

*Testimony to the  
President's Task Force on Women*

*1971?*

THE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF WOMEN TO OBTAIN A COLLEGE EDUCATION

I should like to address myself directly to providing research information regarding the rights and responsibilities of women to obtain a college education. In these times of the polarization of the society, there is considerable questioning about what our national policy is on a great many issues. Fortunately, this is not the case for education. Every one of the five Presidents since Roosevelt--Democrats and Republicans alike--and beginning with the Truman Commission in 1947, has endorsed a national goal of post-secondary education for all who can profit from it. By special legislative act, President Nixon is to report to the Congress this December on the progress of the nation in achieving this goal. I think there is little quarrel with the statement that we believe that some form of post-secondary education is a right of every individual, and it is also a responsibility to a society whose need for an educated citizenry is increasing rapidly. An enormous amount of effort has gone into making certain that there is equality of educational opportunity and that those who have not availed themselves of it in the past do so now.

Without my having mentioned any particular group of people in this introduction focusing on the nation's concern and commitment to equality of educational opportunity, most people, perhaps yourselves included, would assume that I have been talking about the blacks, the disadvantaged, the poverty-level Americans. Their plight has been well-publicized, and at long last we are beginning to make progress. But although the statistics for women

are equally deplorable, the situation has received scant attention, and there are many well-educated people who insist that no problem exists.

I believe that there is good research evidence that a problem does exist, and, simply stated, the problem is this: How do we explain the fact that for the nation at large sixty per cent of the college students are males and forty per cent are females? The answer must lie in one or both of the following explanations. Either women aren't as eager as men to obtain a college education or it is more difficult for them to get it. Some would add a third alternative--that women don't need higher education as much as men do. But even if that is conceded to be a debatable question, it is included in the other two. If it is the woman who feels she doesn't need it, she has a more difficult time getting it. Let me then discuss some research that might justify the present 60-40 ratio in terms of either of these explanations.

Is it true that women don't seek college admission as frequently as men? Yes, it is. In three reported national studies, roughly 55% of the men and 45% of the women said that following high school graduation they planned to enter college. (TALENT, SCOPE, Trent-Medsker, 1967)

As we have learned with the minority groups, it is a totally inadequate response to deny educational opportunity by dismissing it with a shrug, saying, "See, they don't apply." There are reasons why women do not have the educational expectations of men, and for our purposes today, I will skim the surface of this problem with some data from educational research without going into the literature of psychology and sociology. Let me illustrate the operation of the double standard at several different levels. The first level I shall call the folklore level. To illustrate, many accept without question the

statement that it is more important for a man to go to college than it is for a woman. College women themselves accept it; 94% of them think that it is very important for a man to go to college whereas only 50% ranked it equally important for a woman. College men were even more skeptical--only one fourth of them felt that college was very important for women, but 83% said it was very important for men. (Trent-Medsker, 1967) If, however, the double standard is removed from the folklore level and made more personal by asking how important college is for them, then the answers are near unanimous. Ninety per cent of the women and 92% of the men say it is very important to them.

At still another level, the double standard has a subtle but direct effect. We know, from many research studies, that encouragement from parents bears a very high relationship to college attendance. And boys are more likely to get encouragement from their parents than are girls. Almost 70% of the high school senior men who enter college report "definite encouragement from parents," compared with about 60% for the women. (SCOPE)

Still another way of looking at the double standard is in terms of the learning that takes place during seventeen or eighteen years as a girl in our society. Girls learn to be submissive, and I'm afraid that they learn diminished self-confidence. For example, despite the fact that girls make considerably better grades in high school than boys, they are less likely to feel confident about their academic ability. Thirty-five per cent of the men, but only 26% of the women say that they "definitely have the ability to do college work." (SCOPE)

The question of how much of the double standard we wish to preserve may be a question for debate. The point to be made from these research data is that the double standard operates in direct and indirect ways to discourage

the entrance of women into higher education. Much of what I have said supports what we all know to be true of our society, but its all-pervasive effects on the right of women to intellectual development and self-fulfillment are not often recognized, and the import is rarely documented through research.

Now let me move on to my second exploration of the 60-40 ratio--that women cannot get <sup>higher</sup> education as easily as men even if they overcome society's general expectation that they should not be as well-educated. The question here is, "Is it true that women are discriminated against at the undergraduate level?" Yes, it is true. The problems are nowhere near as serious as they are at the graduate and professional levels, but they are serious, and many will be surprised to know how blatantly colleges discriminate. To make this point, I will simply analyze some data that are available to every high school student and counselor. My source is the Manual of Freshman Class Profiles published by the College Entrance Examination Board. Colleges are permitted to present as much data as they wish to help guide students regarding the admissions practices of the college. Since it is quite public information, I feel at liberty to discuss the colleges by name--at least within the confines of this Task Force. I will confess that one of the reasons I picked these particular colleges is that they are quite bold in their discrimination, and they are sufficiently naive about their discriminatory practices to present more data for me to get hold of. Let me caution you that the question I am discussing is, "Is there discrimination?"--not, "Do all colleges discriminate?" I'm sure they don't, but my impression is that the highly selective prestige colleges that should be the leaders in human rights reform are most likely to discriminate on the basis of sex. As a matter of fact, I will present data later to show that this is the case.

Exhibit A is the College of Liberal Arts at Cornell University. It is the largest of seven undergraduate colleges at Cornell, and it has a larger number of women students than any other. Yet that college accepted students in a ratio of 66% males to 33% females despite the fact that the females applying were somewhat better qualified than the men. Eighty-three per cent of the women and 72% of the men applying graduated in the top fifth of their high school class, and when you have that situation, it's pretty hard to justify accepting two men for every woman. What they did/was to take 40% of the top male applicants and 32% of the women with the same high class rank. But, since nationally, women make higher grades in high school than do men, it is not fair to look at class rank alone. So let's look at test scores. The verbal portion of the Scholastic Ability Test, commonly known as the "College Boards," is the best test predictor of grades for most liberal arts colleges. Of those scoring between 700 and 800 on the Verbal Aptitude Test, Cornell accepted 71% of the men who applied but only 57% of the women. I am happy to report that I cannot find any evidence that Cornell discriminates in financial aid granted to accepted students--in fact, women come off ahead of the men; 66% of the women who applied for financial aid and were accepted received it compared with 62% of the men. I should remark perhaps that without going to any of the work I went to, women students get the message. They know that it's very hard for women to get into Cornell, and they simply don't apply in very large numbers. About one out of three applicants to the arts college is a woman. Perhaps I should add that if Cornell were to cease their discriminatory policies suddenly, they would have a problem, since their women applicants are better qualified, academically speaking, and Cornell would face the prospect of accepting more women than men.

Exhibit B is Denison University, a good private liberal arts college in Ohio. Denison accepted 86% of the men who ranked in the top fifth of their high school classes, but only 55% of the women applying with the same high school rank-in-class. If we look at test scores, Denison accepts 78% of the men and 74% of the women with SAT scores above 650. But at scores between 450 and 600 where the great bulk of Denison's applicants are and where the hard decisions are made, Denison accepts 57% of the men but only 29% of the women. There is also considerable discrimination on financial aid at Denison. Overall, Denison made an offer of aid to 68% of the accepted men who applied for financial aid, but to only 58% of the women. It is also a fact that women who go to college come from higher socio-economic levels than do men, and it is more accurate to look at financial aid offers in terms of family income. To students who applied for aid with family incomes below \$9,000, Denison offered 84% of the males help compared with 61% of the females. Since it is generally easier for men to obtain jobs, it would appear that if any discrepancy were to exist, it should be in favor of the women. Lest women applicants be slow to grasp the idea, Denison states in their introduction that because of the high number of qualified applicants, it has been necessary to reject 37% of the women and 25% of the men who applied.

These two case studies are presented not to tar and feather Cornell and Denison, but to illustrate some of the facts of life for bright women who apply to prestige institutions of two different types--one a highly selective eastern university, the other a moderately selective midwestern college. With the limited time I had available and working only with data at hand, I can only venture the hypothesis that the more selective the college, the more the likelihood of discrimination on the basis of sex. If so, this is the first

step in reducing the ranks of highly able women in graduate schools and the professions.

Another pattern that seems to operate in discriminatory practices is that colleges pick the point at which they will sacrifice high test scores for a "favorable" male ratio. For example, Reed College in Portland, Oregon, states in their guidelines that they seek especially able students and so in the very high test score range (SAT-V--650-800), they accept almost all applicants--89% of the men and 92% of the women. But when it gets down to a little lower test score range (550-650), they accept 70% of the men and 54% of the women.

One other point that should be made in discussing discriminatory practices on the part of the colleges is that they have felt protected against charges of discrimination because of the college requirement that women must live in the dormitories, whereas men can live where they please. As you are probably all aware, that requirement is almost gone, leaving the colleges completely exposed.

I should like to return now to look at some of the national data to see how discrimination and lowered educational aspirations combine to produce the 60-40 ratio in colleges.

For the nation as a whole, college women must be better students than men, and they must have more money. This is a statement of fact that can be documented by numerous research studies of college students. Extracting bits of data from several national studies, I found that 43% of the college women graduated in the top 10% of their high school class compared with only 30% of the men (CSQ); or in terms of grades, 67% of the women had B averages or better compared with only 45% of the men (ACE), or if we look at it in terms of the obstacles posed by poor grades, we might use the statistic

that the proportion of boys who make it to college despite high school grades of C or lower is double that for girls--40% to 20% (ACE). On aptitude tests, women score higher on verbal; men score higher on mathematical ability.

Research verifies the fact that college women come from homes of slightly higher socio-economic levels than do college men. It is, in other words, the privileged classes that send a daughter to college. At the very high socio-economic levels, almost all young people go to college regardless of their ability, and this is the only level in society at which men and women attend college in roughly equal proportions. With one exception, the greatest discrepancy between males and females occurs in the middle class and at the middle ranges of ability. Project TALENT, which is a 25-year study of some 400,000 students from across the country, shows that middle class men with B and C grades in high school are more likely to go to college than women. The greatest discrepancy of all, however, occurs for very bright women from the lowest socioeconomic level. Whereas 61% of the men from the top quarter in ability and the lowest quarter in socioeconomic level went on to college, only 42% of the women did. Looked at in terms of the national loss from this talented group, 27% of the men and 41% of the women did not go on to some form of post-secondary education.

Even when women do go on to college, however, a recent study (SCOPE) shows that women tend to enter state colleges or what used to be teachers colleges and men tend to enter junior colleges or universities. Now one can say that this as it should be since women are interested in teaching, but it is not quite that simple. I was able to tentatively check this hypothesis by looking at the data for two different states. In

Massachusetts, college men are twice as likely as women to go to the more prestigious universities (21% of the women and 40% of the men enter the university) and women are more likely to go to the state colleges (26% to 18%). Massachusetts presents a somewhat exaggerated pattern of the more common national picture, but California departs from this pattern. Most students in California (57% of the women and 67% of the men) start their education in the junior colleges, but unlike the other states in this study, California has more women than men entering the university. The explanation for this difference between California and Massachusetts is probably to be found in the California legislation which stipulates that anyone graduating in the top 12% of the class is eligible for the university, anyone graduating in the top third is eligible for the state colleges, and any high school graduate may go to the junior colleges.

Although it may not be the most desirable situation as far as the efficiency of higher education is concerned, it seems that women, like men, want to go to the "best" college that they can get in. It is a hypothesis that bears further study that women go to the state colleges, not necessarily because they are interested in teaching, or in the attractions of the state colleges, but rather because they have a more limited choice than men. It is true, however, that more men than women go to the totally free-choice junior colleges, but the proper point of comparison here may be the special schools such as business colleges where larger proportions of women go. In the hierarchy, then, men go to the university while women go to the state colleges; and men go to the junior colleges while women go to the business colleges. Unfortunately, there is a

pecking order, and, tentatively, I suggest that it preserves the double standard.

In concluding, let me say that things are getting better for a number of reasons. As post-secondary education becomes more available and less selective, women are gradually closing the gap, but it is slow going. The proportion of women in college has increased from 37% to 40% over the last decade, and in the previous decade, it increased from 32 to 37%. Also, as housing restrictions begin to ease, and the concern for human rights increases, some progress should be made.

There are, of course, numerous things that can be done to speed up the process, and I will be happy to propose some of my ideas about this at the appropriate time.