

## **The Inclusion of Women in American Higher Education: Institutional Adaptation and Resistance**

*Anne J. MacLachlan*

The first women in the United States to receive a B.A. graduated from Oberlin College in 1841, long before women in most other countries could matriculate. Steady sustained growth in the participation of women dates from the 1870s when state colleges began to admit them. In 1870 11,000 women were enrolled in U.S. colleges, about one to every four men. Only 1 to 7, however, received an A.B. After this date the numbers of women attending college continued to grow at women's colleges, state colleges, and increasingly at co-educational and „coordinate“ liberal arts colleges. Enrollment of women grew from 85,000 (39.6%) in 1900 to 283,000 (47.3%) in 1920 to 806,000 in 1950 (30.2%) to 3,258,459 (40.1%) in 1970 to currently (1995-96) 7,919,242 or 56%.

1972 was a watershed year in that the Higher Education Amendment to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 required institutions to proactively recruit women and minorities to all schools and departments. The situation of women then was expressed in the American Council of Education Meeting in 1972 with two basic points [which] the authors and registrants were agreed almost unanimously: “Discrimination against women in higher education exists, is wrong, and should be eliminated; such discrimination is illegal, and those who practice it today are subject to stringent and costly legal sanctions, as they were not even a few years ago.”<sup>1</sup> Nearly 30 years later, despite the great growth in numbers of women students and faculty signaling their real inclusion within institutional life, there are still serious issues of discrimination, usually less blatant than in the past, but equally demoralizing. How is this possible when women appear to be ubiquitous and there is such an elaborate legal structure intended to protect them from discrimination?

Part of the answer could be found in the way in which disciplines, the curriculum, governing structures and even professional associations have been shaped since the nineteenth century and the particular role of the professor as an independent scholarly entity within a collegial structure of his peers. Likewise, the actual prejudices against women at that time still

ineluctably shape the present, and the history of women's exclusion from particular programs of undergraduate study, largely from graduate and professional degree programs, and from most faculty positions (although there were more women faculty in the U.S. in the 1920s than in the 1970s), would be informative. However, for this short presentation, I am focusing on the organization of the modern research university as a possible explanation of why discrimination can still exist and why it is so difficult to eradicate.

My central point of this short discussion is that the research university is highly compartmentalized. This blocks Information flows so that knowledge of the institution is very often confined to the individual's sphere of operation. The hierarchy within this structure intensifies compartmentalization and stymies flows of information among individuals and groups. Worse, there are parallel hierarchies: the academic, the student service, the administrative, among others, each operating in many respects not only independently from one another, but with limited or even distorted knowledge of what other sectors do. The hierarchy itself operates functionally in task designation, and informally reinforces a system of deference to faculty independence.

Within this organization individual atavistic attitudes and behaviors are still to be found. It would be fairer to suggest, however, that the same individuals think they are generally well disposed toward women, but are unaware of the consequences of their language and deportment, or that of others. Discrimination persists because in such a system there is a remarkable lack of personal accountability in matters other than teaching and research. Bureaucracies are famous for no-one being responsible: process, layers of decision making, layers of implementation all diffuse personal accountability. Higher education is not only bureaucratic today, it is an ever more elaborate stage for the pursuit of interest (including economic interest) in which the actors are not only individuals, but departments, disciplines, administrative bodies, and political groups infused with attitudes and values supported by visions of the meaning of education, the tradition of the university, and the sense of privilege which accrues to these.

This paper therefore is essentially about the inner workings of the university and will examine briefly a couple of aspects to understand how, in the end, it can succeed in not dealing

with issues and problems while serving the greater good as educating institutions. The issue does not have to be the situation of women within higher education, it could be that of minorities, of staff/faculty relationships, of graduate students, of junior faculty—there are quite a few choices. Women’s issues, however, present a broader problem than some of the others, because, along with American minorities, their issues are also those of American society. The university is not the sole site of women’s struggles, society at large is, so in consequence there are laws for society at large and for higher education in particular which attempt to enforce equality. Again the question is raised: If there are so many laws how is it possible for their implementation to be avoided? How is it that the hope expressed by the speaker above in 1972 that new laws and stiff penalties would end discrimination has not?

It should be noted that the author is at a leading Research I institution in which many departments are ranked among the top in the United States. Its faculty are distinguished, its students bright and it is a very competitive environment a many ways. There is no doubt that the author’s perceptions are shaped by an entire adult life-time in association with this institution. Although the values and behaviors observed here are likely common to all major research institutions, they are unlikely to be found in whole cloth in other types of colleges and universities.

Discrimination against women has a long tradition in western society and women themselves have very often been socialized to accept exclusion, inferior working conditions, a subordinate position at home, and in employment. Female identity is multifaceted, can be contradictory and is shaped by a multitude of cultural influences. In the research university, however, some clear forms of disparate treatment are found which render female complexity moot. If girls have survived the negative climate in high school for the pursuit of mathematics and science subjects to enter college, there are often unexpected barriers to be overcome in the climate for undergraduate women in many fields, but particularly in science and engineering. Despite the fact that girls actually do better in math and science than boys with respect to grades and standardized test scores, teaching methods and faculty attitudes can be very discouraging. A recent national study by Linn and Kessel documents the complexity of women completing

undergraduate majors in mathematics at research universities. Direct discouragement certainly plays a role. This semester a very bright woman undergraduate working for me was told by her teaching assistant that she should drop an upper division advanced calculus class because women had no business learning math. Sadly other studies by the Association of Women in Mathematics and other organizations the American Association of University Women and the Association of Women in Science document that this was not an isolated incident. The results are reflected in the continued low participation of women in graduate programs in math based disciplines from mathematics itself, economics, engineering, physics and chemistry. This in turn is reflected in the very low participation of women in academic or other professional employment in these fields, much lower than even the low percentage of Ph.D.s completed by women in them.

Additionally women are simply not getting tenure track jobs at the same rate as men, they are not being hired in anything approximating their percentage of earned Ph.D.s, and when employed tend not to earn as much as men, to have access to fewer facilities, be more dependent on soft money and to not qualify for tenure at the same rate as men. Employed women academics also are concentrated at less prestigious, more teaching intensive institutions where salaries are low compared not only to research universities, but to other professions (AAUP, ACE, ACS, NSF, NAS).

How is such a situation sustained? At research institutions there is a tendency to believe on the part of senior management and many male faculty that there are no problems with gender discrimination because they do not hear about them or rarely, and in the general course of their daily life women appear to be treated fairly. It is one of the great rarities of institutional life that President Vest at MIT when presented with the clearly documented findings of the women faculty there about the various ways in which their working conditions were inferior to men, reacted quickly to address these disparities and even called for a meeting of university presidents in New England to examine the situation of academic women. What also made it exceptional is that the president dealt with an issue brought to him outside of the normal chain of command by a group of women from different departments and of different ranks. Here is where institutional culture and organization comes into play.

Salary disparities arise in the first place because the individual academic negotiates his her own salary and work conditions, particularly at competitive research institutions. There is a presumption that even novice academics know this and know how to effectively ask for what they need to do their work. This is often not the case for either men or women, although women tend to be less aware and less able to negotiate effectively. These transactions are known only to a limited number of people, and once employed individuals rarely discuss their salary with other faculty. Salaries are further complicated in that (predominately male) fields such as engineering, business, economics, and medical specialties are paid more than history, English, and sociology. Interestingly, the one area of science in which women are equally present, the life sciences, is paid on the humanities scale. If there are problems with women earning less than men, communication channels on this topic are few even among women in the same department, let alone among women from other departments.

It is more likely that disparities come to light by highly indirect means. In one case an associate professor of biology serving as a reviewer for the National Institutes of Health discovered through grant applications of her colleagues that these men with equal or less qualifications than she were earning much more than she. With the support of NIH she did a review and demonstrated a clear pattern of salary disparity between men and women applicants among NIH applicants and at her own institution. Putting together a coalition of women from her home university similar to that at MIT, her particular institution took three years and the threat of publicity to get official agreement to a institution wide salary review. What is interesting in this case is that despite clear documentation of discrimination and unequal treatment, none of the legal mechanisms intended to insure equality in the academic workplace which were so hopefully looked to in 1972 were put into force.

Research institutions individually receive multi-millions of dollars a year in federal funds for research, for student support, for special programs and centers. In theory the receipt of federal money requires the institution to enforce all federal civil rights laws including the Equal Pay Act of 1963, likewise all other federal anti-discrimination legislation which might apply. Yet as far as can be ascertained, almost no university has ever been threatened with withholding of federal

money because of non-compliance with federal law, except in the case of corrupt athletics programs. Even if these offices were always fully informed, it is a higher order administrative decision to address any situation which could be seen as non-compliant with the law. Clearly the overall interest of the university does not lie with awakening sleeping federal watchdogs.

It also suggests that knowledge of the legal basis for regulating the presence of women on campus tends to be confined to the administrative bodies responsible for oversight. By the same token knowledge of the law appears not to be widely distributed among the faculty or even the middling ranks of academic officers. A related situation to salary disparities for women can be seen in the hiring trends for women faculty at the University of California after the passage of an internal motion in 1995 and a state wide referendum (Proposition 209) which abolished affirmative action in education and employment throughout the State of California. Four years prior to these acts, the number of women and minorities appointed to faculty positions had been increasing. Four years later in the entire system the number of women faculty has dropped from 488 (34.5%) to 378 (27.5%). These figures are suggestive in several respects. First, the hiring of women and minorities was viewed as legally compulsory and such candidates were not necessarily chosen entirely voluntarily by individual faculty in individual departments. Second, although all federal affirmative action laws dating from 1972 on are still in force, the general (incorrect) perception is that with the passage of proposition 209 they are not. The consequences of the decline in academic hiring in relation to the increasing numbers of women receiving Ph.D.s means that the disparity at this institution between the percentage of earned doctorates and new hires for women faculty have increased. It also means the absolute numbers of women faculty on campus has declined.

All this suggests that the inclusion of women in the penultimate academic position as faculty is not yet self-evident, that academic culture still has reservations about women as colleagues. The various parts of the research university has learned to accommodate to women's presence in a great many ways, yet a deep seated resistance persists.

---

1.W. Todd Furniss and Patricia Albjerg Graham, *Women in Higher Education*. Washington, D.C.: ACE, 1974. xiii