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Jennifer Prevete

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“Maybe It Was Too Much to Expect in Those Days”:
The Changing Lifestyles of Barnard’s First Female Students

by

Jennifer Prevete

Fordham University

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Profs. Julie Kim and Oneka LaBennett

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Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the lives of women who attended college during a time far less accommodating to their ambitions for higher education than today. From 1890 to 1920, some of the first females to attend college in the United States matriculated from single-sex institutions along the east coast. Existing discourse emphasizes the difficulties these women faced as they tried to pursue both career and family after graduation. Citing population studies of this time period, scholars suggest that an unusual number of college-educated women did not marry following their graduation or married at a later age. Aside from the scholarly interventions on this topic, I used written accounts provided by questionnaires from the first students at Barnard College, founded in 1889, to supplement numerical data with first-hand perspectives. The college's extensive archives provide a more comprehensive understanding of education's effects upon women. Alumnae responses on biographical questionnaires reveal how college instruction exposed them to new opportunities. Simultaneously, their answers capture the societal pressures they felt as some graduates lamented Barnard's lack of domestic training. Furthermore, higher education conferred a new way of life that some women participated in through socio-political activism after graduation. Ultimately, I assert that while a college degree allowed women at the turn of the twentieth century to pursue a life with career as the focal point as opposed to family, graduates became pulled between tradition and opportunity because a woman's college education was not compatible with female roles in the family unit.

Today, the majority of people attending college, 57 percent, are women in comparison to only 43 percent of men.¹ This ratio is far different than that of a century ago when women first began to pursue higher education. From 1890 to 1920, some of the first females to attend college in the United States matriculated from single-sex and co-educational institutions along the east coast. Existing discourse emphasizes the difficulties these women faced while pursuing both a career and family after graduation. Because these women were attempting new educational initiatives during a time when the female's role remained within the domestic sphere, they faced the consequences of engaging in an unpopular choice. The implications of their decisions appear in both statistical data and cultural attitudes of the time.

In this thesis, I attempt to explore the complex social pressures surrounding women pursuing higher education during this time period. I first examine statistics about marriage and family from this time period. From the available data involving the turn of the century, scholars suggest that an unusual number of college-educated women did not marry following their graduation or married at a later age. After 1920, matriculation rates experienced a decline while marriage rates and birthrates rose again. The numbers alone suggest that these women resumed familial roles rather than pursuing higher education. In order to provide context for these numbers and explain alterations of the feminine place in society, I describe the creation and the nature of women's colleges, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. The development of higher education marks an interesting progression. Once used to stabilize women's duties within the home, education eventually involved activism and employment. After discussing the historical context, I delve into sources featuring contemporary voices in order to better understand the general perceptions of women's education at the time. Aside from the existing

¹ "Student Effort and Educational Progress – Table A-26-2," *National Center for Education Statistics*, Institute of Education Sciences, <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/tables/table-dcd-2.asp>.

interventions on this topic, I used accounts from the first students at Barnard College, founded in 1889, to supplement numerical data with first-hand perspectives. The college's extensive archives provide a more comprehensive understanding of a college education's effects upon women of the time period. The biographical questionnaires allowed alumnae to comment upon their experience decades after attending Barnard. The responses further reveal that college instruction exposed them to innovative methods of thought and new opportunities. The goal of examining these questionnaires is not to examine patterns of nuptials or childbirth; several reliable studies have already done so. Instead, the firsthand accounts of these women help explain the trajectories of family and employment in an individual's life. They also help uncover why so few of these women acted as both a professional and a wife and mother.

Ultimately, higher education conferred a new way of life that some women embraced through socio-political activism and employment after graduation. Oftentimes, employed women defied domestic roles and never married. Many who did marry felt Barnard's influence in their lives and attempted to enact the principles of their education through various organization activities. The graduates' feelings toward their alma mater are complex, but their individual responses illuminate the social pressures they experienced at the time. Consequently, I assert that while a college degree allowed women at the turn of the twentieth century to pursue a life with career as the focal point as opposed to family, graduates became pulled between tradition and opportunity because a woman's college education was not compatible with female roles in the family unit.

The Women in Numbers: Rates of Marriage, Employment, and Birthing

As more women began to attend college at the turn of the century, more defined patterns involving marriage and reproduction rates emerged. Present-day scholars work to identify these

patterns and isolate the socio-economic forces behind them. Various sources approximate that “sixty to seventy percent of the first generation of graduates from women’s colleges did not marry and many pursued specifically identifiable careers.”² The changes in family initiatives brought apprehensions about women’s roles in society, as well as race suicide. Mary Cookingham conducted a population study in the 1980s which tracks the “V-shaped pattern” of marriage rates for women graduates from 1865 to 1910. According to Cookingham’s work, nuptials for these women were at the lowest point from 1885 to 1910. The graduates preceding and succeeding these years experienced a higher marriage rate. This pattern indicates some unique elements of education or society within that time period to produce the trend.³ While historians and eugenicists provide explanations rooted in the nature of education and the “self-selection factor” of the graduates and their suitors, Cookingham favors an economic explanation: the “marked decrease in the opportunity cost of remaining single for college women.”⁴ According to Cookingham, women did not make a conscious choice to pursue or avoid marriage; instead, they balanced social and institutional restrictions with the amount of available opportunities. Variations in the labor market helped determine whether or not it was in women’s best interest or ability to postpone marriage in favor of pursuing employment. She supports this idea with evidence that employment for young educated women coincides with the lower nuptial rates.⁵

Claudia Goldin engages in her own study and divides different generations of graduates into cohorts on the basis of their career and family outcomes throughout the twentieth century. She identifies five distinct cohorts, the first of which graduated college from 1900 to 1920.

² Conway, 8.

³ Mary E. Cookingham, "Bluestockings, Spinners and Pedagogues: Women College Graduates, 1865-1910," *Population Studies* 38, no. 3 (November 1984), 350, America: History & Life, EBSCOhost.

⁴ Cookingham, 360.

⁵ Cookingham, 354-355.

Without the opportunity to embrace a family and a career simultaneously, graduates of this first twentieth century cohort made the decision between the two. In other words, many women secured either marriage or career but not both simultaneously.⁶ To supplement her theories about the nature of the relationship between education and family, Goldin analyzes the marriage and reproduction rates in each cohort and compares the differences in rates among educated and uneducated women of the time period. She observed that more than 30 percent of female graduates in the 1900 to 1920 cohort never married by the age of fifty. Only about 8 percent of the female counterpart with no college education remained single by the age of fifty. By age forty, over 50% of the college women in the 1900 to 1920 cohort were childless. In contrast, the work-rate for those women who graduated college and did get married is low, with only 20% of married graduates working at age forty-five. The generation of women graduating from 1890 to 1920 was particularly significant because their marriage and birthing rates indicate some of the non-traditional choices they made. According the Goldin, firsthand accounts from this generation describe their careers as “higher callings” that “liberated them from the constraints of marriage and household duties.”⁷ This reflection captures some of the traditional expectations from women. Meanwhile, cohort 2, which covers the years 1920-1945, saw a decline in the rates of women who remained unmarried and childless among college graduates even while more work opportunities emerged. As women of the generation increasingly felt societal pressures, more and more decided to marry, as opposed to pursuing sustained employment. They did not believe they could possess both at the same time.⁸ From 1920 to 1970, the percentage of women enrolled in college ended its previous pattern of increase, continuing to climb only modestly or

⁶ Claudia Goldin, “The Long Road to the Fast Track: Career and Family,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political & Social Science* 596, (November 2004), 21, America: History & Life, EBSCOhost.

⁷ Goldin, 23.

⁸ Gordon, 240-241.

instead declining at some points. Lynn Gordon attributes this change to the fears of race suicide that only grew following the Spanish American War. As women began to pursue education and life outside the home while simultaneously not producing children, Anglo-Saxon Protestants faced the threat of the growing numbers of foreign races and immigrants within America.⁹ By the 1920s, those pressures came to a head. The constraints of society at the time did not easily allow women to attain both a family and a career. These notable patterns begin toward the end of the nineteenth century, but women's entrance into higher education involved the occurrence of preceding events. By looking at the social and political implications behind women's admittance into college, variations in marriage and employment reflect the pressures these women experienced.

The Evolution of Women's Higher Education

According to present-day scholarship, women's involvement in family and career varied over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Those women who graduated from college between the years of 1890 to 1920 comprise the second generation of collegiate females. Development of women's higher education emerged after a number of societal transformations in the nineteenth century. Beginning in 1820, girls increasingly received schooling beyond bare literacy.¹⁰ The educational reformers who advocated this change hoped girls' continued schooling would help stabilize and reaffirm the traditional authoritative positions of the community, church, and family. In short, education would enhance a woman's abilities to act in her previously designated roles, mother and wife of a household, for the overall benefit of society. While female education at this time emphasized maintenance of traditional domestic roles, Nancy

⁹ Gordon, Lynn D., "Education and the Professions," in *A Companion to American Women's History*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt, 227-249. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002), 231.

¹⁰ Green, Nancy, "Female Education and School Competition: 1820-1850," in *Woman's Being, Woman's Place: Female Identity and Vocation in American History*, ed. Mary Kelley, 127-141. (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1979), 128.

Green remarks that the young women's assimilation into secondary school acted as a precursor to the movement for women's colleges.¹¹ Paradoxically, the educational reform efforts of the mid-nineteenth century intended to stabilize the family unit and a woman's place within this unit would eventually help her find a path outside the home. Once greater numbers of women began to attend college, concerned leaders in politics, education, and eugenics took note of the marriage and reproduction patterns of women in higher education. Present-day studies confirm that these varied family and career trends did exist.

Records of American history denote the Civil War as a time of great upheaval in the United States, and the Civil War's transformative role in the development of [women's](#) education is no exception. The movement for women's colleges emerged from the antebellum and Civil War eras in the United States as a consequence of shifting societal values during the nineteenth century. The ideal woman of the Victorian era engaged in "passive femininity" as she performed her duties elegantly and dedicated herself to traditional domestic duties.¹² At this time, coeducational institutions advocated, above any other purpose, schooling for women's betterment in her existing traditional roles in society. Jill Conway observes that the period following the Civil War generated a shift in education as greater numbers of women pursued independent careers. Previously, women were mothers to their biological families and nurtured the next generation of civically and morally responsible citizens. During the Civil War, women activists began to challenge their gender roles through "their attempts to act out the now-accepted women's role of guardian of society's moral standards through a concern for the

¹¹ Green, 137.

¹² Abrams, Ann Uhry. "Frozen Goddess: The Image of Woman in Turn-of-the-Century American Art," in *Woman's Being, Woman's Place: Female Identity and Vocation in American History*, ed. Mary Kelley, 93-108. (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1979), 93.

situation of slaves rather than through childbearing and teaching.”¹³ Entrance into the political sphere through abolitionist movements marked a change in consciousness for women. Feminists who challenged their subordinate position faced opposition, but the disapproval of others did not diminish the feminine concern with issues outside the home. While the conclusion of the Civil War brought an end to some of this activism, these revolutions in thought contributed to more significant consequences for college-educated females.

The conflict over feminine roles continued post-Civil War as intellectual life became professionalized. Women who pursued higher education had more opportunities to use their academic discipline within their occupations.¹⁴ From the social changes following the Civil War, scholars note the first definitive group of college women. Similar to the women who participated in the feminist abolition movements, women who did attend college at this time faced the difficulties of pursuing an unpopular course in life. The first generation of women to attend college in the United States, from 1860 to 1890, was not of the highest socioeconomic class. Families of elite status believed higher education would potentially “make women unmarriageable.”¹⁵ From 1859 onwards, women contended with fears that education would make women unfit or malcontent to remain within the home. From these sentiments, some promoted women’s education as a way to enhance traditional socio-cultural roles.¹⁶ Many of the coeducational institutions of the nineteenth century thus emphasized the differences between men and women, even as changes to education in the 1860s and 1870s would allow increasing numbers of women to pursue new career opportunities.¹⁷

¹³ Jill K. Conway, “Perspective on the History of Women’s Education in the United States,” *History of Education Quarterly* 14, no. 1, (Spring, 1974), 7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/367602>.

¹⁴ Conway, 8.

¹⁵ Gordon, 240.

¹⁶ Gordon, 227.

¹⁷ Abrams, 93.

Coeducational schools first arose in the 1830s beginning with Oberlin College in 1833; however, women in the eastern United States struggled to find institutions conferring degrees of equal merit to women until the emergence of the Seven Sisters over the years 1865 to 1894.¹⁸ The Seven Sisters colleges were deigned for the education of women from their inception. They included Mount Holyoke College, Vassar College, Wellesley College, Smith College, Radcliffe College, Bryn Mawr College, and Barnard College. Vassar opened first in 1865 and Radcliffe College was the last to open in 1894. By 1893, 237 coeducational colleges existed in the United States, but despite the number of coeducational colleges, contemporary sources specifically praised the Seven Sisters for promoting the academic development of women and maintaining the standards of the men's colleges of the day.¹⁹ In contrast, coeducational Oberlin dedicated its academic efforts towards creating a domestic workforce for men. Their curriculum included laundry duties, during which female students would wash and repair male students' clothing, as well as the daily tasks of cooking and cleaning.²⁰ The Seven Sisters engaged in teaching contrary to previous methodologies. Primarily, they conferred degrees and educational opportunities equal to those of men's colleges. Many who supported female higher education did not advocate a curriculum identical to that of men's colleges. According to G. Stanley Hall, who founded the Child Study Institute at Clark University, the biological and sociological differences of women needed to be considered in educational components. He saw education as an opportunity to train young women for their roles in motherhood. To him and many others, the delay and denial of marriage in female college graduates was one of the major detriments of

¹⁸ McCabe, Lida Rose, *The American Girl at College* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1893.), 114.

¹⁹ McCabe, 107.

²⁰ Conway, 8.

equal education.²¹ Some colleges incorporated domestic science into the curriculum in order to refocus women on their duties of motherhood in a time of increased worry over the declining rate of reproduction.²²

Generally, educated women had more options in life, and as a result, they did not always make traditional choices. The fearful atmosphere did not positively relate to female college education, although the second generation of college women did experience a more enhanced campus life with increased extra-curricular activities and involvement, especially at single-sex schools.²³ These women who graduated after 1890 received training that demanded independent effort. Their education's purpose could not be fulfilled "within the narrow confines of domestic life."²⁴ College education prepared women to pursue careers as teachers, social workers, nurses, librarians, and secretaries. The Seven Sisters allowed graduates to become more involved in their occupations and society.

Opinions of the Time: Contemporary Sources on Women's Education

Contemporary writings reflect the attitudes of the time period, vehemently defending or denouncing the merits of female education. As mentioned in the present-day scholarship, many activists advocated the rights of female colleges, but these proponents still accommodated the traditional views of the time, advocating women's higher education to enhance her roles as wife and mother. Books of the time period provided advice for young women's self-help and advancement. William Drysdale's book *Helps for Ambitious Girls* begins with the premise that despite any venture into education or career, the home is still the center of a woman's world.

²¹ Jenkins, William D., "Housewifery and Motherhood: The Question of Role Change in the Progressive Era," in *Woman's Being, Woman's Place: Female Identity and Vocation in American History*, ed. Mary Kelley, 93-108. (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1979), 144.

²² Jenkins, 148.

²³ Gordon, 339-340.

²⁴ Conway, 8.

This connection to the home should not be broken by pursuit of any of these ambitions: “If it did the writer would be one of the first to advise every girl to stay at home.”²⁵ Published in 1900, Drysdale’s book does not necessarily recommend a college education for every woman. If she has received training in the household arts, she is educated enough to function in society. With the home as the focal point, he writes, “without that training [in the household arts] she is not educated,”²⁶ portraying domestic knowledge as a necessity. Drysdale’s emphasis on domestic values displays that despite woman’s increasing establishment in higher education, she still faced the absolute and superseding duties of home and family. Drysdale does not completely discourage college education for women, but he takes great care to display that higher education should be considered “a luxury rather than a necessity.”²⁷ In this vein, sources of the time specifically resist higher coeducation by citing the biological and sociological differences between men and women. In 1903, Ely Van de Warker published his book *Woman’s Unfitness For Higher Education*, in which he claims that while economics and cost reduction promote coeducation, it is not the most prudent form for colleges.²⁸ In the bulk of his argument, Van de Warker argues that men and women simply are not similar enough to be educated in the same ways in the same institutions.²⁹

Although male authors created the aforementioned works, female authors also wrote with emphasis on women’s traditional roles. Female authors expressed their enthusiasm for the women’s presence in college, but tempered their recommendations for education with focus on domestic duties. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, suggestions of education for other purposes would be a radical idea likely result in more criticism of women’s entrance into college.

²⁵ Drysdale, William, *Helps for Ambitious Girls* (New York: T.Y. Crowell & Co., c1900), iii.

²⁶ Drysdale, iv.

²⁷ Drysdale, 54.

²⁸ Van de Warker, Ely, *Woman’s Unfitness for Higher Coeducation* (New York: Grafton Press, c1903), 7.

²⁹ Van de Warker, 29.

Lida Rose McCabe quotes the missions of women's colleges, including the Seven Sisters, in 1893: "We train her simply to be a whole woman, a power for the highest good in any community in which her lot may be cast, and in no position is her influence so potent as in the home."³⁰ In sum, college education would hopefully better prepare her to engage in life in the ways in which she was most likely to be called. McCabe most notably commends the existing Seven Sisters Schools including Barnard for their notable affiliations with prestigious universities.³¹ Throughout her book, McCabe hoped to dispel any notions of women's higher education as only a passing trend. She addresses society's biggest fear: the marriage rate. According to her, recent statistical data shows more college women marrying at a younger age.³² Her reports of data are thus contrary to present-day studies. She clearly works to solidify women's position in college, claiming that education does not negate a woman's function but does enable her ability to act as a "bread-winner."³³ Authors such as McCabe worked to promote the movement for women's higher education. In the twentieth century, these efforts coincided with the movements for women's rights and women's suffrage.

Käthe Schirmacher's description of the women's rights movement in 1912 shows the perceived shift in the role of middle class white women.³⁴ Not by coincidence, this demographic also represented the face of women in college in the northeastern United States. The goals of the movement, composed by the International Council of Women, first and foremost placed emphasis on equality in education. Like the abolitionist movement during the Civil War, the political nature of the women's rights movement also contributed towards higher education. Schirmacher harkens back to the beginning of the nineteenth century and describes the state of

³⁰ McCabe, 14.

³¹ McCabe, 3.

³² McCabe, 8.

³³ McCabe, 154.

³⁴ Schirmacher, Käthe, *The Modern Woman's Rights Movement* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1912), 11.

schooling in the 1800s by stating, “The education of girls in the United States was entirely neglected.” Secondary schools and colleges were closed to women at that time, and although available in 1912, they still did not provide the same educational opportunities as they did to men. Common barriers to educational equality were women’s perceived intellectual inferiority and fears of the loss of femininity.³⁵ At the turn of the century, women’s higher education involved significant socio-political implications and a restructuring of gender roles in the United States.

By the time Virginia MacMakin Collier published her book *Marriage and Careers* in 1926, women had achieved the vote and become increasingly concerned about maintaining both marriage and family after graduating college. Collier expresses an optimistic view of the social tensions and asserts that, “The question of marriage and careers is really no longer a question at all.”³⁶ Most women, including those who pursued a professional occupation, desired both marriage and children. The Bureau of Vocational Information conducted a study of these professional women and presented new information about the effects of marriage and motherhood upon work. From this study, Collier developed an interesting analysis of motivation for why women sought employment. She notes that the majority of women cited their desire to work out of their “need of outlet for energy,” far above “financial necessity.”³⁷ This motive for work elaborates upon women’s continued push for activity outside the home. Collier finds that by 1926, more than half of the women surveyed responded that marriage and childbirth did not interfere with their careers.³⁸ While Collier’s account is one of the more optimistic forecasts emergent from this time period, by 1920 women had made substantial progress in altering their

³⁵ Schirmacher, 42.

³⁶ Collier, Virginia MacMakin, *Marriage and Careers* (New York: Channel Bookshop, c1926), 9.

³⁷ Collier, 13.

³⁸ Collier, 44-45.

roles. The struggle to solidify the expanding presence of women in society continued well into the twentieth century.

Barnard College and the Battle for Women at Columbia University

An analysis of Barnard College, from its first graduating class in 1893 to 1920, shows how women's education and attitudes developed over time. From its inception, Barnard College existed as one of several colleges within Columbia University in New York City. The addition emerged after a failure to introduce coeducation to Columbia College, although the institution's President at the time, Frederick A. P. Barnard, campaigned diligently for women's integration. The events that would eventually lead to the college's creation began in 1883 when the Collegiate Course for Women became the first attempt to introduce women to Columbia. It was an annex plan that allowed women to enroll in classes that took place off-campus under Columbia instructors. The "watered-down" nature of the plan did not hold lasting appeal; only four women received a Columbia degree from the program.³⁹ The lack of interested students led to motions for another alternative, although the majority of the trustees remained opposed to coeducation. Named after the President of Columbia who had campaigned vigorously for women's acceptance, Barnard did not represent the goal that the man originally envisioned, despite the fact that he became the college's namesake. President Barnard exemplified the progressive visionaries who supported coeducation. He "believed [women] would thrive at Columbia" and that female presence in colleges was "distinctly conducive to good order."⁴⁰ Unknowingly, the leaders and faculty at Columbia University took part in a contemporary debate involving the nature of progress in society and the role of women in societal advancement.

³⁹ McCaughey, Robert A., *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University in the City of New York, 1754-2004* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 167.

⁴⁰ Rosenberg, Rosalind, *Changing the Subject: How the Women of Columbia Shaped the Way We Think about Sex and Politics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 25.

Opposite President Barnard was John Burgess of Columbia's School of Political Science.

Throughout his presidency, Barnard became progressively more inclusive of who could serve as contributing members to Columbia's reputation for excellence and leadership. In contrast, Burgess remained opposed to admitting students who hailed from underrepresented groups, including women. To Burgess, a university was the domain of "the best of men," which is to say well-familied white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant males."⁴¹ In this case, the intersection of gender and race debates seen in the Civil War continued as the exclusivity debate engaged women, as well as ethnic minorities. The conflict over exclusivity reflects the changes in professionalism. With learned professions becoming more common, the question of expansion extended to women as well. Debates increased and inquired where women's presence would be appropriate. In this debate, women entered the university with limitations when the Columbia board approved the creation of Barnard College as a separate entity within the institution in 1889.

Barnard College conducted classes in a rented brownstone at 343 Madison Avenue, five blocks away from Columbia College, until the institution's later move to Morningside Heights.⁴² Despite the physical separation of Barnard College from Columbia's campus, the classes, curriculum, and instructors were to be in every way the female counterpart of the already existing university entities.⁴³ Like its preexistent counterpart Columbia College, Barnard enacted a curriculum that included classes in mathematics, English, and languages. It also admitted a limited number of students into special subjects such as botany.⁴⁴ The creation of Barnard College undoubtedly increased the presence of women students and women faculty in

⁴¹ McCaughey, 163.

⁴² McCaughey, 186.

⁴³ Rosenberg, 54.

⁴⁴ Rosenberg, 57.

the Columbia community. Approximately two hundred students matriculated through Barnard within the first decade it was founded.⁴⁵ The school's education provided these women with a number of new opportunities with corresponding challenges. Barnard not only used Columbia's curriculum and instructors but its critical method of teaching. Female students struggled with mild culture shock upon encountering the unfamiliar collegiate atmosphere and educational analyses. Even the chance encounter with males could serve as a source of stress. For example, social standards of propriety did not prepare women for interactions with unfamiliar men that held the door for them on the way out of the university library.⁴⁶ As the students gradually adjusted to the physical and mental environment, a Barnard education also led to changes in thought and life goals.

Barnard students made decisions about their career and family outcomes while under the pressure of social and economic forces. As reflected by nuptial rates, these forces varied with the climate of the time. The turn of the century involved increasing complexities in the workforce and economy. More occupations called for a college education, and women began to make strides in fields from which they had previously been excluded. These included literature, sociology, history, and science.⁴⁷ As noted in the Cookingham study, market outcomes often dictated how many women could afford to postpone marriage and enter the labor force. In Barnard's first decade, up to 1900, economics worked in favor of college women as opportunities expanded. The beginning of the twentieth century saw a reverse in the trend; opportunities declined and marriage rates rose.⁴⁸ Coinciding with the economic forces, social conflicts pushed women back into the home. These primarily included the Spanish American

⁴⁵ McCaughey, 188.

⁴⁶ Rosenberg, 57.

⁴⁷ Rosenberg, 94.

⁴⁸ Cookingham, 364.

War and World War I. War created a fear of the foreign and reignited concern with sexuality. Both conflicts generated pressures to reduce feminism and reassert the strength of the family. Women who attempted to obtain a career within education and social work contended with a strong “pregnancy taboo.”⁴⁹ Women faced the expectation to hide their pregnant condition, especially from the youth. As a result, many women who married were forced to resign from employment while pregnant, including several female faculty members at Columbia University.⁵⁰ Women at Barnard received education while remaining mindful of these various priorities. At times, when opportunity allowed, women withstood the pressure to remain inside the home and embarked on career paths in which they would either postpone or forego marriage.

Into the Archives: Alumnae in Action

Created in 1963, the Barnard College Archives is now the permanent home for all records of the college.⁵¹ Within the Archives, primary sources range from Board of Trustees documents, student scrapbooks, departmental records, and more. The records of the Associates Alumnae of Barnard College provide a wealth of information about life outcomes of the graduates. Based upon the existence of the Alumnae Employment Committee, the College undertook efforts to send women into the working world. The bulletins and alumnae magazines also reached out to former students to promote involvement in the college’s future. The Bulletin cites the alumnae ability to “make valuable contributions to the discussions of college policy.”⁵² The Associate Alumnae also expressed its accomplishments in securing women to various positions.

A 1914 Report of the Employment Committee remarked upon increased placement but noted continued difficulties and a low proportion of people placed (415) in comparison to people

⁴⁹ Rosenberg, 107.

⁵⁰ Rosenberg, 103.

⁵¹ “Archives,” *About the Archives*, Barnard College, <http://barnard.edu/archives>.

⁵² Associate Alumnae, *The Bulletin of the Associate Alumnae of Barnard College* IV, no. 2 (December 1914), 9, Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

registered (925).⁵³ The Committee attributed these numbers to the candidates' lack of training in certain areas, as well as aversion to teaching, which was one of the most common areas of employment for graduates. The records of Appointment Work of the Committee in Employment for the years 1919 to 1920 display some of the Associate Alumnae's achievements. Reflective of the obstacles of the time, the numbers of both the applications and placements of women seeking temporary positions increased from 1919 to 1920 while permanent full-time positions declined. According to records, women most commonly found placement as teachers, governesses, and clerks. Notably there were many more applications than placements as women struggled to find openings in the market.⁵⁴ The Associate Alumnae employed its available resources to advance the position of graduates who sought activities outside the home. While the Associate Alumnae compiled general data for their Bulletins and alumnae magazines, they also gathered information about individual Barnard experiences.

One of the most significant resources providing insight into the first Barnard graduates is the Biographical Questionnaires conducted by the Associate Alumnae. The Associate Alumnae sent out the questionnaires in 1956 and received responses back from all the graduating classes, including the very first in 1893. The earliest graduation years submitted the fewest responses, due most likely to the small class size and to old age (average 85 years) of the alumnae at the time of the questionnaire. The questionnaires of the women who did reply included the answers to over sixty questions. They provided details about such categories as vital statistics about self and family, educational data, activities as alumnae, organizational and leisure time activities, employment data, and home-making. The final section asked graduates about their experience at

⁵³ *Bulletin IV*, no. 2., 14.

⁵⁴ Associate Alumnae, *The Bulletin of the Associate Alumnae of Barnard College X*, no. 1 (April 1921), 25, Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

Barnard as a whole. Decades after receiving their diplomas, graduates weighed in about their feelings towards their alma mater and changes they would make if they had the opportunity to do so.

I examined several questionnaires in detail from the graduating classes [from](#) 1893_ [through](#) 1920, and I focused on specific years in intervals: 1893, 1896, 1900, 1905, 1909, 1914, 1917, and 1920. Notable patterns of work and activity emerged. Along with the patterns derived from their listed information, I closely examined the specific responses of the alumnae at the end of the questionnaires. These comments revealed the individual's opinions about college education and female societal roles. Oftentimes, an individual's perspective of her time at Barnard depended upon her life ambitions and how far college took her towards her goals. From the supplementary responses at the end of the questionnaires, the simplified categorization of the reason why a student would not choose Barnard again ranged from: I would not choose Barnard again because it did not properly prepare me for a life of domesticity, or I would not choose Barnard again because it did not provide me with the range of opportunities I desired. In other words, students remarked upon their preference for either traditional values or increased opportunity. Many alumnae also noted their satisfaction with their college education. The women most likely to report no regrets worked for many years and remained unmarried. Respondents tended to find certain elements either valuable or lacking dependent upon what course their lives took following graduation.

Many women who graduated from Barnard found employment. Also, while some women never worked, they engaged in organizational activities clearly influenced by their time at Barnard. These women, usually single, remarked upon their satisfaction with college and the ways in which higher education helped them advance in life. One of the first students, Eva S.

Potter, exemplifies this type of alumna. Eva Potter graduated in 1896 and became the Second President of the Alumnae Association. Miss Potter never married and never found employment, but she became extremely involved in her community in a variety of ways. Aside from her membership in the First Reformed Church and the Alumnae Association, she dedicated her energies to children's museums, libraries, and hospitals. Miss Potter most likely lived with enough inherited financial stability that she did not need to earn a living and could engage in other activities instead. She along with another alumna organized the Employment Committee of the Alumnae Association, which was later taken over by Barnard College. She also worked to open a dormitory while she acted as President of the Alumnae. Miss Potter dedicated an entire extra page in her questionnaire to elaborate upon her activities with the Friends of Children's Museums and Pilgrim Slate Hospital. Her extensive answers and activism speak to her pride in attending college and extending her efforts to warranted causes. Her participation in the social sphere appeared to be a full-time endeavor that became enhanced by her experience at Barnard. Her review of Barnard commended the college's: "affiliation with Columbia," "its high standard of scholarship," and "its lack of sectarianism."⁵⁵ Other graduates who obtained jobs gave similar praises about their educational experiences. Eliza J. Jones, class of 1894, taught full-time in a high school from 1905 to 1936. She never married, but agreed that Barnard could not have trained her better for life than it did.⁵⁶ In the 1900s, Barnard graduates reported more diversity in their jobs but still maintained the same positive attitude towards their alma mater. Some women in education field secured greater responsibility. For example, Esther W. Hawes, a graduate of the class of 1914, worked in College Administration at Rutgers from 1921 to 1952. She was also

⁵⁵ Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – "Eva S. Potter: 1896," Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

⁵⁶ Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – "Eliza J. Jones: 1894," Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

actively involved in several women's associations.⁵⁷ Others explored the non-traditional realms of math and science, such as Evelyn M. Baldwin who graduated in 1920 and never married. At the time of the survey, she still worked as a full-time employee of Bell Telephone Lab on the technical staff team. She too noted her approval of education at a woman's college.⁵⁸ While various women had positive responses towards Barnard, some respondents elaborated upon domestic pressures.

Several survey respondents commented upon qualities they found lacking in their Barnard education. One of the most common complaints discussed the college's lack of preparation in domesticity. Even successfully employed women lamented the absence of domestic studies. While Edyth Fredericks, a single teacher from the class of 1906, ultimately approved of the way Barnard conducts its students, she recognized a need for Barnard to accommodate the values of the time. First, she praised Barnard: "I am convinced that the comparatively small women's college gives fine opportunity for personal contact and group living." Despite these valuable qualities, she believed that Barnard could have trained her better for life. "Present day courses are closer to daily living," she wrote. "American Civ would have been useful, also courses in home-making, public speaking, religion."⁵⁹ She appreciated the opportunities [that](#) college opened for her, but she also noticed incompatibilities with reality. Notably, some Barnard graduates achieved both a family and employment; however, these women were not wholly satisfied with their college instruction. Elizabeth S. (Day) Fowles, class of 1905, married a Methodist minister at age twenty-four and had four children. She also

⁵⁷ Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – "Esther W. Hawes: 1914," Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

⁵⁸ Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – "Evelyn M. Baldwin: 1920," Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

⁵⁹ Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – "Edyth Fredericks: 1906," Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

received her Masters at Columbia. In her spare time, she joined a Women's Club and the School Board of the institution her children attended. Although she worked part-time and engaged in various activities, she lived a life centered about the home. Her explanation of why she would forego a Barnard education involved her desire to attend "a college offering domestic science courses" because "circumstances led me into a life where a classical education did not help me."⁶⁰ Also class of 1905, married Christian worker Florence I. (Nye) Whitwell was of a similar disposition as Mrs. Fowles and desired more home economics classes.⁶¹ In these cases, married graduates felt that higher education did not practically serve their domestic livings. An alumna from the class of 1920 requested similar changes in her education. After she graduated, Lois M. (Wood) Clark married and taught English in high school for nine years. In her opinion, Barnard could have trained her better for life because "there were no courses which served as preparation for marriage and home-making."⁶² As a woman who did get married after graduation, she found the instruction that she received not completely suited for marital life. Because she married between the ages of 26 and 30 years, it is possible she felt as a disadvantage for marrying later in life. As alumnae responded to the questionnaires, they recognized the fact that college education in the early 1900s was not necessarily compatible with the lifestyles that they sought.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, several ambitious women felt that Barnard did not allow them to advance enough within their careers and the social sphere. One of the graduates of Barnard's first class in 1893, Alice (Kohn) Pollitzer, commented upon what areas Barnard should focus on in consideration of several deficiencies. Mrs. Pollitzer had two daughters and

⁶⁰ Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – "Elizabeth S. (Day) Fowles: 1905," Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

⁶¹ Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – "Florence I. (Nye) Whitwell: 1905," Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

⁶² Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – "Lois M. (Wood) Clark: 1920," Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

completed various work in the fields of education and social work. She commented, “In my day Barnard ignored the important areas of sex, religion, and politics including the issues of the time.”⁶³ Because she entered college in 1899, she experienced the college in its first stages of development. It is highly unlikely that a new women’s college would make revolutionary instruction about gender and political issues within its first years of existence. Pollitzer directed Barnard’s future educational efforts towards “the development of the individual student’s fullest potentiality and as full an understanding of the world in which she lives as possible, with emphasis on human relations.”⁶⁴ Although she set her alma mater lofty goals, the fullest potentiality of a Barnard student would only grow over time as fields of employment expanded for women. An account from graduate Adelaide Hart class of 1906 summarizes the opposing pressures for females pursuing higher education during that time. Miss Hart never married. Like many students to come before her, and many who would come after, she became a teacher. Miss Hart struggled to reconcile the “purely academic” subjects she studied with her need “to earn a living.” Higher education was not the most practical choice for the majority of women of her time. According to her, the practical and cultural sides of life did not necessarily reconcile upon graduation. Women possessing this amount of determination appeared in greater numbers after Barnard’s first decade, despite the pulls of tradition to bring women back to their duties of home and family. Later graduates sought to enter new areas of employment but simultaneously encountered social and educational limitations. Graduate of the class of 1905, Marion (Franklin) Loew exemplifies this situation. She married at age twenty-one, a year after she graduated, and had two children. Her employment most likely did not occur until after her children left home. She received her medical degree in 1920 and found employment in the clinical and research

⁶³ Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – “Alice (Kohn) Pollitzer: 1893,” Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

fields. Mrs. Loew worked consistently from 1930 to 1953 under the New York City and New York State Health Departments as Assistant Director. She remarked that if she could enter college again, she would have chosen coeducational college.⁶⁵ Certain fields, such as the sciences, were more difficult for women to enter. As a result, they believed that a coeducational college would have given them a better opportunity at obtaining various professions. Several alumnae, including Mrs. Loew, highlight this relationship among career ambition and coeducational colleges. Graduate of the class of 1917, Therese (Hiebel) Bernhard got married later in life, between the ages of 26 to 30, to an electrical engineer and had one son. She studied math at Barnard and worked as a full-time mathematician for Bell Telephone Lab. Years after graduating, she found her passion in painting. The combination of her mathematical skill and artistic talent led her to long for the chance at a different career. She wrote, “If I had to do it over again, my choice of occupation would be in architecture and training in that field could be had to better advantage in a coeducational college [...] maybe it was too much to expect in those days.”⁶⁶ Mrs. Bernhard realized that she would have enjoyed working in a field that was both different and unusual for women in her time. Women possessing this amount of ambition were few and far between. As they answered their questionnaires decades later, they better perceived the obstacles that prevented them from reaching their goals.

Respondents seemed to grasp the need for preparation and understanding to face a world that was not completely ready to accept their increased participation in society. While several women did succeed against social pressures by both raising a family and obtaining a fulfilling career, others found an outlet for energy and a higher purpose in organizational activities for

⁶⁵ Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – “Marion (Franklin) Loew: 1905,” Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

⁶⁶ Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – “Therese (Hiebel) Bernhard: 1917,” Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

extensive and important causes. These alumnae engaged in lives of domesticity but found a mediatory outlet for their energy. Bertha S. (Van Riper) Overbury was a wealthier alumna who graduated in 1896. Her house possessed high value, and she also enjoyed the luxuries of a housekeeper and chauffeur. Mrs. Overbury married but never had children. She never worked but participated in a number of organizations, including: her church, Red Cross, Women's Club (Social and Civic), Republican Club, Kappa Kappa Gamma, Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and New York Women's University Club. She commented the most on her involvement in Friends of Huntington Library and the Manuscript Society. She wrote about her collection of over 2000 books, many by notable American women authors. She also possessed valuable autographed manuscripts from Harriet Beecher Stowe and Emily Dickinson. Mrs. Overbury donated all of these volumes and manuscripts to Barnard College where it exists today as part of the institution's special collections.⁶⁷ These organizations became Mrs. Overbury's outlet for energy and knowledge. Similarly, Ruth A. (Reeder) Arbuckle, class of 1905, balanced marital life with social activism. Mrs. Arbuckle married a professor of theology and went on to Teacher's College at Columbia. She never worked or had children, but she did participate in various religious and socio-political organizations, including church, Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), League of Women Voters, American Association of University Women (AAUW), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She clearly placed her time and energy into causes that she felt were worthwhile. She provided a very objective and progressive reflection upon her experiences over fifty years after she graduated. She wrote: "The men and women who planned the curriculum and policies of Barnard at the turn of the century were conditioned by the fact that they could not possibly have foreseen the

⁶⁷ Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – "Bertha S. (Van Riper) Overbury: 1896," Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

upheavals through which our civilization has since passed and the tremendous changes in the status and role of women. I think these planners did the best they could in the light of the knowledge they had.”⁶⁸ Mrs. Arbuckle not only noted advancements in the status of women, but the very difficult limitations of her time. Women such as Arbuckle and Overbury did not find employment but found other ways to use their college education in order to contribute to society.

Accomplishing Something Remarkable

After I categorized the women in context of their life trajectories and satisfaction with college, a lengthy analysis of the questionnaires as a whole revealed some of the common behaviors and factors of the graduates. The employment efforts in context of each woman’s background reveals correlations of social characteristics. A look at the employment experiences of women also elaborates on the difficulties of assimilation and advancement in various fields. Teaching was a profession of high recruitment for Barnard graduates. Several graduates from 1893 to 1920 received further instruction at Columbia Teacher’s College or NYU Training School before employment at the secondary or high school levels. The vast majority of those who taught full-time never married. Several women taught for over thirty years at the same institution. The educators that emerged from Barnard College in general had a positive response to their single-sex education, and expressed contentment with their life and education choices. After the first decade of Barnard’s existence, areas of employment extended beyond the teaching realm. With this variation in occupation, the opinions of graduates varied as well. Because the respondents answered the surveys in 1956, the alumnae answer their questions with the knowledge that more colleges have opened their doors to women since the time that they attended Barnard. As a result, those women who sought more ambitious employment, unusual

⁶⁸ Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – “Ruth A. (Reeder) Arbuckle: 1905,” Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

for women at the time, often elected not to attend Barnard again should they have had the opportunity. In summary, work opportunities for graduates gradually became more varied from 1893 to 1920. As opportunities increased, more women acknowledged the limitations they had faced at the time and commented upon their hardships in their responses.

As displayed by contemporary sources, women did not usually seek employment due to financial necessity; instead, a majority pursued a job as an “outlet in energy.”⁶⁹ In accordance with this principle, some alumnae never worked a day in their lives. Instead, many graduates became extremely active in the social and political realms. Women of Barnard, both single and married, began to engage in various organizational outlets. This level of involvement is particularly significant for those women who used activity outside the home to reconcile with their lives in domesticity. Politically, common activities included the Republicans Club, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the American Association of University Women (AAUW), the League of Women Voters, and various Women’s Societies to name a few. Some women filled every line available in the activities section and held various officer positions as well. They also joined various social and philanthropic causes such as Children’s Welfare League, Children’s Museums, Red Cross, the Young Men’s Christian Association, Service League, Overseas Division, and Parent-Teacher Association. Church organizations featured prominently as well from involvement in Methodist and Unitarian denominations to membership in the Catholic Daughters of America.⁷⁰ The varied and extensive replies to organization activities complicate the narrative of purely-career or purely-family oriented graduates. Instead, many of the women who married but did not work found a mediatory outlet in the form of these social and activist organizations. While there was a

⁶⁹ Collier, 13.

⁷⁰ Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires, Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

disparity between education and domestic life, women found ways to enact their knowledge and energy in the form of community involvement. Social activity, especially in the political forms of organization, echoes the efforts of those women who served as moral guardians to society during the Civil War. Participation in causes geared towards community demonstrated the influence college education could have beyond the realms of employment and career.

An examination of the last section of the survey features extensive comments about the nature of Barnard's education. As the women remark specifically upon their education at Barnard, several women advocated an idealistic approach to the purpose of higher education: its mission to cultivate contributing members of society. Socially active women of various marital statuses remarked upon Barnard's capability to produce women who could engage with the world around them. Some valued this quality so much that they named it as a desired goal for the college for the next twenty-five years. Hilda (Newborg) Strauss graduated in 1900. Both her daughter and granddaughter attended Barnard, so her answers derived partly from their experiences as well. She believed that, "as always college should prepare one for life," and as such, "students should be taught primarily what is necessary to deal with international affairs, so that the United States can keep the principles for which our fathers fought—true democracy, liberality of thoughts and actions, and loyalty."⁷¹ Mrs. Strauss believed women capable of upholding the essential values of the United States. Her desires reflect a need for women to engage in the role of moral guardian of society. Another opinionated graduate of 1907, Laura A. (Manley) Cole set the college a new goal: "to train people capable of reforming the constitution and 'keeping house' rationally and creatively in the western hemisphere."⁷² Early graduates,

⁷¹ Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – "Hilda (Newborg) Strauss: 1900," Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

⁷² Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – "Laura A. (Manley) Cole: 1907," Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

such as Mrs. Strauss and Mrs. Cole, saw that women could make greater contributions in society. It is remarkable that socio-political implications appeared despite the noted difficulties women had breaking into the political science field. After living through multiple world wars, the implications of global encounters weighed on some of the graduates, as seen in their responses. Although they may have disapproved of certain aspects of Barnard's curriculum, many women believed that the school had a greater purpose in creating the type of women who could be of consequence in the political realm. These responses are another example of female ambition extending beyond both family and career. Some alumnae saw the potential to extend women's influence from the home to a much wider sphere: the world in which they lived. Efforts to broaden the feminine role in society intertwine with women's entrance into higher education. College not only gradually extended women's influence but also opened the female mind to possibilities previously unrecognized.

Undoubtedly, students emerged from Barnard changed by the years that they spent there, although these changes occurred in ways that these women could not have foreseen. Graduates could have high expectations of the opportunities and capabilities that college imparted upon its students; however, those ambitions became tempered by realistic expectations of the time period. Adelaide Hart, class of 1906, wrote, "I am proud of being a Barnard graduate even though I have not set the world on fire with anything remarkable."⁷³ The women who graduated from Barnard and from other colleges at this time may not have necessarily set the world on fire, but they did accomplish something remarkable. During a time in which women's higher education for purposes beyond traditional feminine roles seemed unnatural, the first Barnard students enrolled in an institution that worked to further their potential in life. While many alumnae resumed lives

⁷³ Associate Alumnae, Biographical Questionnaires – "Adelaide Hart: 1906," Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY.

within traditional feminine roles upon graduation, others embraced lives as single women, as professionals, and as activists. By facing the challenges they encountered, Barnard students at the turn of the century helped lay the groundwork for later generations of college women to succeed in new, non-traditional areas.

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