Dartmouth trustees: "For God's sake, for Dartmouth's sake, and for everyone's sake, keep the damned women out."²

Next, consider an example from Yale. When the Yale Corporation first opined publicly on the education of undergraduate women, one alumnus responded this way: "There is a glory to tradition. I think of the girl filled weekend—the cocktail party, the dances, the plays . . . the big football game. Then there is the adventure of . . . journeying to the girls' colleges. . . . And gentlemen—let's face it—charming as women are—they get to be a drag if you are forced to associate with them each and every day. Think of the poor student who has a steady date—he wants to concentrate on the basic principles of thermodynamics, but she keeps trying to gossip about the idiotic trivia all women try to impose on men."³

Here are some examples from Princeton: Coeducation, one alumnus said, would dilute "Princeton's sturdy masculinity with disconcerting,

2 William O. Keyes to Dudley W. Orr, Jan. 2, 1970, John Sloan Dickey Papers, Box 7200, DP-12, Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College.

3 Conrad Yung-Kwai, letter to the editor, *Yale Alumni Magazine* 29 (July 1966): 3.

mini-skirted young things cavorting on its playing fields.”⁴ Another alumnus put it this way: “What is all this nonsense about admitting women to Princeton? A good old-fashioned whore-house would be considerably more efficient, and much, much cheaper.”⁵

As for faculty, some were supportive, some were opposed, but virtually everyone put the newly admitted women students on the spot by asking for “the woman’s point of view,” no matter whether the course was in literature or psychology, where such a view might have been relevant, or in math or physics, where it wasn’t. In terms of explicit insults, consider the art history professor at Dartmouth who posted slides of nudes on the screen, running his hand up and down their thighs, or the oceanography professor who showed pictures of sea creatures, shrimp and lobster, squid, and naked women. Or the Yale history department chair who when asked to consider offering a course in women’s history responded that that would be like teaching the history of dogs.

Students were not always much better about welcoming their female classmates. There were regular outbursts from men unaccustomed to having women in their classes. The benign version: “It’s a girl! It talks!”⁶ Male students often told their female counterparts that they did not belong on their campuses. Dartmouth offers the most striking examples of bad behavior. Dartmouth men hung banners from dormitory windows reading, “No Coeds” and “Better Dead Than Coed.”⁷ They shouted out numbers meant as ratings of attractiveness as women entered the dining hall, as if they were rating the quality of a dive. Fraternities delighted in drunken, degrading, dangerous behaviors and scurrilous verbal assaults on women students. In the third year of coeducation, the winning entry in the annual intra-fraternity Hums competition was the song “Our Cohogs,” ten verses of outrageously insulting, sexualized attacks on women. (“Cohog” was a highly derogatory nickname for women students.) The judge of the competition, the Dean of the College, chose “Our Cohogs” as the most original

4 Elleard B. Heffern to R. Manning Brown, Dec. 11, 1968, Office of the President Records, Robert F. Goheen, Box 95, Folder 4, AC193, Princeton University Archives, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

5 A Princeton Alumnus, letter to the editor, *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, Sept. 29, 1968, Goheen Papers, Box 94, Folder 7.

6 Yvonne Ng and Jennifer Rexford, eds., *She’s An Engineer? Princeton Alumnae Reflect* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University, 1993), p. 61; Janet Lever and Pepper Schwartz, *Women at Yale: Liberating a College Campus* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 190.

7 *The Dartmouth*, May 14, 1973, Women at Dartmouth Collection, Box 6593, DO-61, Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College; Gina Barreca, *Babes in Boyland: A Personal History of Co-Education in the Ivy League* (Hanover, NH, and London: University Press of New England, 2005), p. 4.

submission and joined fraternity members in an exuberant public rendition of the song.

We turn now to the United Kingdom. At the University of Cambridge, Churchill, Clare, and King's Colleges admitted women in 1972. At the University of Oxford, five men's colleges—Brasenose, Hertford, Jesus, St. Catherine's, and Wadham—admitted women undergraduates in 1974.

As for why coeducation happened in the UK, the story begins with the focused scrutiny of the British university system in the 1960s. The first of two major reports—the *Report of the Committee on Higher Education*, chaired by Lionel Robbins (a member of the APS)—made the case for expansion of British universities, with a proposed tripling of capacity such that anyone who qualified would find a place. Less than 5% of British youth enrolled in universities, and of those, less than a quarter were women. Lord Robbins argued that a large pool of talent was being denied entry.

The second report—the *Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, chaired by Oliver Franks—argued for broader recruitment of students at Oxford, reaching beyond traditional independent boarding schools to more diverse, less elite state schools in order to accomplish “the social representation of the nation in Oxford's student body.”⁸ It argued, too, for growth in the size of the student population and for increasing the number of women undergraduates.

There was a clear desire to expand opportunities for women to study at Cambridge and Oxford, but the women's colleges lacked capacity and resources to accomplish it. In 1963–64, women accounted for 16% of Oxford students, compared with 28% in British universities as a whole. At Cambridge the next year, just under 10% of students were women, the lowest percentage of any university in the country. The question of how to increase the numbers of women students was front and center on the two universities' agendas.

A peculiarly British version of strategic advantage operated at Cambridge and Oxford. Their overwhelming prestige and power made it less likely that the “best boys” in the UK would opt for other, already coeducational institutions. And yet there was new competition for students with the founding between 1961 and 1965 of “new universities” at East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Lancaster, Sussex, Warwick, and York. These new universities offered broader, more flexible, more interdisciplinary, and more innovative curricula, and they emphasized new styles of learning. They also offered coeducation. By 1966–67, depending on the university, women accounted for 35% to 43% of the students.

⁸ University of Oxford, *Report of Commission of Inquiry*, vol. 1: *Report, Recommendations, and Statutory Appendix* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 35.

The popularity of the new universities among women students helped prompt Cambridge and Oxford to consider mixed colleges. Strategic advantage meant not “losing out” in the competition for “highly able girls.”⁹ But additional issues of strategic advantage were involved in particular colleges’ decisions to go mixed. The men’s colleges that were the first movers at Cambridge and Oxford tended not to be the richest or the most prestigious of their respective groups. Admitting women was seen as a way to gain advantage in the Tompkins and Norrington Tables, which ranked the colleges at Cambridge and Oxford, respectively, in terms of the academic achievements of their graduating students. The women’s colleges stood at the top of those tables. Admitting women would move a number of the strongest students from the women’s colleges to newly coeducational colleges; moreover, it would likely attract more accomplished male students who would otherwise have eschewed middling men’s colleges for more prestigious choices.

Just as the 1960s influenced the move toward coeducation in the United States, so it was also true in the United Kingdom. The women’s movement, the antiwar movement, and the student movement were felt powerfully in Europe, affecting expectations at Cambridge and Oxford about the ways men and women were to be educated. As the American historian Richard Hofstadter observed in his 1968 commencement address at Columbia University, “Not only in New York and Berkeley, but in Madrid and Paris, in Belgrade and Oxford, in Rome, Berlin and London . . . students are disaffected, restive and rebellious.”¹⁰ Sir Eric Ashby, the master of Clare College Cambridge, remarked on the “sustained gale-force wind of change” in British colleges and universities, with “sit-ins, protests, and assaults on the Establishment” part of the normal order of the day.¹¹

As was the case in the United States, another contributing factor bearing on coeducation had to do with the diversification in the 1960s of the student bodies of the most elite single-sex institutions. Cambridge and Oxford colleges began to look to grammar schools and state schools to supplement their traditional constituency of students from schools like Eton and Harrow. As student bodies on both sides of the Atlantic became more diverse, it became increasingly anachronistic to draw the line at admitting women.

⁹ Carol Dyhouse, *Students: A Gendered History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 103.

¹⁰ Richard Hofstadter, “Columbia University Commencement Address for the 214th Academic Year,” *American Scholar* 37 (Autumn 1968), 587.

¹¹ Eric Ashby, “Notes from the Master,” *Clare Association Annual*, 1966, p. 23 (“gale-force wind”), and 1968, p. 16 (“sit-ins”), both in Clare College Archives, CCCS/4/5, Clare College, Cambridge.

All of these factors set the climate for a move to coeducation. Who drove it? In the American case, the answer is college and university presidents, who had to convince boards of trustees, deal with alumni, and mobilize internal planning and execution to make coeducation happen. In the British case, the faculty was in charge; fellows could force a decision for coeducation, even over the objection of the college head.

Why were fellows of men's colleges at Cambridge and Oxford enthusiastic about coeducation? There was a generational shift in many college fellowships in the 1960s; the newly elected fellows were younger men, themselves influenced by the movements of the decade. Some of them had direct experience with coeducation; virtually all of them were more open-minded and progressive than many of their elders, and they regarded single-sex education as increasingly outmoded. Unfettered by accountability to trustees and alumni, they were in a strong position to push successfully for coeducation.

Still, there were widespread popular fears that admitting women to men's colleges would mean the end of civilized higher education as Oxford and Cambridge had known it. There were many forecasts of doom. My chapter titles give the flavor: "Like Dropping a Hydrogen Bomb in the Middle of the University"; "A Tragic Break with Centuries of Tradition"; "Our Crenellations Crumble, We Cannot Keep Them Out."¹² But, as complicated as it was to work out plans for going mixed, women students were accepted at previously all-male colleges more readily and with fewer hiccups than in the United States.

There is no evidence of fellows and tutors treating women students as any less able and serious than men, nor was there evidence of the ham-handed interactions in which faculty members at American colleges and universities asked their new women students for the woman's point of view. There is also no evidence that Oxford men treated Oxford women, or that Cambridge men treated Cambridge women, in ways that made Princeton, Yale, and especially Dartmouth so awkward for, and at times deeply inhospitable to, women students.

Why did the inclusion of women in these venerable male colleges go smoothly? For all the novelty of mixed colleges at Cambridge in 1972 and Oxford in 1974, Cambridge and Oxford had educated women students for almost a century. Women had sat in lectures with men, occasionally participated in tutorials with men, and engaged in routine social interactions with men who lived and studied nearby. The schools had sponsored mixed dances; men and women had sung together, debated one another, participated in the same religious groups,

12 Nancy Weiss Malkiel, *"Keep the Damned Women Out": The Struggle for Coeducation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

and belonged to the same theater, journalism, and political clubs. Although the colleges had not been mixed, the universities had, and women and men were sufficiently accustomed to encountering one another in a range of settings to make coeducation a less dramatic change than at single-sex colleges and universities in the United States.

Moreover, the intense animus from alumni that fueled unrest over coeducation in the United States was not part of the picture in the United Kingdom. Alumni were a much less powerful force, in significant measure because of different funding arrangements; annual giving had not yet become a feature of the expected support for colleges at Oxford and Cambridge. And alumni were quick to recognize that coeducation had advantages, as their daughters could aspire to attend their colleges.

That said, one ought not to overstate how easy it was to accomplish coeducation in the UK. There were plenty of contentious battles within college fellowships, and colleges that had expected to be in the vanguard had to step aside when they failed to muster the necessary two-thirds majority to change their statutes. And although alumni were less consequential than in the United States, they needed to be reckoned with, as evidenced by the efforts made by Eric Ashby of Clare College Cambridge and Hrothgar Habakkuk of Jesus College Oxford to persuade Old Members to accept coeducation. Both leaders compared it to the decision almost a century earlier to remove the requirement of celibacy for the tenure of a college fellowship—a monumental change in its own day, but one regarded as natural and beneficial 90 years later. The same, they predicted, would be true of coeducation.