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Before the Second Wave: College Women, Cultural Literacy, Sexuality and Identity, 1940--1965

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BEFORE THE SECOND WAVE: COLLEGE WOMEN,
CULTURAL LITERACY, SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY, 1940-1965

A Dissertation Presented

by

BABETTE FAEHMEL

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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May 2009

Department of History
BEFORE THE SECOND WAVE: COLLEGE WOMEN, CULTURAL LITERACY, SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY, 1940-1965

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ABSTRACT

BEFORE THE SECOND WAVE: COLLEGE WOMEN, CULTURAL LITERACY, SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY, 1940-1965

MAY 2009

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This dissertation follows career-oriented college women over the course of their education in liberal arts programs and seeks to explain why so many of them, in departure from original plans of combining work and marriage, married and became full-time mothers. Using diaries, personal correspondences, and student publications, in conjunction with works from the social sciences, philosophy, and literature, I argue that these women’s experiences need to be understood in the context of cultural conflicts over the definition of class, status, and national identity. Mid twentieth-century college women, I propose, began their education at a moment when the convergence of long-contested developments turned campuses into battlegrounds over the definition of the values of an expanding middle class. Social leadership positions came within reach of new ethnic and religious groups at the same time that changes in the dating behavior of educated youth accelerated. Combined, these trends fed anxieties about a loss of cultural cohesion and national unity. In the interest of social stability, educators and public commentators tried to turn college women into brokers of cultural norms who would, as wives, socialize a heterogeneous population of men to
traditional mores and values. This interest of the state to hold educated female youth accountable for the reproduction of a homogenous culture then merged with the desire of gender conservative students to legitimate their own identity in the face of challengers. In encounters with peers, women who aspired to professional careers and academic success learned that their gender performance disqualified them as members of an educated elite. Suffering severe blows to their self-esteem as a result of what I call “sex and gender baiting,” they reformulated their goals for their postgraduate futures. Drawing on expressions of shame and fear in diaries and letters, I show through women’s own voices the severity of the personal conflicts gender non-conformists experienced, offer insights into the relationship between historical actors and cultural discourses, and illustrate how the personal and the intimate shape the public and the political.
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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1940, shortly before she started her freshman year at the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Art, seventeen year old Helene Harmon turned to her diary to ponder her future. From the time she was a child, she reflected, she had imagined herself with a “house, … garden, [and] children.” A husband, she mused further, would be a necessary and desirable part of this picture and she certainly expected to fall in love one day. Yet parallel to these traditional dreams, she also emphasized that, for a marriage not to become a claustrophobic prison, a woman needed to be economically and emotionally self-sufficient. “This I know,” she wrote, if I should ever settle down to be just a housewife … it will be an acknowledgement that I have failed in what I have set out to make of my life. Love and marriage of this sort is all very well … but I know so many housewives who … might have gotten married in fear of a solitary life or because they could not be self-sufficient (financially or friendshiply). – From this I pray to be saved.¹

Locked into relationships of dependence and frustrated because of a lack of non-domestic outlets, such wives, Helene contended, became women who “yell at their children, pester their husbands about money, and when they get together with others of their kind gossip viciously about the lady next door.” Yes, she conceded, she could see herself getting interested in “cooking and children.” But clearly, this could and should not be the be all and end all of a woman’s existence.²

Considering that Helene was writing at a time when the United States had only just begun to recover from the Great Depression, her adherence to the image of dependent

¹ Helene Harmon, diary, entry dated 09-06-1940. Helene Harmon Weis papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

² Ibid.
middle-class wives seems surprising. But Helene’s entry does not reflect reality. It shows her internalization of a construct according to which any woman of her class who was not a dependent of a man was by definition an exception. Compared to the hardships faced by women of color, married, white, middle-class women were certainly shielded from the impact of the economic emergency. Yet, as historians have shown, whether as housekeepers or as wage earners, their economic roles expanded greatly during this time. Women, by 1930, constituted more than 25 percent of the labor force, which amounted to about 10 million women working for wages. However, as Alice-Kessler-Harris has argued, the public portrayal of women was influenced by a “tacit understanding” that they were located in the home. During the Depression, this stereotype rendered invisible the suffering of many women who lost jobs and professional positions they needed to support themselves and their families. It also ignored the fact that as wives and homemakers, women were performing essential labor necessary for national recovery and individual survival. Moreover, against the background of mounting economic strains on many families, the portrayal of women as dependents also fed an image of them as a caste that seemed—simply by virtue of sex—imbued with special privileges and shielded from the hardships experienced by men.

Stereotypes of middle-class women were a staple in the 1930s media. Depression Era magazines and popular books directed at an educated middle-class readership frequently

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applied the trope of woman as “parasite”: a wife or daughter who expected the men around her to support and pamper her. This image had multiple origins. Already before the economic crisis, social scientists addressed the impact of economic and technological change on gender roles. Positing the urban middle-class family as the norm, sociological experts argued that it was no longer a unit of production. Under conditions of modernity, the tasks and responsibilities that had once formed the core of a married woman’s life were no longer as labor intensive as before. In “up-to-date homes” appliances had reduced housework to a “matter of hours.” Because of declining birthrates, childcare also no longer occupied a woman’s day. Yet, attitudes of men and women had often remained steeped in the past. Husbands did not want their wives to work outside the home. Married women, meanwhile, often lacked the training for non-traditional jobs because they had been educated for roles and responsibilities of a bygone era. The consequences social scientists portrayed as potentially problematic. Sensing that the “machine age” had changed the importance of their tasks, women no longer gained the same satisfaction from their labor as their mothers. Their responses and coping mechanisms negatively affected the people around them. Some women overcompensated by throwing themselves into household chores or by doting on husbands and children. Others restlessly pursued non-domestic pursuits but failed to succeed for lack of training or as a result of their own psychological ambivalence towards new roles. A solution to the dilemma, most social scientists agreed, could only come over time through a

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combination of individual counseling, education of the public, and structural changes in the economy.⁶

While the social scientific literature highlighted the complex intersections of structural, historical, and psychological factors, the popular media portrayal of women in the machine age was less balanced. Publications like John Erskine’s The Influence of Women and Its Cure (1936) or the recently launched Esquire Magazine (1933 - ) that targeted middle-class male readers, portrayed women either as failures in their attempts to compete with men in the public sphere, or as a leisure class that did not even try to shoulder economic responsibilities of their own. By the late 1930s, this image of middle-class women as the beneficiaries of the machine age who let men wait on them and work for them even influenced the writings of feminists. For instance, in a 1939 radio address, historian Mary Ritter Beard talked about “parasitic-minded” wives who “seek to escape the heavy exactions of the marketplace by retreating to complete dependence at the hearth in an age which is controlled productively by the machine.” Beard here was guided by a desire to counter attacks against professional women like herself who were accused of selfishly taking jobs from men. She, too, however, fed the image of the domestic roles of middle-class women as essentially devoid of value in modern times.⁷ Depression era economic conflicts thus fed


misogynist images of women that had long existed but that were brought to the fore under conditions of crisis. As Linda Kerber has argued, women were increasingly seen as a caste that was “privileged by the law, [and] excused from obligations incumbent on men.”

What got lost in the portrayal of women in the Depression Era media were, on the one hand, the many accomplishments of female professionals and, on the other, the structural, economic, and psychological dilemmas faced by middle-class women who wanted careers of their own. New nepotism rules disadvantaged married female professionals and men increasingly competed with them even for formerly sex-typed jobs. Women’s options to succeed in the public sphere were thus limited through no fault of their own. Moreover, the general understanding that a wife did not belong in the workforce influenced attitudes in many families. Middle-class status was still linked to a husband’s ability to support his dependents on his income alone. A wife’s wage labor therefore did not just disrupt power relations between spouses; it also threatened a family’s social position. Consequently, couples often chose to rely on savings rather than part with traditional divisions of labor. If wives and daughters had to take up work outside the home, they tended to cast it as a temporary adjustment to an emergency. The Depression Era debate, however, ignored gender specific obstacles and rendered invisible the many gains and accomplishments the “new” women of past decades had won for themselves and through their own initiative.

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The damage the public image of women had suffered notwithstanding, Helene Harmon’s diary suggests that the Depression era debate potentially served as encouragement for young women to embark on independent life paths. In periods of national emergency, public commentators have historically urged women to adjust their behavior and actions to the needs of the moment. The attacks against women as having failed to adjust to conditions of modernity, however, called on the female sex to alter their attitudes for good. Helene was clearly influenced by this discourse. Women, as she mused in her journal, needed to change as a matter of principle. Only by cultivating their talents and accepting roles that went beyond traditional responsibilities would they realize their potential as human beings. With better marriages as the outcome, she clearly saw this as a change in the interest of the common good. But a woman’s right to develop and realize her own individual talents also influenced her thinking.

Although Helene was unaware of her predecessors, her musings reflect what historian of women’s education Barbara Solomon called “a new stage in the evolution of the educated woman.” College women who graduated before World War I would have been likely to think of marriage and career as mutually exclusive options. Female college graduates who entered a profession tended not to marry because they realized that their home responsibilities would prevent them from achieving in their chosen field. This generation tended to seek friendship and intimacy in relationships with professional colleagues and female friends. In the interwar years, however, students were becoming more familiar with the theories of European sexologists and psychologists that challenged Victorian ideas about women’s

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sexual nature. College women by the 1920s tended to feel that by remaining single, they would deprive themselves of an essential component for health and happiness.\(^{11}\) Collecting experiences in a heterosocial student culture removed from the direct supervision of elders for these women was as much a part of their college experience as their studies. The image of the typical female student during this time changed from a young woman of modest means or with sincere professional interests to that of a flighty flapper – a “coed” who went to college for a little education and a lot of fun before she settled down as a married wife and mother.\(^{12}\) Contrary to the popular image, however, opinion polls reveal that college women continued to be interested in careers. Alumnae surveys from the 1920s through the 1930s show a majority of graduates working full time at least at some point after college. Continuing the trend started by the first cohort of women who entered higher education, they married later and had fewer children than their less educated female contemporaries. Women’s proportion of doctoral degrees also held relatively steady. What Helene’s thoughts thus reflect are the attitudes of a post-suffrage, self-consciously modern generation of women who felt they ought to be able to have it all.\(^{13}\)

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\(^{13}\) According to Barbara Solomon, women’s proportion of doctoral degrees, while peaking in 1930 at 18 percent, held steadily between 15.3 and 13.4 percent through the twenties and thirties. Company of Educated Women, 172.
As a diarist from the early 1940s, Helene wrote her journal entries against the background of expanding opportunities for women in higher education. For female undergraduates, the United States’ entry in the Second World War opened unprecedented opportunities. A virtual torrent of promotional literature encouraged students to major in the sciences to meet the demand for trained professionals expected as a result of the war. When their male peers joined the armed forces, women at coeducational schools filled vacancies in student government and assumed leadership of some of their institutions’ most prestigious societies and clubs. Many were encouraged to continue their studies beyond the bachelor degree. By 1944, women held more than half of all masters and 18.4 percent of all doctoral degrees.14 This upward trend, however, ended with the war. When servicemen returned, female students at coeducational institutions made room for them to assume leadership. They often needed a little prodding to do so. Students at women’s colleges, however, did not face the competition of returning veterans. Nonetheless, they left academia in growing numbers. The percentage of women with a bachelor or first professional degree dropped from 41 percent in 1940 to 24 percent a decade later.15 In a stark departure from longer-term historical trends, college women married younger and had more children than any cohort since the 1890s. The typical coed, many social scientists agreed, was best epitomized by what influential sociologist Talcott Parsons in 1942 called a “glamour girl.”


15 Solomon, In the Company of Educated Women, table 6, 133.
As a woman heavily invested in cultivating her “sexual attractiveness” her main concern was to catch a husband.\textsuperscript{16}

In an attempt to explain why post World War II college women “chose home responsibilities over the workplace,” Betty Friedan in her influential \textit{The Feminine Mystique} (1963) pointed to the pervasive gender conservatism of the period. Mass media and mental health experts, she argued, relentlessly bombarded women with the message that they would realize their true potential only in motherhood and marriage. Increasingly successful in defining normalcy for all women, Freudian psychoanalysts portrayed wage work outside the home, non-domestic ambitions, and especially the concerted pursuit of a career as signs of deeply troubling personal problems. For evidence that her generation of college women internalized these notions and translated them into action, Friedan could point to her own life. After graduating from Smith College \textit{summa cum laude} in 1942 and taking up work as a journalist, she ultimately renounced plans for graduate studies, married, and became a suburban housewife. She also compiled the statements of female students about to follow in her footsteps for her book. “Girls,” she quoted a Smith College student saying in 1959, did not get excited about their courses anymore. They went to college because: “Everybody goes. … But a girl who got serious about anything she studied … would be peculiar, unfeminine.” The “most important thing” was to “graduate with a diamond ring on her finger.” Any 1950s coed, Friedan’s interviewees argued, learned “freshman year to turn up [her] nose at the library,” and for the sake of popularity followed conventional expectations.\textsuperscript{17}


\textsuperscript{17} Betty Friedan, \textit{The Feminine Mystique} (New York: Norton, 1963), 152-153.
The women Friedan interviewed illustrated a trend. In retrospect, it is clear that postwar college women made choices that stand in stark contrast to those made by earlier generations. By the mid 1950s, 60 percent of them left college before completion of their degrees. Conclusive data about their motivation does not exist. Anecdotal evidence, however, fed the notion that the reason why women turned away from their studies was because they could not wait to get married and start their families. In a departure from historical trends, 1950s’ coeds also married younger and had more children than since the 1890s. Although during the period famous for its baby boom, marriage and birth rates increased among all social demographics, the steepest rise occurred among the nation’s highest educated women. These developments led Elaine Kendall in 1975 to term coeds “the chief casualties of the feminine mystique.”

Against the background of post World War II demographic trends, it is remarkable that many college women in their introspective writings still articulated their desire to combine marriage and a career. Like Helene Harmon, they saw little appeal in exclusive domesticity. Alice Gorton, a woman hailing from suburban Cleveland, Ohio, for instance, entered Smith College in 1950. Alice certainly noticed that the type of coed considered a “nice girl” had a distinctly traditional outlook on life. A “nice” girl, she wrote as a sophomore, “believes that a woman’s place is in the home.” For such a girl, the “goal in life

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[was] to prepare herself as best she can to make herself worthy of some ‘nice’ boy and to bring up his children to be ‘nice’ people.” The quotation marks Alice put around the word “nice” also indicate, however, that Alice did not buy into these value judgments. Her low opinion of society’s conventional norms shows in the way she contrasts the goals of nice people with her own. She wanted to be recognized for “outstanding” talent, to develop a “deep true philosophy” and to produce “extremely admired works” of literature. Her career wish, about which she repeatedly fantasized in the pages of her diary, was to move to New York City where she would live independently as a writer for high-brow literary publications and entertain love affairs on the side. Eventually, she wanted “a great mutual love-union.” She did not want to have children, however, and she surely did not just want to be a housewife.20

At about the same time Alice was attending Smith College, Massachusetts native Margaret Hall went to another one of the Seven Sisters, as the women’s equivalent to the Ivy League men’s colleges were called. When she started her studies at Bryn Mawr in 1951, she was engaged to a young man who believed that a higher education for women was supposed to prepare them to be educated mothers. After delving into the study of literature, however, Margaret realized that this was no longer the kind of role she imagined for herself. As she wrote in 1953 during her second year, “life” was so much more than “the marriage-relationship between a man and a woman.” What she had right now was an opportunity “to “cultivate [her] own garden” from which an early marriage would only keep her. She ended her engagement. Margaret continued to participate in the dating culture and expected to

20 Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 65 (back), box 2, folder 15, January - August 1952,” Alice Gorton (Hart) papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Archives.
marry eventually. Yet she also studied hard and diligently for her major in English, attended an advanced summer course on Shakespeare in Great Britain, and applied for graduate school. With a degree in education, she mused in her journal, she would have an area of expertise of her own that would prevent her from ever becoming one man’s “Little Woman.”

A little later in the decade, in 1956, the daughter of Midwestern farmers, June Calender, started her studies at Indiana University in Bloomington. She too found little to admire in exclusive domesticity and motherhood and in her journal scoffed at hometown acquaintances who had neither the “training” nor “enough drive to do anything but get married.” For her own life, she imagined going “into politics” or a career in journalism. As a glamorous woman with outside interests aplenty and a profession that made her independent, she also expected to eventually attract a mate who appreciated a modern wife. And the same year, Dori Schaffer, from a middle-class Jewish American household, reflected on her life in the same vein. Having just decided to transfer from the private women’s college Scripps to the University of California at Los Angeles she wrote that was looking “forward to a wonderful college career and friendships and maybe marriage coupled with [her] career as a sociology professor”.

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21 Margaret Hall, diary, entries dated 04-17-1953, 04-25-1953, Margaret to John, 10-15-1956, Margaret (Hall) Whitfield papers, private collection.


What these women articulated was exactly the kind of sentiment some of the most conservative postwar experts would have portrayed as misdirected ambition, grounded in neurosis. Yet the sentiments these female undergraduates expressed were not exceptional. In a 1953 survey at Barnard College, sociologist Mirra Komarovsky found her respondents quite evenly divided on the question of the ideal role for educated middles-class women. Half of the students polled looked “forward to motherhood and homemaking as the ideal design for living without any misgivings or reservations.” The other 50 percent, however, desired to combine marriage and a career. Of this group, 30 percent conceded that they would compromise career goals should “the condition of their lives” demand such an adjustment. 20 percent of female undergraduates, however, Komarovsky labeled “determined career girls.” Post World War II female students, the sociologist further argued, in general looked optimistically into their postgraduate futures. They assumed that the struggle for women’s rights was won, that women should be able to combine marriages and career, and that there was no need anymore to see men as potential or actual adversaries. Komarovsky called this type a “new style feminist” who rejected “militancy” and expected “her future husband to be by her side, sympathetic towards her aspirations and sharing in their realization.”

“The new style” or not, the diarists quoted above would not have endorsed Komarovsky’s label. Accepting the stereotypes circulating in the postwar media, they saw feminists as selfish career women or pitiable spinsters. This notwithstanding, this dissertation

24 The most notorious example of this literature, Modern Woman: The Lost Sex, for instance, cast non-domestic interests as the consequence of feminist lobbying efforts to devalue all things feminine. Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham, Modern Woman: The Lost Sex (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1947).

will show, they articulated beliefs that can be seen as an articulation of difference feminism. Their femininity, in their minds, was a basic component of their nature and they certainly expected one day to get married. Most of them also expected to become mothers. They did not think, however, that the traits that set a woman apart from men defined her or limited her in her pursuits. With that, these undergraduates argued in agreement with exactly those women who were the first to embrace “feminist” as a label for themselves. Early in the twentieth century, for instance, Greenwich Village artists and political radicals distanced themselves from the older generation of women’s rights activists by arguing for the distinctiveness of female instincts, while at the same time insisting that their talents were equal in worth to those of men.26 Falling out of favor during the feminist resurgence of the so-called second wave of the late 1960s and 70s, “difference” feminist notions once again became popular in the eco and cultural feminism of the 1980s.27 Judged by their own words when they began their education, college women of the 1950s thus seem to bridge the early and the post second wave feminist decades of the twentieth century.

26 A major influence in the formulation of this difference feminism in the early twentieth century was the Swedish writer and educator Ellen Key. Entering the discussion about women’s roles and sexuality at the same time Freud did, Key emphasized women’s reproductive potential as central to their nature. This notwithstanding, she also argued that women had a right to sexual fulfillment and self-realization on a par with men. For an analysis of the feminism espoused by Ellen Keys see Mari Jo Buhle, Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 39-42. Political radical Emma Goldmann was one notable woman who embraced Key’s ideas. Modernist artists flocking to New York’s Greenwich Village scene also found Key’s work appealing. See Christine Stansell, American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000).

In the way theories were translated into practice, there were, of course, differences. For young women of a generation before and after the 1950s, a budding feminist awareness tended to lead them into collective activism. The postwar World War II campus, by contrast, did not produce a protest climate. This is particularly remarkable considering that the women quoted above fit the profile of activists in-the-making.

Movement theorists have identified certain prerequisites that need to be in place to mobilize historical actors for political protest. To develop a critical political perspective, people need to experience a “cognitive liberation” first. They need to recognize particular social conditions as problematic, develop a language to talk about it, feel a responsibility to act, and believe in the possibility of change. In their introspective writings, female students of the 1950s show that they were undergoing exactly such a politicization. They identified particular kinds of relationships as problematic, wanted to base their own lives on new principles, and were optimistic that the men to live such lives with were available. Even more importantly, they did not think that social change was just a matter of making the right choices in their personal lives. In fact, when I followed women through their first semesters, I found that they developed an adversarial position towards families and home communities in regards to the political events of the Cold War and that they saw their personal choices and the cultural context as connected. A broad consensus among students was the notion that anti-communist witch-hunts, racial prejudices, and conformity to conservative sexual mores

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29 See Klatch, A Generation Divided, 95.
showed individual pathologies writ large. As members of the educated young generation, women felt they had a responsibility to educate their fellow Americans about the psychological hang-ups that impeded progressive social change. And at least for a time, they were immensely optimistic that changes were just a matter of exposing the American people to the right kind of information; a task for which college educated women like themselves were cut out.

When I looked at the introspective writings of college women who articulated plans for careers, I found that they were attracted to particular academic disciplines. In part, their preferences reflected the traditional focus of the female liberal arts curriculum. After the war’s end, few women imagined professional futures as scientists. More common was the goal to write professionally and to study literature. However, women also made plans for postgraduate studies and professional jobs in disciplines like psychology, sociology, and anthropology. By doing so, they identified exactly those fields considered cutting-edge and relevant for national preparedness at the time. Although policy planners and government officials considered the hard sciences the fields with the most direct bearing on the build-up of the military industrial complex, the federal government during the Second World War had also utilized the expertise of mental health experts and anthropologists on an unprecedented scale. From the study of personality and culture, many Cold War public intellectuals and cultural critics expected insights into the origins of prejudice and aggression and hoped to arrive at a complex understanding of human motivations. College women were definitely

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aware of these trends and the career aspirations they articulated suggest that they wanted to have a voice and play an active part in shaping postwar culture and academia.

When I followed career-oriented women through their stay in college, however, I noticed a common pattern. In departure from original plans, most of them married young and became mothers right away. Instead of trying to combine work and marriage they declared that they would dedicate themselves to facilitating the career of their spouse. In addition, their view of their peers – and of fellow women in particular -- became increasingly negative. Something thus seemed to have happened in the course of their college education that challenged these women’s belief that they would indeed be able to fulfill themselves through love and careers. In this dissertation, I attempt to explain and evaluate this dynamic.

Historians of women in the Cold War have emphasized conservatism, repression, and a widespread longing for security to explain women’s apparent embrace of motherhood and domesticity. And undoubtedly, the challenges college women faced were daunting. The war generally opened up new opportunities for women, but gains for female scientists, academics, and professionals were tentative at best. Despite the fact that by 1943, the nation’s research and educational institutions urgently needed to fill the spots vacated by men,


31 Probably the most influential work in this vein is Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (New York: Basic Books, 1988).
departments treated female scientists as temporary replacements. In most academic fields, women did not advance beyond the positions of instructor. Although some women made significant contributions to their disciplines, these were rarely spotlighted in the media or acknowledged by their home institutions. As academics and scientists, women were thus largely invisible. Older women’s marginal status as scholars combined with stereotypes of female professionals as old maids negatively affected the young generation of female undergraduates’ ability to identify with them or to see them as trailblazers. The women they met as instructors or professors, college women tended to see either as temporary or low-status instructors; or as isolated exceptions who had gained an elevated rank because they were super-performers willing to renounce all outside interests (including love) other than professional ones. Even during the relatively fortuitous wartime period, the image of scholar and scientist therefore remained clearly a male one. This marginalization of women in academia only worsened with passage of the 1944 Serviceman Readjustment Act (G.I. Bill).

While the G.I. Bill broadened access to higher education and postgraduate economic opportunities for men, the same cannot be said for women. Female veterans were eligible for G.I. Bill benefits on a par with men. However, they made up only 3% of veterans. Moreover, administrators often did not consider them as likely targets and some of the publications of the Veterans Administration did not even mention them. The absolute numbers of female undergraduates continued to rise through the 1950s so that by 1957 one in every five 18 to 21 year old women was in college. In proportion to men, however, women’s representation

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32 Reflecting the hostility towards women in especially the sciences, their proportion rose only from 4.0% in 1940 to 4.1% in 1945. Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Before Affirmative Action, 1940-1972* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 24.
shrunk. During the peak years of the G.I. Bill in 1946 and 1947, veterans made up almost half of all students. Women’s proportion of the student body, by contrast, dropped from almost half in 1944 to under 30% right after passage of the bill. Not only did the number of men flooding the nation’s campuses dwarf that of female students, lack of encouragement combined with unwritten quotas to keep women out of research universities, the sciences, and engineering. This marginalization of women as members of the academic community was especially consequential as the post World War II period constitutes an essential phase in the expansion and consolidation of the apparatus of higher education. During this period, formal degrees became the pathways to middle-class status. Yet while many educators and politicians actively worked to allow new groups of men access to academia and the professions, their policies made it hard for female students to take advantage of the same opportunities.³³

The political climate also turned more and more hostile for women who, by donning a public role, challenged gender conservatism. As historians have demonstrated, Cold War rhetoric was heavily gendered. Psychological experts and political commentators alike cast individuals who had strayed from traditional gender role expectations as maladjusted neurotics whose mental health issues made them easy prey for extremist agitators. This discourse heightened popular suspicion against career-oriented women who, as gender non-conformists, became increasingly vulnerable to being red-baited.³⁴ The American


Association of University Women was but one professional women’s organization whose members were called in front of state and federal investigators for alleged subversive sympathies. The upsurge of anti-feminism also put institutions of higher education for women on the defensive. In the Seven Sisters, the effects show for instance in the efforts of administrators to craft the institutions’ public image. Women’s colleges portrayed themselves increasingly as places where notions of femininity were reinforced rather than challenged. Mount Holyoke, Smith and Wellesley Colleges, for instance, tried to distance themselves from their older image as homosocial spaces in which students assumed public and leadership roles and relied on each other. Instead, they emphasized their heterosocial character. They increased the proportion of male faculty members and in their promotional brochures emphasized that dating opportunities and heterosocial mixers would be a prominent part of students’ educational experience. This double-message had been a part of the irony of women’s higher education since the founding of the first women’s colleges. In the context of Cold War anti-feminism, however, gender conservative messages grew in prominence.35

I argue, however, that, while it can not be denied that public events influenced college women, they do not sufficiently explain the decisions they made. At a time when Cold War political and gender conservatism spread, in many ways institutions of higher education provided safe spaces in which adversarial attitudes towards the Cold War consensus could

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grow. Despite the difficulties women faced as scientists, especially the women’s colleges continued to encourage students to major in non-traditionally female fields. College women also encountered – often in person – some of the leading experts in cutting-edge academic fields. Moreover, while many Americans encountered expert discourse only in a simplified and popularized version in the mass media, college women gained insights into the whole gamut of theories in the mental health field. In their classes and through readings recommended by peers, they found support for, but also challenges to, gender conservatism. Many professors were outraged about the conservative bent in fundraising and promotional brochures. Many also continued to encourage students to maintain a critical perspective on Cold War politics. Student Christian organizations provided outlets for activism in the area of peace, free speech and civil rights and institutions committed to the advancement of women in academe continued to lobby on behalf of female students.36

The effect of this sheltered environment shows in the fact that even against the background of anti-subversive investigations and conservative expert debates, women continued to explore politically progressive ideas and toy with idiosyncratic personas in their writings. Their attitudes even seem surprisingly unaffected by national developments. Women whose education coincided with the height of McCarthyism and those who read about the segregationist riots that responded to the resurgent Civil Rights movement of the mid-1950s displayed a stalwart optimism that through work and personal example their

generation of educated young would contribute to national progress. Considering these continuities, it is all the more important to explore what exactly brought down women’s faith in their ability to imagine themselves as fully realized women who had spouses but also careers.

The intersection of political and personal experiences during the Cold War has been explored, for instance, by Daniel Horowitz in his biography of Betty Friedan. Friedan, a woman who had in her youth and young adulthood been an avid proponent of labor and feminist issues, never had to answer directly to anti-communist investigators. Witnessing the havoc that red-baiting wrecked all around her, however, nonetheless had an effect. Like many of her contemporaries, Friedan realized that past thoughts and actions, no matter how well-meaning, could brand an individual as a dangerous subversive. She could see that lives of people who held opinions not very different from her own were destroyed when their views were exposed to an unsympathetic and suspicious public. In response, Horowitz argues, Friedan did not turn away from activism. In the case of persistent resistance to her ideals, she “surrendered her hopes for a major social reorganization and focused instead on what she could do on the local level.” She also, however, silenced some of her opinions and concealed important aspects of her personal life. These strategies, in which Friedan was joined by many liberals and former or present communists of the period, although not meant as a withdrawal into privacy, still fed a cultural climate of dissemblance and evasions.37 On

college campuses, I argue, a very similar dynamic took place. Only in this case, the events that affected women were related especially to issues of their sexual and gender performance.

That sexual issues did become such a central focus in students’ lives stems from the fact that their coming of age coincided with a particularly difficult transitional phase in the nation’s history. The mid-century saw the convergence of a number of longer-term trends that had all been avidly contested. For one, this was a time when the speed and visibility with which the sexual cultures of the middle class were changing had increased. Although the transformation of manners and mores began in the early twentieth century, the social and demographic upheaval in the wake of World War II served as a catalyst for change. Magazine exposes and social scientific studies highlighted the extent to which these transformations were taking place. There was no consensus, however, on the appropriate response or on how to evaluate the effects. As a group, college women experienced the effects of this situation of flux particularly acutely because it was also at this time that

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38 Historians of gays and lesbians have illuminated this state of flux particularly perceptively. Estelle B. Friedman in her study of prison reformer Miriam Van Waters has shown the mid twentieth century as part of a transitional era in regards to theories about the origins of homosexuality. Early twentieth century notions of “sexual inversion” as inborn still fluctuated while psychoanalytical views of same sex desire as a developmental maladjustment were gaining ground. George C. Chauncey found a similarly unsettled debate about male homosexuality persisting into the 1950s. That theories about heterosexuality, too, were in transition, has received less attention but Jonathan Ned Katz has started to address the question. As he argues, a heterosexual pleasure ethic began to spread in the late nineteenth century but continued to exist in uneasy tension with traditional emphases on self-restraint and morality. This tension, he argues, would only subside in the course of the 1960s. See Estelle B. Freedman, *Maternal Justice: Miriam Van Waters and The Female Reform Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); George C. Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and The Making of The Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Jonathan Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton, 1995).
educators and public commentators tried to position them as the main arbiters of traditional middle-class values. Faced with the influx of new groups of men into institutions of higher learning, the nation faced the challenge of assimilating these newcomers into the ranks of the traditional social and cultural elite. College women here were supposed to serve as brokers of culture and morality. As a consequence, college women in their alma maters encountered a set of moral and behavioral prescriptions that was increasingly at odds with the behavior expectations they encountered in the heterosocial student culture and practices in the nation at large. Moreover, the official emphasis on conformity to traditional values clashed with messages they encountered in their courses, through extracurricular readings, and in talks with peers. Especially those women who – because of their academic ambitions - possessed a high level of cultural literacy thus experienced intense difficulties in mediating clashing messages. These were students who were not only aware of the ambivalent nature of the cultural discourse. Their position was even more precarious because their education had made them highly conscious of the link between an individuals’ gender and sexual performance on the one hand, and mental health, political reliability, and social status on the other.

In the middle of the twentieth century, career-oriented college women had to come to terms with their feminine identity and sexual selves at a time of clashing codes and contradictory prescriptions. They faced these challenges in an environment in which the consequences of their behavior were assumed to have far ranging consequences. The strains growing out of this situation made social interactions in college a highly precarious endeavor. As historians of sexuality have already shown, most women chose to cope with the situation
by opting for silence and outward conformity. These coping mechanisms, however, drove heterosexually active women into a closet of silence, evasions, and lies that not only prevented a public and collective critique of sexual mores from taking place but also undermined solidarity and generational cohesion among the educated young.

In the campus social environment, a dynamic I call sex and gender baiting became the equivalent to red-baiting in the larger polity. As educators of women enlisted students in enforcing rules and regulations at odds with behavioral expectations among the young, 1950s coeds constantly encountered their peers as enforcers of an official morality they knew was widely defied. This situation isolated them from other women and harmed their sense of self. When female undergraduates were called to answer to student-run judicial or honors boards; or when they saw how sexual gossip ruined another woman, they lost faith in the power of education to change attitudes. When they themselves failed to stand up in defense of actions they had committed or at least contemplated at some point they suffered blows to their self-esteem. In the end, college women grew disillusioned in their own peers and lost faith in their own abilities and strength. Driven into isolation, they began to expect lonely lives. By the end of their course of studies, many women in consequence reformulated their ideas about postgraduate goals.

Sexual and social conflicts eventually caused formerly career-oriented college women to endorse a concept of culture lag. Arguing that the world was not prepared to deal with gender non-conformists, they adopted a view of the family as a sphere protected from the scrutiny of the public. During the 1950s, this helped to perpetuate a conservative campus climate. But in

evaluating women’s decisions, I believe, we have to take into account the fact that they endorsed the family as their sphere of self-realization only after personal experiences had convinced them of the validity of this intellectual claim. Even though from a post 1960s perspective their choices will seem conservative, at the time they made them, they reflected these women’s high level of cultural literacy and their ability to utilize the intellectual discourses at their disposal to make sense of their own experiences.

This dissertation builds on the rich and expansive revisionist historiography of gender in the Cold War. Although in the popular imagination, the image of women during this time is still shaped by what Betty Friedan so memorably labeled the “feminine mystique,” historians have shown that she intentionally exaggerated her portrayal of the mass media discourse on femininity. By doing so, she drew attention to the dilemmas of white, middle-class housewives, but also rendered invisible the much more complex realities of many postwar women. While in this reading, the 1950s appear an aberrant period that contrasts starkly with the war years and the activist 1960s, early revisionist accounts pointed out the continuities between these decades. Even middle-class women, William Chafe argued, never left the labor force in the numbers that Friedan suggested. Moreover, Eugenia Kaledin added, there was a vast array of accomplished female artists and professionals. What dominated the literature up to the mid 1990s was nonetheless a view that emphasized the obstacles and oppressions women faced. 40 Joanne Meyerowitz, who sees this latter approach expressed

40 As the most recent example see Jane Sherron De Hart, “Containment at Home: Gender, Sexuality, and National Identity in Cold War America,” in Rethinking Cold War Culture, Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert, eds., (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001). The tendency to portray the 1950s as the repressive pretext to the liberating climate of later decades is most visible in works on Second Wave Feminism. The most prominent example is Ruth Rosen, The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America (New York: Viking Press, 2000). Beth Bailey’s Sex in the
best by Elaine Tyler May’s *Homeward Bound*, drew together the expanding revisionist literature in her edited volume *Not June Cleaver* to emphasize the opportunities women found in the Cold War context. She showed the postwar discursive landscape to include, parallel to the undeniable celebration of motherhood, images of successful professional women who managed to balance household responsibilities and careers and whose accomplishments the media did celebrate. Other contributors to the volume revealed the way in which activists and professionals made use of the rhetoric of national emergency to carve out a public role. In particular, historians showed the wide-ranging activism of women in the labor movement, of women of color, and of women who flocked to civic and religious institutions as outlets for non-domestic interests and energies.  

Against the background of this increasingly complex and multifaceted picture, the image of college women, however, is still one of apolitical quiescence.  

41 Heartland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) stands out as an exception. The author illustrates young men’s and women’s frequent evasions of restrictive rules regarding sexual behavior outside marriage in the decade leading up to the sexual revolution. But these evasions, Bailey argues, were for the most part private and secretive and did not challenge the status quo. Downright attacks of sexual conventions and gender roles would have to wait till the 1960s when a mass movement presented a concerted critique of traditional values. Yet to me it seems problematic to relegate people’s private doubts about and challenges to the status quo to the realm of pure evasion. Privately, historical actors might very well internalize but also mediate, challenge and even transform prevalent discourses. Their personal experiences and thoughts should therefore be examined with care.  


42 A notable exception here is the literature dealing with the student branches of the Young Women’s Christian Association, see especially Susan Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times: Racial Justice, Peace, and Feminism, 1945 to the 1960s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).
conformists who played dumb to catch a husband. As such, the nation’s best educated women seem to have “with appalling docility” followed the period’s most conservative prescriptions. Yet, that to understand the choices of people we need to look a closer look at the cultural context in which they made them is suggested by Jessica Weiss. Using data from two longitudinal studies conducted by the Berkeley based Institute of Human Development, Weiss examines how in the process of participating in 1950s culture, young husbands and wives actively transformed conceptions of marriage, romance and wage labor. These transformations then became particularly visible in the 1960s when more and more married middle-class women entered the labor force. At first, however, Weiss emphasizes that women usually deferred wage labor to later stages in their life course and put marriage and motherhood first.

In my dissertation, I look closer at the context in which educated women made their choices. While Jessica Weiss shows how young couples’ conceptions of marriage and love changed over time, I address the question why women privileged these choices in the first place and what exactly they saw in them. By focusing on female undergraduates, I shine the spotlight on a group that has so far received little attention in the revisionist literature on women in the Cold War. I see these women as grassroots intellectuals. Although they did not establish themselves in a prominent position in academia or the professions, they participated

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actively in a larger debate about culture, values, and gender roles. I will show how these
highly literate women mediated between what they read and what they experienced. Based
on an analysis of their personal and introspective writings, I offer insights into the
relationship between personal, every-day, lives, political events, and the intellectual realm of
*grand ideas*. I will further show the extent to which the discourses at their disposal enabled
these young women to construct meaningful identities for themselves.

In many ways my work builds on Wini Breines’ *Young, White, and Miserable*. Starting off from the question of how she and others of her generation became feminists in the late 1960s, she examined not only the expert discourse of the period, but also the
“situation in which [young women] found themselves and how they constructed
themselves.”\(^45\) Drawing on memoirs of and coming-of-age fiction by women who were
teenagers in the 1950s, she finds that they found in the “paradoxes” and “tensions” of the
times “opportunities and images useful for their own emancipation.” Primarily interested in
the view of her own contemporaries, though, Breines leaves out the views of women who
were young adults in the early half of the 1950s. Moreover, she uses writings by authors who
later became feminists and who then looked back at their youth in an attempt to explain their
choices. The benefit of hindsight inevitably influenced the way women presented their own
past. As Breines writes, the women’s liberation movement changed not only the women
touched by it, but also how they saw themselves and the decisions they made. *Young, White,
and Miserable* thus provides a view of the 1950s through the lens of the late 1960s. It leaves
unanswered, however, the question of the range of constructions of female identity that were

\(^{45}\) Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the 1950s*
(Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), xi.
possible on the basis of the discursive raw material available to college women in the years between 1940 and the early 1960s.

As the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs has argued, the memory of the past is inextricably linked to the social context existing within a particular group at the time at which the act of remembering takes place.\(^{46}\) Women in the aftermath of Second Wave Feminism draw on a different rhetoric and symbols than women before those social upheavals. Even women who rejected or were skeptical of feminist goals frequently explain or justify their life choices in reference to issues raised by the second women’s movement. Supporters of the movement even construct their group identity in explicit distinction from the past; or rather, from a particular, socially mediated construction of the past. The 1950s are therefore constantly measured against the yardstick of the late 1960s. To avoid the distortion that goes along with a retrospective view, I therefore chose to rely heavily on college women’s own introspective writings. I am not proposing that the way in which feminist writers have presented their youth is inaccurate. Critical distance certainly gave women very valuable insights. But I would suspect that in their reconstruction of the past writers might have privileged certain aspects while downplaying or neglecting others. I argue here that in the retrospective some of the complexity of young women’s experiences in the 1950s got lost.\(^{47}\)


My dissertation deals with a specific group of educated young women that was in a sense pre-selected by the nature of the questions I am asking. Because my subject concerns private experiences of women from the relatively recent past, the number of sources available in repositories is small. In the course of a nationwide search for diaries written after 1940 but before the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* accelerated the spread of a feminist analysis of gender relations, I managed to locate 17 unpublished and two published journals. Not all of these, however, turned out to be useful for the purpose of this dissertation. Because I wanted to learn about the intersection of private experiences, public events, and intellectual debates, I needed access to diaries by women who were not only introspective but also addressed books they read and theories they encountered. This narrowed the number of useful sources down to 13. All of these women turned out to be in a liberal arts college or course of study. All diarists but one majored in a field of the humanities – most often in English literature. Only one woman – Radcliffe College student Claudine Harris – majored in a hard science (physics) and she did so during the war. Although my reading of all these diaries influenced my analysis, my quotations are only from those that enabled me to gain a good understanding of the writers’ surroundings and circumstances. The use of some of the diaries was moreover restricted and in one case the author preferred to conceal her identity. In addition to the unpublished diaries, I have also read three published journals and about 50 sets of student letters. This personal correspondence includes letters sent to family and friends and love letters exchanged between college women and their partners. Some of these are from college archives, others I have solicited through calls in alumnae magazines. Once again, not all of the sources yielded insights into the questions that concern me here. The relevant collections are listed in the bibliography. Like the diaries, they offer intriguing
insights into the world of ideas in which college women of the immediate post World War II period moved. To complement my findings from introspective writings, I have also consulted student newspapers, yearbooks, and scrapbooks, and I have perused class notes and term papers left by the women whose private writings I analyzed. Last but not least, I have read the published diary of poet and writer Sylvia Plath.\footnote{Karen V. Kukil, ed., \textit{The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962} (New York: Anchor Books, 2000).} I found many parallels between Plath’s experiences and those of other college women. Because I want to focus on the stories of lesser-known historical actors, however, the reader will not find quotations from Plath’s writings in the chapters that follows.

Class, race, and heterosexual privilege unite the writers of my sources. As I was interested in why women made the choices they made and what they saw in them, I needed to focus on students who had the luxury of choice to begin with. Only women who at least at the time they made the decision identified as heterosexual had the option to choose marriage and motherhood over wage-work. None of the women I write about identified as a lesbian or bisexual at the time. I know of only one who came out as gay at a later point in her life. The writers are also almost all white. Black women have historically had to shoulder greater responsibility for the economic survival of their family than white ones. Even if they had felt torn between conflicting prescriptions of their role, they could less often look at marriage as an alternative to wage-labor. The black middle class also already had a strong tradition of support for female education and wage labor. For these reasons, black college women transitioned into the labor force with less conflict and less fanfare than their white peers. As diary writing is often taken up at a time of conflict and crisis in the life of the writer, they
might have been less likely to keep one for an extended period of time. Moreover, black college women were also less likely to leave personal journals that documented private and social events. The experience of blatant discrimination African-American students endured as a group on account of their race politicized them more strongly and faster than northerners. As a consequence, a black college woman whose personal journal dealt mainly with day-to-day social events of campus life was less likely than her white counterpart to regard it as a source that ought to be preserved in an archive. The one diary I found only made it into an archive as part of a larger collection documenting the Civil Rights and Church activism of the writer. In addition to this diary, I found only a few collections of letters by black students that yielded insights into the kinds of questions I am interested in. Unfortunately, I can therefore not draw on the experiences of African American college women to the extent that I would have liked. In the sources I did find, however, I discovered intriguing parallels with some of the material from white students on which I will expand in the dissertation.49

Their position as relatively privileged social actors aside, however, the identity of many college women—even those who were white, came from a middle-class family, and identified as heterosexual—was precarious. This was a result of the social, economic, and political trends of the period. Students were often the first members of their families to go to college or university. Frequently, they featured regional or familial backgrounds that,

especially in the east coast women’s colleges, were underrepresented up to this point. Interested in careers and academic subjects, they were also non-traditional in terms of their ideas about the purpose of their education. These characteristics, however, were typical for the undergraduate students who entered higher education after the Second World War. The immediate post World War II period was an important phase in the transition from elite to mass higher education. Many of the women who, in spite of financial and structural obstacles, gained access to college or university during this time came from families who had no prior experience with college culture. Many also came from families who, after their encounter with financial hardships during the Depression, were willing to reconsider the traditional middle-class hostility to the wage labor of married women. Female students who were non-traditional in their background and/or goals were thus an increasingly common part of the mid twentieth century student body. They did, however, enter a collegiate setting that was still shaped by the culture, styles, and expectations, of traditional, upper middle-class coeds. Female students had to negotiate their own goals and identity against the backdrop of this encounter with collegiate culture. The journal and letter writers who left a record of this experience might have been unusually articulate members of this student generation. As their situation was typical, however, the conflicts they faced and the strategies they adopted were likely shared by many others. Diarists and letter writers therefore offer insights into the experiences of a transitional generation of female undergraduates who gained access to higher education when this was no longer a privilege of an elite. But they did so before their contemporaries were able to see ordinary women as legitimate presences in academia.

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters and an epilogue. The first chapter introduces the reader to those elements of the mid twentieth century intellectual and political
discourse that are relevant to understand the experiences of college students. The second chapter then illustrates the development of the collegiate ideal in higher education and sheds light on the reasons why it still shaped the norms and conventions in the student culture even after social and economic developments had rendered it anachronistic. This chapter provides important context to understand the influence of an upper middle-class coed ideal on non-traditional students. Depression era and wartime conditions led to a diversification of outlook among college women and the socio-demographic composition of the female student body. Because by the mid-twentieth century a seemingly objective language of personality naturalized behavioral norms steeped in ethnic and class biases, however, anachronistic gender norms continued to exercise a strong influence on all college women and enabled traditional coeds to serve as the arbiters of norms. Non-traditional students, because of their precarious class position combined with insecurities about their gender performance, were susceptible to these normative pressures. They were nonetheless likely to challenge norms and conventions found on campus. Chapter four shows how their experiences in the collegiate setting turned diarists and letter writers – those from non-traditional background especially – into critical thinkers and potential challengers of the emerging Cold War political consensus. It also illustrates how the elite setting of the collegiate culture encouraged these women to see themselves as budding experts and intellectuals who thought that they had a special obligation to utilize their education in a professional fashion.

The fifth chapter takes a closer look at the ways in which career-oriented college women attempted to reconcile the mixed messages in the educational setting. Post World War II ideals of individualism combined with a debate critical of the conformism bred by mass culture to challenge prescriptions about the female gender role as promoted by neo-
Freudian experts and adjustment psychologists. Career-oriented college women internalized both sets of normative pressures. They drew particularly on ideals of individualism, however, to carve out justifications for their own non-traditional goals.

In the last two chapters, I highlight the limitations of the strategies women developed to deal with conflicting normative pressures. I turn the focus on sexual conflicts and interactions between male and female college students to explain the appeal of notions of gender difference to women. As I show, elitist and masculinist ideals of individualism served women as a defense against normative pressures only so long as they managed to hold on to notions of exceptional talent and self-awareness. Because of the specific way in which female sexuality was treated in the Cold War context, however, heterosexually active women inevitably made themselves vulnerable to suffer internal and external conflicts. Chapter seven illustrates the effects of this difficult situation on the budding identities of culturally literate young women. Through an emphasis on specifically feminine values, interests, and talents, college women attempted to establish authority and agency in competitive and sexually charged encounters with men. Their own internalization of masculinist values and misogynist notions, however, made this coping strategy ineffectual. The epilogue then illustrates how changes in the quality of their private experiences already by the late 1950s enhanced female students’ sense of entitlement to professional jobs and egalitarian treatment in their relationships.
CHAPTER 1

INTELLECTUAL FRAMEWORKS: THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY CONTEXT

To understand the experiences of educated young women in the mid century, we need to look more closely at the cultural and political environment in which they came of age. Before focusing on the collegiate setting, I will therefore briefly sketch the cultural and political frameworks of the mid 20th century. I want to stress, though, that what follows is not a comprehensive intellectual history.\textsuperscript{50} I am delineating only those debates that, as later chapters will demonstrate in detail, notably resonated in the campus culture. Writers most popular among students tended to be public intellectuals\textsuperscript{51} who from the 1930s through the post World War II period addressed the expansion of the welfare state, the spread of consumer society, the rise of fascism abroad, and the broader implications of these


\textsuperscript{51} Drawing on Horowitz’ use in \textit{The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), I define “public intellectual” broadly. I include under it academics from a variety of disciplines, politicians, and public writers who actively tried to influence national policies and attitudes. I use the term “liberal” in an equally broad fashion and am drawing here on Ruth Feldstein’s definition of “liberal discourse.” Acknowledging the diversity and contradictions within liberalism, Feldstein sees certain overarching themes in the sources she discusses and labels “liberal”: these include a belief in social science and education in solving social and political problems, an emphasis on the need to preserve a spirit of individual responsibility, coupled with a commitment to expand collective security. See Ruth Feldstein, \textit{Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 9-10.
developments for national policies and identity. Combined with the increasing prominence of psychoanalysis as a field of inquiry, this global and domestic context produced a powerful interpretation for politics and for the way Americans evaluated the behavior of individuals. According to this discourse, self-awareness and individualism were the character traits most relevant for the survival of democracy. The actions and personality of individuals, the argument went, had implications for the nation as a whole. This framework is important background for the chapters ahead. Its influence explains why issues of sexual and gender performance assumed the significance they did in the minds of students educated in the collegiate setting of the 1940s and 1950s.

In the 1940s and 1950s, fears that Americans were drawn to extremist political ideologies or that they were unable to resist manipulation from the outside would spread on the nation’s campuses and in society at large. Central elements of this debate, however, were already firmly established by the 1930s. At that time, the development of welfare policies, the spread of mass-consumption and evidence of family breakdown combined with international developments to feed intense concerns about the survival of democracy in the United States.

To understand the force and shape of the postwar debate, it will be helpful to look at its origin and the underlying assumptions that accounted for the way in which it developed.

Although images of the Dust Bowl, breadlines, and strikes have shaped the way we picture the Depression, it was during the 1930s that mass consumption and consumer-oriented policies emerged as central aspects of public life. During the New Deal, consumer rights advocates as a new interest group began to compete for state support with labor and management. Supporters of social security, unemployment benefits, government subsidies for housing, and proponents of welfare pushed the state in the direction of assuming
responsibility for the material well being of citizens. Moreover, despite the financial hardships the Depression brought to many Americans, by the time the decade ended life styles and spending patterns had become central in shaping personal identities and demarcating the boundaries of class membership.  

The exact shape that this New Deal state ought to assume was a matter of controversy. For conservative Republicans, legislation that redistributed wealth and expanded the power of federal agencies put the nation on a slippery slope towards socialism. In their eyes, the Roosevelt administration had turned away from what they saw as core national values, namely free enterprise and individual responsibility and endorsed instead the radical demands of organized labor. In search of the subversives who might try to push the country further along this path, Congressman Martin Dies in 1938 began the House investigations into alleged un-American activities that would continue into the post World War II period.

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52 The spread of mass consumption, which Lizabeth Cohen defines as “the production, distribution and purchase of standardized, brand-name goods aimed at the broadest possible buying public,” was fairly advanced already by the end of the 1920s. See Cohen, A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America (New York: Knopf, 2003), especially her definition of “mass consumption” on page 22. The Depression slowed this development, yet at the same time public commentators were becoming more aware of behavioral patterns in the middle class. From the 1930s on, social scientists were turning to examine “average” as opposed to “deviant” populations and making their findings available to an interested public. On the development of this trend see Sarah E. Igo, The Average American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). For critiques of consumerism of the middle class as they developed in the 1930s see for instance Horowitz, Anxieties of Affluence; also see Paul Gorman, Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth Century America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

War II era under new chairmen. For many 1930s liberals, by contrast, the human suffering they witnessed during the Depression only confirmed their belief in the inhumane consequences of conservatives’ embrace of unfettered enterprise as a guiding principle of economic policies. For many middle-class intellectuals, the Depression meant a move to the left and some forged alliances with communists in the popular front. One cause that became particularly central to progressive liberal and leftist activists was the creation of a permanent system of social security. Against considerable opposition in Congress, reformers pushed the Roosevelt administration to introduce a safety net that would protect citizens from the vagaries of the market. Yet, although the 1935 Social Security Act transformed permanently the face of poverty in the nation, its passage fueled a debate in which liberalism was cast as an ideology that was undermining entrepreneurial initiative and individualism as core national values.54

Although singled out by conservatives as promoters of allegedly un-American policies, liberal reformers actually worried no less than conservatives about the law’s potential impact on society. Benefits and entitlement that were offered too generously, they feared, might encourage irresponsibility among citizens. The concern that this alarming trend was already under way in numbers too large for society to deal with seemed to be supported by the rising incidents of family breakdown described in the sociological literature. Strengthening a patriarchal family model thus became an essential part in liberals’ attempts to legitimate social security and welfare policies. Male breadwinners would need to stay

committed to supporting their dependents. With stable families, welfare spending could be contained. Moreover, normative gender roles would bolster democracy.\footnote{For a comprehensive discussion of the “gendered imagination” that shaped 20th century policies see Kessler-Harris, \textit{In Pursuit of Equity}. Also see Gordon, \textit{Pitied But Not Entitled}; Feldman, \textit{Motherhood in Black and White}.}

To comprehend liberals’ concerns over the development of New Deal welfare legislation, we need to understand the gendered assumptions that were at the core of the American ideal of citizenship and national strength. In the political iconography of the United States, the figure of an independent male capable of sacrificing self-interest for the greater good had traditionally embodied the citizen ideal. While autonomy was the central characteristic of this ideal type, \textit{dependence} on others carried uneasy connotations with the childlike and feminine. The fact that women were not independent and were therefore \textit{not} seen as possessing the autonomy they needed to make informed political decisions had long served to deny them access to the vote. With the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920 and the expansion of economic opportunities for women, this clear-cut division of gendered obligations to the state was gone. Moreover, the corporatization of the economy eroded the material basis for male self-sufficiency as more and more men found themselves in employed positions as white-collar workers in large corporations. By the 1930s, the way in which men and women accessed citizenship rights and duties and entered the public sphere was therefore converging. However, the debate over how women’s influx into the public sphere would affect the body politic was still unsettled. Here, it is important to note the venues in which women during the Depression were particularly visible. As lobbyists for social security, consumer protection, and safety of women, children, and workers, they established a foothold in many New Deal agencies. With that, however, they also seemed to introduce into politics
concerns over security and comfort that were marked as feminine. In the eyes of many observers, women’s political activities were therefore heightening in the citizenry in general a preoccupation with things feminine that could only weaken the nation. These concerns about female influences in politics only grew in the latter half of the 1930s when developments in Europe and the Far East suggested that a new world war was imminent.

In the collegiate setting of the mid 20th century, debates that pitted proponents of an isolationist foreign policy against interventionists resounded loudly. Many of the liberal intellectuals college students of the 1940s and 1950s encountered as speakers on campuses or as writers of popular books were early and avid supporters of U.S. intervention in response to fascist aggression. Even though it was obvious from the earliest days of the Nazi dictatorship that Germany would make anti-Semitism an official policy, interventionists at first found little support among the majority of Americans. In 1936, the fascist allies Germany and Italy lend their military support to general Francisco Franco’s attack on the democratically elected Spanish government. A year later, the Japanese empire occupied Manchuria. In 1938 in Germany, Jewish citizens became the victims of the large-scale pogrom that made history as Kristallnacht. The same year, Hitler annexed Austria. This notwithstanding, isolationism remained the official foreign policy agenda and most Americans joined in the international celebration of the 1938 Munich treaty that ceded territory to Nazi Germany. Germany eventually defied this agreement and overran an unprotected Czechoslovakia. Still, statistics

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56 On the gender ideals underneath the consumerism critique see Kathleen Donohue, “What Gender is the Consumer?: The Role of Gender Connotations in Defining the Political,” *Journal of American Studies* 33, no. 1 (1999): 19-44.
demonstrated the persistent strength of non-interventionist sentiment in the American public.  

The place where activism on behalf of peace was particularly visible was among organized students. Here, anti-interventionism was based on the principles of pacifism from a religious standpoint or alternately on opposition to imperialist aggression. Up to the mid 1930s, the student peace movement united under its umbrella a broad coalition of Marxists, socialists, liberals and Christian pacifists who joined with communist students in the Popular Front. Even at its height, this activism attracted only a minority of students. It was, however, highly visible. Inspired by overseas’ peers who introduced the Oxford Pledge on British campuses in 1933, the American Student Union the same year launched a petition drive. Signers of the American pledge vowed never to take up arms on behalf of their country “except in cases of the invasion of the mainland of the United States” and to work instead “actively for the organization of the world on a peace basis.” The campaign for the pledge was covered by mainstream middle-class publications and the strength of anti-interventionist sentiment also showed when mass magazines published the results of peace polls on  


58 On the student peace movement see Robert Cohen, When the Old Left was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement: 1929-1941 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Eagan, Class, Culture, and the Classroom.
campuses like Columbia, Brown, and the elite women’s colleges.\textsuperscript{59} In fact, despite the general lack of active involvement of the student body, the attitude on campus in general was skepticism towards idealist justifications for an activist foreign policy. This mood had spread after World War One when revelations of secret treaties between the allies of the United States, of false propaganda claims to stir up patriotism, and of profiteering in the weapons industry discredited the Wilsonian idealism that underwrote the campaign for U.S. entry into war and for the League of Nations. Only after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor would polls conducted among students show them rallying in support of a U.S. entry into the conflict abroad.

Although it started out from a broad base of support, the student peace movement became increasingly fractured and isolated in the course of the second half of the 1930s. Women’s colleges and religious organizations continued to support pacifist activism. This also rendered the public face of the movement increasingly feminine. When Nazi Germany entered a non-aggression pact with Soviet Russia, the Popular Front coalition between liberals and communists collapsed. Following on the heels of the failed “appeasement” policy, the Hitler-Stalin Pact raised the stakes for liberals to disassociate themselves from a movement they now saw as having been based on a weak, ineffectual, and misguided agenda. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, college students heard from a broad variety of liberal politicians and intellectuals that they needed to part with the attitudes of previous cohorts and support intervention. One figure that would become particularly relevant in this context was the Protestant liberal theologian and long-term activist Reinhold Niebuhr.

Niebuhr, who taught at the Union Theological Seminar in New York City, was a prolific writer and contributor to such left-liberal publications as *The Nation*. A long-time adviser of the Young Women’s Christian Organization, he frequently appeared as guest speaker in colleges and universities. A former socialist, he had turned into a Popular Front liberal and actively supported the student peace movement in the early 1930s. Yet, despite his roots in political organizations that were rapidly losing legitimacy, he would become one of the leading Cold War liberal intellectuals. This was a feat Niebuhr accomplished at least in part because he managed to change the image of the Christian liberalism he supported from one of effete sentimentalism to one of realistic, assertive, take-charge activism.  

Niebuhr’s turn away from a political stance he had once supported was fueled by international developments. Witnessing the escalation of conflict abroad, he grew increasingly frustrated with the reluctance of liberal Christian theologians and politicians to support intervention. In his criticism, he directly targeted students as the most prominent supporters of pacifism. In an article addressing the American left in general he delineated his changing view of the “present generation of college students”. Peace sentiment among them, he argued, was but a symptom of their general immaturity and irrationality. Considering the events abroad, their “attitude of irresponsibility” in regards to European nations and the “spirit of cynicism” amongst them was “morally intolerable.” These attitudes were not based on rational political calculations but revealed a naïve belief in politics as either completely good or completely evil. Students merely displayed attitudes that were characteristic of the

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American populace in general. The prevailing mood in the nation, he charged, was a “horrible mixture” of “self-righteousness, cynicism, idealism,” coupled with a “fear psychosis.” Educated youth, in particular, however, needed to accept that they had a responsibility to act and search “for the truth amid conflicting claims.” Instead of passively standing by while the world was in flames, they needed to embrace the need for assertive action.61

Among students, Niebuhr’s use of the term “fear psychosis” was likely to strike a chord. Psychoanalysis as individual therapy had gained popularity among college educated Americans since the 1920s. Motivated by the escalating global crisis, and dissatisfied with economic explanations alone, more and more liberal and left-wing intellectuals now turned to psychoanalysis and its related disciplines in hope that its theories might explain the racism and jingoism of some types of “Western men” and the apathy of others.62 The migration of leading scholars of psychoanalysis from Europe to the United States boosted this trend. Finding new homes in American colleges and universities, émigré scholars met native

61 “Idealists as Cynics,” The Nation, 150, 3, January 20, 1940, 72,74; 74. For another public intellectual who argued that the American people needed to commit themselves to the building of a stable postwar order based on the ideals of democracy and chastened consumption see for instance Archibald Macleish, “The Unimagined America,” first published in: The Atlantic Monthly in June 1943, republished in ibid., Freedom is the Right to Choose: An Inquiry into the Battle for the American Future (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1943), 17-32.

anthropologists and sociologists eager to expand the influence of their disciplines. Psychoanalysis’ focus on the unconscious thus became entwined with the study of culture to produce a framework of ideas that would grow in strength in the course of the war and continue to influence social analysis in the Cold War.  

Proponents of what came to be known as culture and personality studies presented the problems ailing nations as the products of individual psychological problems writ large. Reproducing the same gendered rhetoric of autonomy versus dependence and reason versus irrationality that was also at the heart of the American construction of citizenship, their works lent new prestige to the longer standing assertion that traits and interests marked as feminine harmed the body politic. Particularly influential here was analyst Erich Fromm whose books became part of the postwar college curriculum and whose theories also influenced some of the most best-selling works of non-fiction in the 1950s. Writing in Escape from Freedom (1941) Fromm argued that in the industrial age, “modern man” had become free from the “shackles” of religious dogma and economic oppression that had bound him in the past. Man was now “an ‘individual.” His “freedom,” however, had set him adrift. He had lost his former communal connections and his religious faith. As standardized modern culture offered only superficial and inauthentic “thrills” instead of spiritual sustenance, modern man looked for


“mechanisms of escape from freedom” and found them in “a new kind of bondage.” “The principal social avenues of escape,” Fromm elaborated, were “submissions to a leader” or “compulsive conformity.” The former pattern showed in “Fascist countries” where people gave in to their unconscious longing for “domination” by an authoritarian father figure. Yet in democratic countries, the same vulnerability existed. Here, Madison Avenue and Hollywood played a similar role as Hitler or Mussolini. They offered substitutes for meaning and values and provided the norms and conventions to which the individual then only had to conform to feel secure through membership in a crowd. As conformity to inauthentic conventions offered only fleeting assurance, however, unconscious desires remained unfulfilled. Sharing with the denizens of fascist nations the same “authoritarian character” structure, Fromm warned, Americans were no less vulnerable to seduction of an extremist political creed. “Positive freedom,” he explained, came through individuation and self-realization. An authentic, creative, and independent life would offer meaning and fulfillment in modern times. Despite his generic use of “man,” it needs to be pointed out that Fromm explicitly included women in his call for individuation. For him, they no less than their male peers needed to learn to differentiate between authentic desires and the push and pull of


66 This argument went back to Max Weber. As he argued in the early 20th century, the individual lost his or her connection to a spiritually enriching ethic as a consequence of industrial development and economic prosperity. Prior to Fromm, Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd already drew on Weber in their seminal studies Middletown (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1929) and Middletown in Transition (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1937).
convention. This is especially relevant as female students often encountered leading proponents of culture-personality directly. After the American entry into World War II, male students became subject to the military draft. Consequently, especially women’s college students became the first cohort that learned the newly influential theories from émigré academics and their native colleagues. Erich Fromm, for instance, found a new academic home at Bennington College in Vermont. Karl Koffka, a pioneer in Gestalt psychology, was teaching at Smith College in Massachusetts when he died suddenly in 1941. Kurt Levin, who researched the dynamics of group prejudices and later founded the Research Center for Group Dynamics at M.I.T., first taught in such female dominated fields as home economics and child welfare. Radcliffe students could take courses under renowned anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn while Wellesley College women learned under his wife Florence Kluckhohn. The couple’s well-known colleague Margaret Mead meanwhile frequently addressed college women as guest speaker and lecturer. Proponents of the fields and lay converts also during the 1940s increasingly addressed the reading public in newspaper editorials or in the pages of non-fiction books written for a popular audience. With that, college women were directly exposed to the thesis that to combat authoritarianism and cultural decay, autonomy and independence of mind were of the utmost importance.


The new academic trend was not without its critics. The focus on psychological factors over economic and political ones, some feared, would bring to an end work for social and economic justice. In his bitingly sarcastic “The Yogi and the Commissar,” for instance, essayist Arthur Koestler ridiculed the scores of liberal and Popular Front reformers who had at one point worked tirelessly to change the material basis of society. Abandoning their former infatuation with ideals of progressive liberalism or Marxism, the same “commissars” who had once sought a panacea in economic reform had turned into apolitical “Yogis” searching for truth in their inner selves. The turn to psychoanalysis, Koestler thus argued, would mean the end of a social reform agenda in favor of a self-indulgent quest for personal enlightenment. Moreover, by painting the new outlook as merely the newest articulation of an unconscious attempt to fill one’s inner void, Koestler impugned the motivations of politically active and outspoken people from a broad range of ideological backgrounds.70

The newly influential theories indeed downplayed economic and political factors as solutions for social problems. Moreover, by casting suspicion on the unconscious motifs that pulled people into activist movements, they fed skepticism towards left-wing and liberal progressive attempts of social reconstruction. Koestler’s indiscriminate use of the derogatory term “commissar” to describe communist and liberal reformers alike reflects the loss of legitimacy of interwar progressive reform strategies. In the form in which students encountered the “Yogi” approach in the 1940s, however, the goal of social reconstruction was not abandoned. “The psychological problem cannot be separated from the material basis

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of human existence, from the economic, social, and political structure of society,” wrote Erich Fromm. Reinhold Niebuhr, too, emphasized the turn inwards merely as a first step towards public activities. What he urged his readers and listeners to do was to try to “understand man in the unity of his body and soul, in the urgency of his physical needs, [and] in the interestedness of all rational processes when they are concerned with his physical wants.” People would then need to build on this knowledge and try to build a better world. A life without commitment to a goal larger than one’s self, he in fact argued, was meaningless. Meanwhile, anthropologist Margaret Mead also called on her readers to utilize intellectual tools for social reconstruction. While the thinkers whose words entered campus culture thus emphasized that unresolved psychological conflicts made people vulnerable to the suggestions of manipulative demagogues, they also upheld a progressive liberal commitment to reform. As long as people understood the workings of their inner selves, they had already accomplished a necessary first step for successful political activism.71

Culture and personality studies thus had the potential to form the basis for a politicization of students at a time when the ideological outlook of a previous cohort had lost credibility.72 Moreover, as the new disciplines rose at a time when students encountered constant and urgent reminders of their civic responsibilities and patriotic duties, they


72 Many of the European proponents of culture and personality studies had their political roots in Marxism. By the time they arrived in the United States, they had abandoned the focus on economic change and privileged cultural factors. Nonetheless, the works like those of Erich Fromm and also in the studies of members of the so-called Frankfurt School that was heavily influenced by him, students found an attempt to combine the insights of Marx and psychoanalysis on behalf of progressive social change. William Graebner, The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940s (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 110.
encouraged them to consider professional and academic careers. As they were the ones who learned the new analytical tools, they would become the experts who applied them for the good of society. As venues for voluntary work and moral reform had shrunk, by necessity this would have to occur in the context of a remunerated career. In this context, it is important to repeat that the rhetoric of culture-personality studies urged both sexes to individuate and self-realize. For educated women no less than men, the cultural criticism of their era thus encouraged a life of commitment to social reconstruction and individualism. What also influenced the experiences of college students of the 1940s, however, was the fact that their exposure to new psychoanalytical theories coincided with an upsurge in masculinist rhetoric.

College men in particular encountered the discourse about effeminate Western democracy at a time when both military service and campus life entailed a new scrutiny of the way in which they performed gender. While already during the Depression political rhetoric and iconography had tended to emphasize the value of traits and interests traditionally marked as male, the trend increased during the war when public commentators drew on the already established gendered rhetoric in increasingly strident terms. In the words of one commentator writing for Harper’s after the fall of France, for instance, no one could look at “the history of European civilization for the past two hundred years without perceiving that both France and Great Britain have acted on a female pattern and on a female philosophy.” The obvious consequence in his view was their recent recourse to “appeasement and submission.” For the United States to come to the rescue of these “matriarchies,” the writer continued, they would have to change their own effeminate ways and “turn its
democratic energies toward strength and away from comfort.”  

College men in the 1940s not only read about the threat of feminizing influences in magazines. When drafted into the armed services, they entered an environment that privileged physical and emotional toughness in men. Moreover, as universities and colleges often housed the units that trained officers, even a deferment did not necessarily shield young men from exposure to military culture and masculinist rhetoric. The University of Virginia, for instance, housed a Naval Reserve Officer Corps. By March of 1942, a student had organized a volunteer training unit for reservists and any other college man who wanted to join. The morning exercises and military drills of this “Dawn Patrol” took place in full view of their peers. Volunteers had to make due with wooden rifles, but University President John Loyd Newcomb bestowed on them an image of military preparedness when he exempted Dawn Patrol members from compulsory physical education. At Michigan State University, meanwhile, students shared the campus with a Judge Advocate’s General’s, a Civil Affairs Training and an Army Japanese Language School. College men thus confronted on a daily basis men whose status as members of the armed forces set them apart as more mature and manly.

There is evidence that administrators in higher education saw departures from this model on the side of their charges as in need of correction. At Michigan State one ROTC instructor commented about college men that they were either “indoor, flabby” types or “athletic lounge lizards.” In response to this implication that their students were either


74 For the University of Virginia see: Jennings L. Wagoner and Robert L. Baxter, “Higher Education Goes to War: The University of Virginia’s Response to World War II,” The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 100, no. 3, (1992): 399-429.
pitifully out of shape or, even if “athletic,” still not adequately prepared for national defense, the university introduced a new physical education requirement. Every man not physically handicapped had to take at least four and a half hours of physical education per week. This was also the approach taken by the University of Virginia’s John Lloyd Newcomb who introduced compulsory physical education for all men not already training for national defense as a direct response to the country’s mobilization for war. As this reaction shows, domestic and international crises influenced acceptable norms of how to be a man.

Fears of national and cultural decline continued into the post World War II period. Revelations of the full extent of the Holocaust in the pages of mass magazines brought home that dark and unpredictable forces slumbering in the human psyche could result in lethal consequences. The presence of nuclear weapons raised the stake for peace and, at least in the eyes of some observers, the fact that it had been the United States that dropped this devastating weapon lent support to the idea that it was “Western men” in general who were susceptible to slide into barbarism. The dawn of the Cold War only raised demand for answers and solutions. Moreover, the African-American Civil Rights Movement entered the postwar scene with new momentum and brought to national attention the fact that in the United States itself racism and prejudice had left a legacy of injustice. At the same time, however, new and heightened calls for national unity during the Cold War rendered the airing of problems an unpatriotic act.

The onset of the postwar boom raised confidence and fed the belief in the superiority of the American system. Comparisons with Nazi Germany and Soviet “totalitarianism” made

75 Brian A. Williams, Michigan on the March: The University of Michigan in World War II (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Bentley Historical Library, December 1995), 404.
American democracy look good by comparison. Fears that re-conversion to a peacetime economy would rekindle the Depression did not materialize and many Americans regained their faith in the capitalist economy.\(^76\) In the news media, this showed in a newly triumphant tone. Many commentators were confident that the postwar peace would be more stable than the last one now that the United States had assumed a strong role in the international system. They were also often confident that the flaws that existed in American society would soon be solved. In the postwar mass media, articles written for the lay reader touted the mental health professions as the disciplines most likely to come up with solutions to a broad range of social problems. Successful social engineering, the argument went, depended on scholars and educators applying the tools at their disposal.\(^77\) It was no longer necessary to engage in fundamental economic reconstruction. This optimistic endorsement of a new academic discipline combined with rising anti-communism to marginalize Marxist and liberal calls for economic reforms. Intellectual trends thus intersected with political forces to chop away at the influence of traditional left-wing thought. Moreover, economic trends in the postwar period supported the notion that the need for fundamental structural reforms was past and that the focus now ought to be on the individual.

In the postwar period, the federal government increasingly adopted policies that stimulated consumption and encouraged spending as a tool not just for self-expression but also for political participation. Policy planners at first feared that re-conversion to a peace

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economy would result in a return of the Depression and, indeed, inflation and a wave of strikes suggested an uneasy transition. Yet worries about how to reintegrate the almost 16 million veterans and thereby keep them from fueling the ranks of discontented labor also paved the way for the 1944 Serviceman Readjustment Act (GI Bill). Offering generous funds for education and training, this social welfare legislation expanded the number of especially male - Americans who earned their money in white collar and corporate jobs. Its low-interest mortgages fueled the growth of suburbs and the expansion of the highway system. Moreover, government investment in the defense industry continued once the Cold War with the Soviet Union replaced the hot war with the axis powers. High military expenditures opened new jobs in defense, research, and development, which enabled many Americans to secure their financial future. The government also turned consumption into a patriotic obligation when it presented the country’s economic expansion as a sign of superiority of the “American way.” Statistics from the period show that after years of curtailed consumption, citizens’ demand was huge. By the time the fifties came to an end, the proportion of Americans owning a home had reached sixty percent, seventy-five percent of families had a car, eighty-seven percent a television and seventy-five percent a washing machine. Considering that in the not so remote past, a blue-collar job and an apartment in an inner city neighborhood was the common experience for many Americans, and that, as late as 1939, most homes had not even had central heating or running waters, these changes were indeed enormous.\footnote{In retrospect, it is clear that not every group benefited from the postwar economic boom. Hispanics and African Americans continued to face discrimination. In the rural South, see Horowitz, Anxieties of Affluence, 8-9, 36-37. On the “magnitude” of postwar economic changes also see Breines, Young, White, and Miserable, 2-7.}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{horowitz} Horowitz, Anxieties of Affluence, 8-9, 36-37.
\bibitem{breines} Breines, Young, White, and Miserable, 2-7.
\end{thebibliography}
in Appalachia, and in the inner cities of the North, pockets of poverty remained. These were features, however, that became increasingly obscured in the public culture. The dominant image of postwar America was that of a middle-class society in which virtually everyone, regardless of ethnicity, race, or sex, coveted the same lifestyle and, as the baby and marriage boom suggested, the number of Americans who wanted comfort and security in a home of their own was at an all time high.

The recaptured faith in the American system of government and economy found a distinctive expression in academia. Here, the 1940s and 1950s saw a new interest “to recover, reaffirm and redefine the foundational ideals” of the nation that motivated in particular the study of “American Civilization”. Greatly inspired by the work of culture-personality, this line of inquiry began in the 1930s at Harvard and Yale from where in the course of the 1940s it spread into a variety of disciplines. In English literature, history, sociology, and anthropology a focus on national myths and the collective unconscious informed more and more publications. Illustrative of the theses advanced in this literature is anthropologist Margaret Mead’s And Keep Your Powder Dry (1942).

Mead’s book, which became required reading in college classes almost as soon as it was published, popularized unifying themes in the early literature on American character. Writing at a time when it was far from certain that the United States could win, the author wanted to inspire in her readers a commitment to fight for the ideals of American democracy.


Core national values, she argued, were democracy, idealism, and individualism. These were particularly American characteristics, forged in a frontier society where success was measured according to whether or not a man had achieved the autonomy of the rugged, self-sufficient farmer or the individualistic, successful businessman. This frontier, she conceded, no longer existed, but the values it had produced were so ingrained in the American character that they still constituted peoples’ frame of reference in measuring accomplishments. Because the ideals lacked a basis in material circumstances, people found it difficult to actually live up to them. To compensate for their problems, they tended to look for “impersonal devils” like “Economic Forces … on which to blame their defeat.” Yet a frontier “spirit” did not depend on the actual existence of open land, she wrote. Combining her focus on the role of culture with an affirmation of individual agency, she called on her readers to assume responsibility for their lives. Will and imagination could take its place and turn a beaten down people once again into virile Republicans.81

Mead’s popular book clearly delineated a narrative of national development that was mapped on a romanticized past and on an ideal of self-sufficient male existence. In this, however, her book was typical of the mid-century narrative on national development. By the 1950s, the study of national character had issued in a revival of the work of one of the first interpreters of the American experience, Alexis de Toqueville. His Democracy in America went through multiple reprints and by the early 1960s every major publishing house had brought out its version of the book. By that time, most colleges and universities had specific “American Studies” departments and the American Quarterly served as the official

professional publication for scholars in the field. With that, a generic narrative of American history spread in higher education in which the experiences of women either did not figure, or in which feminine values inhibited progress.

The neglect of women aside and in spite of the motivation of many of the proponents of national character studies to affirm the supremacy of the American way, this field produced the postwar period’s most influential cultural criticism. Cultural critics echoed the national mood that the ideals of American democracy were superior to anything Europe had ever brought forth or the Soviet Union was producing. But in their works, they drew attention to the dissonance between ideals and reality. In An American Dilemma (1948), for instance, Gunnar Myrdal points out the clash between an American “creed” and the reality of racism to argue for an end to the Jim Crow system. Prejudice, Myrdal argued, was a personal pathology concealed as group convention that Southerners defended as their “folkways.” The persistence of this pattern of discrimination, he proposed, harmed not only the minority group. The tensions between ideals and reality also produced a dilemma that weakened the body politic. To alleviate the race problem, Myrdal argued, a change of moral and psychological attitudes was in order. For this emphasis on individual solutions over economic and structural reform, Myrdal attracted the criticism of fellow social scientists. His work is important, though, not just in regards to the longer-term impact it had on the discussion of civil rights, but also in its outlook on the importance of education in the work for social change.

82 Gilbert, Men in the Middle, 39-40.

83 An early voice pointing to the tendency to make generalizations about American history “mostly in masculine terms” came from historian David Potter in 1962. In his case, he commented on David Riesman’s The Lonely Crowd (1950); a book that counted among its intellectual influences among others, the work of Margaret Mead. See Gilbert, Men in the Middle, 50-51.
change. In the context of the discrediting of reforms centered on economic and structural change as guided by a Marxist agenda, many public intellectuals put their faith in education as the most promising -- and least controversial -- tool to alleviate prejudice and advance a social reconstruction.\textsuperscript{84}

Not all of the works produced in the field of culture personality shared Myrdal’s faith that it was possible to change attitudes in the American populace in the here and now. In fact, parallel to the optimistic belief in the power of education to challenge even deeply entrenched stereotypes, the theory of cultural lag gained adherents. Early applications of the concept include William F. Ogburn, Social Change with Respect to Cultural and Original Nature (1922). The extent to which the concept’s popularity had grown in academia by the mid-twentieth century, however, shows in the fact that “lag cultural,” “lag moral,” and “social lag” for the first time became entries in the Dictionary of Sociology in 1944.\textsuperscript{85} Experts used the paradigm in a variety of ways but important for the purpose of this study is its implication for mid-twentieth century theories about the dynamics of social change. Culture lag posits a time-gap between changing social conditions and changes in attitudes. One response to this situation would be to help the individual adjust to new conditions. Another, more pessimistic viewpoint, however, was that the psychopathologies and prejudices of adults resisted educational remedies. In this reading, the only way to turn Americans into less prejudicial


people therefore rested in gradual and long-term changes in childrearing. Yet, whether writers pessimistically declared the futility to challenge "culture lag" or whether they proposed education and reform as solutions for the immediate present, the literature on prejudice shared a critical focus on mass conventions and group values. Progressive change would depend on individuals who possessed autonomy of mind and were capable of independent actions.

Parallel to the literature on prejudice a growing chorus of writers also continued to call attention to the negative effects of consumerism on American culture. David Riesman in The Lonely Crowd (1950) and C. Wright Mills in White Collar (1951) portrayed middle-class life styles as shaped by conformism and materialism. A host of popular writers jumped on the bandwagon and painted the nation’s expanding suburbs as suffocating places in which the pressure to keep up with the “Joneses” dominated life, where creativity was stifled, and where citizens sought refuge in an empty mass culture. Gendered assumptions once again shaped the discourse. When David Riesman, for instance, defined the “other directed” personality, he described individuals who were attentive to the needs of others. His discussion of the implications and value of this development was complex. The way in which popularizers expounded on his theses and in which his work was discussed in the news-


media, however, the “other-directed” cultural type became the stereotype of a suburban male who was behaving in ways traditionally labeled feminine and who allowed especially the women around him to dictate his interests, needs, and goals.  

In the collegiate setting, a critical discourse on the flaws in American society thus remained alive through the Cold War. Works discussed and promoted called attention to the problem of racism, prejudice, and conformity and called for individualism in mind and action. Wrapped in a generic narrative of American civilization as the history of men, however, this discourse also ignored women and glamorized stereotypical male values and traits. Students learned that the American nation was exceptional but that the material basis for its national values no longer existed and that, as a result, cultural and social pathologies were spreading. In the context of the escalating Cold War, this academic trend is important because it would lend an air of objectivity to partisan arguments that a pervasive masculine crisis of the American ruling caste put national security in danger.

The end of the war saw a continuation of the political battles of the 1930s, albeit in an intensified form. As a concession to the need for national unity conservative Republicans had put their inquiries into communist influence in the New Deal establishment on the backburner for the time being. After 1945, however, the House Un-American Activities Committee picked up where the prewar Dies committee had left off. By then, many liberals were already reevaluating their former stance on appeasement, the peace movement, and the popular front. The extent to which postwar liberals felt on the defensive, however,

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increased greatly in the postwar period. This was the period in which the mass media switched from a pre-war focus on scandals among the rich and famous in New York City and Hollywood to Washington. Debates about national security thus occupied a central place. By the late 1940s, the reading public was aware of loyalty investigations, espionage in the nuclear industry, and suspicions against high-ranking diplomats. One particularly important event was the loyalty investigation of Alger Hiss. A former employee with the State Department, Hiss in 1948 had to answer the charge of ex-communist Whittaker Chambers that he had delivered secret information to the Soviet Union. He denied the accusation and the case went to trial where Chambers, against expectations, produced incriminating evidence. In 1949, Hiss was convicted of perjury and sentenced to a prison term.

The Hiss case has special relevance for understanding campus culture because it threw in doubt not only the validity of a particular political sentiment but also of a distinct way to perform masculinity. When Hiss was first accused, among the majority of students and professors, the sympathies were clear. Speaking in 1952 at the University of Missouri, for instance, liberal intellectual Mary McCarthy recalled the dominant attitudes around the time of the trial. Suave, patrician, and Harvard educated, Hiss embodied the “clean-cut college type.” Culturally and politically, most college students would have identified with him. Yet in the course of the trial it became clear that “the unsavory unkempt man” who was

91 Lisle Abbott Rose, The Cold Comes to Main Street: America in 1950 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 208-209.

accusing him “was telling at least a partial truth.” 93 With an “epitome of the eastern establishment” thus exposed as a communist sympathizer, the stake among liberals to draw a distinction between themselves and the “type” Hiss embodied rose. Hiss’ “type” was, however, no longer just suspicious because of his actions, inactions, or political sympathies. Increasingly, the focus was his particular kind of masculinity.

To understand the growing focus on masculinity it is important to consider the context of the trial. By the time it made headlines, the language and theories of psychology and its related disciplines had spread in the mass media. Building on the prestige they had accumulated through successful wartime service, mental health practitioners after the war assumed the height of their influence. 94 Whether as writers of advise columns, private therapists, government employees, or lecturers, experts trained in psychiatry, psychology, or psychoanalysis offered their knowledge to explain the origin of social problems and to suggest cures. As it turns out, these new authorities found much to worry about American men. Right after the war, Edward Strecker, one of the psychiatrists employed to screen military recruits during the war, revealed in a lecture covered by the New York Times the alarmingly large number of men he had to reject for psychological reasons. American men, Strecker argued in his subsequently published book Their Mothers’ Sons (1946), had difficulties cutting the umbilical chord to the parental home. They remained unduly attached

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to their mothers and failed to develop in an autonomous fashion.\textsuperscript{95} A few years later, the notion that there was something wrong with American men found more support in the Kinsey study on \textit{Sexual Behavior in the Human Male} (1948). The author and researcher here tried to present in a non-judgmental fashion the fact that American men engaged in a broad variety of sexual acts, including same-sex ones. Yet while Kinsey had hoped that the large proportion of men who reported having at one point in their lives had a same-sex experience might normalize homosexuality, most reviewers reacted with alarm. Combined with the growing visibility of same-sex bar culture as a result of the social and demographic upheaval of the war, the Kinsey study fed the notion of a virtual epidemic of homosexuality. Then, the same year \textit{The Vital Center} was published, Undersecretary of State John Puerifoy released information about the firing of ninety-one employees who were alleged to be homosexual.\textsuperscript{96}

In this climate in which psychological interpretations of male development, often in simplistic and sensational form, spread in popular culture, the way a man performed his masculinity and in which he acted out his sexual desire became a matter of national security. And here, the patrician manhood embodied by the now discredited Hiss increasingly smacked of deviancy.

The extent to which sophisticated, Ivy League, masculine styles were losing legitimacy shows vividly in the demagoguery of Joseph McCarthy who began his rise to notoriety in the early 1950s. His smear campaign of the liberal establishment not only drew on the growing fears of communist infiltration but also on concerns with elite masculinity.


\textsuperscript{96} For the events bolstering a sense of crisis of masculinity at the time of the Hiss trial see Cuordileone, “Politics in an Age of Anxiety,” 527-533.
The “bright young men … born with silver spoons in their mouth” who walked the halls of the State Department and the Capitol, with their “Harvard accents” and “lace handkerchiefs” were “prancing mimics” of Moscow who should not be entrusted with political power. His rhetoric only grew more explicit when he did not encounter opposition. Whoever disagreed with him, he at one point proposed, had “to be either a Communist or a cocksucker.” While McCarthy outdid everyone in vulgarity, however, he had no monopoly on the trope of emasculated elite manhood.

In what would become one of the founding documents of postwar liberalism, Arthur Schlesinger’s *The Vital Center* (1950), the author had already drawn an explicit line between the type of eastern establishment Progressive epitomized by Hiss and the new postwar version of a liberal. While the latter had the “juices” to approach politics in the realistic and take-charge fashion needed, the Progressive was a malleable “doughboy” whose spine-less masculinity and unprincipled, weak, posturing in response to communism endangered the nation. The postwar liberal, Schlesinger promised, was a “tougher breed” and would issue in a return to the radical tradition of an America as it had existed before the machine age “emasculate[d] the political energies of the ruling class.”

The Cold War discourse thus continued the discussion of an effeminized citizenry that had already shaped the cultural criticism during the Depression. Fears that national security was compromised and partisan conflicts gave the debate a new momentum and the popularization of psychological lingo in the mass media lent it a new language. With a prominent New Dealer sentenced to a prison term, the charge that there was something unreliable about the types of men who made

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97 For a detailed analysis of the rhetoric in the Hiss case and Schlesinger’s book see Cuordileone, “Politics in an Age of Anxiety,” 521 (McCarthy), 519-520 (Schlesinger).
national decision had a basis. As pertaining to college students, this Cold War partisan rhetoric thus rendered especially suspect the masculinity of young men who identified politically as liberals and culturally with the east coast elite.

Worries about men remained central to the popular and academic discourse in the postwar period. Yet what also emerged in the literature was a particular interpretation of the role of women in bringing this state of affairs about. Here, just as in the case of men, postwar experts no longer focused just on the impact a feminized and therefore effeminizing culture had on the development of the psyche. Instead, experts increasingly pondered what actual women in their capacity as mothers and wives had done to bring about the male crisis. This interpretation was based on the psychoanalytical study of the influence of child-parent contacts during early infancy. The gender performance of mothers and wives that became the centerpiece in this analysis, however, because women were widely perceived to have gained too much power and influence.

As would become clear in retrospect, American couples in the postwar period returned to clearly circumscribed roles for the sexes. Yet, this was not clear to observers of the cultural scene in the years following the war. The overwhelming perception here was that the roles of men and women had converged. To succeed in the corporate economy and to fit into conformist mass culture, argued for instance influential sociologist David Riesman, men had to cultivate stereotypically feminine traits. Women, meanwhile, donned more masculine roles. After a temporary drop following demobilization, they returned to the labor-force and

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98 On the popularization of psychoanalytical discourse see Janet Walker, Couching Resistance: Women, Film, and Psychoanalytic Psychiatry (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1-22. On the notion of a male crisis as a construct appearing first in postwar academic writings see Gilbert, Men in the Middle.
the proportion of working wives rose the steepest. Women, the perception went, grew more assertive in the workplace, in relationships, and even in the sexual realm. In the private and cultural sphere, they were becoming more and more influential. As editorials in leading magazines pointed out, once men departed to commute to their corporate jobs, the nation’s suburbs turned into virtual matriarchies. While their spouses thus put their manhood on the line in the “other directed” corporate culture, women wielded exclusive control over the home. They also increasingly voiced their discontent with circumscriptions of their influence and in mass magazines of the time this showed in the plethora of articles and advice columns about discontented housewives. While men were thus getting weaker, women seemed to be growing stronger.

The evaluation of these developments ranged from alarm to acceptance. At its most conservative edge, the literature promoted exclusive domesticity for women. In Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham’s Modern Woman: The Lost Sex (1947), for instance, the authors cast the slightest stirring of ambivalence towards motherhood and domesticity as a

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99 As K. A. Cuordileone argues, we should not just “write off” as rhetorical the postwar lament about the growing influence of women. Rather, she writes, the perception of “a heightening female self-assertiveness” was a consequence of World War II boosts to women’s opportunities and the new expectations postwar affluence encouraged. “Politics in an Age of Anxiety,” 526-527.

sign of neurosis. Farnham and Lundbeck, however, were on the extreme end of a much more diverse discourse. Readers of mass magazines found positive images of working wives and mothers parallel to celebratory articles on the joys of housework and motherhood. Meanwhile in academia, educators of women emphasized the need for their charges to find a broader base for their identity than their reproductive role, to self-realize, and to dedicate talents and energies to political, academic, and civic tasks. Yet, when it came to the question of the male crisis, the person most experts saw as accountable was a woman.

One highly influential analysis of women’s responsibility for the male crisis and a whole host of additional social ills was Philip Wylie’s *Generations of Vipers*. Originally published in 1942, it went through multiple reprints and was assigned reading in many college classes at least up to the early 1950s. Wylie also wrote a series of popular novels in which he repeated central arguments he developed in *Generations*. Gender historians of the postwar period tend to read *Generations* in the same vein as Farnham and Lundbeck’s *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*. It is problematic, though, to lump Wylie together with the work of these neo anti-feminist promoters of domesticity for women. As his fan mail shows, educated young women and men both responded enthusiastically to his books. Because


his work resonated so strongly in this particular population, the arguments of this author deserve a detailed description.

Wylie earned his reputation as a gender conservative particularly for coining the term “momism” which he used as a shorthand for the rule of a “dynasty” of middle-class, middle-aged women over American life.104 And indeed, in Wylie’s oeuvre women as mothers and as wives appear responsible for virtually every problem ailing the nation. He blames them for the nation’s descent into shallow consumerism, and for imposing their sentimental interest in love and romance on popular culture. Women have this influence, he charges, because they wield exclusive control over family purse strings. Because they demand it, men waste their energy in “the manufacture of girdles.” Moreover, because women are emotional, uninformed and prejudiced, their influence impedes the realization of a liberal progressive agenda of economic and social justice. Yet having all this influence did not make women happy. In fact, women acted the way they did because they were alienated from their instincts and therefore profoundly discontented and unhappy.105

Because of Wylie’s charge that women held undue influence over American society, he is often interpreted as an anti-feminist who wanted women to return to domesticity. Women’s economic role, however, was not where Wylie saw the main problem. On the question of the social consequences of their expanding roles, he preferred to withhold definitive judgment. So far, he argued, woman had not done a very good job performing roles


that had once been reserved for men. Yet although he patronizingly belittled the accomplishments of women in the public sphere, he was at least willing to consider that a future generation would excel where their mothers had failed. It was possible, he pondered, that women would indeed be able to “instruct the national courts, train the guard, select the priests, and reorganize the peasants.” Any kind of social progress would be blocked, he argued however, as long as middle class matrons maintained control over the definition of sexual morality.

In Wylie’s analysis of the root cause of the nation’s current problems, sexual mores were the main focus. The only reason why women could turn potentially red-blooded Americans into corporate drones was because “moms” imposed their version of sexual morality on the nation instead of allowing the experts to have their say. It was “Mom,” he charged, who insisted on confining sexual intercourse to marriage. With that, she enabled her younger version, “Cinderella,” to use her virginity as a bargaining tool to secure a provider. This use of sex to entrap men, Wylie argued, hurt the current generation of women no less than men. Indoctrinated since childhood with the outdated sexual morality of matrons, young women never got a chance to come to terms with their sexuality. Hopelessly frustrated, they could see no other outlet for their energies than becoming younger versions of the bigoted,

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106 He left this question open. “American women think” that they can “instruct the national courts, train the guard, select the priests, and reorganize the peasants. … Perhaps they can. … With nine tenths of all females either escaping into imaginary Cinderellaism or trying, somehow, to become Cinderella, we have enough trouble on hand.” Wylie, Generations of Vipers, 52
manipulative, repressed, and toxic “moms” who reproduced social pathologies and prejudice in the next generation.107

Because of Wylie’s popularity among students, it is important to highlight the importance he attributed to sexual morality. Successful social reconstruction in his mind depended on new sexual attitudes. For reform-minded Americans to succeed in the task of building a better society and a safer international order, they first of all needed to stop denying the primacy of the libido and free themselves from the influence of the “dynasty of the dames.” For an ideal society to become reality, the young needed to “remove the fetid incrustations of ages from [their] sexual instinct” and find a more “honest principle for love.” This “principle” entailed that they came in touch with their “instinct” and rejected the sexual blackmail that the rule of “mom” had imposed. Wylie thus wanted to take control away from the persons he saw as present arbiters of morality and put it into the hands of educated and enlightened youth themselves. This entailed a permissive attitude towards premarital sex. As long as “our attitudes became realistic and our motives honest,” letting go of the “laws, rules, superstitions, taboos, dirty names, repugnances, and secrets” would not result in promiscuity and sexual chaos but in fewer neuroses. Racism would no longer take hold. The insights of science could be used to shape a better world. Here, it is also important to note that he had in mind a quite active role in women to contribute to building this ideal society. He did, however, see a need for a new woman. “Cinderellas” he argued, had demonstrated their unreliability in times of national danger. When they witnessed fascist aggression, all they had done was to “frown and buy new hats.” If “Cinderellaism” was

107 On sexual mores and “Cinderella” of whom “mom” is but the “End Product,” see the chapter “A Specimen American Myth,” and “A Specimen American Attitude,” 46-81.
dismantled, however, women might act quite differently: “Amazons,” he mused, “might have piled into Manchuria and Ethiopia to stop the Japs and Mussolini.”

That gender historians have paid more attention to what Wylie wrote about “Cinderellas” and “moms” than to what he had to say about “amazons” reflects the fact that *Generations* was only one of many more books that would blame mothers for what happened to their husbands, children, and the nation as a whole. Looking for explanations of the psychological problems of men, a plethora of academic and popular writers in the postwar period found a culprit in mothers who were ambivalent about their sex roles. Whether by smothering their children with love, or by harming them through emotional coldness, mothers who unconsciously resented their role in one expose after another were blamed for juvenile delinquency, homosexuality, and racism. This literature was different than Wylie’s work, however, in regards to writers’ attitudes towards sex out of marriage. While the author of *Generations of Vipers* did not see intercourse of unmarried partners as a problem per se, most postwar experts worried even more than their Depression era predecessors about an increase of “deviant” families and relationships. The Kinsey studies on men and the subsequent volume on *Sexuality in the Human Female* (1953) had pointed out

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109 It needs to be said that Wylie also attributed disproportionately more space to mom blaming than to positive remarks about women. Nonetheless, in the 1955 annotated edition of *Generations of Vipers*, he expressed his bewilderment that his theses could possibly have been taken as an attack against “real women” (emphasis his). Here, he also emphasized that he received “hundreds” of letters of repentant “moms” and their “sons and daughters” who told him “in effect: Thanks.” See annotations, 194-195. Rebecca Plant’s analysis of his fan mail also supports Wylie’s claim that his theses received a positive reception among female readers.

110 For examples and a discussion of this literature see Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents*, particularly the chapter “Ladies in the Dark,” 165-205.
that growing numbers of Americans of both sexes experimented with diverse sexual and family relationships. Among middle-class men, a model of masculinity based on the allegedly more primitive virility and sexuality of non-white races and lower classes had gained popularity since the late nineteenth century. With growing prosperity in the course of the 1950s, this model became only more visible. The subculture of black and working-class urban youth entered middle-class homes in the form of rock’n’roll, pulp novels, and movies. Hugh Heffner’s Playboy, the first issue of which came out in 1953, promoted bachelor lifestyles as alternatives to marriage and the influx of non-traditional male veteran students undermined moral conventions on college campuses. Among most experts, however, this way to regain a sense of manhood summoned fears of sexual chaos and values dissolution. In the psychological literature of the period, concerns show in the focus on the dangers of “hyper” or “pseudo-masculinity.” Adorno et al. threw in doubt, for example, the psychological health of men who displayed traits and interests conventionally equated with masculinity in an exaggerated fashion, and who were unable to admit weakness or dependence on others. These men were aggressive in their business tactics, opportunistic in their social relations, and “manipulative” in their attitudes “toward sex partners.” These characteristics were, however, no admirable signs of male vigor, but deeply seated personality flaws. In fact, the researcher team found men of this make-up particularly among prejudiced, violent, and overly conformist subjects. Their exaggerated masculinity was not a

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112 For the critical debate that accompanied these changes see Barbara Ehrenreich, The Hearts of Men: American Men and the Flight from Commitment (New York: Anchor, 1983); Graebner, “Coming of Age in Buffalo.”
genuine, authentic, trait, but a manifestation of an essentially weak, authoritarian, character structure. Men who acted aggressive and sexually assertive to an extent that was socially no longer beneficial, experts therefore portrayed as suffering from the same psychic disturbance as effeminate or homosexual men.\(^{113}\) The challenge faced when it came to American men was how to encourage an independent, assertive manhood conducive to the development of leadership and creativity without encouraging sexual promiscuity and anti-social behavior.

In response to the question of how to solve the dilemma of boosting manhood while keeping society stable, Wylie was not the only writer who saw a solution in promoting a new kind of woman. With the right kind of partner at his side, a diverse group of experts agreed, men would not have to take “flight from commitment” because they could unfold their manly, autonomous, nature at home. This woman was a mother and a wife; albeit a very particular kind. Writers across the ideological spectrum shared a set of common assumptions about womanhood. They agreed that a fully self-realized, healthy, and mature woman ought to be free of sexual repression. Yet, although experts posited women explicitly as sexual beings with a libido no less developed than a man’s, the postwar era saw a heightened focus on sex difference.

An emphasis on clearly differentiated sex roles actually united works starting off from various ideological and methodological positions.\(^{114}\) In the period’s best-known anti-feminist tract Modern Woman: The Lost Sex, women’s difference rested simply in their

\(^{113}\) Adorno et al., The Authoritarian Personality, 415-421; 428.

\(^{114}\) For some experts, this notion was based on a cultural relativist or existential view of female reality influencing their experience. For others, it was grounded in the functionalist notion that a certain division of roles was most conducive to social stability and thus had to be maintained. On the influence of functionalist arguments see for instance Janet Walker, Couching Resistance, xvi.
anatomy. Supported by the theoretically more sophisticated writings of Freud’s pupil Helene Deutsch, the authors assumed that a normal woman longed for a child, engaged in sex for the purpose of procreation, and found fulfillment in motherhood without suffering even the slightest hint of ambivalence.\(^\text{115}\) In contrast to Farnham and Lundbeck, most experts were no longer comfortable with biological determinism as a basis for sex role theory, but even writers emphatically in favor of expanded opportunities for women affirmed the value of sexual difference of men and women.

Across the ideological spectrum, writers agreed that the notion that the sexes were \textit{alike} had been one of the flaws in the ideology of interwar feminists who misconceived equality as same-ness.\(^\text{116}\) Even \textit{if} men and women started out from the same blank slate, the argument went, the reality of their lives would soon encourage them to develop different interests, traits, and sensitivities. Margaret Mead was a particularly influential voice in this debate. There was in the present United States a great confusion, she argued in \textit{Male and Female}, as to how to define the differences between the sexes. As an anthropologist, she could refer to plenty of examples of cultures that assigned traits to the sexes differently than the United States. Yet while she disputed notions of an essential femininity or masculinity, she affirmed the value of gender differentiation. Every society needed the “stimulus of contrast” she argued, in order to strive. By trying to equalize men and women, a culture did


them as much damage than by “pigeonholing” them. And such a devaluing of “personality differentiation” she saw at work in the current United States. With each attempt to minimize sex differences, she concluded, “humanity” was deprived of a contribution that would enrich it.  

The postwar writings of Margaret Mead suggest the spread of a postwar consensus among scholars from a range of ideological backgrounds who agreed that gender differences needed to be affirmed rather than corrected. Along with this, they also tried to imbue domesticity with new value. In a similar vein as Marynia F. Farnham, Barnard sociologist Mirra Komarovsky and pioneer historian of women Mary Ritter Beard argued that women had suffered when the conditions of modernity eroded the importance of their traditional reproductive tasks. Just like gender conservatives, these scholars harked back to a pre-industrial golden age in which society valued women for the specific contributions they made as mothers and domestic producers and in which mothers and housewives rested comfortably on the notion that their lives were important. These female professionals criticized the virulent strain of anti-feminism embodied by the work of Farnham and Lundbeck. But they agreed that by performing domestic and reproductive tasks, women contributed something

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117 Mead, Male and Female, especially her chapter six: “Sex and Temperament,” 128-142.

118 According to Mirra Komarovsky, a previous generation of feminists had tried to press women into a mold designed for men and devalued all traits and interests labeled feminine. Women and men, she argued, were best served if society acknowledged and accommodated their sex specific contributions and needs. Komarovsky, Women in the Modern World, xxviii. For Mary Ritter Beard’s thought on women’s roles and feminism see Ann J. Lane, ed., Mary Ritter Beard: A Sourcebook (New York: Schocken Books, 1977).
distinctive to the world. Complementary family arrangements, they held, were valuable for society as a whole.\footnote{Mead, Male and Female, 14.}

That experts from a variety of backgrounds in the 1950s so emphatically affirmed sex differentiation and the value of traditional female tasks, suggests that the concept had a complex meaning. Indeed, when writers like Komarovsky and Beard affirmed the importance of gender difference, they ultimately arrived at a very different conclusion than their conservative colleagues. The details are essential. In Modern Woman, for instance, the wish for a child and a dependent role not only figured as the main marker for normalcy for a woman, the authors also denied the possibility that individual variations might have a neutral or even beneficial effect on society. A woman who was a mother and wife in their reading was a deviant if she did not put her non-domestic aspirations aside to devote herself wholeheartedly to nurture. Biology here was simple destiny. Yet, many other writers, by contrast, stressed that the impact of women’s choices needed to be assessed on the basis of individual circumstances. As Mirra Komarovsky argued, mothers with access to cooperative partners and employers might very well combine childrearing and career without harming their children. The “quality” of childrearing in her reading was a more decisive factor than the “quantity” of care.\footnote{Komarovsky, Women in the Modern World, especially chapter 5. Also see Paul Landis, Making the Most of Marriage (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), 55-64.} Ashley Montague agreed. Although the title of his book, The Natural Superiority of Women (1952) suggests a narrow essentialist view, he argued against the notion that a person’s sex determined his or her social role. “Abilities are functions or persons,” he writes, “not of groups or classes.” (his emphasis) Because of this, “both sexes
should be afforded equal opportunity to realize their potentialities, and the judgment of their abilities should not be prejudiced by any bias of sex.”

Although he argued that for preschool children, the love and care of a mother was essential, he proposed to respond to the increase of the number of working couples with a restructuring of the economy to allow for collaborative parenting arrangements. Authors like Komarovsky and Montague thus granted legitimacy to women’s individual goals and acknowledged a diversity in family arrangements that prevented them from promoting a narrow model of femininity.

Despite the complexity of the 1950s discourse, the popularity of arguments in favor of sex differentiation and domesticity also illustrates the fact that these theories could be mobilized to serve the purpose of containing dreaded changes in the realm of gender roles, sexuality, and the family. For one, insistence on sex difference helped contain sexuality within marriage. If motherhood was the central goal of female sexuality, a woman who engaged in sexual acts promiscuously easily appeared maladjusted, if not neurotic, or vulgar. Any psychologically healthy woman would want to secure that she had protection and security for herself and the infant before consenting to intercourse. A mature woman would thus insist on marriage before sex. As such, she would keep male sexuality contained

121 Montagu, Natural Superiority of Women, 208,194-196.

122 Whether a single mother of a sexual delinquent was labeled a treatable neurotic or a member of a depraved underclass depended on her race. While experts, for instance, paid a lot of attention to the adjustment and treatment of white young women they saw as promiscuous, they did not extend this treatment to African American women and members of other minorities. These women were seen as merely enacting the pathologies of their distinct racial or ethnic group. See for instance Rickie Solinger, Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade (New York: Routledge, 1992). For the middle-class psychoanalytical portrayal of female deviance see Rachel Devlin, Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Daughters, and Postwar American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), especially chapter 2.
within the family. For liberals and conservatives alike, meanwhile, affirming female-male gender difference served an important function in assuaging fears of a male crisis. The right kind of woman would not turn the family into a matriarchal space in which only her values counted. She would cooperate with, and complement, her spouse. At ease with her femininity, she would feel no need to prove her worth by being like a man. By coming home to such a partner, a man could refuel and regain his personal integrity. As long as he returned to a home in which his vigor and individuality were valued and affirmed, his performance as an other-directed employee would not weaken the nation, but on the contrary, contribute to economic growth. Infants, meanwhile, would enjoy the love and care of a mother who harbored no anger or resentment as a result of her role. Raised in a conflict-free home, they could grow into their best as rational citizens free of prejudice. The solution to a variety of social and personal problems, a broad range of experts thus saw in the creation of the ideal couple -- a man and a woman who both performed their respective sex role free of ambivalence and who cooperated as a harmonious whole.

By the mid 1950s, this construction of the ideal couple as a fix to the problems that seemed to ail individual men and the nation was part of common parlance. When thus in 1955, Adlai Stevenson, another epitome of the liberal establishment, stepped in front of an assembly of Smith College students to promote the “humble role of housewife” as a tool in the Cold War, he could assume that his audience understood his references. They might all one day be “hitched to one of these creatures we call ‘Western man,’” he said. Of all the possible roles a graduate of this prestigious college could assume, “the biggest” one would be the “job” to make sure that these men remained both “Western” and “whole” and to enable men and children to develop their “personality and individuality”:
In modern America the home is not the boundary of a woman's life. There are outside activities aplenty. But even more important is the fact, surely, that what you have learned and can learn will fit you for the primary task of making homes and whole human beings in whom the rational values of freedom, tolerance, charity and free inquiry can take root.\footnote{Adlai Stevenson excerpt from a commencement address, Smith College, reprinted in Women's Home Companion, September 1955, 30-31}

That Stevenson insisted so emphatically on the value and worth of this grand “job” that lay ahead of Smith College graduates, however, also suggested that he still felt the need for a sales pitch. After all, the social attitudes needed for the liberal family utopia to become true were still missing. The labor of reproduction was not widely honored in the Cold War intellectual discourse and stereotypically feminine traits and interests were stigmatized as at odds with the progress of civilization. What young college women and the men they encountered actually drew from the cultural debates about gender and the individual and what they saw in Stevenson’s vision of separated spheres, the following chapters of this dissertation will investigate in detail.
CHAPTER 2
THE COLLEGIATE IDEAL:
AN INTERSECTION OF CLASS, ETHNICITY AND GENDER

As discussed in the previous chapter, college students were a target audience of public intellectuals and politicians during Depression, World War II, and Cold War. Despite fears of gender conversion, female students were explicitly included in appeals to the social and political responsibilities of the educated young. Nor did psychologists and psychoanalysts exclude them in writings about the need for modern youth to individuate and develop their full human potential. College women encountered these messages, however, surrounded by a campus culture in which a large proportion of their peers saw in the cultivation of social poise and broad, well-rounded interests the main purpose of their education. This conception of collegiate culture had a long tradition, but had become an anachronism by the mid-twentieth century. Notwithstanding this, however, exposure to campus life homogenized the way female students fashioned and presented themselves. As subsequent chapters will show, this affected even those women who started their studies holding ideas and goals quite at odds with conventional expectations. Because of the great staying power and normative pull of conventional campus life on women into the post World War II period, it will be necessary to describe the factors that shaped this student culture.

This chapter’s outline of developments in the history of higher education will give important background information on why young women from very diverse backgrounds modeled their own behavior after conservative expectations on what a co-ed should be like. As I will show, campus life was influenced by a nativist and pronatal discourse that
developed in response to the challenge to assimilate new immigrants to American culture and new population groups into the ranks of the social elite. Campus conventions thus exercised a strong influence on newcomers not only because they were associated with the upper class, but also because alternative styles and behavior patterns were stigmatized as the outlook typical of immigrants and ethnic minorities. Mid-twentieth century intellectual and political factors eroded the legitimacy of racist and anti-Semitic beliefs and the liberal democratic rhetoric of this period suggested that membership in the ranks of a social elite was based only on merit. By the 1940s, however, the prejudices and assumptions that underwrote campus conventions had become naturalized by the seemingly objective language of social science. As a result, on the eve of Pearl Harbor sentiments that had their roots in attempts to bar new groups from access to social influence still struck the typical student as a natural ranking of personality traits and interests desirable among members of an educated and cultured caste. Even after the public discourse had shifted from support for to vocal criticism of class and ethnic stereotypes, students amongst themselves thus actively reproduced long-standing stereotypes.

The women who in the mid-twentieth century flocked to college campuses were the beneficiaries of a long struggle to gain access to higher education. In the early history of the American nation, women were denied access to collegiate institutions on the basis of their sex alone. Enhanced educational opportunities had been part of a feminist agenda since the Revolutionary period. As their demands clashed with notions of morality, sex difference, and

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124 The first college that started to admit women was Oberlin in 1837; and it did so mainly as a measure to prepare female students to become missionaries or school them to become educated wives of clergymen. See Patricia A. Graham, “Expansion and Exclusion: A History of Women in American Higher Education,” Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society 3, no. 4 (1978): 759-773.
the idea of separate spheres, however, the first women who wanted more than an education in a finishing school or a religious seminary met considerable resistance. That educational opportunities eventually opened was a result of persistent individual dedication and collective struggles. An important additional factor that allowed the pioneering cohort of women access to college, however, was the fact that the apparatus of higher education was expanding -- and their need for students therefore growing -- before access to formal degrees became a necessity for economic success for men.

Men’s disinterest in higher education during the nineteenth century illustrates the marginal role academia played in the nation at large. Up to the Civil War, most private citizens and policy makers saw little need for higher learning. With the economic developments and territorial expansion during the Gilded Age, this changed. Recognizing that the rapidly industrializing country needed a better trained workforce, Congress passed the first of a number of laws designed to create a public higher education system. With the Morrill Land-Grant Act (1862), individual states received funds from the sale of public lands on the condition that they opened at least one public college or university. Public institutions of higher education soon opened in every state and with an 1890 follow-up act of the same name, the federal government increased its support of public institutions through tax

125 The separation of the spheres of man and women, central to Victorian ideologies, was not complete. Rural, African American and working-class women, for instance, tended to lack the material resources to live up to the ideal. White middle-class women involved in civic causes and reforms meanwhile were expanding their sphere of influence as well. The Civil War boosted changes and by 1870, almost two million women would work for wages. As a theoretical ideal and marker of an elevated social status, Victorian gender ideology remained a powerful construct, though. Barbara Solomon, In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 45.
initiatives and additional grants while also extending benefits to the states of the former confederacy. 126

The new public colleges and universities that opened in the wake of the Morrill acts were of course not the first institutions of higher education in the nation. Some of the private colleges on the East Coast that in the 1920s acquired the moniker Ivy League were founded in the colonial period. Then, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, literally thousands of additional academies and colleges received state charters. Like already established institutions such as Harvard, Princeton, or Yale, they were private and residential colleges that focused on strict moral supervision and rigid rote instruction. Their curriculum of mainly Greek, Latin, and mathematics served no immediate practical or economically viable purpose and already in the eighteenth century enlightenment reformers urged inclusion of new sciences and modern languages. That colleges only slowly added new subjects to the classical curriculum, however, reflects not just the fact that the small student population and the concomitant dearth of tuition payments did not allow them to hire a large enough faculty to teach a more modern curriculum. The collegiate model of education was also based on a consensus shared by college officials and the parents of students about how exactly young men ought to be prepared for future positions of political and social leadership.

The main purpose of the collegiate model of higher education in the nineteenth century was the moral and cultural preparation of a small and culturally homogenous circle of citizens for social leadership. This group was white, male, Protestant, and middle-class. High educational costs kept the student body limited to sons from families who had at least middle-class status and up to the early twentieth century, almost all of these college men

126 Solomon, Company of Educated Women, 44.
tended to come from native-born families from the eastern seaboard. This was not only because college presidents saw in this caste the natural leaders of the country, but also because it was only here where there existed the preparatory schools that were sufficiently staffed and funded for the basic training in Greek and Latin necessary for students to start college level work.

Not only did there exist an agreement among the nation’s elite about who ought to be granted access to it, there was also a consensus about what young men ought to gain from their stay in college. The curriculum was not supposed to turn them into expert professionals, academics, or to convey economically viable skills. Nor was the college faculty supposed to produce new knowledge. Instead, professors were expected through rote learning and rigid moral supervision to form the character, mental discipline, and cultural background of a Christian gentleman.

Frequent clashes between students and faculty indicate that college men did not necessarily welcome their alma mater’s educational philosophy. In a period that increasingly stressed the values of individualistic attitudes for business success and in which enlightenment ideas competed with Christian morality, male collegians chafed particularly

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127 Costs were high even though tuitions were low. As students had to board on campus, costs for housing and meal made their education costly. Moreover, students could not support their families with income or labor for the time they attended college. Because of this, most working-class and rural families could not have sent their children to college. Robert L. Church and Michael W. Sedlak, “The Antebellum College and Academy,” in Education in the United States: An Interpretive History (New York: Free Press, 1976), 23-51.


129 Church and Sedlak, “The Antebellum College.”
under the regimen of rote learning and the regulated nature of their social life. Reflecting the low regard in which students held their professors, they tended to prefer association with peers in social clubs and on the football field to the cultivation of good relationships with their instructors.\textsuperscript{130} Yet that college nonetheless continued to attract elite young men also shows that their stay in established institutions served their purposes. As club members or athletes, students formed connections with other members of their social class. Moreover, their study of Greek and Latin enabled young men to join in common cultural practices among educated Americans who routinely drew on quotations and proverbs in Greek or Latin to demonstrate their family background. The collegiate models’ emphasis on cultural education and its campus life thus served the needs of a student body that did not need to acquire economically viable skills because family and social connections were the basis of their available economic opportunities. Even in the rapidly industrializing nineteenth-century nation, the traditional college education thus continued to serve mainly as a marker of social prestige.

While private colleges and academies focused on the reproduction of class status through a classic curriculum and social activities, the educational focus in the public land-grant colleges and universities was different from the onset. As the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 specified, their curriculum ought not to exclude the study of the classics and sciences. The emphasis of instruction, however, was supposed to rest on economically viable subjects in “agriculture and the mechanical arts” to benefit “the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.” A response to employers’ growing need for a trained

\textsuperscript{130} Helen Horowitz, \textit{Campus Life: Undergraduate cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present} (New York: Knopf, 1987).
labor force, the act was not necessarily designed to challenge established social and cultural hierarchies. Because it also demanded that public institutions made education broadly accessible and affordable, however, it opened opportunities for upward social mobility for new groups of Americans.\footnote{For the text of the Morrill Act see Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith, \textit{American Higher Education: A Documentary History} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), vol. 2, 568-569.}

Although the framers of the Morrill Act had had the sons of Midwestern farmers in mind when they passed the legislation, women incidentally benefited from the legislation because it triggered a new interest in higher education. Traditionally a red flag for the majority of Americans, coeducation became a reality in the years after the Civil War. The Morrill Land Grant Act specified that access to universities needed to be open to all citizens. Already by 1870, nine state institutions were admitting women and with expansion of the public apparatus of higher education, more joined the list. With this new support for one of the women’s movement’s longer-standing demands, activists also pushed for access to the established private colleges. The latter, wedded to an institutional identity as places for the education of leaders, remained adamantly opposed to the presence of females. Their hostility to female students, however, by the late nineteenth century inspired the founding of a number of private institutions for women. Vassar College opened its doors in 1865, followed by Wellesley and Smith Colleges in 1875 and Bryn Mawr in 1884.\footnote{Women’s interest in higher education also shows in the growth of the older Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley, Massachusetts that became Mount Holyoke College in 1887. See for instance Mabel Newcomer, \textit{A Century of Higher Education for American Women} (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 11, 44.} With institutional expansion, women’s proportion of the student body swelled. As students in the single-sex
colleges on the East Coast, combined with those in coeducational colleges and universities, women made up 35.9 percent of undergraduates by 1890. In 1920 the percentage had grown to 47.3 percent.\footnote{133}{For figures see Solomon, \textit{Company of Educated Women}, table 2, 63.}

The opening of educational opportunities for women right after the Civil War is particularly remarkable considering that this was in many ways a time of backlash against the women’s movement. As the considerable opposition to female suffrage shows, Americans were hardly willing to part with traditional notions of gendered spheres. In reflection of the spirit of the time, few of the founders of the first colleges for women actually endorsed a feminist agenda. Adhering to the same educational philosophy than their contemporaries in male institutions, the founders of private women’s colleges, for instance, strove to educate young women in the proper virtues of Christian womanhood. Women’s colleges had similar residential requirements than the men’s colleges and catered to an equally small constituency. With their all-female student body and focus on gender appropriate instruction, they showed elements of the traditional female seminary.\footnote{134}{For a detailed history of the educational philosophy in the elite private women’s colleges see Helen Horowitz, \textit{Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women’s Colleges from their Nineteenth Century Beginnings to the 1930’s} (New York: Knopf, 1984).} Notwithstanding this, whether by design or unwittingly, it cannot be denied that giving women access to college contributed to the erosion of traditional notions of gendered spheres.

Conservative elements aside, the collegiate model from the start had a different impact on women than on men. Even though training in Greek and Latin did not directly translate into employment opportunities, women’s mastery of these subjects showed that they
were capable of the same intellectual accomplishments as their male peers. By providing the traditional cultural and moral education appropriate for the middle class, women’s colleges thus challenged the Victorian gender system and opened up new vistas for students. Despite their private and residential character, the liberal arts women’s colleges therefore served a similar function for their constituency as the public land grant universities. They opened up for their students the prospect of roles and identities beyond that of a middle class lady dependent on a male breadwinner and immersed in the labor of reproduction.

The potential to undermine traditional gender roles was similar in the coeducational institutions. Moreover, they reached an even larger constituency. Land-grant institutions did not have the residential requirements of private women’s colleges. By law, they had to offer an affordable education and their curriculum was explicitly designed to prepare students for a vocation or career. Providing affordable preparation for economically viable occupations, they thus opened opportunities beyond marriage for non-elite women and also potentially broadened conceptions of gender appropriate roles for their constituency.

That nineteenth-century women put their education to a different purpose than men becomes clear when we compare the composition of the female and male student bodies. Male collegiate institutions attracted a socio-demographically and culturally homogenous population of young men. In the case of women, by contrast, private single-sex and public coed institutions alike attracted students from diverse backgrounds. Women were often older than the typical college man and often came from families who had to sacrifice financially to send a daughter to college.135 These were women who sought training and economic opportunity; not culture and poise. In the nineteenth century, women’s entry into higher

education in general was thus a considerable challenge to gendered divisions of labor and power in American society. This erosion of the status quo was possible, because for a short but fortuitous period, for a variety of reasons, the wishes of women, the needs of the nation, and the practical considerations of institutions of higher education overlapped.

To understand women’s admission into higher education in the late nineteenth century, we need to consider that this was still a time when formal degrees had little or no role in shaping the economic prospects of men.136 As late as 1913, fewer than one of every twenty Americans spent any time in college at all. For most parents, the economic sacrifices that sending a male child would entail simply made no sense. Family connections and apprenticeships were far more important in determining a man’s opportunities than formal degrees. Very few professions required prior college training and even fields that demanded specialized knowledge did not have standardized requirements. Some law schools, for instance, insisted that applicants had a bachelor degree, others not. In newer professions, like medicine, access was even more open and unregulated. As late as 1910, a report authored by Abraham Flexner for the Carnegie Corporation still pointed to the lack of uniform degree requirements.137

136 The college experience only touched the lives of a small elite. As late as the 1850s, only 1.25 percent of all 20-24 year old Americans spent any time in such an institution at all. See Church and Sedlak, “The Antebellum College and Academy” and John R. Thelin, A History of American Higher Education (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

While interest in formal degrees among men was weak, the women’s movement had long demanded that women be granted access to higher education. Like suffrage, the demand met resistance. Male casualty figures during the Civil War, however, raised the specter of large numbers of single daughters and widows who for lack of a male provider would need to find ways to support themselves as “respectable” spinsters. As a result, a growing number of middle class families began to support the opening of occupational and educational opportunities for women. Starting during the war, but continuing through Reconstruction, women moved into fields like teaching and nursing when the scarcity of male candidates opened doors for them. These fields had long been accessible without formal degrees. The time when women established a foothold in them, however, was also the period when educational requirements began to rise. The Civil War cohort’s need for economic alternatives to marriage thus inevitably fueled women’s interest in formal study.

Especially for the newly founded land-grant institutions, women’s interest in and need for formal education was fortuitous. By law, these schools had to keep access open and affordable for all citizens. But this alone did not open doors to women. In the case of African Americans in the South, colleges and universities ignored requirements for equal access specified in the legislation and for the next half-century continued to do so unhampered by the federal government. In the Midwest and West at a time when few men

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139 Land-grant institutions were also founded with the tax payments of the parents of daughters as well as sons, which gave women additional reasons to feel entitled to admission to public universities on the same basis as men. See Newcomer, A Century of Higher Education for Women, 12-14.
wanted or needed undergraduate degrees, however, the tuitions of women were often essential in enabling new colleges and universities to survive. Administrators and college officials thus had little interest in putting obstacles in the way of potential female students and admitted them willingly. For women able to pay for their education, late nineteenth century opportunities thus grew because men were unavailable and because their interest in formal degrees was not seen as a threat to the social order. By the 1890s, the ratio of men to women had once again reached parity but by that time new developments boosted women’s influx into colleges and the professions. This was in particular the case because the rapid economic and cultural changes of the post-bellum period opened up a new demand for workers who had both the education as well as the sense of social responsibility that women were increasingly gaining in colleges and universities.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, women’s move into public roles and education was both a driving factor and a side effect of the Progressive movement. Under the term Progressivism, historians summarize a broad range of efforts to cope with the social effects of accelerated urbanization, industrialization, and immigration between the 1890s and the First World War. Diverse and multifaceted, the movement took many different shapes. What united its various supporters, however, was a background in the educated middle class, and a sense that the explanatory models and traditions of the past were no longer adequate to address the problems of a modern and industrial nation. Critical of laissez-faire economics and the deterministic explanations of social hierarchies advanced by Social Darwinists, Progressives trusted that through a rational application of knowledge, human beings could and should actively change society for the better. The experience of going through a series of painful economic downturns, of witnessing poverty spread in urban
neighborhoods, and of noticing violent clashes between labor and management in the industrial north meanwhile made middle class Americans in general willing to try new strategies.\textsuperscript{140}

That the first cohort of women who had studied in colleges or universities became particularly active in Progressive reforms clearly shows that despite conservative elements in female higher education, its potential to broaden role conceptions and gender identities beyond domesticity and motherhood remained considerable. When the first cohort graduated from college, their members had very few alternatives to marriage. That their stay in college had encouraged them to think of themselves as women with skills and talents beyond domesticity and childrearing shows in their eagerness, however, to carve out occupational niches for themselves. Here, Progressive era college women no longer saw intellectualism and femininity at odds. Far from emasculating them, they argued, their education had helped them develop femininity and intellect. As professionals and intellectuals, they claimed the skills to understand and engage with an increasingly complex modern society. As women, meanwhile, they argued that they were cut out to concern themselves with the work of care and reform. Social housekeeping was a phrase women used to describe many of the public activities they took up at this time; including work in settlement house projects to aid the poor, temperance reform efforts to combat alcohol abuse, or initiatives to alleviate corruption in public office. Yet while Progressive women often argued that they, as members of their

sex, were particularly inclined to show an interest in these issues, they always emphasized that it was most of all their education that qualified them for their work. While earlier female reformers had thus worked as volunteers or charitable ladies, college women at the end of the century claimed professional identities.\textsuperscript{141}

The way in which the efforts of Progressive reformers changed the working environment and professional identities of many women shows, for instance, in the area of teaching. Having long been an occupation practiced by instructors with only a few more years more schooling than their pupils, the field had carried little prestige. Progressives, however, saw the public common schools as especially relevant loci to socialize the children of immigrants to American culture. Yet, as levels of school attendance and the quality of instruction varied hugely from school to school, and district to district, reformers pushed for uniform standards and higher quality instruction. Already in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, many states standardized their requirements and instituted teacher-training programs. By 1914, most had compulsory high school attendance laws.\textsuperscript{142} At a time when women were filling the majority of teaching slots on the secondary level, progressives had thus turned the field from an unregulated vocation into a profession. This potentially could have raised the stature and salary of women working in this field and thus facilitated the opening of alternatives to domesticity and marriage. As access now depended on formal degrees, national demand for


teachers moreover contributed considerably to the rise of the proportion of females as a part of the undergraduate student body.

Developments in the teaching profession are but one example of the snowball effect of progressive reform. When a first cohort of college graduates carved out professional niches for members of their sex, they expanded the boundary of acceptable public activity for women. Their emphasis on social housekeeping with the help of social science made the study of such subjects like psychology and sociology acceptable for and appealing to young women from middle class homes. The growing interest of female students in professional options shows in the fact that they increasingly demanded instruction in these fields and by the turn-of-the-century, many women’s colleges met these demands by adding social science classes to the more traditional classic and moral curriculum. Especially for affluent women, a higher education thus continued to open up a host of possible future vistas; reaching from work in public reform to graduate and advanced study. But the development of professional identities was not just limited to the small faction of women who had the financial resources to fund their dreams and visions. Rising demands for educated teachers also opened new job opportunities for many lower middle-class women. Whether in the form of a teacher-training program or as a liberal arts course of study, a higher education encouraged female students to think of remunerative and professional work as an appropriate part of the female life course and, for a short time, women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds shared access to these opportunities.\(^{143}\)

\(^{143}\) The good conditions for educated women in the labor force are reflected in numbers: Between 1870 and 1930, there were twice as many women as a proportion of the professional than the non-professional work force. Patricia A Graham, “Expansion and Exclusion: A History of Women in American Higher Education,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 3, no. 4 (1978): 759-773.
That by the turn-of-the century, women had established a secure foothold in higher education shows in the fact that families from the growing professional middle class increasingly sent a daughter to college. By that time, women made up 35 percent of the undergraduate student body and only the most affluent families continued to prefer finishing schools or academies for their daughters. This greater acceptance of the female as undergraduate is also reflected by the rising marriage rates of educated women. While the first generation of pioneers was often shunned by men of their class for their deviation from norms of femininity, the college woman of the Progressive Era was becoming marriage material.\footnote{The figure is from Graham, “Expansion and Exclusion,” table I. On the growth of the female student body and increased opportunities for women see also Lynn D. Gordon, “The Gibson Girl Goes to College: Popular Culture and Women’s Higher Education in the Progressive Era, 1880-1920,” American Quarterly 39, no. 2 (1987): 211-230; especially 214.} The very growth of the female undergraduate population, however, also changed the way in which Americans viewed the purpose and role of higher education for women.

The idea of opening up economic opportunities and alternatives to marriage for women lost acceptance among Americans once it ceased to be a path chosen by only an exceptional and tiny group. When the first cohort of women had pushed for access to higher education, the general interpretation had been that this was a small group who because of a sad lack of a male provider threatened to become a financial burden to their families and the state. Even decades later, women studying to become teachers in the public schools still received a warm welcome in their programs because they answered a national need for a cheap and abundant labor supply. Women in liberal arts programs and the professions, meanwhile, had been seen largely as exceptionally driven or talented specimen of their sex.
By the 1890s, by contrast, college was no longer just a choice for a select few women. Women were now undeniably a visible and strong presence on the nation’s campuses. Faced with a growing number of middle-class women interested in higher education, public commentators debated the social consequences of this development.\textsuperscript{145}

The debate that accompanied women’s influx into higher education centered especially on the anticipated effect on the traditional division of gender roles in the family. As early as the 1870s, experts had warned that strenuous intellectual activity would render women physically unfit to become mothers.\textsuperscript{146} By the early twentieth century, educators of women had succeeded in neutralizing fears that the health of college women would suffer as a result of their studies. To counter the impression of causing gender trouble, they increasingly paid attention to college women’s health and diet and took care to emphasize traditional middle class feminine virtues and morality. The goal was now to turn attention away from the fact that a higher education opened up alternatives to marriage and to emphasize instead that college could make women better mothers and wives. The success of these efforts shows in the fact that, by the early twentieth century, many middle-class


\textsuperscript{146} An early example for the concerned debate about the social effects of women’s influx into higher education was Edward Clarke’s 1873 books \textit{Sex in Education: A Fair Chance for the Girls}. In it, the retired Harvard professor argued that because their reproductive function was central to their physical system, women were simply not fit to engage in the same intellectual exercises than men. He qualified that he was not opposed to women’s access to a higher education per se. He did insist, however, that women suffered harm if they received the same kind of education than men. On Clarke’s influence in the debate about female higher education see for instance Sue Zschoche, “Dr. Clarke Revisited: Science, True Womanhood, and Female Collegiate Education,” \textit{History of Education Quarterly} 29, no. 4 (1989): 545 - 569.
families saw sending a daughter to college as simply a rite-of-passage shared by women of a certain class, rather than a radical venture that would put them on the path to economic self-sufficiency. At the same time, however, experts from the burgeoning mental health professions inserted themselves into the debate and looked at the psychological effects of education. Once again, they feared negative social consequences. A stay in college, the argument went, might turn naturally nurturing and selfless women into egotistical achievers. By fostering ambitions and competitiveness, it encouraged women to think like men. The impact then was a functional castration, that, to quote G. Stanley Hall, led to women’s refusal to “accept the limitations of married life” and the “functions peculiar to their sex.”  

Whether because it ran against laws of biology, or because it encouraged gender inappropriate expectations, education, experts warned, caused women to reject their traditional role.

The effects of this debate soon became noticeable. Women who by the late nineteenth century aspired to formal degrees found fewer doors open to them than their predecessors. Building on momentum they had created in the early days of the progressive era, women’s proportion as members of the professions remained fairly stable up to 1940. The road to access to these fields, however, became more rocky. Universities founded on the principle of coeducation were soon making it more difficult for women to enter. When in the 1880s Leland Stanford first defined the mission statement of the university that would eventually

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148 According to Graham, “Expansion and Exclusion,” this was largely a result of the fact that women who had gained entrance to a professional job in the teens and twenties – most notably teaching – had managed to hold on to their position through the Depression decade.
carry his family’s name, for instance, he committed the institution to equal treatment of male and female applicants. Yet in 1899, Stanford University set a cap of 500 on the total number of women allowed to be enrolled at any one time. Cornell University, meanwhile, resorted to a residency requirement to limit the number of female students. By requiring that all students board on campus but making only a limited number of beds available for women, it kept the latter’s number at a maximum of 120. Even land-grant colleges and universities in the West and Midwest that depended on the tuition payments of women by the early twentieth century featured quotas for access to many of their programs and channeled female applicants into a small number of fields; most notably teacher training and home economics.149 Objecting to such limits imposed on women’s freedom to study, educators in many private women’s colleges reemphasized their commitment to offering a full liberal arts curriculum. Here, too, however, officials’ public statements convey a growing uneasiness with the idea that their graduates might embark upon non-traditional life paths.

While private women’s colleges had been comfortable with the mission of enabling a small segment of exceptional women to lead idiosyncratic lives, they were far less at ease with the idea of educating a large student population. Women’s interest in higher degrees enabled institutions to grow and expand. The specter of middle-class women rejecting their traditional responsibilities in the family en masse, however, alarmed educators. To avoid such harmful and large-scale consequences, Smith College President L. Clark Seelye in 1890

argued, for instance, that although his institution was committed to help a woman to “develop … her intellectual capacities,” this should occur only by applying “the most carefully devised means.” It was a part of these careful efforts, that private women’s colleges in the early twentieth century not only stepped up their attempts to instill in young women traditional feminine virtues like altruism and social responsibility, but also expanded their offerings of courses that prepared students for a homemaker and mother role.\footnote{See Newcomer, \textit{A Century of Higher Education for American Women}, chapter 5: “The Course of Study.”} Even more importantly for the history of female higher education, they also undertook a concerted effort to curb the diversity of the student body.

The period in which the socio-demographic profile of students in private colleges was similarly diverse as that found in public institutions came to an end in the early twentieth century. After World War One private colleges severely restricted what kind of woman would be able to benefit from the education they offered. At the time at which women had reached almost parity with men as a proportion of the undergraduate student body, exactly those institutions committed to offering them the full benefits of a liberal arts education raised their tuition.\footnote{On tuition hikes see Thelin, \textit{A History of American Higher Education}, 226-228. The rising costs for higher education for women was not solely because of tuition raises, however. A contributing factor was also that institutions increasingly emphasized “gracious living” and cultural education. The greater concern with these issues accounts for the fact that room and board for female students continued to be higher than for men way throughout the first seven decades of the twentieth century. As most institutions also did not allow female students to live off campus, women had few opportunities to defray costs for room and board. On the comparatively higher costs for on-campus-housing for women see Newcomer, \textit{A Century of Higher Education}, 150-157. On the introduction of residency requirements at Cornell and how this affected female students see Conable, \textit{Women at Cornell}, 109-111.} With that, the typical backgrounds of women who worked for a formal
degree at one of the most renowned places of study became significantly less diverse. In contrast to the late nineteenth century, when private, single sex colleges had attracted women of varied ages with often clear vocational interests, their typical student after the First World War bore greater resemblance to her male peers in an established institution like Dartmouth or Amherst College. Most were now in their late teens or early twenties, and came from the affluent families who alone could afford to send their daughters to these institutions. These women still often wanted concrete career preparation from their studies. They also, however, increasingly shared campus with female peers whose parents wanted them to obtain the cultural background, refinement and social polish that served as class markers among the elite.

The unraveling of support for female higher education apparent by the early twentieth century indicates that the opening of opportunities for women was no longer acceptable once a significant proportion of women tried to take advantage of this option. To put this resistance in its proper context, we need to understand that the increase in the female student population coincided with a whole series of cultural changes which cumulatively caused native-born white Protestants to worry about their ability to hold on to their traditional influence over the definition of dominant cultural values and norms.

Social concerns grew to a large extent in response to demographic changes in white, urban, northern, middle class families. From census figures that started to be published on a regular basis in 1870, and also from anecdotal evidence provided by physicians, observers gleaned that college educated women were remaining single in disproportionate numbers.
Even if they married, they tended to have fewer children than preceding generations.\textsuperscript{152} As interpreted in retrospect by historians, these trends did not necessarily mean that women were rejecting traditional roles. Although the fact that educated women now actually possessed alternatives to marriage certainly caused a number of them to opt for careers rather than husbands and children, most college women by the late nineteenth century did eventually get married. They merely tended to do so later than their less educated contemporaries. The smaller number of children, meanwhile, could also be seen as the result of rational considerations of post Civil War families in response to changing economic conditions. As at least some years of high school education were becoming necessary for work in a white-collar occupation, Americans aspiring to middle-class status had to invest more money than past generations to enable their offspring to reproduce their social position. Considering this, it made sense for parents to focus on raising only a small number of children. Indeed, historians today argue that couples made decisions about family planning together.\textsuperscript{153} Rather than the effect of gender role rejection on the side of over-educated women, the demographic patterns in the white urban middle class were thus part of their larger adjustment to the modernization of society. In the context of multiple and highly visible challenges to the traditional middle class society and culture, however, women’s decisions became symptoms of a larger crisis. In the eyes of many commentators, their interest in education seemed to

\textsuperscript{152} At a time when more then 90 percent of non-college educated women married, among college graduates, figures were much smaller. Some studies suggested figures as low as 50 percent. See Solomon, \textit{Company of Educated Women}, 119-120. On the declining birthrate see D’Emilio, Freedman, \textit{Intimate Matters}, 57-60.

\textsuperscript{153} D’Emilio, Freedman, \textit{Intimate Matters}, 80-84.
epitomize the unraveling of a cohesive set of values and norms that had so far unified the white, Protestant, elite.

An upsurge of nativism and an accompanying pronatalist debate were central factors shaping the response to women in higher education in the early half of the twentieth century. Women flocked into higher education at a time when changing immigration patterns caused native-born white Protestants to worry about their ability to hold on to their influence over the definition of values and culture. Responding to industrial demand for cheap labor as a result of rapid economic development in the wake of the Civil War, unprecedented numbers of Southern and Eastern Europeans entered the country and replaced northern Europeans and Anglo Saxons as the most numerous immigrant groups. These newcomers included large numbers of Jews and Catholics who, with their own folkways and languages soon put a distinct stamp on many city neighborhoods. Because of this, in addition to the growing political clout of new immigrants especially in the cities of the industrialized Northeast, the white, Protestant, middle class soon feared for their own hold on the definition of national values.¹⁵⁴

In the context of the influx of newcomers, women’s interest in social opportunities struck many cultural conservatives as a threat to the reproduction of the ruling caste. While especially in the northeast, birthrates in the urban middle class declined, the number of children in new immigrant families tended to be high.¹⁵⁵ The debate about this phenomenon by the turn-of-the-century culminated in warnings of a “suicide” of the white, Anglo Saxon,


¹⁵⁵ High birthrates in these families reflected typical demographic patterns in families from agriculturally-based societies.
Protestant “race” and observers saw a logical culprit in female higher education. As falling birthrates coincided with women’s influx into higher education, the conclusion seemed obvious. College distracted women from their natural role. It made them selfish, individualistic, and ambitious. As such, female higher education in the eyes of social conservatives became a danger to class homogeneity. At a time when the cultural elite ought to have presented a united front in response to new immigrant groups, women’s interest in formal degrees seemed to lead them to reject their traditional roles.156

The institutional response to women in higher education cannot be separated from the nativist and pronatal climate of the era. College officials were members of precisely the traditional white, Protestant elite that felt their influence threatened by the influx of new immigrants. If opportunities for social mobility for middle class women remained limited, however, they would be channeled back into traditional marriage and towards motherhood. Yet, in order to fully understand how college and university administrations responded to female students, we also need to consider that women moved into higher education during a time when institutions and the professions themselves needed to rethink their organizational structure and educational philosophies. Here, as we will see, the exclusion of women became one strategy in a struggle for legitimacy and prestige between established institutions of education and new, modern, competitors.

We will not fully understand the hostility towards female students without realizing the extent to which traditional conception of the shape and purpose of higher education were changing in the course of the first couple of decades of the twentieth century. Up to this

point, formal degrees had not been essential requirements for men to assume leading positions in society and business. After the First World War, however, college degrees largely determined whether or not an individual would have access to the professions, management, and more and more white-collar jobs. This new situation adversely affected women. Once the appeal of formal degrees for men increased, institutions founded on the principle of coeducation began to see the presence of female students as a problem. This was not initially because they lacked the facilities to accommodate both sexes. In fact, in all but a handful of colleges, the number of applicants did not exceed that of available slots during the interwar period. Institutions did find, however, that women handicapped them in their struggle for social relevance and prestige.\(^{157}\)

The question of female education became central to debates in higher education in the interwar period because this was an essential time of re-definition and consolidation in academia and the professions. Although efforts to reform American higher education date back to the time of Benjamin Franklin, the conditions to actually tackle this task were not in place before the end of World War One. While earlier attempts of private and public institutions to focus more on research and to modernize their curriculum had failed due to a lack of funding, a large-scale expansion of the tuition-paying student body by the 1920s allowed the reform impulse to succeed. The progressive push for the utilization of social science and the growing demand of entrepreneurs for a specialized work force steadily

\(^{157}\) Even though college degrees were becoming more popular, the proportion of students as part of the overall population remained small. Most institutions that excluded women, for instance, did not suffer an excess of applicants. Slots for students were still available. Yet prestige was linked to the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of an institution’s most typical undergraduate student. See David O. Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration, 1915-1940* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).
enhanced the importance of formal education, and this is reflected in the growth of the undergraduate population. World War One then added to and greatly accelerated this momentum. Concerned that their institutions would not survive a large-scale exodus of college men enlisting in the military, educators became vocal and proactive proponents of higher education as a way to produce trained intelligence and thereby meet national needs during war and reconstruction.

Increased official support for higher education showed in the fact that the federal government, despite manpower shortages, supported the creation of a student training corps designed to discourage college men from enlisting. It also asked draft boards to accept student status as a reason for deferment. With that, Washington officially portrayed a college education as a socially relevant act that would yield results beneficial for the nation. For the first time, it also called on the expertise of college and university trained scholars to help the war effort. As a result, academia emerged after the Armistice with its image strengthened. While policy makers had formerly seen in the typical professor a meek, unworldly scholar, and in the college student a leisurely gentleman, both were now on the way of acquiring a new image. Gradually, the training of skilled experts, scientist, and engineers who would serve the needs of the nation, was emerging as the accepted purpose of a college education. What the progressive reform movement had set in motion, the war thus helped to advance.\(^{158}\)

It is against this background that we need to see the growing hostility towards women in academia. As students, scholars, and reformers, women had actively participated in the Progressive redefinition of the role of science and academia in American life. Until 1910,

enrollment rates for women rose at a rate twice as fast as that of men. In fields like social work, nursing, and teaching, they dominated the labor force. Here, however, a trend soon crystallized: where women were present in large numbers, men were not. That female dominated fields lacked appeal for men was, on the one hand, because of the low pay-rates in place here. It was also -- and in fact the two issues were linked -- because the presence of women carried negative connotations of a feminized workplace or course of studies. The sexist assumptions at the base of this circular logic aside, the presence of women was a threat for institutions and academic fields in the process of establishing themselves as the new arbiters of expertise.

World War One developments brought within grasp of individual scholars and institutions gains in cultural authority and prestige that were unprecedented in the realm of American academia. To maintain the influence and stature won during the war, however, academics found it essential to maintain the aura of objectivity and efficiency they had gained only recently. Unfortunately for female professionals and scholars, these traits were seen as gendered. Associated with voluntarism and sentimentalism women threatened the image as efficient and scientific contributors to the nation’s well-being which scholars were trying to establish. As a result, many of the academic disciplines that were in the process of gaining stature pushed female practitioners to the margins. In many of the organizations formed to represent the burgeoning professions and to regulate who could legitimately carry

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159 Levine, The American College and the Culture of Aspiration, 123.

160 Women were paid less because the assumption that they were the dependents of male providers, sheltered in a traditional family unit, working only for “pin money” continued to drive wage politics. See Alice Kessler-Harris, In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
the title of experts, women were barred from membership. They continued to work in fields they had helped advance during an earlier stage of the progressive reform movement. In fields like sociology of teaching, for instance, their paths and those of male colleagues parted. Women social workers and class-room instructors became practitioners in fields now defined as semi-professional. The mostly male workers in academic departments, by contrast, as scholars of sociology or pedagogy established themselves as scientific specialists.¹⁶¹

Just like women professionals, female students after World War One became pawns in academic struggles for prestige. None of the colleges and universities that in the 1920s became known as the prestigious “Ivy League,” admitted women on the same basis as men. Although Harvard, Columbia, and Brown University agreed to the compromise of coordinate arrangements in the form of separate female annexes, prestigious Dartmouth College, for example, remained rigorously opposed to the admission of women. It was this model institutions like Stanford or Cornell tried to follow when they established caps on female students and channeled them away from the programs it wanted to advertise as lucrative and prestigious fields of occupation for men. Their success in becoming flagships of the new research apparatus in the course of the interwar period shows how powerful sexist policies were as tools in institutional quests for relevance.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, the figure of the female undergraduate no longer figured prominently as a threat to the status quo or the professional stature of men. Educators of women by that time downplayed the academic and economic opportunities a

college education offered women and instead emphasized its role in maintaining traditional gender and family roles. The effect of the new image of college soon dominated popular culture. In magazines and novels, the figure of the female student became more and more often that of a nice young lady who expected from college a cultural education and social poise; but who was mainly interested in marriage and motherhood. This new image spread already in the course of the 1890s in popular magazines and was most memorably portrayed in the form of the “Gibson Girl.” That it was also during this period that the “coed,” as she was now often called, became an acceptable dating partner of college men, further shows that college for women no longer carried hints of careerism or economic need. In the 1920s, when the American economy went through a boom period, the image of college women as good sports and fun companions then reached its full bloom in the shape of the jazz loving and dance crazy flapper: a woman who, at least according to her portrayal in popular culture, spent most of her time having a good time in all night bull sessions with peers or in the company of college men.¹⁶²

The image and the practice of higher education for women did of course differ. Even after the backlash had left its traces in the popular portrayal of modern coeds, the curriculum for women continued to include instruction in the social sciences and in other economically viable fields.¹⁶³ The new image of the purpose of college for young women, however,


¹⁶³ Even after the backlash against female higher education, women’s colleges often featured a faculty and a curriculum that could be considered on the cutting-edge of academic trends. See Helen Horowitz, “In the Wake of Laurence Veysey: Re-examining the Liberal Arts College,” History of Education Quarterly 45, no. 3 (2005): 420-426, 423.
increasingly influenced conventions among students and shaped the expectations they brought with them to campus. More and more young women now came to college looking for a moratorium before accepting their adult responsibilities. Before they moved into the home of a husband and devoted themselves to the raising of children, they wanted some fun and a little learning. And while there were still many women who expected to study for a place in the professions, it was the sophisticated and fun-loving coed who by the 1920s had successfully replaced the spinster professional in the public image of the female undergraduate.

The spread of the image of flapper coeds in 1920s American culture indicates more than just heightened gender conservatism, however. It also illustrates that the progressive notion that social leaders should come from the ranks of those who had acquired expertise through specialized study had not yet fully replaced the older collegiate model of how the nation’s leading caste ought to be prepared for its role. Newly affluent middle-class families in the 1920s were aware of the growing utility of formal education to help their children advance economically. What they saw in college, however, was often still steeped in an older conception of collegiate life as centered on a little study and a lot of social activities. College degrees were coveted as badges of social progress and as markers of middle-class standing. A degree opened doors to the upper echelons of business and management or to a professional school. Few families expected their offspring to return as specialized scholars. It is because this relative disinterest in encouraging scholarship was shared by the parents of many middle class college men and women alike that the campus life of students of both sexes converged. College men, no less than women, by the 1920s had a reputation for their vibrant interests in
social activities, athletics, proms, and parties. Even at a research-oriented university like Harvard, it was these aspects of academic culture that dominated its public face.\textsuperscript{164}

The persistent association of college with campus life confronted institutions of higher education with somewhat of a dilemma. While it would take the middle class longer to catch up, in academia the research model had already become the new norm. Following the example set by Harvard University during the tenure of its president Charles Eliot (1869-1909), every institution that could afford to, broadened its curriculum to add more and more professional courses of study. Professional schools for law, medicine, business, and engineering opened on campuses nationwide. Institutions also did their best to free their most renowned faculty members from teaching obligations so that they could spent time doing research.\textsuperscript{165} As colleges and universities depended on undergraduate tuition and alumni supporters to advance their research agendas and expansion, however, they also needed to make concessions to their more socially oriented students.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, even prestigious colleges could no longer afford the hostility with which they had in the eighteenth and nineteenth century responded to the exploits of students in campus life. In fact, it would be exactly the kind of student most inclined to have an active interest in campus life, who was coveted as the most desirable applicant. While in the past, no college ever had had more applicants than open slots, the period of growth and consolidation within academia issued in a time of competition for students. And here, institutions across the board saw the white, Protestant, sons of affluent

\textsuperscript{164} Thelin, \textit{A History of American Higher Education}.

families as their most desirable undergraduates. That this was the case not just because Americans commonly referred to under the acronym WASP (“White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant”) were most likely to pay a higher tuition, it was also because academics and administrators considered it pertinent that the traditional elite remained the gatekeepers of American culture. Accepting male WASP undergraduates as the people most deserving and desirable as future leaders, college and university administrators during the interwar period competed fiercely for this group. As part of their efforts, by the 1920s they actively supported such elements of student culture like intercollegiate athletics, Greek letter societies and dining clubs. Even where women were barred from entrance as students, they were welcomed as dating partners of men at officially sponsored parties and mixers. Yet despite this support for campus life, academia also had a commitment to research and scholarship. In the immediate post World War I period, institutions therefore also tried to counteract the hedonistic inclinations of undergraduate students.

The depth of commitment to new academic expectations shows in the fact that even the most prestigious institutions became willing to part with their long-standing practice to draw their student body almost exclusively from only a small number of eastern preparatory schools. In the decade after the First World War, the quality of high school instruction had greatly increased. Public institutions in many urban locales in the North, West, and Midwest now graduated pupils whose academic preparation easily matched standards in the costly and exclusive schools that had traditionally supplied the clientele of private colleges. From these public high schools, colleges in the 1920s increasingly recruited students. With hiring a first

Dean of Admissions in the 1920s, even the exclusive Dartmouth College joined the trend. As its president Ernest M. Hopkins enthusiastically declared, his institution would become a leader in shaping a new “aristocracy of brains” that earned its standing through merit and independent of the “accident of birth”.  

To raise academic standards among the student body as a whole, administrators at many other formerly highly exclusive institutions started to accept the upper percentile of the graduates of a given high school class regardless of the family background of the student. Utilizing the newly developed tool of the intelligence test as a means to assess ability and leadership potential, they tried to attract more students with a zest for achievement. Drawing on financial gifts of progressive industrialists and entrepreneurs, they also offered financial aid and cash prize awards to students who on their own could not have afforded an elite college education. Colleges and universities also introduced curricula inventions such as honors courses of study so that the more serious students had an opportunity to acquire an expertise in a small area rather than the broad cultural background they traditionally offered. These efforts to raise academic standards, it was clear from the onset, entailed the admission of a certain number of ethnic minorities and particularly urban Jews, as well as students from working-class families. Educators saw this as an acceptable risk in their attempts to keep up with rising expectations into scholarship, though. Through tests and questionnaires, they tried to select non-traditional students likely to assimilate and blend into the WASP culture of campus and to absorb the canon of Western culture without challenging it. They initially did

\[167\] Hopkins announced his intention to establish true meritocracy at Dartmouth College in a 1922 statement. See Levine, The American College and the Culture of Aspiration, 141.

\[168\] On the financial gifts of wealthy alumni see Synnott, The Half-Opened Door, 8-13.
not, however, see a danger to cultural homogeneity of the ruling elite by carefully increasing diversity.  

Despite educators’ efforts to select non-traditional students who would blend into campus life, it was here where the newcomers encountered instant hostility. Most college students in the 1920s echoed uncritically the nativist attitudes of their parents. In eating clubs, Greek letter societies, and on athletic teams, students of minority origin were rarely accepted as members. Discrimination was rampant against African Americans, Catholic, and lower middle-class students. Where it was strongest, however, was when it came to students of Jewish origin. Partly because of their greater number compared to other minorities, but also in reflection of rampant anti-Semitism in the culture at large, Jews on many northeastern campuses ran into a virtual wall of discriminatory practices. Most gentile students refused to board, play, or eat side-by-side their Jewish peers and they determinedly shunned them as dating partners or as pledges in Greek letter societies. Faculty members and administrators at times criticized in private and at occasion even in public, the racist parochialism of their charges. That they did not officially counteract them, however, was not only because they tended to believe that change would only come gradually through education, but also because they followed the direction pointed out by the men and women they depended on to fund their pursuit of knowledge: their own wealthy WASP alumni.  

Upper-middle class Protestant alumni in the 1920s and 1930s feared the influx of Jews into college particularly because of the latter’s potential to compete for positions of power and influence. Jewish responses to discrimination in campus life took two broad

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directions. Some, when shunned by their socially inclined peers, concentrated on academic work or on political activities. Jewish students became particularly active in peace and left-wing student organizations and in literary clubs. Others founded and joined separate social organizations. Jewish Greek letter societies, for instance, by the 1920s resembled their Protestant counterparts.171 With both strategies, Jewish students threatened the future prospects of the children of Protestants. In a society that was becoming increasingly aware of the need to acquire specialized knowledge, academic achievement might replace family background as the prerequisite for the social leadership roles the WASP elite wanted to pass on to their own children. Jewish students acquiring social connections and middle-class accoutrements through participation in campus life, meanwhile, might also potentially undermine the status quo.172 Jewish alumni, it needs to be said, were often no more comfortable with the influx of newcomers into the ranks of the socially prominent. In their case, it was especially the urban Jew of working-class or rural Russian or Polish origin whose presence threatened their own attempts towards gaining acceptance. Because of their own concerns with social gains, they therefore failed to mount a concerted resistance to the growing anti-Semitism on college boards and in elevated social circles.173

Class and cultural prejudices ultimately undermined attempts to establish meritocratic standards in colleges and universities during the interwar period. Answering the considerable

171 The first Jewish fraternity was founded in 1898 in New York City; the first Menorah society in 1906 at Harvard. See Wechsler, “An Academic Gresham’s Law.”

172 According to Wechsler, Jewish Greek letter life by the 1920s matched that modeled by their Protestant student peers. See “An Academic Gresham’s Law.”

173 For Harvard as a case study of anti-Semitic dynamics see Synnott, The Half-Opened Door, 77-80; also see Levine, The American College and the Culture of Aspiration, 155-156.
clout and pressure from wealthy alumni and also following their own growing concerns when
the proportion of Jewish students rose in the course of the 1920s, college and university
officials in all the elite institutions sought ways to limit the presence of what they considered
undesirable students. Already before the Depression depleted the scholarship and aid funds of
many institutions, administrators scaled back their financial support for high school
graduates from ethnic urban neighborhoods. To also decrease the number of socially
undesirable students from more affluent homes, admissions forms increasingly asked for the
birthplace of parents or religious affiliation of students. Just as it had occurred in the case of
female students in coeducational institutions, most colleges established minority quotas by
the mid 1920s. To accomplish better this task of exclusion, admissions officials now also
shifted their utilization of standardized tests. What had begun tentatively as an attempt to
recognize academic potential now became a means to identify the religious and family
backgrounds of students.\textsuperscript{174}

In the utilization of standardized and intelligence tests, admissions officials’ followed
scientific trends in the fields of psychology and psychiatry. Adopting the language advanced
by these disciplines, however, was also a way to conceal the racist and classist assumptions
on the basis of admissions practices. That such a recourse became necessary to an extent
shows the success of the progressive attempt to assimilate the immigrant population to the
norms and values of white, Protestant American culture. As some college officials believed,
it would be relatively easy to use standardized tests to separate desirable from undesirable
college students, because, as one official put it in 1922, “especially [Jews] of the more

\textsuperscript{174} For a detailed history of anti-Semitism in the Ivy League see Synnott, \textit{The Half-Opened Door}.\textsuperscript{174}

objectionable type, have not had the home experiences which enable them to pass these tests as successfully as the average native American boy." Yet, as part of their effort to maintain cultural homogeneity against the background of an increasingly diverse population, more and more public high schools by the 1920s offered exactly the kind of instruction that would enable a pupil of immigrant origin to score no different from a native-born peer. In an attempt to separate coveted traditional college men from ethnic intruders, admissions officials thus increasingly looked at test results for evidence of particular personality traits. An applicant whose file suggested an interest in academic achievement, who was studious and eager to excel, appeared suspicious because these traits suggested a desire to make the jump into an elevated social class. In contrast to this potential intruder into the upper echelons of society, an applicant whose interest in social activities and broad cultural studies marked him as someone who would not have to aspire aggressively to achieve because he could already rest easily on his family’s wealth and social connections. In American society between the wars, both cases carried distinct ethnic markers. An elevated social position was still more likely to rest with native-born Protestants than with newcomers.

As had occurred earlier in the case of women, the exclusionary practices elite schools directed against ethnic minorities and financially needy students set national standards. Educators who in the past had complained about the hedonistic elements of campus life, now argued that such extracurricular activities were important in the cultivation of the “whole”

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175 Herbert E. Hawkes, dean of Columbia College, about his institutions’ use of mental testing. Quoted in Synnott, *The Half-Opened Door*, 18.

person. Emphasizing the value of involvement in a broad variety of campus life activities in shaping the well-rounded and sociable personality of future leaders, they painted studiousness as a suspect trait. A single-minded concentration on achievement, the argument went, indicated a problematic personality that would threaten the homogeneity of middle class values and virtues. In the Ivy League, especially, Jews now found it increasingly hard to gain access. As alternatives, many went to institutions outside the northeast. Yet while they faced less restrictive admission policies there, they encountered the same anti-Semitic prejudices and peer hostility in campus life than their peers in the east. Class bias meanwhile spread further through higher education. Although lower middle class and poor students did not score lower than their more privileged peers on standardized tests, they increasingly found themselves put on a path towards vocational training at junior or low prestige state colleges.

The model established by institutions concerned with the education of male leaders shaped responses to female students as well. Gender also accounted for the fact, though, that developments for women took a slightly different turn than those affecting men. To different degrees, all the prestigious private institutions adopted quotas against Jewish, black, and Catholic applicants. Raising their tuition in the 1920s, they also increasingly curtailed access to women from the lower middle and working class. Having begun as places where women from diverse backgrounds found opportunities for social mobility, women’s colleges thus became loci for the reproduction of class. Maintaining class homogeneity in the case of women, however, also entailed slightly different efforts than those applied in the case of men.

177 On the growing stratification of the American system of higher education along lines of class see Levine, The American College and the Culture of Aspiration, 162-184.
Excluding members of the lower classes and ethnic minorities enabled private colleges to keep access to prestige limited. Yet while, by the 1920s, the fact that coeds were now coveted dating partners of college men had tempered the nativist concern with race suicide to some degree, the very popularity of female students raised new red flags. Being a good sport and fun companion might make a college woman dating material. As a wife and mother who could be counted on to reproduce a set of values conducive to social stability, however, she would also need to develop moral virtues and a concern with the common good. Proponents of the collegiate model thus faced a gendered challenge when it came to women. On the one hand, they needed to emphasize the fun social aspects of college life to attract the coveted students of WASP origin who had no need for a career or vocation. They also, however, needed to mold a woman whose sense of responsibility for the well-being of society would eventually top her interest in having a good time.

Female educators tried to instill a sense of social responsibilities in their charges through a variety of means. While for college men by the 1920s, attendance at religious services was no longer mandatory, their female peers were still required to attend a certain minimum number of Chapel services a month. Similar measures also reached women at co-educational institutions where specially appointed Deans of Women concerned themselves with the moral education of female students separate from male ones, while the position of Dean of Men disappeared from the academic landscape. In response to the spread of secularism in their student body, many schools allowed women to choose lectures on civic or social themes to fulfill the requirement. As a result of educators’ concerns with countering
the egotism of the modern coed, a collegiate education for women did, however, entail a
heady focus on notions of noblesse oblige and civic duty. 178

Although the educational experiences of men and women were different, the
collegiate experience of the sexes was supposed to result in a symbiosis. Well-rounded men
might enjoy their campus life as undergraduates with all-around female peers. Once they
passed this rite-of-passage and entered a marriage, however, both ought to have turned into
bearers of the traits that allegedly unified the WASP elite. Elite men by that time had ideally
acquired all the background and connections they would need to assume their position in
society. The educated woman at their side, meanwhile, would maintain a commitment to the
disinterested concern with the common good and the moral superiority that allegedly
distinguished the ruling class from the masses.

This chapter’s broad survey of developments in the history of higher education has
illustrated important changes that influenced the reception of women in academia. Tolerated,
and in certain fields even appreciated at a time before formal education became interesting to
men, female students became undesirables when academia emerged from its marginal
position in American culture. Presenting unwanted competition and a threat to hopes for
prestige, women were excluded from exactly those fields and disciplines that were emerging
as newly influential in the early twentieth century. At the same time, developments in the
nation at large raised the stakes for the alternative role educated women might be able to
play. For cultural conservatives eager to preserve the class and gender status quo, white,
middle-class women were important bearers of culture. If educated the right way, college
women would reproduce the ruling class. Hopes here rested on the one hand very literally on

178 Solomon, Company of Educated Women, 159-162.
reproduction in the form of babies. Yet a parallel and equally important focus in female higher education was on reproducing values. Faced with newcomers’ arrival on American soil, but even more threateningly, their growing intrusion into spheres of social influence, public commentators had seen a consensus on what constituted these values allegedly central to national identity slipping since the late nineteenth century. By educating women in the collegiate fashion, and instilling in them an appreciation for culture and a sense of noblesse oblige, it might be possible to not only prevent them from turning into egotistical carbon copies of college men. It might also secure that as paragons of civic virtue, they would maintain a disinterested devotion to the common good, which, in addition to a well-rounded personality, supposedly qualified a member of the east coast elite to serve as an authority for national development.
As the previous chapter has shown, anti-Semitism and class bias kept alive the prestige of a collegiate model of higher education and undermined attempts to heighten academic standards in colleges and universities. The intellectual and political discourses I explored in the first chapter, however, challenged campus life. International and domestic political developments by the late 1930s suggested that the way in which the American system of higher education was organized was not only anachronistic, but bred what Reinhold Niebuhr and others termed a “socio-political irresponsibility” in elite youth especially alarming considering the challenges ahead. This chapter explores the experiences of college women at a time when the socio-demographic composition of the student body once again broadened. As a consequence of their Depression and wartime

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179 The term “coed” was originally coined to refer to female students who entered coeducational institutions. Yet when, in the early twentieth century, a stay in college changed from being an anomaly to a rite-of-passage for middle-class “girls,” the label became common for all female collegians. The changing use of the label illustrates the mainstreaming of higher education for women but also the increasing insistence among educators that a college degree contributed rather than challenged gender role stability. Central to the image of a “coed” became that she went to college to mature into the roles of wife and mother. See Lynn D. Gordon, “The Gibson Girl Goes to College: Popular Culture and Women’s Higher Education in the Progressive Era, 1880-1920,” American Quarterly 39, no. 2 (1987): 211-230.

180 Reinhold Niebuhr, as discussed in chapter one, was one of the most outspoken critics of elite student culture. He was far from alone, however. On the “socio-political irresponsibility” of the pre Pearl Harbor college population see for instance Edward Y. Hartshorne, “Undergraduate Society and the College Culture,” American Sociological Review 8, no. 3 (1943): 321-332; 323.
era experiences, newcomers to the collegiate setting brought with them concepts of their roles and responsibilities that clashed with established notions of the purpose of female education. In their attempts to establish their interests and outlooks as legitimate, however, students who either by virtue of their postgraduate goals or because of their family backgrounds deviated from the profile of the traditional coed faced an uphill battle. On the eve of Pearl Harbor, the discourse of personality had naturalized the hierarchy of desirable traits and of interests that were rooted in class and ethnic prejudice. While the origins of collegiate norms were no longer visible, the stigmatization of academic achievers as people suffering from a deep personal flaw had remained. Newcomers were introduced to these sentiments in interpersonal encounters. In interactions with women who, as a result of their class position, had an advantage in defining which campus conventions carried the greatest prestige, non-traditional coeds confronted powerful pressures to conform to established notions of style and behavior that ultimately clashed with the culturally specific outlook of their own families and communities of origin.

The Great Depression affected the system of American higher education in complex and ambiguous ways. On the one hand, criticism of elite student culture grew. On the other, rising nativist concerns also kept intact supporters of collegiate education’s commitment to warding off challenges to campus culture. In this, they responded to visible changes in students’ political activities. By the early 1930s, public commentators witnessed an upsurge of left-wing campus activities. Although the momentum of left-wing politics had declined by the end of the decade, concerned observers still worried about the extent to which students supported the peace movement. For either
phenomenon, they held women and ethnic minorities responsible. Left-wing politics in the early days of the Depression spread widely particularly on relatively young urban universities. Because these schools had a large proportion of Jewish students, nativist sentiments combined with longer-standing fears of left-wing thought as “un-American” ideologies and stigmatized politically active students as dangerous – and alien -- agitators. The peace movement, meanwhile, carried an association with effeminate sentimentalism and the fact that it blossomed on the campuses of women’s colleges only served to affirm the link.  

Being better known for their blasé cynicism and hedonism than left-wing politics, most Ivy League men were not associated with the upsurge of student radicalism on the 1930s campus. By the time the decade wound down, however, anxieties about the strength of American liberal democracy and concerns about changing gender roles combined to feed worries about college men. While liberals like Reinhold Niebuhr feared their lack of idealism would keep them committed to isolationism, for cultural conservatives the seeming passivity of this student population triggered a different worry. In their eyes, elite male students’ disinterest in political activism seemed once again to indicate that the scions of America’s ruling families allowed Jews and women to acquire too much influence.  

181 Even evidence to the contrary did not significantly affect the common perception of women as doves. At the University of Michigan, for instance, more female than male students supported intervention. A poll conducted in 1939 showed seventy-seven percent of the men, but only sixty-three percent of women opposed to U.S. intervention. Ruth Bordin, Women at Michigan: The “Dangerous Experiment,” 1870s to the Present, fourth edition (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 55.

Outside the Ivy League, educators’ worries were of a more material nature. In all but a handful of private colleges, student attrition rates skyrocketed in the early 1930s. Many universities tried to respond to changing student needs in their own way. The University of Michigan, for example, increased its student loan programs and instituted a textbook lending library. Individual responses such as this, however, were insufficient to meet the crisis. To decrease the number of youth who joined the ranks of the unemployed, the Roosevelt administration launched a first federal work-study and financial aid program. Conceived as temporary relief, the ninety-three million dollars dispensed until the program ended in 1943 covered only the tip of an iceberg of much greater need. The measure did, however, enable a number of students from economically-burdened families to continue their studies. Moreover, as the federal government justified investment in higher education as essential for economic recovery, the measure supported the arguments of those who wanted advanced studies to be more than just a schooling in culture and poise and who supported opening access to formal degrees to a larger student population.

Although the Great Depression accelerated the speed with which conceptions of the role and purpose of higher education were shifting, elite educators’ commitment to maintaining cultural homogeneity on their campuses initially widened the gap between different types of institutions. Rather than accepting government aid and thereby broaden access, the Ivy League in particular stepped up its efforts towards exclusion. Continuing

183 Bordin, Women at Michigan, 54.

184 Federal aid for education was meant as a relief program to keep people out of the job market, comparable to the Civilian Conservation. On higher education during the Depression see Levine, The American College, 185-209.
their discrimination against applicants who might be bright but did not feature the right kind of family background, schools like Dartmouth, Harvard, or Yale began to compete all the more ferociously for the offspring of the upper middle class.\(^{\text{185}}\) At many public institutions in the 1930s, approximately two-thirds of all students worked to finance their education. By contrast, only 15 percent of undergraduates at a “typical eastern elite institution” had to do so.\(^{\text{186}}\)

On women’s college campuses, however, the homogeneity of the student body was far harder to maintain. Private collegiate institutions for men were able to afford exclusivity mainly thanks to endowment monies from captains of industry and business. Although the most prestigious private women’s colleges on the east coast had in the 1920s begun to refer to themselves as the “Seven Sisters” of the male Ivy League, they had never enjoyed the same kind of financial support. Educators here therefore had to come up with measures that enabled young women to continue their studies. This was a considerable challenge to the aura of socio-economic privilege surrounding the image of the modern coed.

The letters and diaries of female students from the late 1930s and early to mid 1940s offer evidence of increased socio-economic diversity. At private institutions like Smith and Mount Holyoke Colleges, even a casual reading in their archives shows the considerable number of young women who could continue their studies only with the

\(^{\text{185}}\) As Levine argues, they “were competing fiercely for the children of the less than 5 percent of American families that had incomes of over $5,000 while brighter youngsters from poorer families were forced to forgo college or to attend less prestigious public schools.” \textit{The American College}, 192.

\(^{\text{186}}\) Ibid., 192.
Because the economic strains of the era threatened to lead to a mass exodus of coeds, even prestigious women’s colleges had to reconsider their commitment to the idea of a higher education as a privilege of the affluent. Moreover, by the time the depression decade came to an end, international and ideological developments suggested a rethinking of discriminatory admissions policies when it came to religion and ethnicity as well.

Growing awareness that racist, xenophobic, and nativist ideologies constituted dangers for the global order in the late 1930s and 1940s increased the clout of those critical of discriminatory admissions policies in higher education. The Ivy League and the Seven Sisters had a long history of issuing quotas for racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. These practices, while they did not disappear entirely, became much harder to sustain in the 1940s. As wartime appeals to patriotism emphasized the differences between American ideals and the racism and anti-Semitism of enemy nations, African American and Jewish Civil Rights organizations found powerful ideological support for their demands to end discrimination. College officials thus increasingly found themselves

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187 Letters from a number of Mount Holyoke College students show that they held jobs to help them defray expenses, Grace Gray (class of 1945) waited tables; Alice Rigby (class of 1945) waited tables and worked as a math tutor. See Grace Gray papers and Alice Rigby papers, Mount Holyoke College Archives. At Smith College, the papers of Janet Kedney (class of 1944), Judith Lauterbach (class of 1947) show that they were on scholarship. See Janet Kedney papers and “Transcripts of Judith Lauterbach’s letters and diary entries, as selected and excerpted by her father, Leo Lauterbach, 1957,” Judith Lauterbach papers, Smith College Archives. For the increase in student diversity at the “Seven Sisters” see Kendall, “Peculiar Institutions”: An Informal History of the Seven Sister Colleges (New York: Putnam, 1976).
on the defensive to explain the under-representation of minority students on their campuses.\textsuperscript{188}

Ideological challenges did not put a sudden end to discriminatory practices in the student culture, but the war increased the likelihood of inter-personal encounters between members of different religions and ethnicities. Administrators at most elite institutions were unwilling to interfere with prejudicial practices in campus social organizations and athletics. As a result, a greater inclusion of minorities never became mandatory and this hesitance of officials extended into the post World War II period. The federal government also did not alter its restrictive quotas that prevented immigrants, especially Jews from Eastern Europe, from escaping to the United States. This notwithstanding, the student body diversified in even the country’s most prestigious institutions. When looking for diaries and letters of college women, I found that a considerable number came from Jewish and Catholic families and some even featured a refugee past. Reflecting the fact that discrimination against African Americans in northern institutions took far longer to

\textsuperscript{188} African American as well as Jewish Civil Rights organizations and activists both utilized patriotic wartime rhetoric to push for an end of discriminatory admissions practices in colleges. Jewish organizations highlighted especially the anti-Semitism in student social organizations. On the situation of African Americans in academia see James D. Anderson, “Race, Meritocracy and the American Academy during the Immediate Post-World War II Era,” History of Education Quarterly 33, no. 2 (1993): 150-175. On the use of holocaust analogy in the fight for civil rights see: Michael E. Staub, “‘Negroes are not Jews’: Race, Holocaust Consciousness, and the Rise of Jewish Neoconservatism,” Radical History Review 75 (1999): 3-27. Staub argues for a decline of solidarity based on a shared identity as an oppressed group by the late 1960s. During the immediate post World War II period, however, Jewish supporters of black Civil Rights still drew parallels between Nazi racial oppression and Southern apartheid.
soften than that against Jews and Catholics, I also found diaries and letters from no more than just a few token black students for the entire period under study, however.  

As limited as the trend towards diversity may have been, Depression and war inevitably brought to the campuses of even the most prestigious institutions a population of women whose experiences put them at odds with collegiate culture. Students on financial aid had to maintain certain grade point averages and thus by necessity needed to concentrate on their coursework. If their studies left them time for socializing and extracurricular activities, a scarcity of funds limited their opportunities. Participation in campus life entailed keeping up with fashion, hairstyles, and other aspects of youth culture. Membership in sororities was costly. Youngsters from financially struggling families were therefore not likely to have easy access to the resources they needed to become well-rounded. Coming from families adversely affected by economic emergency, they were also likely to be aware of the vagaries of the market and the need for women, too, to shoulder financial responsibilities. With such experiences, many students were likely to expect from education economically viable training and an opportunity that they should not squander. Minority students, meanwhile, still often encountered obstacles to their participation in social life. While Jewish and Catholic students could join separate clubs and organizations, encounters with prejudice certainly would also have been likely to politicize newcomers and make them critical of the established patterns of collegiate

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189 For examples of students with an ethnic minority and/or refugee background see “Judith Lauterbach papers,” Smith College Archives; “Judith Raskin papers,” “Patricia Beck papers,” both: Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Archives; “Claudine Maroni Harris papers,” Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa Libraries.
life.\textsuperscript{190} With family histories that had early on alerted them to the importance of planning ahead for their future, we can reasonably assume that wartime students approached college with an interest in and dedication to its academic aspects. Such attitudes were even more likely to grow in the context of the cultural atmosphere of crisis in which commentators called for more studious attitudes and somber outlooks among the educated young.

While already in the 1920s, many observers had responded with alarm to college students’ alleged social irresponsibility, the growing probability of a U.S. entry into war added to their concerns by the late 1930s. After Pearl Harbor, appeals to the young to adjust their attitude and to adopt a more somber outlook picked up momentum. National attention was once again stimulated by fears that men of the class that had traditionally shaped politics and culture were losing influence. Yet as it was also clear that the military draft would make many of these male students unavailable as targets for idealistic appeals, many commentators turned to college women. Here, some certainly simply continued reminders that the future wives of male leaders would have to play a supporting role in maintaining family and nation. Female students also heard the message, however, that, for democracy to survive, they needed to commit themselves to active political work and utilize their expertise for the building of the postwar order. Public speakers, of whom Reinhold Niebuhr and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt were but the most prominent, encouraged college women to educate themselves in politics, foreign

\textsuperscript{190} We know that such a dynamic was at work, for instance, in the case of Betty Friedan who studied during the war at Smith College. See Daniel Horowitz, Betty Friedan and the Making of \textit{The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism} (Amherst; University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).
languages, and their own nation’s as well as other cultures’ histories. What added to such appeals to women’s international and national responsibility to train and educate themselves, was that the war also produced what Margaret Rossiter described as a virtual “torrent” of promotional literature urging female students to major in the sciences to meet the demand for trained professionals expected as a result of the war. Behind this notion of utilizing “womanpower,” as historians have amply demonstrated, most politicians and academics would rally only for the duration and never with a lot of commitment. Yet, as I illustrated in the first chapter, many of the speakers that addressed college women on their turf wanted to create a safer and more permanent postwar order. For this agenda to succeed, they considered it essential that the educated young made a long-term commitment. Appeals to the political and civic responsibilities of female students therefore made no mentioning of the temporary nature of new roles.

Just like the diversification of the student body, wartime appeals to the educated young to accept responsibility for the global situation challenged collegiate culture. Public intellectuals like Reinhold Niebuhr, the First Lady, or Margaret Mead addressed young women as guest speakers in Chapel or at Commencement. A student who missed a

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191 Reinhold Niebuhr, for instance, spoke at Smith College in 1943 and at Mount Holyoke in 1944. See Janet Kedney to family, letter postmarked 10-05-1943, folder 4, “correspondence, 1943-44,” Janet Kedney papers, Smith College Archives; Grace Gray to parents, 10-10-1943, box 1, folder 9, “correspondence, April 1943,” Grace Gray papers, Mount Holyoke College Archives. On Eleanor Roosevelt and her appearances in front of female students women see Allida M. Black, Casting her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

personal encounter could read about campus guests’ activities and publications in her alma mater’s newspaper and it was also here where she would find enthusiastic support for women’s new responsibilities in the present crisis and beyond. Approvingly quoting their college’s president Herbert Davis, the Smith College Associated News in 1943, for instance, argued that in response to the new challenges of the times, “college life” had to change. Rather than approaching their stay on campus as “a process of growing up, in the course of which it may be possible to pick up a little miscellaneous information as painlessly as possible, and gather a little worldly wisdom” students should develop expertise in a specialized area. Instead of the students who flocked to “committees, … house dances, Rally Day, soccer games” it should be those in the “honors system” who were lauded as exemplary figures on campus.\textsuperscript{193} This appeal to their peers to change their attitudes was also the tone adopted by a group of women at Michigan State University. These coeds, who organized as the “Women’s War Council,” in one of their pamphlets explicitly singled out the type of fellow student who came from an upper-class neighborhood and chose a cultural course of study. “It is also your war, Suzy Smith, Lit major, from Cleveland Heights, Ohio,” sounded one of their flyers: it was “time to awaken” and “to put away … bridge games and all night bull sessions.”\textsuperscript{194} At least according to some young women, the focus of campus life thus needed to go from the social to the academic. The brain rather than the debutante ought to be the model coed.

\textsuperscript{193} The Smith College Associated News, November 23, 1943.

\textsuperscript{194} For the text of the flyer of the Women’s War Council see Brian A. Williams, “Michigan on the March: The University of Michigan in World War II,” 14.
In the personal writings of college women, there is evidence that patriotism spread on campuses across the nation. Especially in letters and diary entries written in the direct aftermath of Pearl Harbor, discussions of political affairs and global events replaced descriptions of social and extracurricular campus life. Coeds reported to be “glued to the radio” in order to follow presidential speeches and political debates. Many of these young women had friends and relatives who were drafted into or enlisted for military service and their letters and diary entries show their concern for the well-being and safety of those directly exposed to the fighting. Many students also adopted the rhetoric of their generation’s responsibility. It was time for “partygoers,” Ruth Honamann, a student at Smith College, put it, for instance, to turn into “men and women” concerned about “the future” and what it “MUST hold.” Because of age restrictions, it was not possible for many students to enlist in the military. Many women who remained in school, however, used their leisure time to help in agriculture or to fill vacancies in other jobs. They donated blood, bought war bonds, and attended or organized events to entertain service men and women. That student newspapers and campus speakers did not tire in appealing to college women’s responsibilities, however, also indicates that politically active students and concerned commentators felt that the typical coed did not show the needed level of commitment. Contemporary sociological articles reflect this


196 Ruth Honamann to parents, 12-09-1941, folder “September 1941 - February 1942,” Ruth Honamann papers, Smith College Archives.

sentiment. College women were portrayed as “lethargic” and politically uninformed. Despite the war, they concentrated on social pursuits.\textsuperscript{198}

An analysis of student letters and diaries from the war years indeed suggests that even women who arrived on campus with career and vocational goals and somber political outlooks quickly adjusted their attitudes to conform to campus life conventions. In the diary Helene Harmon, a Catholic teenager from Philadelphia, kept from 1936 to 1943, for instance, we encounter a woman who, as a result of her family’s recent experiences, started her studies equipped with progressive notions about educated women’s future roles and responsibilities. Once immersed in campus life, however, she changed her priorities and outlook. To understand the dynamics of this development, it will help to look at Helene’s case in some detail.

Helene had experienced a sheltered childhood. While her parents, Marian Grace and Harry Murphy Harmon, had an Irish immigrant background, they had clearly made the jump into the middle class by the time their only daughter reached her teenage years. For Helene’s high school education, this meant that they emphasized cultural and moral schooling over vocational training. At the single-sex Holman School for Girls, the adolescent Helene was thus introduced to literature and poetry and encouraged to develop her burgeoning interest in art and the theatre.\textsuperscript{199}


\textsuperscript{199} Helene Harmon, diary, see for instance entries dated 02-19-1940, 07-04-1940, Helene Harmon Weis papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.
While Helene did enjoy a cultural education, however, the Depression left a mark on attitudes in the Harmon family. The economic emergency had hurt them financially and money was tight. Without a partial scholarship from the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Art, it is doubtful that Helene would have been able to attend college at all. That the Harmons were nonetheless willing to take on an additional financial burden therefore suggests that, in the light of recent experiences, they were reconsidering their attitudes towards the education of daughters. In this, they joined many more middle-class Americans who had become aware that the semi-professional and white-collar fields that employed a large number of women were less susceptible to the vagaries of the market than the male-dominated production sector. As a result, awareness of the economic role of wives and daughters grew. Not only were many parents becoming more open to the idea of sending a female offspring to college; many adjusted their idea about shape and purpose of female higher education. Rather than wanting daughters to gain a broad cultural background and social poise, middle-class families sobered by their Depression experiences were more likely to expect that a stay in college would yield economically viable training. That this was true for the Harmons shows in Helene’s diary in which she commented on discussions with her mother about the kind of course of study she should pursue. Here, while Helene’s mother conceded that her daughter ought to develop her interest in theatre and art, she also emphasized that she needed to acquire economically viable skills. “Mother still wants me to take costume design,” Helene recorded for instance and added that this preference was shaped by her parent’s concern about “making a … living.” That Marian Grace and Harry Murphy Harmon expected

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Helene’s schooling to translate into a remunerative job also shows in the fact that they expected their daughter to use her earnings to help bring a younger brother through college.\textsuperscript{201} For her part, Helene felt at times that her parents’ practical considerations meant that she would have to sacrifice her passion for “beauty and poetry.” All in all, however, she agreed that a cultural education alone would not prepare her adequately for her adult life. “I don’t want to choose my vocation with nothing but making a good living in view,” she recorded, “but neither do I want to be disregardless (sic) of this. … [A]fter all, a certain amount of security is necessary.”\textsuperscript{202}

Eventually, Helene would strike a balance between her interests and the practical considerations of her parents by choosing “stage craft” as her major. The prospect of embarking on this course of study excited her and her diary entries during the first weeks of the semester convey her enjoyment of the academic side of her education. Soon, however, the focus of her entries shifted. She became “better acquainted” with “upper class men” and befriended a young woman from a financially much more secure background than her own. With that, the curricula aspects of her education largely disappeared as a topic in her journal. Instead, Helene now adopted as her goal becoming more popular and gaining access to a mixed-sex crowd of students she referred to as the “gang.” As Helene admitted herself, collegiate living “changed” her. “I care so much more for clothes [and] jive” now, she admitted. Rather than concentrating on her books and studies, she strove to develop well-rounded interests. Reflections on the importance of “love of beauty” and “happiness” took the place of concern for economically viable

\textsuperscript{201} Helene Harmon, diary, entries dated 07-15-1940, 03-29-1943.

\textsuperscript{202} Helene Harmon, diary, entry dated 07-15-1940.
training in her journal. And not even the outbreak of war sufficed to take her mind off campus life. “It continually surprises me,” she wrote the day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, “that my personal concerns still mean more to me than the fate of humanity.”

Helene’s experiences mirror those of Jewish refuge Judith Lauterbach. Judith was a woman whose personal background and experiences introduced her to hardships at a tender age. She was born and raised in Britain where her father was a secretary of the Zionist Executive in London. In this capacity, Leo Lauterbach already in the late 1930s learned about the extreme danger Nazi anti-Semitism posed to European Jewry. When the blitzkrieg of the German Luftwaffe began, Judith and her mother evacuated the island while Leo Lauterbach went to Israel to work for a Jewish homeland. After a short stay in Montreal, Judith and her mother arrived in New York City in 1941 where Judith attended Dalton, a prestigious preparatory school, and also the experimental Walden School that focused on education in the visual and performing arts. Meanwhile, she maintained an active correspondence with her father. Although Leo Lauterbach’s letters have not survived, it is clear from Judith’s responses that he encouraged his daughter’s interest in politics. In addition to this personal influence, Judith’s political consciousness was also raised by the fact that while she could consider herself lucky, most European Jews had not managed to enter the United States and escape European anti-Semitism.

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203 Helene Harmon, diary, see for instance her entries dated 02-16-1941, 06-04-1941, 12-07-1941, 11-08-1942.

In 1943, the politicized and academically talented Judith entered the private liberal arts Smith College with the help of a scholarship of $400. As becomes clear from the letters she sent when she begun her education, she expected the emphasis at Smith College to be on academics and politics. Her “idea of college,” she wrote, was “contact with serious thinkers.” Yet although she started out emphasizing an interest in international relations, Judith, too, like Helene, was quickly won over to the collegiate ideal of a well-rounded education with an emphasis on social activities. She was soon immersed in social activities at Hillel, the Jewish student organization to which, in Judith’s own words, “all the Jewish girls automatically belong,” and to which most went mainly because of its “social functions.” To her father, this seemed frivolous. In her response, however, Judith defended herself: she could not see “why useless company can be harmful.” Making as many new friends as possible in her mind would “further [her] experience.” A short time later, she described college as fostering “a very good time, a feeling of unity, and a little learning.” When, shortly after the war, her father criticized her younger sister for also privileging social over academic and political activities, Judith came out in her defense:


205 Judith Lauterbach to father, 09-22-1943.

206 Judith’s impression of Jewish campus organizations as social in outlook conforms to what Wechsler has argued about their development nationwide. While Jewish clubs and societies in the early twentieth century had often been more literary and political in their orientation, by the 1920s they largely matched their Protestant counterparts in their emphasis on social activities. Wechsler, “An Academic Gresham’s Law,” Teachers College Record 82, no. 4 (1981): 567-588.
There is nothing shallow or aimless in the urge … to enjoy one’s self in social ways. To learn such things when one is young is as valuable and probably more lasting than other things one learns at school.\textsuperscript{207}

To a reader familiar with the social life of campus students at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it might not come as a surprise that two young women removed from the direct supervision of their parents wanted to enjoy themselves in the student culture. We do, however, need to keep in mind the historically specific circumstances of their adolescence. Like many of their female contemporaries, neither Judith nor Helene could take the opportunity to gain a higher education for granted. Their families had made financial sacrifices to send them to college. They reminded them of the need to take their studies seriously. The political context of the time greatly raised the stakes for taking an interest in the fate of humanity. Considering the specifics of their coming-of-age, the influences on the attitudes of these young coeds therefore need to be examined.

The two young women’s campus conversion to the ideal of the well-rounded coed is particularly surprising as neither Judith at Walden or Dalton, nor Helene at the Holman School, had been active participants in the peer culture. Already then, normative pressures would have been high. On the eve of Pearl Harbor, participation in high school youth culture unified the experiences of more and more American teenagers. Facilitated by New Deal laws against child labor but also because more and more families now saw in education a path to economic security for children, rates of high school attendance climbed throughout the Great Depression. By the late 1930s, one can argue that, with the exception of the South, a stay in high school was a common feature of the childhood and adolescence of the majority of Americans. Along with this, Beth Bailey has convincingly

\textsuperscript{207} Judith Lauterbach to father, 10-13-1943, 08-02-1944, 20-20-1946.
argued, came a homogenization of attitudes and styles. Exposed to their peers’ culture for long stretches of the day, high school youths increasingly took their clues about values and norms from each other rather than traditional authorities such as parents, teachers, or religious or community leaders. The world these high school age youths created was one in which, often in groups, dating couples and their friends went out to visit such venues of commercial leisure culture as soda parlors, skating rings or movie houses. Depression era scarcity put a damper on the spread of this world. Even the economic emergency, however, ultimately did not stop the expansion of youth leisure culture.

The expanding youth culture did not escape the attention of social scientists. As soon as college-educated urban Americans adopted the practice of dating after World War I, public commentators debated the potential consequences of what they saw as a departure from traditional middle-class values. When jazz age city youth and young couples took advantage of new leisure and entertainment opportunities, they parted with the emphasis on self-restraint and delayed gratification that had long been a hallmark of the Protestant success ethic. By challenging parental authority, they broke with a family model based on relationships of duty and obedience. Modern marriage reformers welcomed the rejection of Victorian mores as evidence of their own growing influence over traditional sources of authority. Already in the 1920s, however, many were

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209 Among the proponents of modern notions of psychological and sexual development were academics and progressive reformers like the Juvenile Court Judge Ben B. Lindsey, child psychiatrist Ira S. Wile, and psychologist Lorine Pruette. They found support among journalists, writers, and a number of radical intellectuals. See Christina Simmons,
worrying about the effects of new attitudes on the nation. As a rise in divorce suggested, couples were increasingly discontent with marriage and no longer willing to stay in relationships that were unfulfilling. When then, in the course of the 1930s, family breakdowns and marital strains reached new proportions in visibility and scope, experts took an increasingly proactive stance in regards to preparing young Americans for their future responsibilities in the family.²¹⁰

To some extent, depression era social scientists supported the trend towards a break with parental values and practices among modern youth. Autocratic parent-child relationships had lost legitimacy among advice writers by the 1930s. Experts saw parents who prohibited their children from associating with peers as contributing to a spiraling social problem. Youngsters who were not allowed to graduate from home were ill prepared for the challenges of adulthood. Entering marriage with repressed Victorian notions, they would experience adjustment problems that easily ended in divorce. In the words of influential and prolific writer of marriage advice Paul Popenoe, for example, the “fears brought along from childhood and adolescence” spent in families with old-fashioned parents, needed to be “eradicated” for marriages “to run … successfully.” For


this purpose, “young people [needed to] get acquainted” with each other and “build up a normal social life with their equals” Modern experts thus supported youths’ immersion in a one-generational world in which they collected experiences away from their parents. The challenge family experts faced, however, was to encourage youth to cut the umbilical cord to the home but to keep them committed to the institution of marriage, which all but a tiny segment of radicals saw as central to social stability.  

That experts worried about their ability to influence the behavior of youth was to a large extent a reflection of national concerns about the impact of mass culture. Marital advice writers from the late 1930s through the 1940s feared that the leisurely pursuits of the young were not only detrimental to the creation of responsible citizens; they also worried that popular culture promoted exaggerated expectations and unrealistic attitudes toward family life and love. Here, women in particular seemed to take from their exposure to movies and pulp novels the sense that their adult relationships would entail an endless succession of thrilling and exciting adventures. Moreover, their social experiences as adolescents in high school combined with growing opportunities in the public sphere led them to expect that as wives, too, they would be treated as an equal and a pal. This concerned marriage experts especially because of the strength of the academic paradigm of cultural lag. Changes in attitudes towards femininity and masculinity, most advice writers would argue, were lagging behind new social opportunities. When women encountered this lag in their marriages, discontent and disappointment was the logical consequence. For stable marriages and happy families, experts thus felt that a more

rational approach than reliance on modern media and high school peer culture was needed.\footnote{212}

In the attempt to strike a balance between autonomy and social stability, social science experts emphasized the need for youth to adopt a 	extit{mature} attitude and to 	extit{adjust} to conventional behavioral expectations. In advice literature published at the eve of Pearl Harbor readers again and again learned about a particular theory of successful personality development. A mature individual, the message went, grasped what kinds of actions yielded the greatest social benefits and subsequently adjusted his or her attitudes. This entailed an understanding of the benefits of conformity to group norms. Considering that mature men were still “attracted by womanliness,” and repelled by women who acted as if they were one of the boys, Paul Popenoe sounded, any woman who still acted like a high school student “pal” should not be surprised if she was “still single at 40.”\footnote{213} For happiness and success in life, it was ultimately best not to stray too far from well-established social expectations but to play according to the rules. This emphasis on adjustment and conformity entered middle-class homes through the growing body of advice literature. The place where the young generation encountered it most directly, however, was high school.

Young men and women, who came-of-age during the Depression, became the prominent targets of the discourse on adjustment as a result of the era’s curricula reforms. When proponents of so-called “progressive education” began their campaigns in the late

\footnote{212} Elaine Tyler May, 	extit{Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 2-7, 91.

\footnote{213} Popenoe, 	extit{Marriage: Before and After}, 26.
nineteenth century, they had an ambitious social reform agenda. Influenced by the writings of John Dewey and others, they wanted to make the classroom more youth centered. The goal was to make the relationship between teacher and pupil more interactive, to address subjects to which a student could relate, and to foster critical social consciousness. By the 1930s, however, the character of the movement had changed from changing to preserving the status quo. Faced with the growing diversification of the student body and the influx of the children of immigrants, educators increasingly took on the mission of assimilating the foreign-born to a homogenous set of values and of preparing a mass student body for jobs in the white-collar economy. Even institutions that had once seen themselves as feeder schools for the elite colleges emphasized the goal of preparing pupils for the roles they would be most likely to assume in life. In many schools this translated into the introduction of courses like “Basic Living” or “Common Learning” in which teachers taught pupils “how to earn a living, how to get along with other people, how to be a good consumer, [or] how to behave on a date.” Adjustment to common conventions and popular norms in classes like this was a prime goal. Reformers valued student success as admirable personality development while they saw traditional subjects like history or English as removed from the reality of the masses. The goal of preparing an elite for college remained an aspect of high school education even after the curricula reforms of the 1930s. Here, too, however, schools had adjusted to shifting admissions practices. As it was clear by the late 1930s that college officials would scrutinize applications for


215 Ibid., 55, 62.
evidence that a student had well-rounded, social interests, even college-bound high school students were actively encouraged to acquire such a record.\footnote{For a case study of a number of New York City high schools and their experiments with progressive education also see Paula Fass, “Creating New Identities: Youth and Ethnicity in New York City High Schools in the 1930s and 1940s,” in Fass, Children of a New World: Society, Culture, and Globalization, (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 74-100.}

For American teenagers, trends in secondary education combined with developments in the social sciences to produce an ambivalent but ultimately quite conservative message. On the one hand, youth was encouraged to separate from parents and to collect experiences of their own in the one-generational world of their peers. On the other, they were constantly reminded of the need to adjust their own behavior to commonly held behavioral expectations. Youth of both sexes learned that what counted in their formative years was to cultivate an out-going personality that allowed them to fit into social groups. Personal idiosyncrasies and unusual displays of behavior, meanwhile, came under suspicion as signs of psychological problems or the influences of a bad environment.

Facilitated by the expansion of formal education and the mass media, social scientific and psychological theories of development spread into the middle class where they boosted the acceptance of youth culture and dating. This development did not lead to a homogenization of attitudes right away, however. In fact, in the extent to which Americans from diverse regional, ethnic, and religious backgrounds accepted patterns of popular youth culture and social scientifically informed notions of personality, considerable diversity existed up to the eve of World War II. This shows in the case of Helene Harmon.
The journal entries Helene Harmon made the summer before college reveal that as a high school student she had merely been a spectator of, rather than a participant in, the world of her peers. Even though many of her friends in the Holman School for Girls had already started dating, she spent her hours after class socializing with a small group of female friends or recording her thoughts about life, books, and poetry in her journal. Her Sundays, meanwhile, she devoted to teaching a Bible studies class. The fact that she deviated from increasingly pervasive patterns among her peers at times made Helene suspect that there might be something wrong with her. “Surely I cannot be normal,” she wrote, for instance, the summer before she began college. As a “girl of 17” she should by now “to all rights and purposes [be] boy-crazy over anything in trousers.” Yet prior to exposure to campus life, she also insisted on the legitimacy, if not superiority, of her own views and interest as opposed to her peers. While they spent hours watching movies, listening to jazz, and “spooning” with the opposite sex, Helene argued, she was holding out for “true love”. What would make her “happy” she wrote, “would not be ‘Hollywood Love’ - that is a lot of petting and mouthing, nor would it be storybook love – they married and lived happily ever after.” Instead, she was waiting for a partner who would share her outlook on “things such as music, art, humor, humanity, [and] ideals.”

The vocabulary with which Helene justified her deviation from common behavior patterns among high school youths shows the degree to which the debate about mass culture’s dangerous influences that I have described in detail in the first chapter had entered the middle class. Yet although the debate about conformism crossed

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217 Helene Harmon, diary, entries dated 09-06-1940, 07-04-1940.

218 Ibid.
denominational, ethnic, and class lines, Helene’s justification of her outlook also reflects the fact that attitudes towards youth and popular culture differed considerably depending on a family’s background. Especially when it came to the question of daughters’ participation in the dating culture, Catholic households remained steeped in conservative values longer than urban Protestants. Her journal entries clearly reflect that, despite her insights into high school youth culture, Helene, too, held on to the values held in her community of origin. She did not believe, for instance, that the dating patterns common among her peers would be beneficial for marriage. The widespread practice among youth to go out with a number of different partners before settling for a spouse struck her as dangerous. It seemed to her “a kind of mental adultery, which though not immoral in the world’s eyes, might become as dangerous spiritually.” As the end result of modern attitudes, she foresaw “adultery or at least … a couple of divorces.” All in all, she contended, she could not “reconcile” the spreading patterns around her “with [her] religion.”

Helene’s was not an isolated case. In fact, many women who came to college expecting economic opportunity and training had not been active participants in the youth culture. This link, I argue, is not just a coincidence. Rather, it reflects the circumstances of their upbringing. Young women raised as Catholics, evangelical Christians, or Orthodox Jews were less likely than Protestant peers from families with a longer standing in the American middle class to have the permission of their parents to spend their leisure

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220 Helene Harmon, diary, entry dated 09-06-1940.
hours in a world unsupervised by adults. Families of immigrant, working class, and rural backgrounds tended to still expect daughters to help with household chores. Last but not least, for families severely affected by economic hardships, participation in commercial leisure was often not an option because of financial reasons. Class, religion, location, and ethnicity by the 1940s thus still influenced the extent to which American adolescents had been exposed to the urban youth culture. Even though a major purpose of high school curricula reforms was the assimilation of Americans from diverse backgrounds to middle-class culture, when it came to attitudes towards dating and the autonomy of children, many communities had maintained their own distinctive outlook grounded in material circumstances and traditional mores.

The experience of growing up in isolation from the high school youth culture had a complex effect on the identity of daughters. As Helene Harmon’s diary entries from the end of her high school career show, it could lead young women to hold on to some conservative notions about gender and parental authority. As her musings about “mental adultery” show, Helene still conceived of marriage as a spiritual union that ought to be formed for life. In this, she echoed the resistance to divorce that unified urban Catholic Americans far longer than their Protestant contemporaries. Helene was at this time also of the opinion that present day youth were exposed to the realities of adult life at a much too early age. “I think the youngsters ought to be kept in ignorance,” she wrote, about “anything … unpleasant and complex.” Yet while she was out-of-step with some modern attitudes, Helene did embrace a progressive notion about the need for women to plan for economically self-sufficient futures. The effect of her upbringing was thus a quite broad conception of her gender role and of the purpose of her education. Although the late
1930s and early 1940s brought to college a number of women with expectations and outlooks similar to that of Helene, their exposure to campus life undermined their beliefs in the legitimacy of the culturally specific mores and values in the families.

To understand why the collegiate setting confronted nontraditional female students with more powerful normative pressures than high school, we need to keep in mind the extent to which the language of social science naturalized behaviors and values rooted in class privilege and ethnic bias. On the mid century campus, students from diverse backgrounds encountered a distinct set of norms clad in the seemingly value-free evaluation of personality. Because of this, class-based value judgments acquired an aura of objectivity that made them hard to contest.

An article published in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* in 1941 serves as an illustration of the setting newcomers to campus encountered. For the study “Fad and Fashion Leadership Among Undergraduate Women,” researcher J. E. Janney relied on student informants to observe their peers at an unnamed private women’s college. From their reports, the writer then proposed an explanation of what kind of women for what reason enjoyed the greatest influence in setting conventions on campus. Here, Janney argues, neither “academic standing, intelligence, athletic participation, financial income,” or “health” accounted for the hierarchy among college women. Rather, women became trendsetters on the basis of their personality. In this interpretation, coeds naturally gravitated to those fellow students who navigated the peer culture with ease and grasped even the “subtle aspects” of the right social “etiquette.” The ability to grasp these “subtle” cues, however, is attributed to personal maturity, not to class privilege. As
Janney contends, one could find students on scholarship side-by-side students from elite families in the upper echelons of the campus hierarchy.\textsuperscript{221}

While Janney and her informants argue that personality serves as the most important factor in elevating a student’s social standing, they also point to it as the cause that kept some women at the bottom. In the view of Janney’s informants, the least-popular women on campus had, despite encouragement and prodding by their peers, either refused to join them in social events, or had tried too hard to join the popular crowds. These women fell into two basic categories: They were spoilsports who spent their “free time in self-imposed solitary confinement in their rooms,” and who refused to “appear at teas [and] receptions.” Alternatively, they tried to join the ranks of the trendsetting crowd but, as a result of their lack of comprehension of social mores, failed to fit in.\textsuperscript{222} Either way, it was women’s inability to comprehend and then to adjust to the conventions of campus life that, according to this study, earned them their marginalized position on campus.

What we can see in Janney’s study are all the elements of the stigmatization of scholarship students and ethnic minorities that had shaped admissions policies of colleges since the 1920s. It was women on scholarship who needed to maintain grade-point-averages who would have to spend their free time studying in their rooms. Similarly, it would be women from non-East Coast, white, Protestant families who were ignorant of the subtleties of cultural styles by which the WASP elite defined itself. Janney’s study


\textsuperscript{222} ibid., 275-278; 276-277.
also shows, however, how successful the discourse on personality concealed prejudices
against newcomers to college culture. From the perspective of the student informants and
the researcher, the woman who refused to appear at a social event did so either because of
a misguided choice or because of a developmental flaw that they had not yet overcome.
Coeds were punished by unpopularity not because of their backgrounds, but because they
were either too “obstinate” to conform to convention, or too shy. For those women who
tried to join the ranks of the most popular girls but who failed to succeed, meanwhile,
their rejection, according to Janney’s study, was because of their annoying personality;
not because they were feared as social climbers by a class that was trying to protect its
exclusivity.

Based on a small sample of students at only one private women’s college,
Janney’s study of course is hardly a comprehensive look at student culture. The personal
writings of women in colleges and liberal arts programs reveal, however, that it described
a very common view. Female students from a broad variety of backgrounds shared an
overwhelmingly negative opinion of studious peers who concentrated on their class work,
who turned down opportunities to socialize and have fun, or who became active in
campus life in ways deemed inappropriate. Women whose extracurricular activities
centered on political causes, for instance, easily acquired negative reputations among
their less active peers. On the Smith College campus students found the writer for the
student newspaper Bettye Goldstein (later Betty Friedan) “strident” and the young
woman was painfully aware of this image. On the Mount Holyoke campus similar
attitudes existed. As one coed wrote about a fellow student: “We discussed Census Points
and R[.] Agitator H[.] was all for abolishing them. I think that’s a dumb idea.” (emphasis
A common epithet to describe studious women, meanwhile, was the “grind.” As one student at Mount Holyoke College in 1943 described “the type” in a letter to her parents, a grind-like woman did not know how to dress. She wore “a drollly skirt and a V-neck cardigan with no blouse underneath – you know the type” and combined this with “knee-socks of drab colors and ‘sensible shoes.’” Not only did she have a bad fashion sense, she also “kept her hands in her pockets all the time and managed the most moronic expression!”

Although the students’ description of the “type” of the grind came from a student performance and did not describe an actual peer, it reflects a widespread attitude. Her “average” was only a B-, wrote another Mount Holyoke College student at the end of her freshman year in 1942 in a letter home. She was “really quite happy with this, she assured her family, however, because she would “hate to be” like one of the “three girls in [her] dorm who got all A’s and such.” They, she contended, were “sadly enough … the sort of drips that will be Phi Bets.”

Similar evaluations, students were likely to make in response to women they encountered as professors or in other positions of authority.

What many here focused on was the extent to which these women conformed to a narrow

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223 On Bettye Goldstein at Smith see Horowitz, The Making of the Feminine Mystique. The “agitator” quote is from Alice Rigby to family, 02-02-1944, folder 5, “correspondence, January – February 1944,” Alice Rigby papers, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

224 Alice Rigby to family, 10-25-1943.

225 Gale Stubbs McClung to parents, 02-16-1942, box 1, folder 3, “correspondence January – March 1942,” Gale Stubbs McClung papers, Mount Holyoke College Archives.
norm of acceptable feminine styles and well-rounded personalities, not the extent to which they were good teachers or made intellectual contributions.\textsuperscript{226}

Students thus evaluated their female peers and older women based on the extent to which they appeared appropriately feminine and well-rounded. Alternative styles and interests, meanwhile, were heavily stigmatized. In the psychological literature, uneasiness with, if not hostility towards female intellectualism showed in the extreme when women professionals or artists were painted as lesbians.\textsuperscript{227} In none of the letters and diaries I consulted did students actually go so far as to insinuate that a peer or a professor might be a sexual deviant. What they clearly did see in bookish women, however, were pitiable wallflowers, who were not only socially awkward, but physically unattractive to boot. When referring to a woman as a studious “grind,” for instance, “greasy” often was the adjective that accompanied the label.\textsuperscript{228} The anti-Semitic roots of this moniker by that time seemed largely forgotten. But what the stigma still denied was that a woman’s studiousness could be grounded in agency and choice, or be based on legitimate needs or interests. “Grinds” according to the common view, acted the way they did because they did not know any better. Because of a psychological flaw, they never acquired the interests that would make them pleasant company for their peers. For the same reason,

\textsuperscript{226} See for instance Margaret McClumpha to mother, 02-11-1941 and 05-21-1941, folder 1, “correspondence, January 9, 1940 – May 27, 1941,” Smith College Archives.


\textsuperscript{228} On the negative stereotype of the “greasy grind” see Helen L. Horowitz, \textit{Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present} (New York: Knopf, 1987), 142, 197.
they had miserably failed to develop their femininity. Lacking feminine appeal and social poise, they acquired notoriety as “types” deserving pity but certainly no emulation.

The fact that class and ethnicity based value judgments appeared to be an impartial evaluation of personality created a campus social environment in which the interests and goals of many newcomers were from the onset denied legitimacy. For students from non-traditional backgrounds, campus life thus meant that they would find it difficult to continue to see the outlooks they had brought with them to campus in a positive light. This clearly shows if we look at the way encounters between women of different backgrounds played out.

The uneven playing field newcomers faced in the collegiate setting is poignantly illustrated by the friendship that developed between Helene Harmon and fellow coed “Dena,” who played a major role in introducing the young Catholic to the dos and don’ts of student life. Helene’s journal is short on information about Dena’s family. It is clear, though, that she came from a socio-economically very different background than the scholarship student Helene. A comment Helene made at a later stage of the relationship reveals that Dena’s adolescence was shaped by her parents’ ability to “feed[…]” their daughter with “tennis and financeering (sic).”229 In contrast to Helene, Dena therefore came from a fairly affluent home and the material circumstances of her upbringing affected her ability to navigate the collegiate environment successfully. Allowed and able to enjoy costly leisure activities, she had collected experiences in the youth culture that, for cultural and financial reasons, had not been available to Helene. These experiences rooted in class privilege put Dena in a position of a conveyor of norms.

229 Helene Harmon, diary, entry dated 12-22-1941.
In Helene’s reaction to Dena, we can clearly see how newcomers came to accept women from affluent backgrounds as brokers of cultural conventions on campus. From entries in which Helene described the peer as given to “screaming ecstasies” and other annoying traits, it becomes clear that the relationship between the two young women was not free of tensions. The features that set Dena apart from herself -- including her extroverted persona and her familiarity with dating and social conventions -- however, also impressed Helene. Even though Dena at times annoyed her, she accepted her as an authority on questions of social etiquette. As students of drama and related subjects, Dena and Helene probably moved in a world in which a larger tolerance existed for idiosyncratic styles and behavior than elsewhere. In fact, students in both women’s inner circle seemed to have been intrigued by examples of bohemian artists who led unusual lives. Helene, for instance, described conversations she had with fellow students about “a Gaugin-like (sic) existence.” From Dena, however, Helene had learned that while flaunting some elements of “bohemian existence” might be okay, once a woman “acted too bohemian,” it would lead to her well-deserved marginalization in the peer culture. Helene not only cited Dena’s opinion on other women’s personality and style, but also learned from her which of the male students were considered desirable as dating partners. After a young man walked her home one day, for instance, Dena approached her and “confided” that he was a man who ranked high on the student scale of popularity. Subsequently, Helene recorded in diary that she considered him a “very nice boy” and that she was “flattered that he had payed [her] attention.” 230 It was thus Dena through

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230 Helene Harmon, diary, entries dated 01-05-1943, 01-20-1941, 05-12-1941, 01-22-1943.
whom Helene learned what kind of behavior coeds deemed acceptable and prestigious and which actions they considered inappropriate. And it was also on this woman on which she began to model her own behavior and styles. It was after befriending Dena that she recorded that she now cared “so much more for clothes [and] jive” and the extent to which she accepted these interests as a desirable norm shows in the way she evaluated the change in her outlook as compared to her high school past. “A great many extraordinary things have happened to me, I do not feel that I am so much of an introvert, … I do not pretend so much and I do not feel uneasy at growing up.”

We can see from Helene’s use of vocabulary that after exposure to campus life, she no longer granted legitimacy to the values and outlooks that had shaped her high school past. Instead, her former distance from the peer culture and her interests in books now struck her as a pretense, a rationalization for what was at heart simply her fear of “growing up.” Here, she was far from alone. Like her, other students from backgrounds that put them at odds with the conventional patterns of campus life quickly grew self-conscious about their former values, styles, and interests and tried to mold themselves after a new behavioral norm. Young Catholic Patricia Beck had not been exposed to youth culture before beginning her studies at Bennington College in Vermont either. Patricia had an unusual childhood. In 1928, she lost her father. Five years later, her mother, Margaret Beck, married Paul Swiderski, a heavy weight champion from the Bronx. With her prizefighter husband and her three children, Margaret Beck traveled for years through Europe and only returned to the United States when the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War foreshadowed the escalation of tensions on the continent. Despite her idiosyncratic life style,

231 Helene Harmon, diary, entry dated 07-04-1941.
however, Margaret Beck clearly wanted her daughter to grow up in accordance with the values of her Church. Patricia attended a convent school for a year and was brought up very strictly. As an adolescent, she was allowed very little autonomy. Because of this and her family’s itinerant past, Patricia therefore missed out on the opportunity to participate in the high school peer culture that increasingly counted as the typical experience among American middle-class teens. Patricia had also witnessed a lot of poverty while staying abroad and her journal entries show that she was highly conscious and critical of the social inequality she had observed as a child. It was probably because of these encounters with a harsh reality that she developed rather sincere and earnest interests. At Bennington, however, Patricia learned to become critical of those aspects of her background and interests that set her apart from her peers.  

Patricia’s acute self-consciousness about her own and her family’s idiosyncrasies show in a questionnaire she was asked to fill out as part of a class assignment at Bennington. Asked how she would assess her “general social adjustment,” she self-critically recorded that she had never been the well-rounded type. Instead of joining her peers in the fun-filled world of youth, she had spent her childhood in a “world of adults.” As a consequence, she now found it difficult to “relax and have fun,” and did not always “get along … with others.” At a number of occasions, she castigated herself for her inability to loosen up and enjoy life and up to the point when she dropped out of college, she never lost the sense of personal inadequacy.

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232 For biographical details see Patricia Beck papers, especially box 1, folder 2, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Archives.

233 Patricia Beck, typewritten notes in response to an in-class assignment, box 1, folder 2; Patricia Beck, diary, see especially the 1945 volume.
Personal conflicts as a result of her failure to enjoy and participate in campus life also continued to haunt Patricia’s contemporary, the Jewish refugee Judith Lauterbach at Smith College. In contrast to the former, Judith did complete her course of study. Even as an advanced student, however, she still castigated herself for not having taken full advantage of the opportunity to develop a well-rounded personality. When the war was over and Judith was about to graduate from Smith, her view on what she thought she had missed out on shows once again in a letter to her father. She was unfortunately a late-bloomer, she explained. She had not joined her peers in the youth culture “until [she] was about 16,” and added that this was “rather too late.” She “regret[ted] … very much” that her stay at Smith had not given her access to more socially oriented peers. Her “friends” she explained were unfortunately “a peculiar bunch” and not the kind of people who would “form a social group who go out … together.” This was not the first time the topic of Judith’s social life came up in their correspondence and in a prior letter, Judith’s father must have argued that it was far more important to commit oneself to Zionism rather than well-roundedness. Judith still disagreed, however. She envied women who had more opportunities for social activities than she and found that this was ultimately “more important that (sic) joining a Zionist Club.”

Considering their unusual childhoods and the context of national and international crisis, it is remarkable that the women quoted above did not bring up the circumstances of their youth to explain why their personality had developed along different lines than that of a sheltered debutante. Jewish students did not mention the possibility that anti-

234 Judith Lauterbach to father, 02-20-1946, Smith College Archives.
Semitism might account for curtailed social opportunities. Lower middle-class or ethnic students also did not suspect nativism as a factor. Rather, students like Patricia and Judith blamed themselves for their inability to relax, have fun, and mold themselves into a model coed. This fear of not fitting in, or of being somewhat lacking in comparison to seemingly more self-confident peers, is of course a common experience among adolescence in modern times. Yet in the case of the women who began their education on the eve of Pearl Harbor, we witness not just their adolescent angst, but also a cultural clash. Female students whose recent past had introduced them to concepts of women’s roles and responsibilities at odds with the upper-class femininity that reigned on campus from the onset faced an uphill battle. The psychological discourse, that portrayed the styles, interests, and behavior of upper class debutantes as evidence of mature adjustment, was reproduced in daily encounters between students. Because it naturalized a class and ethnicity based bias, it rendered alternative styles and interests illegitimate. For non-traditional students, the onset of their studies thus easily became the start of a personal identity crisis.

Of course, the wartime situation also offered nontraditional students support. As we glean from articles in student newspapers or pamphlets like the one of the Michigan Women’s War Council, the climate of crisis encouraged many women to contest the influence of the debutante as a setter of norms. Yet despite the fact that many wartime commentators encouraged female students to concentrate on academics and prepare for a post graduate career, these calls from the onset coexisted with messages of a different kind.
While wartime coeds heard many voices that urged them to major in the sciences, to translate their education into professional careers, or to become active in student politics, most discussions about female contributions to the war effort reflected widespread uneasiness with the prospect of changing gender roles. A number of public commentators and educators called for a long-term adjustment of women to the challenges of new political and economic realities. Their arguments coexisted with the warnings of those who feared adverse social consequences should women continue to expand their influence and gain more independence. Especially against the backdrop of the recent Depression era debate about a crisis of the American family, these voices were powerful.

Commentators’ concerns were a response to visible changes in women’s public roles. As workers and professionals, women made important gains during the war. Many lower middle and working-class women gained access to jobs in the defense industry that paid better than the ones they had held before. In the union movement, demands for pay equity of the sexes for the first time gained support of policy makers and labor leaders. In institutions of higher education, meanwhile, female scholars gained access to instructor positions vacated by men. That such advances seemed to translate into a new assertiveness among women observers noted not only in the many women who confidently assumed new roles in public but also in a popular media lauding the courage and competence of women as nurses, as members of the military, and on the home front. This very visibility, however, also boosted efforts to keep changes in family roles limited to the period of national emergency. Reflecting widespread fears of gender and family instability, for instance, policy makers opposed the expansion of child-care facilities for
women workers. Attempts to keep the definition of women’s roles anchored on their family responsibilities also sped up the defeat of a short-lived proposal, introduced to Congress by James W. Wadsworth and Warren Austin, to draft women to defense-related labor.\textsuperscript{235}

In higher education, these concerns about gender role stability show in the hesitation, if not actual hostility, with which administrators and faculty approached the prospect of changing their treatment of women. Policy makers concerned about labor shortages in areas like science and medicine actually urged for a more concerted utilization of female expertise.\textsuperscript{236} Laws introduced during the Depression to prevent wives in double-earner households from continuing in their jobs were relaxed. Because academics had only recently gained authority as nationally relevant figures, however, they saw the presence of women as a threat to their developing prestige. As a consequence, resistance to the recruitment of women remained high. The field of medicine, as the youngest of the professional disciplines, held out especially long before it admitted women and did so only after the shortage of doctors had become acute. In colleges and universities, few women advanced beyond the low status of lecturer.\textsuperscript{237} Their marginalization as scholars and professionals is reflected in the mass media. Although a


\textsuperscript{236} Eisenmann, Higher Education for Women, 66-68.

\textsuperscript{237} Campbell, Women at War with America, 19-22.
number of female scholars made essential contributions to their fields, they received at best a casual mention in magazines and even their own research institutions often neglected to point to them in their official publications. The effect of the widespread resistance to changing gender roles was thus a lack of positive images of accomplished women professionals that could potentially have countered the stigmatized image of the female intellectual as a developmentally arrested grind or spinster.

Practical concerns of administrators in colleges and universities further added to the mixed nature of messages directed towards female students. Women’s colleges had suffered financially during the Depression. When family budgets recovered, their endowments did, too, but the prospect of losing large numbers of coeds to jobs in the defense industry was not something educators of women could easily stomach. In coeducational institutions, meanwhile, the military draft once again created a situation in which the tuition payments of women were needed to keep doors open. Concerns about institutional survival translated into a lack of direction for female students. For college men, institutions changed term lengths and course offerings as concessions to the war. In the case of women, however, there were no uniform policies. At some colleges, like Mount Holyoke in South Hadley, Massachusetts, the college week was adjusted to allow students to take up voluntary labor in defense-related industry. For the most part, however, women’s educators left it to individual students to decide how and whether they

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would contribute to the national crisis.\textsuperscript{239} While the patriotic responsibilities of college men were thus clearly defined, female students lacked direct encouragement for making choices at odds with traditional ideas of their roles.

In addition to the hesitancy with which educators reacted to the wartime situation, gendered definitions of patriotism also made it possible for women to simply continue social activities in a new patriotic garb. This once again grew out of the period’s concern about gender role convergence that is nicely illustrated by the drawing that accompanied a \textit{New York Times} article about the future roles of women by Columbia English professor John Erskine. The viewer sees a group of women dressed in traditionally male worker’s garb marching in almost military like formation, and shouldering agricultural and industrial tools. Although their faces and hairdos are feminine, the picture reminds of New Deal murals of male production workers. Contemporary observers, used to seeing growing numbers of actual women en route to work in slacks and coveralls, would not have missed the implication that women were becoming more like men.\textsuperscript{240}

The inconsistent official response to the wartime contributions of women illustrates the extent of unease with the specter of gender convergence. The government’s womanpower campaign actively solicited female contributions to the defense industry. At the same time, however, news coverage also emphasized that new roles ought not to come at the expense of women’s femininity. Although today we tend to associate the image of the female defense worker with Norman Rockwell’s drawing of a masculine

\textsuperscript{239} Eisenmann, \textit{Higher Education for Women}, 5.

looking Rosie the Riveter, this picture was actually an exception to the general look of World War II propaganda. Here, an emphasis that even employment in heavy industry would not challenge the femininity of a normal American woman dominated.  

In the case of college women, the cultivation of femininity as a wartime responsibility was a particularly strong emphasis. In women’s magazines, coeds found fiction and non-fiction stories applauding young women who served as hostesses in the newly created United Service Organizations (USO) for their patriotic service. A 1942 Woman’s Home Companion article, for example, commended a California woman’s organization for hosting parties for servicemen. To show the servicemen a good time, the organization enlisted the help of college women: “Sorority girls from near-by colleges have been enrolled as dates and pay six dollars yearly dues.” Advertisements in the same magazines, meanwhile, cast the cultivation of sex-appeal as another way in which young women ought to contribute to the war effort. Alluding to the interwar movie star Clara Bow as the “It” girl who had a natural sex-appeal that no man could resist, an ad for Evening in Paris make-up featured the slogan “Spell ‘It’ to the Marine.” Another ad for Jergens Face Powder showed a platinum-blond young woman made-up, dressed, and coiffed like a 1940s movie star looking seductively at the viewer. Between her fingers, she twirls an air-force wings insignia like a trophy. She apparently had done her duty to the troops. To those who have not yet, the ad says: “Be his Pin-Up Girl! Wear your man-captivating shade of New Jergens Face Powder.”

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Party published ads calling on young women to act as hostesses and entertain the servicemen. As Marilyn Hegarty has argued, this portrayal of young women in the wartime news media “suggested a patriotic homefront exchange of female (hetero)sexuality for military defense.” By being feminine, glamorous, and a good sport, the media implied, a coed could serve her nation.

The appeal of the role of social companion as a patriotic contribution is readily apparent. Students from different backgrounds in a variety of institutions devoted time and energy to serve as hostesses. At events sponsored by the Young Women’s Christian Organization, they danced with and entertained servicemen on leave. Some students even took matters into their own hands. At Bowling Green University, the YWCA was the official supporter of the “Campus Teen Service Club,” but coeds served on the board of directors. According to its official rules, the club was a “social center for service men and civilians.” Hostesses had to “attend dances or other functions …. and help entertain or perform any other patriotic duty.” At Mount Holyoke, too, events designed to entertain GIs regularly interrupted the academic routine. Even though the college was located in an

243 “Spell ‘IT’ to the Marine.” Advertisement, Woman’s Home Companion, August 1943, 55. “Be his Pin-Up Girl!” Advertisement, True Story, June 1944, 87, for the advertisement by the American Labor Party see Daily Worker, January 29, 1942.


245 Mickey Campbell Welker, “College Scrapbook, September 1943-May 1945,” box 1, volume 2, Mickey (Maxine) Campbell Welker papers, Bowling Green State University College Archives.
isolated rural part of Western Massachusetts, the nearby Westover airbase offered students a ready supply of social opportunities. “Today is the Victory Ball,” wrote Grace Gray, a wartime student and added: “All the kids are going.” Alice Rigby, another Mount Holyoke student, also repeatedly went to USO dances. She and a friend, she wrote her parents, “got all silled up” and jitterbugged with servicemen. She had “a perfect time,” she assured her parents and “found out more about the Army” than ever. Many other women enthusiastically and frequently flocked to dances and reported with pride about it in their letters. While thus the military draft, curfews, and gas rationing certainly put a damper on the social whirl on many campuses, parallel efforts to portray social hostess duties as a way for young women to express patriotism supported the social interests of the part of the student population who already enjoyed a privileged position as setters of norms.

Even under favorable wartime conditions, this chapter has shown, the cards were stacked in favor of proponents of traditional elite ideas about women’s roles, responsibilities, and about the shape and purpose of female higher education. Yet in a different respect, the need to assimilate a new student population also had the potential to undermine the status quo. Newcomers’ efforts to mold themselves after the coed norm, reflects the considerable social fluidity of the period. Despite the fact that the hierarchy of desirable traits and styles in the student culture had a basis in anti-Semitic and classist prejudices, the seemingly neutral language of personality brought access to elite status

246 Grace Gray to parents, 04-17-1943, box 1, folder 9, “correspondence, April 1943,” Grace Gray papers; Alice Rigby to parents, 09-23-1943, folder 3, “correspondence, September – November 3, 1943,” Alice Rigby papers, both Mount Holyoke College Archives.
within reach of new groups. Wartime political discourse might not have undermined campus conventions. It did, however, stress the idea that in the United States of America a person’s social position depended on individual effort alone. Intersecting with the language of personality, the discourse of democracy thus loosened the definition of class. This, too, influenced college women who in dormitories, at social mixers, or during extracurricular activities, encountered peers. When women like Helene Harmon or Judith Lauterbach confronted fellow students from the traditional elite, they thus did not assume that class, religion, or ethnicity might put them in a different league. Rather, they believed that social prestige depended on cultivating the right kind of style. While the threat of being labeled a wallflower or grind was therefore the stick that pushed women into conformity to peer conventions, the promise of an elevated social status that went with it was the carrot.

Considering that newcomers to college saw in successful mastery of campus conventions a path towards membership in an elite, we might wonder if their infatuation with campus life did necessarily harm them. Historians who have examined encounters between different groups have in recent years emphasized that assimilation is not a one-way streak. Even populations faced with groups that own considerable power advantages often manage to leave at least a partial imprint on the dominant culture with which they interact. It seems useful, therefore, to look beyond the emphasis women put on living up to the outward markers of coed femininity and sophistication. Nowadays, theorists of education actually suggest a link between immersion in social activities and the
achievement of “educational excellence.” To investigate the extent to which mid-century coeds actually internalized conservative gender ideals, we therefore need to look in more depth and over a longer term at the way in which they responded to their environment. As the next chapter will show, the collegiate ideal was not the only influence. Although the conservative elements of student culture not only survived the war, but were actually strengthened by postwar gender conservatism, college also had another impact on young women. The clash between student culture and mores and conventions in their families of origin forced non-traditional ones especially to define new values and defend them publicly. In the process, they developed critical skills.

Combined with political and intellectual factors, the social environment of college thus helped turn young women into critical thinkers and public speakers. Gaining distance not only from the sentiments held in their communities’ of origin but also from those in the nation at large, many college women actually became outspoken critics of the Cold War political consensus.

CHAPTER 4

COEDS BECOME BRAINS

The preceding chapter has illustrated the considerable pressures on newcomers to the collegiate setting to conform to the ideal of well-rounded femininity. As part of their efforts to conform to behavioral expectations on campus, many students became self-conscious about their interests in classwork, politics, and their lack of experience in the youth culture. However, as we will see in this chapter, although non-traditional college women were susceptible to the norms of conventional campus life, they were also a group likely to change this culture. This was the result of a historically specific dynamic.

During World War Two and the Cold War, students from backgrounds not traditionally associated with the East Coast elite gained access to higher education. When these non-traditional students entered college, they learned more than to conform. They also learned to question views and practices they had long taken for granted and that their families of origin often continued to adhere to. Moreover, once Cold war partisan battles escalated, academics tried to protect higher education from encroachment by the organs of the state. Many professors and administrators ultimately caved under Cold War domestic pressures.248 According to the ideal, however, higher education ought to be a realm in which the values of free inquiry, free speech, and unprejudiced objectivity reigned. This idealist construction created for students a space in which they toyed with views and opinions increasingly considered subversive in the nation at large. Introduction to the intellectual climate of college thus easily caused newcomers to depart in styles and attitudes from communities of origin. Non-traditional female students especially needed to find ways to reconcile the multiple

worlds they moved in. As this chapter illustrates, outwardly non-rebellious and conforming coeds still became critical, and even more importantly, outspoken thinkers.

That the impact of college on the budding identities of young women cannot be reduced to the reproduction of gender conservatism and genteel norms becomes apparent if one looks beyond students’ preoccupation with social life. Recountings of social and dating experiences often dominate correspondence and private reflections. But this does not mean that students paid no attention to the political and cultural debates of their era. During the war, for instance, the appearance of prominent liberal Reinhold Niebuhr on campus often triggered enthusiastic remarks. “Gosh, he’s got such a brilliant mind…” gushed Janet Kedney, a woman who attended Smith College on a scholarship, in a letter home in 1943.

A year later, in 1944, Grace Gray, a science major at Mount Holyoke echoed her sentiment after a meeting with the prominent intellectual: “He was absolutely marvelous. I’ve never heard anyone like him.” Another Mount Holyoke student who usually filled her correspondence with details about USO events and loved to “jitterbug” with serviceman also

249 Examples of the literature that stresses the conservative elements of female student culture include Dorothy C. Holland, *Educated in Romance: Women, Achievement, and College Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1987). Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963) and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (London: Heinemann, 1963) have also been influential in shaping the image of female college culture as highly conformist and lending itself to the reproduction of traditional norms of femininity.


251 Grace Gray to parents, 10-10-1944, box 2, folder 6, Grace Gray papers, Mount Holyoke College Archives.
attended lectures on the political situation in overseas theatres of war. And from Iowa State
College, farmers’ daughter Beverly George assured her parents in a letter that she was
“furiously reading [war correspondent] Ernie Pyle’s ‘Here is Your War.’”252

Reports by students about their participation in political and academic events lasted
beyond the duration of the war. In the case of this cohort, issues of racial and economic
reconstruction appear frequently in their writings. Janet Brown, a young woman from a small
town in the Hudson Valley, for instance, informed her Republican parents that she had
attended a “most disturbing talk” by Civil Rights activist Bayard Rustin about “the negro
situation” followed the next day by a lecture “mostly on the atomic bomb.” Another one of
her contemporaries, Smith College student Judith Raskin, assured her parents that she was
following the news: “Yes – I’ve read about the [National Labor Relations Board] – and I am
sick over it as you must be!”253 Judith Lauterbach, too, did not just worry about the extent of
her popularity. In letters to her father, she also informed him about what she was reading for
her classes and about her thoughts about politics and culture.254

When the 1940s turned into the 1950s, political anti-communism and the spread of
prosperity fueled outward conformity in the nation at large. The greater availability of
money, transportation, and men, meanwhile, led to a renaissance of campus life. Still,

252 Alice Rigby to family, 09-23-1943, 09-27-1943; folder 3, “correspondence, September
– November 3, 1943,” Alice Rigby papers, Mount Holyoke College Archives; Beverly
George to parents, 01-18-1944, box 1, folder: “Personal correspondence, 1944 (1),”
Beverly George Everett papers, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa Libraries.

253 Judith Raskin to parents, 04-19-1947, box 2, folder 2 – 2, Judith Raskin papers,
Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

254 See for example Judith Lauterbach to father, 01-28-1945, 02-01-1944, 03-12-1944,
“transcripts of Judith Lauterbach’s letters and diary entries, as selected and excerpted by
her father, Leo Lauterbach, 1957,” Judith Lauterbach papers, Smith College Archives.
students grappled with intellectual and political questions. Yet not only did I still find references to intellectual subjects mixed in with student accounts of social life, college women also displayed an openness to ideas most public commentators were dismissing as politically naïve if not downright subversive. The stay of Alice Gorton at Smith College, for instance, coincided with the rise of McCarthyism in the early 1950s. The young woman from an affluent Ohio suburb herself heard the Senator speak when he came to her alma mater. This notwithstanding, in 1953, the English major picked up the work of British literary critic Christopher St. John Sprigg, who was publishing under the pseudonym Caudwell. She knew that he had been a member of the Communist party in the 1930s and had died in the Spanish Civil War. Yet while the credentials of this author as a fellow traveler would have discredited him as a source for any information in the eyes of many of Alice’s contemporaries, she recorded in her diary that she was “having a great time … have found a new person: Christopher Caudwell (alias Sprigg) a Communist critic … who died in Spain in 29. Wrote a book called Studies in a Dying Culture … Mmmm, how I relish new ideas.!” The same year, when she heard that Socialist leader Norman Thomas would speak at the New School in New York City, she planned to attend.²⁵⁵ A few years later on the West Coast, in letters to her parents coed Susan Sperry Borman described lectures on Philosophy, and in 1958 was no less excited about hearing Civil Rights activist Bayard Rustin speak than her East Coast peer at Mount Holyoke had been in the late 1940s. In her letters to her parents, she also reported proudly that she was chairing a panel composed of “a Jew, a Catholic, a Protestant, a Negro,

²⁵⁵ Whether or not she actually went is not clear, but she made plans to do so. See Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 103 (back) and 145, folder 19, “September 1952 - February 1953,” Alice Gorton Hart papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.
and a first generation American - either Japanese, Chinese or Mexican” to moderate a discussion on the origins of religious and racial stereotypes.\textsuperscript{256}

The question of how to weigh this evidence is, of course, complicated. The women quoted above were in many respects typical coeds. None of them saw herself as a political radical. They all participated in conventional campus life. In fact, in letters and personal writings accounts of dances, parties, football games and dates dominate. If their interest in politics and academics was merely fleeting, however, it might not have affected women’s identity in a significant manner; nor affected campus life in general. In addition, the family background of these young women complicates the question of how to evaluate their statements. In fact, it is entirely possible that the discussions of academic or political topics in the papers of non-traditional students were of a defensive nature. After all, their families had made financial sacrifices or were aware of the precarious standing of their particular ethnic or religious group in the opinion of the white, Protestant middle class. In the eyes of parents, a daughter’s immersion in campus life thus easily looked like a waste of opportunities in favor of a hedonistic and socially irresponsible life-style. In many of the homes of non-traditional coeds, a concern with popularity and social opportunities would thus have been treated as a problem.

The postwar mass media’s portrayal of campus life also added incentives for young women to emphasize their interests in topics beyond the social sphere of college. The typical behavior patterns of coeds were often the focus of strong criticism. In the eyes of some educators and cultural critics, the fact that young women flocked in droves to athletic events

\textsuperscript{256} Susan Sperry Borman to parents, 01-23-1958, 05-03-1958, box 3, folder 25, “letters to parents, January to June 1958,” Susan Sperry Borman Delattre papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.
and fraternity parties affirmed the cliché that all that women really wanted was a ring on their finger and an MRS. degree. Based on this perception, president of Mills College Lynn White argued that educating women in the liberal arts was a waste of resources and a disservice to college graduates who, after all, in the main chose to marry and to become mothers. For other cultural critics, meanwhile, the stereotypical coed was the perfect embodiment of the kind of women responsible for the spread of conformism and materialism. Like Philip Wylie’s imagined *Cinderella*, she was trying to catch for herself a man who would then waste his energies in a corporate “rat race” in the attempt to feed his parasitical spouses’ incessant desire for material comforts and shallow entertainment. Concerns over the spread of mass culture and the debate about how the nation’s educational system should allocate its resources in the Cold War thus fueled an image of the typical coed as “Cinderella” — a spoiled and conformist materialist, who had not other end in life than to find a provider.257

Against the background of this historically specific situation, we need to question the authenticity of statements found in diaries and letters. Non-traditional college women had to reconcile the values of home, cultural pressures, and peer conventions. If they emphasized academic or political interests in letters to parents, they might simply have tried to assuage

257 On Lynn White see Barbara Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 192. In the mass media as a whole, the image of young women in general changes from the 1940s to 1950s. While in the immediate post World War II years, plays and novels still featured spunky and independent-minded girl heroines, the characteristics with which these characters were endowed changed once successful books and theatre productions were adapted for the movies. In the hands of Hollywood screenwriters, independent and competent female protagonists became flighty airheads in need of a patriarchal figure in the form of a fiancée or father to protect them from their own silliness. See Ilana Nash, *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). On the image of female adolescents also see Grace Paladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).
familial worries or defend themselves against accusations of frivolity. Diarists, meanwhile, might have expressed an intellectual curiosity and idiosyncratic interests that they would not publicly admit for fear of being labeled a “grind.” If, however, the cultural and political developments of the mid-century did not leave visible traces on the environment in which college women moved, then we would have to concede that they had indeed become prime examples for the gender conservatism which Betty Friedan summarized under the heading of a feminine mystique. As this chapter will demonstrate, however, this would be too simple a thesis.

In the pages that follow I will show that exposure to college affected especially non-traditional students in very complex ways. Introduction to campus life taught newcomers the value of youthful independence and autonomy. The concept of maturity, promoted by public commentators and transmitted to newcomers to campus by more advanced students, entailed that adolescents became able to make responsible decisions independent of the influence of elders. This heightened the influence of a fairly homogenous peer culture on young women from diverse backgrounds. But it forced female students – especially those from families without prior exposure to collegiate culture – to negotiate with elders about behavioral standards and values. In the process, young women learned to question parental authority and challenge patriarchal division of power at home. Introduction to campus life could therefore be a first step towards becoming an outspoken critic of mores that were once considered common sense and universal.

The political developments of the Cold War added more incentives for non-traditional students to question the validity of views held in their families of origin. Although historians have amply demonstrated the complicity of scientists, faculty and university
administrators in the persecution of thinkers who deviated from the Cold War anti-communist consensus, academia was still an environment that upheld a somewhat different set of values than the nation at large. By the late 1940s, few academics departed from the vital center liberalism espoused by such influential organization as the Americans for Democratic Action. Yet many intellectuals and scholars broke away from the anti-Stalinist flock in regards to First Amendment rights. More heavily invested in the protection of the right of free speech and scientific inquiry than non-scholars, prominent academics during the Cold War spoke out against the state’s interference with these freedoms. As one result, the realm of higher education remained a space relatively more open to the discussion of controversial ideas and positions than the world outside the Ivory Tower. Especially for women from families without prior exposure to higher education, however, this also meant that they diverged more and more in their attitudes towards politics from communities at home.

Because of the authoritative and elite aura with which higher education was imbued, non-traditional female students tended to grant more legitimacy to the values and conventions in the collegiate setting than to those in their families. As a result of the confrontation with home communities, they therefore came to see their own views as superior. Combined with Cold War calls on the educated young to embrace an ethic of social responsibility, exposure

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to higher education thus encouraged non-traditional students in particular to consider themselves part of a new intellectual elite.

Before we can launch into an exploration of how college affected young women’s identities in complex ways, it needs to be said that after the end of World War II the conservative elements in female higher education grew stronger. While prior to the Second World War, many educators upheld the collegiate model as the ideal way to educate the social elite, new realities fueled by international and economic developments turned the shift towards a modern model of education into a fait accompli for men. Women, by contrast, would still receive an education modeled in many respects after the genteel collegiate ideal. In addition, at a time when formal degrees opened access to upward social mobility for growing numbers of men, opportunities for women were shrinking.

The most significant factor in the growing gender gap in higher education was the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944. This “G.I. Bill of Rights” (G.I. Bill) brought formal degrees within reach of millions of veterans returning home. In 1947, a peak year of the bill’s impact, former servicemen made up sixty-nine percent of the male student body. Veterans utilized their benefits to access various educational institutions, reaching from vocational schools and junior colleges to liberal arts colleges. With the help of government tuition, however, they flocked especially to the nation’s best and most prestigious schools. This once again presented the Ivy League with a large number of applicants from non-traditional backgrounds. Under postwar conditions, however, the older hostility towards these newcomers was no longer sustainable.

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260 Solomon, Company of Educated Women, 189; Eisenmann, Higher Education for Women, 28-29, 47-49.
The influx of veterans left a profound imprint on institutions of higher education, including the Ivy League. Contrary to the popular image, the G.I. Bill actually did not lead to a radical socio-economic diversification of the student body. Despite the popular perception that this piece of legislation democratized higher education, more recent historical studies have shown that most veterans who went to college with the help of government subsidies would have been able to do so with or without federal help. Because of their nontraditional age and experience, however, veterans nonetheless transformed dominant expectations of the shape and purpose of higher education for men. As traditional male students soon found out, former servicemen were not likely to conform uncritically to campus rules and conventions. Older and more experienced than their non-veteran peers, they were not likely to be intimidated by the hierarchy of popularity based on access to exclusive clubs and fraternities. These were men who had served a war allegedly fought in defense of American ideals of equality and they considered access to opportunities an entitlement. They had spent time in the tightly controlled setting of the military and saw deployment as the beginning of a less regimented life.

Veterans also brought with them an interest in intellectual pursuits that set them apart from previous cohorts of college men. For men who had just left the armed forces, collegiate culture looked not only childish, but out-of-step with the demands of the nuclear age. In the World War II military, training and skill influenced rank. University schooled experts had

261 Although conclusive figures do not exist, historians have estimated that only about 20 percent of veterans would not have been able to afford going to college or university without government subsidies. Daniel A. Clark, "The Two Joes Meet. Joe College, Joe Veteran: The G. I. Bill, College Education, and Postwar American Culture," History of Education Quarterly 38, no. 2 (1998): 165-189.

262 Clark, "The Two Joes Meet”; Eisenmann, Higher Education for Women.
helped win the war through the utilization of scholarship. Moreover, veterans had witnessed human suffering and atrocities many of them found hard to comprehend. All these experiences influenced what they expected to gain from their education. Aware that economic success in the future would depend more on specialized knowledge than on character and a broad cultural background, they demanded career-directed courses. Eager to comprehend the sources of human hatred and prejudice, they expected real-life relevancy from the curriculum. The GI bill thus brought to college a population of students who expected college to turn them into skilled professionals with expertise in solving complex problems.  

Veterans were of course hardly the first Americans who came to college with outlooks and expectations at odds with the elite collegiate model. But this time, the timing was right. Not only did they have strength in numbers, they also benefited from changes in the image of the expert scholar and scientist. Postwar Americans had a distinctly ambivalent attitude towards scientific expertise. On the one hand, many looked with confidence into a future that promised greater comforts and security with the help of science and technology. Others, meanwhile, worried about the destructive potential of nuclear technology. The possibility that new labor saving devices and the growth of the entertainment industry would cause the strength of the nation to deteriorate was an additional specter. The question of the relative danger or promise inherent in technological developments aside, however, the recent war had demonstrated that to remain a successful global player, a modern nation needed to utilize scientific knowledge. The prestige of the academically trained expert that had begun to grow already after the previous conflict, in the post World War II period thus reached its apex.

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263 Clark, "The Two Joes Meet," 176.

A number of additional factors would make it socially more acceptable for postwar male students to display studious and career-oriented attitudes. For one, ideological challenges to the dominance of the WASP elite made the label of the “grind” less threatening for men. Once the full extent of the Holocaust became clear, the practices of prestigious student organizations to exclude Jewish and Catholic newcomers to college appeared in an increasingly negative light. Ordered by the Truman administration, the 1947 Report of the President’s Commission on Higher Education for Democracy, for instance, criticized discriminatory practices against racial and religious minorities.\footnote{Eisenmann, \textit{Higher Education for Women}.} Civil Rights activists, meanwhile, drew on the idealist wartime rhetoric and on the findings of such scholars as Gunnar Myrdal and the intellectuals of the Frankfurt school to challenge racial and religious prejudices. Combined with the growing influence of culture-personality study and psychoanalysis, these developments thus caused group prejudice to look increasingly like signs for a pathological or backwards, uneducated, mindset. Some of the greasiness of the “grind” had begun to wear off.\footnote{See Walter A. Jackson, \textit{Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938 - 1987} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).}

Challenges to racial and ethnic biases also influenced the way in which colleges handled admissions. As a way to handle the swelling number of applications, most colleges
after the war adopted the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Standardized tests, first
administered during World War One, had initially been strongly biased in favor of “Nordic”
races and students from Northeastern prep schools. Especially in the Ivy League colleges,
they had been used to weed out applicants with the wrong family background. The crafters of
the postwar SAT, however, made an effort to eliminate past racial biases and instead tried to
find ways to test for “pure intelligence” rather than cultural background. By the late 1940s,
the SAT was firmly on its way of becoming the universal entrance test for all college
applicants nationwide.267

Cumulatively, these ideological and cultural factors yielded results in the social
sphere of male higher education that would affect all college men. When campus life lost
some of its exclusive aura the link between status and conformity to upper middle class styles
and outlooks unraveled. In addition, once SAT scores rather than family backgrounds opened
doors to prestigious schools to more and more non-traditional students with vocational and
career goals, the range of acceptable interests and styles broadened. When it came to
standards of behavior acceptable among male students, postwar trends had tipped the balance
in favor of academic achievers.

Challenges to discriminatory practices, however, were uneven. On campus and
elsewhere in the nation, European ethnics were increasingly accepted as a part of “white”
America.268 Yet, although the fight against racism in the postwar period became central to
the postwar liberal progressive agenda, opportunities for African Americans and Hispanics

267 Nicholas Lemann, The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy

268 See Karen Brodkin, How Jews Became White Folks (New Brunswick: Rutgers
University Press, 1998), 38-44.
remained sharply curtailed. For members of these minorities, a difficult and prolonged struggle for rights and opportunities still lay ahead. Moreover, white college men’s growing awareness of the utility of formal degrees for economic advancement also inclined them to look at female students as illegitimate competitors for coveted slots in academia and the professions. Practices at prestigious coeducational universities like Cornell reflected this attitude. When men returned, they expected women to vacate the leadership positions they had assumed for the duration. As the students were apparently slow to respond, men enlisted the help of administration officials to remove them. Hostile attitudes towards coeds at this northeastern campus also showed in the fact that up to the 1950s, some fraternities charged members a fine when they brought a Cornell woman as a date to a party.  

Male opposition was not the only factor that influenced the situation of women in higher education after the war. Women as a group did not benefit from postwar developments the same way as white males did. Female higher education developed along a separate path in the postwar period. For one, students from the traditional collegiate constituency remained a strong presence in numbers. At a time when only six percent of all Americans had graduated from college, a 1953 study revealed that forty-four percent of female graduates came from families in which at least one parent was an almuna/ae. In almost half (forty-five percent) of these cases, women’s families had shouldered the entire bill for their daughters’ education (compared to seventeen percent of their male peers) and

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only twenty-nine percent of female graduates had contributed to more than half of the costs of college (compared to fifty-eight percent of men).\textsuperscript{271}

The trends that changed male higher education did not leave the female collegiate setting entirely unaffected. Traditional coeds would encounter growing numbers of newcomers on campus. When the postwar economic boom lifted new families into the middle class, families from diverse regions were enabled to send their daughter to be educated side-by-side the offspring of the East Coast elite. As a result of the same factors that brought Jewish and immigrant men into the mainstream of higher education, the female student population also diversified in its religious and ethnic composition. Yet while higher education brought women from diverse regional, religious, and ethnic backgrounds together, coed norms remained steeped in the patterns and conventions shaped by traditional female students. Academically talented and career oriented college women, for various reasons, on campus would still encounter powerful behavioral expectations and convention that discouraged academic achievement and professional goals.

For our understanding of the lack of change in patterns of female collegiate culture, a closer look at how postwar developments affected the higher education of women is necessary. All through the early Cold War, there were organizations that urged stronger support for women who wanted careers in academia or the professions.\textsuperscript{272} They did not,

\textsuperscript{271} Ernest Havemann and Patricia Salter West, They Went to College: The College Graduate in America Today (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), 19.

\textsuperscript{272} Faced with the expansion of the apparatus of higher education, the National Education Association (NEA), for instance, warned of impending faculty shortages. They also argued that women had long since proven that they were a group that had the intellectual skills and potential to work as researchers and teachers. All they would need was affirmative action. Utilizing the term “womanpower” already familiar to Americans from
however, manage to turn this into a topic that received national attention. This was in part because the influx of male veterans marginalized female students. With women’s percentage as a proportion of the student body at an all time low, men’s demand for, and interest in, higher degrees dominated discussions in the popular media and government.\textsuperscript{273}

The lack of attention to the needs and interests of female students in public discussions affected their actual opportunities. In fact, it was largely the neglect of women that allowed for the expansion of educational opportunities of men.\textsuperscript{274} Neither the media nor policy makers had expected veterans to take advantage of their educational options in large numbers. Once it became apparent that this was the trend, however, veterans’ march into a realm that was once reserved for a tiny elite became a symbol of the superiority of American democracy. Female students, in this narrative, were merely sidekicks. Academic accomplishments and scholarly expertise remained marked as distinctly male in the public image and in none of the period’s important official reports on the status of higher education did issues of gender discrimination in academia receive more than a fleeting mention.\textsuperscript{275}

\begin{itemize}
\item World War II, they promoted more concerted efforts to draw women into academia. See Eisenmann, Higher Education for Women, 58-59.
\item The proportion of women as part of the student population fell below 30\% in the peak years of the GI bill. For figures see Solomon, Company of Educated Women, 63, table 2; Eisenmann, Higher Education for Women, 54-57.
\item Female veterans were no less entitled to G.I. bill benefits than men but their numbers were small. They also did not figure as prominently in public thinking than their male peers. Agencies administering G.I. bill benefits at times did not even include women in their promotional material and female veterans themselves often did not see their services in the same vein than those of men. As a consequence, even the small number of female GIs did not fully benefit from the democratization of higher education. See Eisenman, Higher Education for Women, 54-55.
\item In the six-volume report of the Truman Administration’s Presidential Commission on Higher Education, a landmark study published in 1947, the situation of women was
\end{itemize}
Until the program’s end in 1954, young women would find it hard to enter coeducational universities and professional programs. Facing quotas and caps on freshman enrollment, many female applicants who would have been gladly accepted only a few years earlier now found themselves rejected or on waiting-lists.\(^{276}\) Teacher training programs and costly women’s colleges for many became a major option.

Writers of official reports and members of legislative commissions were not ignorant of the postwar patterns in female higher education. They took note of the dwindling number of women in fields in which they had been well represented during the war. They also noticed that female students tended to cluster in liberal arts and teacher training programs. Most observers, however, attributed this simply to women’s individual choices and their lack of interest in careers. This interpretation, in turn, perpetuated a conservative image of postwar coeds. Most women, it seemed even to sympathetic proponents of female higher education, went to college for their MRS degree. They saw no need to prepare for economically viable careers of their own.\(^{277}\)

The lack of a public discussion of gender discrimination in academia reinforced conservative ideas about the purpose of higher education for women. Although women after World War II flocked to college in numbers larger than ever, educators and policy makers assumed that only a small fraction of unusually driven and talented few would even consider pursuing a professional or academic careers. As the majority of women was expected to

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\(^{276}\) On the G.I. Bill’s effect on women see Eisenmann, *Higher Education For Women*, 47 - 50; Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 106.

choose conventional life paths, educators arguing that female students were best served if college prepared them for their most typical roles became influential voices. With that, many postwar institutions of higher education adopted a heightened concern with helping young women adjust to adult sex role expectations. A number of institutions created anew or strengthened their existing fields of home economics. They also instituted lecturers, classes, and invited guest speakers, that would help prepare young women for their conjugal futures. At the State University of Iowa, an interested student could listen to lectures about “Emotional Maturity in Marriage.” For “brides of the future,” there was even a non-credit course called “Major in Marriage.” As the school promoted it: “If you’re interested in marriage – and what girl isn’t? – here is a group for you.” In order to facilitate relationships between college men and women, the administration also sponsored large-scale mixers in the college gym.

Countervailing messages and opportunities never ceased to exist. Demographic trends and typical educational paths of postwar women caused some observers to lament the loss of brainpower for the nation. In institutions like the YWCAs and other religious student organizations and in the women’s colleges, female students still received training in leadership and had access to rigorous courses of study. Some of the flagship colleges of the


279 State University of Iowa, “Code for Coeds, 1944-1945,” Louise Hilfman Goldman papers; Doris Bender Hughes to family, letter postmarked 10-22-1945, Doris Bender Hughes papers, box 1, folder: “Correspondence; Sept. 1945 – Dec. 1945,” both Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa Libraries.
Seven Sisters resisted the trend towards a feminized curriculum. Smith, Wellesley, and Mount Holyoke College all made mainly minor adjustments to their class catalogue. Here as elsewhere, many educators promoted honors courses and extracurricular activities that would equip female students with in-depth knowledge needed for specialized post-graduate studies.

Homosocial institutions, however, had to be especially wary of their image. Women’s colleges as well as the Young Women’s Christian Association were known as places where intellectual and reform-minded women congregated. The fear that they would attract charges of fostering lesbianism and careerism in young women shaped the way these institutions responded. This often took the form of adding male faculty members. Right after the war, the proportion of female professors at Wellesley fell from ninety percent to seventy five percent. At Smith College, the proportion of men on the faculty reached fifty-one percent by the late 1950s. And Mount Holyoke College already in 1937 selected in Roswell G. Ham its first male president ever.280 Women’s colleges also downplayed the academic facets of the liberal arts education and emphasized instead those aspects of their curriculum that could be seen as preparing women to be better mothers and wives. They also promoted increasingly the social, and, especially – hetero-social - components of campus life. Smith, Wellesley and Mount Holyoke Colleges in the immediate postwar period packed their informational brochures with images of fun-loving young women in male company, or of students caring for babies and learning the skills of homemaking. In 1947, for example, Mount Holyoke College’s President Roswell G. Ham assured the parents of prospective and actual students that his institution

would do its best to turn their daughters into “excellent wives” and to help them in the “acquisition of excellent husbands.” As the brochure assured readers, “Seventy-five percent” of graduates married. By the late 1950s, colleges across the nation adopted similar advertising strategies. “There is always a prom” featured in the “picture books regularly published by the public relations departments of the colleges” wrote Vassar professor emeritus of economics Mabel Newcomer in 1959, “as well as informal gatherings that include plenty of well-set-up young men.” This double message had of course been long a staple of female higher education. But what heightened its prominence after World War II was an unusually pressing need for single-sex colleges to remake their image. Not only were they vulnerable against the background of resurgent pro-natalism and anti-feminism, they were also deprived of the government subsidies available to the Ivy League and coeducational institutions as a result of the G.I. Bill. Women’s colleges therefore had to attract sponsors and funds and they did so at a time when techniques developed in the burgeoning professions of public relations and advertising became available. Because of new techniques applied against the background of ideological pressures, the message that college was a place where the foundation for happy marital lives were created spread as one of the dominant images of women in higher education.

Anti-feminism, however, was by far not the only factor that influenced the situation of women who started their studies after the war. Widespread fears of a return of Depression

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281 Wives and mothers might then also become scientists and professionals. The achievement and career oriented purpose of higher education for women, however, was downplayed. Olsen, “Remaking the Image,” 435.

era economic conditions and social tensions provide another important context. When the New Deal opened access to formal degrees, it had done so with the goal of reintegrating veterans into society. Yet, professional, academic, and research positions had always been just a small segment of the U.S. economy. The immense interest of veterans in formal degrees thus presented a dilemma. Not only were colleges and universities unprepared to accommodate a large number of students, most higher education officials and policy makers also did not expect that the economy would be able to absorb them once they graduated. Investment into research and development in the course of expansion of the military industrial complex would eventually open new academic jobs. From the vantage point of the immediate postwar period, however, it looked as if a smooth transition from an elite to a mass model of higher education depended on women taking separate paths than men.

A gender-specific curriculum served far more than just a practical purpose. The postwar idea that the sexes ought to be educated in complementary ways was also a product of the substantial cultural anxieties that accompanied the abandonment of the collegiate model of higher education for men. Many academics and public intellectuals felt distinctly ambivalent about the development. On the one hand, it was clear that the nation could no longer rely on well-rounded gentlemen to conduct its affairs in the nuclear age. It was time, growing numbers of public commentators agreed, to adjust the system of higher education so that it could produce the specialized experts the nation needed. This transition, however, also triggered concerns. For one, the new outlook opened access to positions of influence to new groups. University trained individuals from backgrounds that had so far been underrepresented as part of the political and cultural establishment might now enter the upper echelons of society side by side the scions of the traditional elite. But even in case that the
new experts had the right family background, the shift to the university system worried many educators and public intellectuals. Academic specialization parted with the long-term emphasis on building character that had been central to the collegiate model. In two studies commissioned by President Truman’s Commission of Higher Education, educators warned that “overspecialization” in liberal arts education was eroding the traditional and important goal of transmitting “a common cultural heritage towards a common citizenship.” The Harvard Committee on General Education in a Free Society that published its own independent report in 1945 meanwhile asserted that “Education must be concerned not only with imparting knowledge and skills but also with producing the ‘good man’ and the ‘good citizen’” through schooling in “values” and “cultural tradition” and by fostering “the capacity for emotional and gregarious life.” Educators were not only alarmed by impending changes because they feared a threat to cultural homogeneity. The specter of narrowly specialized technocrats was also frightening against the background of the recent experience with fascist states in which scientists and bureaucrats had followed their interest in advancing science without any concern for ethics and morality. In the nuclear age, the creation of such professionals who felt no higher allegiance than to efficiency and technological progress became only more controversial.283

Maintaining the collegiate model in the education of women beckoned as a way out of this dilemma. The complementary education of the sexes made possible the transition to

mass and specialized education without losing track of the values and culture that had allegedly unified the national elite so far. While men had to be trained to become technological and scientific specialists, the women they married could be utilized as a reservoir of culture and character. Their fields of study did not have to lead to professional or academic employment. They, the reasoning went, could still afford to concentrate on gathering broad, comprehensive knowledge about the world, morality, art, and beauty. Once they, as Adlai Stevenson put it in 1955, were then “hitched to one of these creatures [called] ‘Western man,’” they would become brokers of middle-class values and of a comprehensive ethical and cultural outlook in their families.²⁸⁴ Because of this, the kind of encouragement the most talented female students received was thus different from that of their wartime predecessors. While the latter had been urged to major in the sciences, many postwar educators emphasized the importance of a broad, cultural education in Western Civilization. Judith Lauterbach perceptively identified the new “trend:” It was, she wrote her father, “towards survey courses,” and “broad cultural backgrounds.”²⁸⁵ This “trend” for many policy makers, public intellectuals, and educators, was an important component of national preparedness and defense. This development also meant, however, that female students were not encouraged to acquire the professional skills needed for economic success in the increasingly specializing economy.

The rhetoric of women as culture brokers, combined with caps on their economic and academic opportunities, reinforced the conservative elements of campus life. Educators still


²⁸⁵ Judith Lauterbach to father, 02-20-1946.
encouraged talented students to pursue academic excellence and upheld the honors system as a way to do acquire specialized expertise. They emphasized, however, that postgraduate employment opportunities would be available only for the most determined and most exceptionally talented women. The statistics suggests that not many women considered themselves part of such an outstanding and genuinely focused elite. As historian Eugenia Kaledin cites, graduation rates of female undergraduates fell to thirty-seven percent in the 1950s. These figures do not tell whether it was marriage, financial difficulties, or dissatisfaction with their course of studies that caused women to drop out. The average age of first marriage for educated women plummeted, however, in the immediate postwar period.  

By the end of the decade, the long-standing concern that education contributed to low birth rates in the upper middle class was put to rest. “Today the college students marry so young and have so many children so fast that the problem is how to get them educated first,” noted Mabel Newcomer in 1959. Quite apparently, the majority of female students did not feel encouraged by their education to see themselves as an exceptional elite that would have access to careers and professions.

Student-run organizations played an active role in promoting the conservative elements of campus life. Student newspapers, for instance, often spotlighted the femininity of coeds. At Bowling Green State University, the school’s newspaper applauded young women for the attention they were paying to fashion: “Bee Gee’s” women looked “more beautiful

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than ever” in the season’s sported fashions, a writer in the Bee Gee News rejoiced.288 This focus on femininity was not simply because editorship of student publications on coeducational campuses was once again in male hands. The same institution’s “Women’s Self-Government Association,” pitched a similar line. It sponsored, for instance, a “style show” for the female members of the incoming class to challenge the saying: “You can always spot a freshman.” Years later, its publications still offered a college woman behavioral advice to ensure that she always looked like “the lady” she was. At the State University of Iowa, female students wasted no time to inform newcomers about the importance of conformity to the conventions of the collegiate model. In the student-edited “Code for Coeds” newly arrived young women learned about the importance of an active social life. As the “Code” suggested: “The more friends you have, the more college will mean to you.” The “Cosmopolitan Club” made similar recommendations: “Circulate … radiate … […] Being popular is easy!”289 Student publications also fed the image of college as a place where young marriages are put on their way. In social pages modeled on those in such national publications as The New York Times, student newspapers reported on couples that had decided to get pinned, engaged, or married. The growing number of college students who made a permanent commitment was thus turned into a matter of the public record.290

288 Bee Gee News, 12-12-1952, 2.


290 For a Bowling Green State University example see Mickey Campbell Welker, diary, entry dated 05-01-1947, 05-17-1947, folder “Post High School and College Diary, December 5, 1941 – June 8, 1946,” box 1, volume 4, Mickey (Maxine) Campbell Welker papers, Bowling Green State University College Archives.
Women in single-sex colleges, meanwhile, did not escape the trend towards heightened hetero-normative pressures either. With the end of gas rationing and wartime shortages, students from the Seven Sisters left in throngs every weekend to visit Ivy League schools and join a mixed-sex party circuit. Alice Silverman, a Smith College freshman in 1948, filled her scrapbook of college life with mementos of college weekends and parties at various Ivy League institutions. “Smith girls,” she quipped, contributed an “impressive sum seasonally to the support of the Boston and Maine and N.Y., N.H. & Hartford R.R., as well as the local cab companies.” Quoting a common adage among her peers she recorded: “As they (sic) saying goes, ‘you haven’t lived’ until you’ve experienced one of these weekend wonders. I often think it would be more appropriate to say ‘It’s a wonder that you lived through one of them!’”

In many other women’s writings, too, social events dominate accounts of their college experiences and invitations to parties and football games at Dartmouth, Harvard, Yale, or West Point were among the subjects they considered most noteworthy. A cartoon Alice Silverman pasted into her scrapbook put a humorous spin on the increased normative pressures that ensued. The drawing shows two casually dressed young women observing feminine looking peers [check] show off their engagement rings. As the single women walk by, one says to the other “I’m beginning to feel insecure.”

Considering these developments, it will not come as a surprise that even women who, in high school, had excelled academically, were still forcefully pulled into campus life.

291 Alice Silverman, “Ever appropriate Weekend,” Scrapbook, 9, Smith College Archives. For more accounts of the hustle and bustle of postwar campus life see Laurie Worcester papers, Smith College Archives; Janet Brown papers, Mount Holyoke College Archives; Sheila Owen Monks papers, private collection.

Alice Gorton, a young woman from the Cleveland suburb of Lakewood, for instance, had won a “News Scholastic Writing Award” in high school. Back then, she had seen herself as above the mass and her diary suggests that in the early 1950s, the language of cultural criticism still helped studious young women to justify their idiosyncrasies. “The instinct of people to pair off,” Alice wrote in her journal, was but “a futile attempt to ward off the inevitable loneliness” of life. At Smith, however, she was soon immersed in a vibrant social life: “It was glorious,” she rejoiced after a party. Having once described herself as socially awkward, she now relished her sense of being “successful” and in reference to her social successes she recorded “everything else is secondary now.” Soon, Alice became an active reproducer of conventions. In reference to a studious peer, she wrote, “this afternoon” she and some other students had “straightened [her] out”: “We told her off good + plenty about the selfishness and the evils of introspection.” Other women suggested to peers that it was “crazy” to choose studying over social life and many women once again feared that they would earn the stigmatized label of the “greasy grind with B.O.” if they privileged their class-work or quiet time over the hustle and bustle of campus life.

293 Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 13, box 1, folder 2, “March 1, 1950 - June 19, 1950,” Alice Gorton (Hart) papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Archives.

294 Alice Gorton, diary, see especially 5-8, box 1, folder 6, “December 1950 - May 1951.”

295 Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 36 (back), box 1, folder 7, “December 1950 - May 1951.”

296 The greasy grind quote in this case is from Laurie Worcester to family, 10-17-1948, Laurie Worcester papers, Smith College Archives. For other students criticizing peers for lack of sociability see also Lelah Dushkin to mother, 11-25-1949, box 1a, folder 1, Dorothy Smith Dushkin papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Archives.
Postwar students’ quotes demonstrate strong elements of continuity in the normative pressures that limited college women’s options to present themselves. A further parallel exists in regards to the elements that pulled especially non-traditional college women into campus life. The language of personality still concealed the hierarchy of class. For women from diverse family backgrounds, changing their behavior and expectations therefore also still held the promise of gaining access to an elite.

The sense of having risen to an elevated social position particularly emerges in quotes of young women who after the onset of college met peers from back home. High school class valedictorian June Calendar, for instance, had felt “like an outcast” in high school in her native Versailles, Indiana. Her academic successes marked her as a grind and her class status aggravated the problem. The daughter of small-scale farmers had been part of the family economy since childhood. Although by the time she hit adolescence, the family had expanded and modernized their farm enterprise, June still had more labor responsibilities than many other of her age group in a small town high school. Her material circumstances thus account for why she found little time for dating. By the mid 1950s, however, the expansion of the mass media meant that the language of personality and adjustment had entered rural farming households. As a result, even June’s rural high school classmates saw a personality flaw instead of a different life-style. As they opined, June was “stuck-up.”

Considering her adolescent experiences, June’s response to the collegiate setting will not come as a surprise. At Indiana University in Bloomington she made a concerted effort to turn herself into “a lady”. She soon rejoiced that she was now often “the first girl chosen” at

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297 June Calender, diary, entry dated 10-17-1956, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.
dances at which she “got to dance with the best looking fellows.” She was most pleased, however whenever she got a chance to demonstrate her new popularity to former high school peers. When out with a college man, for instance, she met a former classmate from her small town home of Versailles. “We met Linda O[,] and I was very glad,” she wrote. When “the kids from Versailles get together and pool their information” about how the “stuck-up June who didn’t date in high school” was doing in college, they would have to admit that she was not doing “too bad.” An even greater triumph occurred on a different day when one of her small town peers spotted her driving with a young man in a car with license plates from out-of-town. “[A] car full of men pulled up beside us at the drive-in + one of them was Gus M[,] – I love every chance I have to show off in front of people from Versailles – I felt such an outcast in that environment.”

Although June Calender’s journal reflects the normative pull of campus life, it also suggests that the elite aura that still surrounded collegiate culture had a quite complex effect on newcomers to this setting. In conventions, outlooks, and mores, high school students already shared a lot with their slightly older college peers. But women raised in culturally conservative families, in small towns, suburbs, or on farms, attributed to well-rounded students on campus an air of superiority they had not granted to the adolescents they grew up with. Because of this link between collegiate life and high status, the conventions students encountered in their new environment were hard to contest. Yet because of this association, newcomers were also encouraged to question beliefs and conventions previously taken for granted.

298 June Calender, diary, entry dated 10-17-1956.

299 June Calender, diary, entry dated 11-03-1956.
Because the values in their families and home communities deviated from those non-traditional students found in college, in college these women confronted a particular intellectual and personal challenge. They would have to find a way to bridge their two often very distinct worlds. Adopting some of the mores and conventions of the student culture would entail having to defend developing new beliefs to parents and relatives. As such, social life could become a first training ground for skills that are also valued in higher education: critical thinking and the ability to present an argument in an authoritative language. As a result, young women became potential challengers to the power structure in their families.

Although written during the war, the journal of Helene Harmon offers important insights into how a daughter’s education affected power relations in the family. Before starting her course of studies, Helene did not seem to have been a particularly argumentative adolescent. When the matter of picking a major came up the summer before her first semester, Helene recorded she wished that she could “defy” her parents and follow her own inclination in her journal. But largely, Helene seemed to have adhered to similar moral values and behavioral expectations as her Catholic parents. On campus, however, Helene learned that to become the kind of modern, sophisticated, woman who held status on campus, she would have to collect her own experiences independently of her parents. The effect of this showed in the fact that the young Catholic soon chafed under what she was beginning to see as too tight a rein of parental control.²⁰⁰

Helene’s growing desire for autonomy shows poignantly in a diary entry she made following a shopping spree. The encounter she described here is in many ways a product of

³⁰⁰ Helene Harmon, diary, entry dated 09-16-1940, diary vol. January 1940 - July 1941, Helene Harmon Weis papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.
Helene’s individual situation as an arts student in a wartime urban locale. But it illustrates a more general experience of women in higher education in the mid-twentieth century. Visiting the Wanamaker’s department store with her mother and her younger brother in December of 1940, Helene ran into a male photographer she had only a little earlier met at the Philadelphia School of Industrial Art. Taking Helene’s pictures, this “Ernest” struck up a flirtatious relationship with the young woman who was immensely flattered. Ernest, in stark contrast to any young men Helene had ever met before, was imbued with an air of worldly sophistication. He was older than she, and moreover featured an émigré background as a refugee from Austria. At the store, they met, and Ernest subsequently joined the Harmon family for a meal. The encounter seemed to have gone quite well. As Helene wrote, they “had a good time” and Mrs. Harmon talked to the young man about “war and politics.” Helene, however, was severely irritated by the fact that her mother did not allow her to be alone with Ernest. In her diary, she vented her anger at her mother’s actions: “I was rather put out,” she wrote about her feelings. She felt robbed of an important opportunity. Because of the presence of her guardian, she missed a chance to collect mature, independent, experiences with a potential beau she would have found more exciting than a discussion of current events. “Why couldn’t [mother] have met him, …, and then gracefully retired?” she complained. She “had wished to talk to [Ernest] of quite different things” than “war and politics” and this “would have been the first time [she] had ever gone out to dinner with a man.” Her mother, she wrote as she closed the entry, would probably never understand “how disappointed [she] was.”

Helene’s experiences illustrate a more general dynamic that many women from non-traditional college backgrounds also experienced. Jewish American Merle Judith Marcus, for

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instance, after the war also had to bridge the different behavioral expectations in her family of origin and in the collegiate setting. In the process, she, too, came to chafe against patriarchal restrictions of her autonomy.

Merle Judith Marcus was accepted at Barnard College in New York City in 1948. Her mother, Antoinette Brody Marcus, was an accomplished musician; her father, Jacob Rader Marcus, a professor of history at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. A scholar of Jewish history and prominent reform rabbi, Merle’s father would have been very conscious of how his family’s ethnic and religious identity influenced their opportunities. Although its Manhattan location accounts for the fact that of all the Seven Sisters, Barnard College was the most accessible for Jewish students, he would have known that the opening of educational opportunities for Jews at prestigious college was relatively recent. The Marcuses apparently found it more important that their daughter benefited from a liberal arts education at a renowned college than to keep her close by and therewith under direct control. This did not mean, however, that they allowed Merle to make autonomous decisions about her life. On the contrary, the influence of, Jacob Rader Marcus in particular, can be seen all over Merle’s personal records. It was her father who suggested to Merle how to best fill out a college questionnaire, and it was also he who offered his opinion on how the young woman ought to conduct herself socially once on her own in New York City. In his opinion, she should be careful not to act in ways that made her stand out in a negative fashion; he clearly wanted her to concentrate on the academic aspects of her education. “I am,” he wrote, “in touch with people who tell me there is a lot of social life in Barnard but I don’t want you to go into that too heavily till you know the ropes and have decided what your responsibilities are.” Merle’s mother backed this line of argument and urged her daughter to heed her father’s
advice: “Darling,” she wrote, “I had a scholarly father who never bothered about my schoolwork which is a handicap you fortunately do not have.” Merle, she argued had “an unusual opportunity” and “any help or suggestions” from her father she should abide by and treasure. \(^{302}\)

Prior to her departure to Barnard, Merle seems to have acted as a dutiful daughter and followed, for example, her father’s advice on how to fill out the Barnard questionnaire: “My father, a professor, has stressed the importance of an academic training + the necessity of having a profession.” she recorded on a draft that survived in her personal records. Yet while the shadow of her parents expectations followed her to New York City, other influences soon competed with those of her family of origin. As a letter Merle wrote during her second year at Barnard to a friend reveals, the Marcuses were disappointed by their daughter’s academic performance. Merle sought out the help of a tutor in subjects in which she lagged behind. She mockingly informed her friend that her parents did not understand why despite such extra counseling she had not yet revealed herself to be a math genius. Only a few lines later, however, she shifted the topic of conversation to a vivacious account of her enjoyment of football games and dates with college men. \(^{303}\)

Merle’s personal correspondence illustrates the gap in perspective that easily opened between Jewish-American parents who after World War II send their daughters to college, and their offspring. For the cohort of the older Marcuses, memories of anti-Semitic

\(^{302}\) Merle Judith Marcus to Barnard College, 08-06-47, father to Merle, letter not dated, box 1, folder 1, “personal correspondence 1940 – 1949,” Mother to Merle, 09-08-1946, box 1, folder 1, “personal correspondence 1940 – 1949,” Merle Judith Marcus papers, American Jewish Archives, Hebrew Union College.

\(^{303}\) Merle to Anonymous, 11-12-48, box 1, folder 1, “personal correspondence 1940 – 1949.”
discrimination, especially in the realm of higher education, were still vivid. As individuals prominently involved in their Jewish community, they would also have grappled intensely with the Holocaust. Their recent memory would have been shaped by the knowledge that even after the onset of deportations of European Jews to concentration camps in Eastern Europe, the United States refused to raise immigration quotas. For them, anti-Semitism was a force to be reckoned with. Like many assimilated members of the Jewish middle class, the Marcuses countered prejudice by trying to distance themselves from stereotypes about the character and intelligence of Jews. Here, they would have had in mind in particular the working-class immigrants from Eastern Europe who had entered the country in rising numbers since the late 19th century. Embracing a similar strategy adopted by African American middle class households, they tried to instill in Merle a sense of the importance of proving herself the epitome of respectability. They warned her about risking her reputation by joining campus life before she had learned the “ropes.” They reminded her to always watch her English and her spelling. In short, by no means should she in behavior and appearance resemble a member of the Jewish immigrant groups that had in the past received a hostile reception from Protestant Americans. To prove herself the best of her “race,” she ought to conform to the standards of respectability and decorum that were also upheld in the WASP circles of polite society.\(^{304}\)

For Merle, by contrast, her parents’ emphasis on respectability no longer made the same sense. By the time she entered Barnard College, older prejudices had not suddenly disappeared. In fact, “day students” who hailed from inner-city New York neighborhoods

and who were often from a Jewish and working-class family background remained marginalized in campus life after World War II. Yet Judith did begin her education at a time when Jews made up an unprecedented proportion of the student body. Moreover, her young adulthood coincided with a time when in liberal rhetoric and in popular culture anti-Semitism was deemed a thing of the past. In reflection on this generational gap, Merle’s Jewish peers at Barnard, too, found it more important to establish their right to collect their own experiences vis-à-vis meddlesome parents than to offer proof that they were beyond moral reprove. In the process, these young women assimilated into a dominant Protestant, white, middle class, and hetero-normative culture. But they also became challengers of the mores, conventions, and power relations in their family of origin.

The complex effect of exposure to higher education on the identity of young women is particularly clear in the letter of “Tasha,” a woman from Merle’s circle of college friends. Although there is not a lot of information about this woman’s personal circumstances in the Marcus papers, by the time Tasha was writing, she seemed to have completed her course of study. Her letter came from Germany where she had gone in the company of her fiancée. Abroad, the relationship dissolved. Subsequently, Tasha’s parents expected her to return home and resume living with them. But their child had different plans. She considered herself “old enough to make [her] own decisions.” Her parents, however, were “convinced that [she

305 Carol Kaminsky, (Barnard College, Class of 1956), October 26, 2008, personal email message (accessed October 26, 2008).

306 One historian who has recently examined liberal rhetoric in regards to its underlying racial and ethnic assumptions is David Roediger. He found that a lack of prejudices against Jews especially was increasingly equated with American national identity, but that African Americans were not included in liberal rhetoric of inclusiveness. See Roediger, Working Toward Whiteness. How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
was] on the road straight to hell.” Rather than being devastated by her broken engagement,
Tasha wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to collect social and romantic experiences
while traveling and working abroad. This behavior was morally unacceptable in the eyes of
her parents. Tasha, however, articulately contested their arguments. “They accuse me of
libertinism rather than being concerned with my liberty,” she vented in her letter and
proceeded to describe her interactions with her parents.

Their argument is that for all their sacrificing, the only thing they want is for me to continue living as they taught me and be a ‘good daughter’. … They claim to love me. And yet as far as I can see, love is evident in the amount of trust one has for the person one loves, and they trust me as far as they can throw me. If I do not take advantage of the situation … before me now, I shall … probably be tied to my parents indefinitely – which is not desirable. ³⁰⁷

As Tasha’s letter illustrates, she had developed ideas about her rights and her
opportunities that were quite at odds with the postwar promotion of stable gender and family
roles. What is even more important, she had developed a language that allowed her to justify
individualistic goals. Whether in her case we can credit her college experience with having
produced such an effect is not clear. A person living through the early Cold War years
certainly did not have to pursue an advanced degree to read about the lofty ideal of “liberty,”
or to learn about the importance of maturity. But where the link between college experience
and the ability of young women to challenge power relations in their families shows also
quite clearly is in the journal of Helene Harmon.

After the disappointment that followed her meeting with Ernest at Wannamaker’s
wore off, Helene made sure that she got her chance for a tête-à-tête with the émigré
photographer. While the summer before she started college she had still agreed with her

elders about the need for youth to grow up shielded and protected, her views began to diverge from her parents’. This shows, for instance, in a talk between Helene and her mother about a young couple that had eloped together. Marian Grace Harmon thoroughly disapproved. Not so her daughter. “I always wanted to run off myself,” wrote Helene. “To my mind all that big church weddings are, is a show for friends and relatives.”

She found far more appealing the image of a young couple that defied their elders and eloped.

Helene’s change of view soon began to influence her behavior. In the process, family dynamics in the Harmon household changed. Increasingly, Helene sought out the opportunities she had missed. Not only did she meet with Ernest on her own, she also went “to dinner, to the movies” with other young men at her college and joined a mixed-sex crowd of peers from her college for social fun and excursions. Frequently, she came home late at night. These activities led to tensions with her mother. Yet, what Marian Grace Harmon was no longer willing to do was to deny her daughter the opportunities she so eagerly sought. Although Helene in her journal described her as concerned about her behavior, she did not want to “forebid” her daughter to meet with young men all on her own, because Helene would then only “deceive her” and meet them “on the sly.”

Mrs. Harmon was thus unwilling to exercise her parental authority. Rather, she tried to foster a relationship with her adolescent daughter in which the latter felt she could talk to her and turn to her for help in case she needed it.

Multiple factors influenced the way in which the relationship between the two Harmon women developed. During mobilization and war, growing numbers of young

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308 Helene Harmon, diary, entry dated 02-08-1941, diary vol. January 1940 - July 1941.

Americans were marrying at younger ages than ever. In addition, marital advice books directed at the middle class had since the 1920s promoted more democratic relations in the family as a means to modernize the institution. Contemporary trends might therefore already have fostered in the Harmon household a sense that the young generation was to be expected to break with traditional mores. Catholic families, however, were more resistant to changing power relations in the family and also more protective of daughters than their contemporaries in the urban Protestant middle class. Only in the 1960s would behavioral patterns in Catholic families catch up with nationwide general trends.\(^{310}\)

As a result of their daughter’s college background, however, the Harmon household would diverge from general trends among Catholic families. Her education had introduced Helene to a language with which she could defend her interests. Moreover, her status as a student gave her an air of authority. Thus equipped, Helen became a broker of new patterns and expectations in her family. She succeeded in gaining permission to join the dating culture of her peers. Despite occasional tensions with her mother, her behavior did not seem to have caused major rifts. The way in which Helene defended the legitimacy of her views does therefore seem to have been successful. Exposure to student life, Helene’s example indicates, thus had a complex impact. Aside from reinforcing hetero-normativity, it also encouraged young women to question assumptions previously taken for granted, to take a public stance in defense of their views, and to insist on their right to take a separate path from their families.

An urban young woman who associated with theatre majors and dated an émigré photographer, Helene Harmon might not be a typical mid-century coed. But there exist

important commonalities between her and other non-traditional students. When behavioral expectations in families of origin clashed with those in the collegiate setting, women tended to give more legitimacy to the mores in their new environment than their old. This was because the college setting was imbued with an air of authority that non-college educated family members lacked. The collegiate settings elitist aura therefore encouraged female students to insist that they and their peers had superior insights over traditional authorities. Conflicts centered frequently on questions of dating and participation in the commercial youth culture. Yet, more than just young women’s attitudes towards social pursuits were affected. Especially once the domestic Cold War heated up, college women would also find that their political views and those in their families of origin were drifting apart.

Although the apolitical inclinations of college men and women were a recurring theme in media coverage of student life, the actual political climate on wartime and Cold War campuses was actually quite complex. Concerned about a backsliding of the populace into the isolationism of the interwar period, wartime commentators like Reinhold Niebuhr or the First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had already appealed to students’ idealism and urged them to dedicate themselves to the defense of American democracy. Historians have argued that the momentum for student political activism declined with the onset of prosperity and escalating domestic anti-communism. But with onset of the domestic Cold War, embattled liberals and academics also turned the collegiate setting into a highly politicized sphere.311

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311 Liberal commentators and social scientists saw the alleged political apathy of the population as yet another effect of the pernicious influence of mass culture. See James Gilbert, Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 44.
When the domestic anti-communism of the late 1940s and 1950s swept up a large and diverse group of people in investigations and accusations, academics and intellectuals responded with an ideological counterattack. Here, theories developed and dispersed in response to fascism offered them a promising line of argument. Now reformulated under the heading of “totalitarianism,” public intellectuals utilized the increasingly influential disciplines of culture-personality study and the long-standing critique of mass society to draw an explicit parallel between passionate political partisans of the left and the right. Anti-communist accusers, the argument went, were not guided by rational and objective concerns. They were suffering from dangerous mental pathologies and uneducated prejudices. As such, they were in the same league as the communist foes they allegedly wanted to root out. Public intellectuals and academics, by contrast, defended their own interests by pointing out the need for the United States to defend the values and components that distinguished American democracy from its stigmatized adversary. While a totalitarian government would routinely intrude into the private and social sphere of citizens, the United States ought to protect these spaces from the organs and agents of the state.

Theories of totalitarianism were especially attractive to academics as the fervor of loyalty investigators threatened to undermine the advances they had only recently made in regards to their national prestige. When committees turned to investigate faculty, scientists, and administrators, they threatened the image of academia as a realm where rationally thinking scholars were engaged in the objective pursuit of knowledge for the good of the nation. In defense of themselves, and their profession, academics therefore tended to uphold the ideal of free inquiry and free speech as important principles. As long as they showed themselves to be un-biased, non-partisan, and guided by reason, the thesis went, researchers
and academics ought to be trusted to act in the interest of the common good of American
democracy. 312

As a response to their own embattled position, academics and public intellectuals
therefore emphasized the theoretical construct of higher education as a sphere that stood apart
from the rest of the nation. In “mass society,” they argued, fear and hysteria was spreading.
In academia, by contrast, educated people free of irrational biases and unconscious hang-ups
still upheld the values of free speech, autonomy, and free inquiry. With this line of reasoning,
cultural commentators thus once more forcefully promoted an ideal of college and university
as places where an elite was reproduced. Yet while central to the traditional definition of elite
had been breeding and family background, its wartime and post World War II version in
rhetoric at least redefined the criteria for social leadership as dependent on intellect,
education, and the ability to reason without prejudice.

The discourse of totalitarianism gave female students a particular role. Women were
explicitly included in idealistic appeals to the educated young to devote themselves to
postwar reconstruction. In 1949, for instance, speakers attending the inauguration of Smith
College’s new president Benjamin Fletcher Wright included former first lady “Mrs.
Roosevelt” who spoke about the “necessity” of “being a world-citizen.” After the former

312 Historians have amply demonstrated that in practice and reality institutions of higher
education and individual scholars and scientists often cooperated with, and at times even
took the initiative to get involved with, state and federal investigative committees. In am
talking here, however, solely about a theoretical construct. On the ideal of academia as a
space apart and a force to resist totalitarianism see Neil Jumonville, Critical Crossings:
The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America (Berkeley: University of California
Press, 1990). On the reality of the response within academia see Ellen Schrecker, No
Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities (New York: Oxford University Press,
1986); Jessica Wang, American Science in an Age of Anxiety: Scientists,
Anticommunism, and the Cold War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,
1999).
First Lady, “an eminent scientist (woman) spoke” who was followed by “a brilliant historian and … the first woman professor at Harvard.” The prominent women and female professionals this young woman listed in her letter home were probably conscious that the climate for female professionals was growing more chilly and might have wanted to encourage educated young women of the upcoming generation. Even commentators without feminist motivations, however, often felt they could not do without the support of college women. In fact, the belief that the intellectual resources of female students ought not to be wasted could exist side-by-side traditional notions of the family with a breadwinner husband and a helpmeet wife. “Educate a woman, and you educate a family”, sounded a Wellesley promotional brochure from 1949. This slogan reflected the wide-spread assumption that the man a college graduate eventually married would spend the majority of his day in the corporate economy. This family arrangement was accepted as a necessity to maintain social stability. Yet it also meant that the male breadwinners of the expanding middle class were no longer available for as an audience for political and intellectual debates. Busy in the market place, they could not be counted on to express their sense of commitment to the common good through activism in civic or social causes. The way to these men’s hearts and minds would have to go through their women.

As a result of the increasingly tense domestic and international situation in the Cold War, gender conservatives and supporters of feminism alike therefore appealed to female students to be “world citizens” and take an interest in social issues, politics, and questions of

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313 Ruth Erisman to mother, 10-23-1949, Ruth Erisman papers, Smith College Archives. The student was referring to Helen Maud Cam, a Bryn Mawr graduate, who in 1948 became Harvard’s first female tenured professor.

morality and ethics. This often might have been intended to direct women towards a helpmeet role. In the writings of college women, however, we can see that female students did not necessarily read the debate in this gendered way. As their writings show, female students took from the discourses at their disposal the idea that by virtue of their education, they were also a new kind of expert.

The following examples will illustrate the way in which the intellectual climate in the escalating Cold War conflict encouraged women to see themselves as people with special insights. Janet Brown from the Hudson River Valley small town of Newburgh was sixteen years old when she entered Mount Holyoke College in 1946 on a scholarship. Janet was the first in her extended family to have the opportunity to get a formal degree. Her father was a sales manager for Dupont and her mother had been trained as a classical pianist. Both, however, came from an impoverished background and were still struggling financially when their only child left for college.

Janet’s political leanings in her freshman year largely reflected those of her father who supported the moderate wing of the Republican Party. In a move that would have pleased her father, in October of 1946 she attended a Republican rally with Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., a representative of the internationalist wing of the GOP. Janet maintained this surface allegiance to the Republicans for a long time.315 She also presented herself as a model coed who wrote about mixers, dances and blind dates. Only later in her life would she declare two important aspects of her identity, which she did not yet dare to profess to as a student. As the biographical information she provided when she donated her papers to the

college archive show, later in her life she changed her political loyalties to the Democrats. She also eventually came-out as a lesbian. The dynamic that encouraged her to assert her own identity, however, was set in motion soon after she had begun her course of study at Mount Holyoke. By the second semester of her first year, Janet argued actively with her father. Although the letters of Mr. Brown are not part of the college archive’s collection, it is apparent from Janet’s responses that she and her father had debated whether the politics of the British Labor Party meant that the U.S. ally was charting a path towards socialism. Janet emphasized that she was not a sympathizer of “socialism” but she also insisted that one ought to not just dismiss policies because of the source that advanced them. “And Dad,” she wrote,

… perhaps you wouldn’t have the money to pay the bills in Socialist England, but I would be going to college on scholarship and have all expenses paid! Seriously, I am against Socialism from what I have been reading in the British newspapers, The Economist, etc., although the health bill may work out all right.  

As this letter illustrates, Janet had begun to see herself as a person who had knowledge and insights her father lacked and who approached the current political situation in a more rational and better informed manner than he. She was certainly not a belligerently argumentative person. In fact, she kept her letters in a light tone and in retrospect noted that she took care not to alienate her parents. Emphasizing that she had arrived at her opinion only after she had consulted various sources, however, she still challenged the patriarchal authority of her father by advising him on how he ought to proceed when confronted with partisan arguments. Citing the health bill as one example, she implied that if he was able to look at a situation without prejudices, he might then even find some good in left wing politics after all.

As passages in Janet’s later letters show, it was her growing awareness of rising anti-communism in the nation that informed the conversation with her father. Here, she had followed particularly closely the media uproar that followed a controversial attempt of intellectuals to influence Cold War politics. The cultural and political backdrop to her letter was the 1949 “Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace” also known as the “Waldorf Conference” in reference to the New York City hotel in which most of the meetings and panels took place. The gathering of international scientists and public intellectuals had become a lightning rod for various partisan commentators in the Cold War. Its chairman, the Harvard astronomer Harlow Shapley was a controversial figure. Shapley was a world-renowned astronomer but also an outspoken Popular Front liberal. One of the first scientists who was called to testify in front of the postwar HUAC, he would appear in 1950 on Joseph McCarthy’s notorious list of alleged communists in high places. He was a firm believer in internationalism and once relations with the Soviet Union chilled, one of the few public voices that criticized U.S. foreign policy. Like the controversial former Vice President Henry Wallace, he called for dialogue with, rather than containment of, the Soviet Union. Already perceived as insufficiently anti-Stalinist, in the eyes of his detractors the fact that he invited citizens of communist-led nations to the Waldorf conference only further affirmed that he was an unrepentant fellow traveler. In an effort to distance themselves from this man whose loyalty to the nation was in question, veterans organizations, labor unions and many Church organizations publicly condemned the Waldorf conference.317

317 For biographical detail on Harlow Shapley see Wang, American Science, 118-130. On the Waldorf Conference controversy see Jumonville, Critical Crossings, chapter one.
Liberal academics and intellectuals were divided in their response to the Waldorf conference. For some, it took the role of the academic and intellectual too far. As many academics and scientists believed, an expert ought to be an unpolitical and unbiased observer of facts, not a public critic. Yet this latter function was exactly what some intellectuals felt ought to be their responsibility in the nuclear age. Cultural critics, especially those associated with the New York intellectuals, believed that they had a public responsibility to work for enlightenment of the public and to use the power of science and philosophy to bring about social progress. In their eyes, speakers of various persuasions ought to be allowed to air their opinions in a public forum. This was not necessarily because they expected beneficial results. In fact, the liberal left was fairly united in their view that conference organizers and attendees were either politically naïve or too biased to offer any enlightening insights. Yet this skepticism notwithstanding, cultural critics backed the event because they saw in the actions of the State Department a dangerous infringement of academic freedom and free speech and as such an action just as likely to foster totalitarian ways of thinking as the airing of Stalinist propaganda. 318

In the media coverage surrounding the event, the views of cultural critics paled in comparison to the general condemnation of the event. If Janet’s comments are any measure, however, they did leave an imprint on women’s colleges in the northeast. As her earlier remark that she was “against socialism” indicates, Janet was wary of being pigeonholed as a leftist. Her education, however, had also turned her into a fervent believer in the power of unbiased information to change minds, and of the responsibility of the educated to bring their

insights and expertise to bear on current political problems. In her view, an interdisciplinary and international conference was the perfect embodiment of this philosophy. “What do you think of [Harlow] Shapley”? she asked her father. He was organizing a “gathering of artists, scientists, etc. to try to find practical ways of obtaining peace” she informed him and then proceeded to present her own criticism of media coverage and the arguments advanced by conservatives and the anti-Stalinist left:

The attitude of newspapers, the state dept. etc. is certainly far from helpful in stirring up the public to picketing on unproved charges. Evidently, those who try for peace a being altogether too easily classed as Communists and we are getting a much more totalitarian and militaristic government than most people realize.”

Janet clearly did not consider herself “most people.” Rather, this small town woman had come to see herself as a cultural critic and a member of a new intellectual elite. As her letter shows, she considered herself a commentator with expertise and insights from whom even a mature businessman like her father could still learn something. With that, she was beginning to embrace a version of liberal politics at odds with major parts of the Cold War anti-Stalinist consensus.

That exposure to college encouraged some women to identify as members of a generation with insights their elders lacked, I also found in the journal of a young African American. Martha Ann Furgerson grew up in Iowa as the oldest daughter of five of a Catholic physician and a schoolteacher. For her college education, she went to Alabama where she pursued a major in history at the historically black Talladega College. After graduating from “‘Dega” in 1947, she returned to live temporarily with her family in the

Midwest. Her diary, which is the only personal journal kept by an African American woman that I managed to locate during my nationwide search, Martha Ann kept for a only short time after graduation. Eventually, it became part of the collection of the Iowa Woman’s Archives to which she donated her personal papers.\textsuperscript{320}

An introspective account by a black woman about her social experiences in college, Martha Ann’s diary is a rare find. Black women have been subject to racialized assumptions impugning their sexuality and morality since slavery. Labeled as more primitive and hence more carnal than whites, they were highly vulnerable to rape. The African American middle class in response to these pernicious stereotypes adopted a strict emphasis on respectability that is reflected in chaperonage requirements and moral regulations in historically black colleges and universities that were much harsher than in the north. The social conduct of female students was supposed to be flawless not just to appear in the best possible light in front of whites but also as a means of protecting them.\textsuperscript{321} Because of this emphasis on a flawless reputation, a black coed who kept a journal about her dating experiences, was less likely than her white contemporary to subject such a document to public scrutiny. Moreover, the experience of blatant discrimination African American students endured as a group on account of their race politicized them more strongly and faster than northerners. Few female black college graduates would have seen personal papers that merely described ordinary,

\textsuperscript{320} This information is from box 1, folder “Nash: biographical information: diary, 1947-1948,” Martha Ann Furgerson Nash papers, Iowa Women’s Archives, Iowa City.

day-to-day, social events of campus life as in need of preservation for posterity. Martha Ann Furgerson’s diary also only made it into an archive as part of a larger collection documenting her Civil Rights and Church activism in later life.\footnote{322}

The specifics of her background not withstanding, however, Martha Ann’s story, just like Janet Brown’s, reflects tensions between assimilation to and contestation of norms caused by the opening up of educational and class prestige to new population groups. Like many of her northern counterparts, Martha Ann in her diary emphasized the importance of social and cultural activities. When she and her parents dropped off a younger sister on campus to start her education in the summer of 1947, she wrote that this would be “four of the most wonderful years” she would ever know. Attending a football game shortly after brought back memories of her recent past as a coed: “Waiting for the kick-off at the game’ [she] felt the old excitement in [her].” She also remembered fondly the joy of “parties” and “glamorous adventure” and credited college with having given her a “veneer of maturity + … sophistication.”\footnote{323} She also, however, felt that her education at Talladega College had turned her into an expert on social and political issues and here, the parallels in her analysis of the postwar situation and her role as a college-educated woman and that of Janet Brown are striking.

\footnote{322} After graduating from college with a major in history and working for a year for the Congress of Industrial Organizations, Martha Ann Furgerson married Warren Nash, a student in medical school, and moved to Omaha, Nebraska. While her husband was finishing his degree and began working as a physician, Martha Ann raised seven children and became an active community organizer. Starting in 1962, she served on the board of directors of the Black Hawk County Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and also remained active in the Catholic Church and the international peace movement throughout her life. See box 1, folder “Nash: biographical information: diary, 1947-1948,” Martha Ann Furgerson Nash papers. \footnote{323} Martha Ann Furgerson, diary, entries dated 09-14-1947, 09-19-1947, 09-26-1947, box 1, folder “Nash: biographical information: diary, 1947-1948.”
Like Janet Brown, in the process of her education Martha Ann came to consider herself an expert on current problems. She felt that she had a responsibility to act as a public intellectual and considered herself by virtue of her outlook as set apart from the members of her community of origin. In Martha Anne’s case, this means that she felt she had more in common with educated youth of either race, than with the non-college educated elders of her own community.

That Martha Ann felt she ought to utilize the insights her education had equipped her with shows clearly in the activities she took up after graduation. In November of 1947, she spoke at a “Christian … Ladies Aid Group,” and afterwards recorded: “I hope my little effort brought the women a knowledge of what Negroes (some, anyway) are thinking.” in Martha Ann’s mind clearly these thoughts of “some” African Americans included the same optimistic faith in education as a tool for social reconstruction also shared by Janet Brown. Pondering the root causes for growing political hysteria in her diary, Martha Ann wrote in November of 1947:

> Americans haven’t been taught to see things the way they are. We haven’t been shown how to examine a situation + really look under to find what is what. If we can all wake up to the implications + causes of the conflict + disturbances in the world today – eventually, war as a means of getting what the other fellow has will not be the politician’s method.³²⁴


Martha Ann’s embrace of education as a tool for social change and of her own responsibility does of course put her into a long tradition within her own community. In the African American middle-class, the people who in W. E. B. DuBois’ term resembled the “talented tenth” have long been looked at as the members of the race most likely to succeed
in working for change. A daughter of educated parents, Martha Ann herself came from exactly such a family background. The domestic Cold War, however, created a rift between her and her family. While Martha Ann had matured intellectually in a college environment in which controversial ideas could at least be discussed, more rigidly anti-communist Cold War beliefs had spread in her home community. Upon her return home, Martha Ann thus found that she could no longer relate to her parents way of thinking.

Martha Ann noticed that the gap between her own political views and those in her family were especially wide when the family’s Catholic priest came for a visit. The topic that made national headlines in the fall of 1947 was the situation in China. Martha Ann’s father and the priest talked about the confrontation between the nationalist Kuomintang and the Communists. Both espoused the hard-line anti-Communism that was also becoming the official foreign policy consensus. Martha Ann, meanwhile, seemed to have listened silently to the men talking. Yet while she might not have challenged the views of her elders, her journal clearly reflects her doubts about their views. Neither man’s opinion, she felt, was based on a rational and unbiased assessment of the situation. The priest, she felt was already prejudiced on account of his religion. Her father, meanwhile, simply did not have the necessary information to formulate an authoritative opinion. “Naturally,” wrote Martha Ann in her journal, her priest held “the Catholic viewpoint about the Communists. He’s ‘agin ‘em’.” Her father, meanwhile, had a simplistic and uniformed perspective. “The way father talked, the Nationalists were good, the Communists + Japs about equally bad.” Martha Ann, by contrast, felt that her education at “‘Dega’ [Talladega] had equipped her with superior insights. Her mockery of the priest’s dialect, “‘agin ‘em’” indicates that she felt she had transcended her rural upbringing and learned a more sophisticated view of the world. She,
too, made a point that she did not harbor sympathies for Communists. But she also made clear that she saw little value in the black-and-white thinking of her elders. At “‘Dega,” she “read books … which showed the Nationalists no better” than the communists in China. Here, her teachers had also introduced her to a more balanced view of the virtues of the American as opposed to the Soviet political system. “I had a teacher once who always used to ask: ‘what is more important, freedom or security?’” And clearly, Martha Ann had pondered this question. As she wrote in her journal: “The Russians have security, but no freedom … . We have freedom (at least we think we do, but right now that is in danger), but no security.”

Martha Ann’s diary shows poignantly that she felt that her education had equipped her with insights that were intellectually superior to those of anyone who had not had the advantage of attending “Dega.” In fact, her journal suggests that she felt that the differences between a college-schooled woman like her and the members of her home community amounted to a generational divide. “The world is in a period of great change,” she wrote right after the priest left. “Something [was] happening.” Her generation was “gradually leaving the Middle Ages behind and catching up with science.” There were still “men (as there are always) who [were] trying to stop it.” But as she told the ladies at the Christian association in front of which she spoke a few days later: “if the old folks … be quiet, the young people might work it out.”

325 Martha Ann Furgerson, diary, entry dated 10-29-1947.

Martha Ann Furgerson and Janet Brown were not alone in their sense of optimism that with the power of knowledge, educated Americans would usher in a better social and global order. Personal letters and journals of female college students from the immediate post World War II period show that they shared the sentiment and participated in numerous progressive political campaigns. By the early 1950s, this momentum for social and economic reforms, as historians of the Cold War have shown, fell victim to growing anti-communist fervor. In the writings of female students from this period, however, we find evidence that college still offered opportunities for the exploration of controversial ideas that were becoming more constricted in the nation at large.

By the early 1950s, by contrast, the public political climate had grown distinctly inhospitable to perspectives that dissented from the Cold War consensus. Against the background of the Korean War and high publicity espionage cases, calls for a balanced analysis of current events were drowned out by fears that Communist sympathizers would take advantage of any weakness in the American system. The writings of many female students still show, however, that they saw fervent anti-communism in the same light as Stalinism. Proponents of either belief system in their eyes were victims of unconscious fears or demonstrated the prejudices of an uneducated mass.

That 1950s college women broke in major ways with sentiments held in the nation at large shows, for instance, in the distinctly mixed reception Senator Joseph McCarthy received when he spoke at Smith College in April of 1952. Addressing members of the Smith Young Republican Club, the American Legion, and the general student body, he found the

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audience divided. More importantly, once the fervent anti-communist left, students continued to discuss the validity of his position. And here, at least some students could not help but see the Senator in the same league as the communists he so adamantly persecuted. The friends of Ohio suburbanite Alice Gorton, for instance, called McCarthy a “true commissar” and ridiculed his rigid views: “Here’s to … all the wise men of ages past who have lived and died and left us their wise words to read and enjoy. I’ll drink to them. And to McCarthy too – for he is a true commissar.”

The use of the term “commissar” in reference to McCarthy hints at the intellectual source of students’ critique. Alice Gorton’s friends were not involved in any Marxist or otherwise explicitly political organization. Like Alice herself, they were mainly interested in the study of literature and culture-personality study. This literature, however, was highly politicized. The label “commissar,” for example, was coined by British essayist Arthur Koestler in reference to people whose passionate embrace of a particular political agenda reflected their biases and unconscious psychological influences. For Alice Gorton, the views of Koestler would have been familiar because she had read Philip Wylie’s popular works of cultural criticism in which he, too, portrayed fervent political partisans as suffering from personality flaws. Similar arguments any 1950s student would also find in Erich Fromm’s Escape from Freedom (1941), Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.’s The Vital Center (1949), and Theodore Adorno et. al’s The Authoritarian Personality (1950). It was this familiarity with cultural criticism that accounts for the nonchalance with which Alice Gorton in 1952 picked up the work of British literary critic and Christopher St. John Sprigg without being disturbed

by his known Communist sympathies. For college women acquainted with the elitist rhetoric of 1950s cultural criticism, grappling with the ideas of a thinker who was ostracized in the nation at large might actually count as a mark of her own superior mindset.

The journal of June Calender serves as a further indication that college women -- especially non-traditional ones -- took from intellectual debates of the Cold War encouragement to see themselves as an educated elite. June grew up in rural Indiana. She was an avid reader and frequent patron of her small town’s public library and a high school valedictorian. In 1956, she entered a liberal arts course of study at Indiana University in Bloomington with the help of a scholarship. In the course of the next few semesters, Cold War intellectual influenced would push this young woman, too, away from her community of origin. In the process, June would come to see herself as a woman with insights and skills that most of her contemporaries lacked.

Neither of her June’s parents had received advanced schooling. Her father, who was born in rural Kentucky, only attended school till the fifth grade. June’s mother graduated from high school and remained interested in reading and writing as an adult. She supported June’s interest in the same, encouraged her to enter essay contests, and introduced her to magazines like McCall’s or the Ladies’ Home Journal. As June reminisced in a note that accompanied her papers, it was through these magazines that she learned how the life styles of Americans in cities and suburbs differed from her own. In the process she also grew conscious of the reputation of rural farming families as uneducated, backwards people.\[329\]

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\[329\] The biographical information is from June Calender papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.
That June was eager to distance herself from associations with the alleged traits of rural Americans shows in an entry she made when during her senior year in high school her class visited New York City. There, in a department store on 5th Avenue, a clerk teased her about her background. But June defended herself. She “said that [she] was a farmer’s daughter,” June wrote, but she “certainly didn’t consider [her]self anything of a hick or bumpkin.” This defense of farm families notwithstanding, however, with the start of her studies in a liberal arts program at Indiana University, June became increasingly determined to move beyond her family background.330

By the time June entered college, the effects of the GI bill had abated. The low costs of public higher education by that time were bringing many women just like herself to college. Yet June did not want to associate with others just like herself. She wanted to turn herself into a very different person. To “become a lady,” she described her goal on her journal and she actively worked to accomplish it. She wanted to learn “to hold [her] shoulders back and [her] voice down,” [and to gain] an awareness … of [her] conduct.” Yet while her parents were still able to relate to Junes desire to turn herself into a sophisticated woman, a far bigger source of friction opened as a result of the way college shaped the young woman’s views on culture and politics.331

Although June’s diary shows her as an active participant in conventional campus life, college had also clearly turned her into a woman whose views clashed with the politics and values held in her home community. At Bloomington, she read psychology and history and

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331 June Calender, diary, entry dated 02-24-1958.
met students from a broad variety of backgrounds. Eventually, she made friends with a group that included Jewish Americans from the East Coast with whom she discussed books, philosophy and politics. This college culture caused her, like many of her peers, to adopt certain central beliefs. She saw prejudices against racial or ethnic groups as evidence of neuroses and she embraced autonomy and personal integrity as ultimate goals of psychological development. In her mind, fervent anti-communism or prejudices against minorities were a danger to democracy. An educated person free of irrational prejudices ought to be able to examine a situation objectively. Yet when the young woman now visited family in small town of Versailles, Indiana, during breaks or holidays, she could not help but realize that her relatives accepted many of the beliefs she had learned to condemn. Recording her experience of a “terrible Christmas” at home in her diary, she vented her frustration: It made her “unhappy with men too dumb to deserve peace on earth, to morally, intellectually, and emotionally biased to understand good will,” she recorded. “These are the people who can find happiness only in a delusion, only on the basis of ignorance of how matters really are. These are the majority of earth’s population.”

June’s frustration with her family could of course have various explanations. She might simply have been bored by the talk and turned to her journal to let off steam. But what the entry demonstrates is that June was beginning to see herself as a person who was cut out for a different life than that of her family members. Like the students quoted above, she believed that her education had turned her into an expert on current socio-political problems and a member of a new intellectual elite.

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332 June Calendar, diary, entry dated 12-24-1958; also see 12-25-1958.
Drawing on a number of case studies, this chapter has illustrated that it was possible for college women to read the complex messages they encountered in higher education in ways that challenged gender orthodoxy. Here, female students -- especially non-traditional ones -- were encouraged to consider themselves a caste of educated young with superior insights. This dynamic was particularly strong in their case because the differences in outlook in their families of origin and in the prestige-endowed setting of higher education led them to think of themselves as a group apart. At the same time, however, these women also internalized the strong heteronormative pressures in their environment. College women thus had to balance two countervailing messages. They had to take care to become well-rounded, mature, and feminine: at the same time that they also needed to develop their potential as independently thinking, rationally reasoning intellectuals.

That many postwar college women did not consider femininity and intellectualism at odds shows in their choices. We have seen that they were exceedingly active participants in campus life. Yet, if we look at women who decided to pursue an honors course of study or to prepare for postgraduate studies, we can find the same social butterflies. Merle Judith Marcus and Helene Harmon wanted careers in the arts. Janet Brown, after graduation from Mount Holyoke, studied psychology at Yale. Alice Gorton chose to do honors work in English literature and while at Smith, looked into opportunities for study abroad and graduate school. June Calendar, too, concentrated on literature and considered a career in politics or journalism. Though strong disincentives existed that would channel postwar female students away from specialized study, this did not seem to have been how many women read the messages at their disposal. Rather than being helpmeets, they wanted to become experts in their own right.
Non-traditional students thus were culture-brokers in a very complex way. Into their families, they introduced notions of conventional femininity, but also of youthful independence. In the collegiate environment, meanwhile, they helped spread notions of female intellectualism in a new form. They wanted to be new women of the nuclear age: femininely mature, but with intellectual skills. In the chapters that follow, we will learn more about the difficulties women encountered in trying to realize this goal. Because personal records vary greatly in the amount of information about women’s college experiences, I will not be able to illustrate the experiences of all the actors mentioned above. But from some case studies we will still gain a sense of the dynamic that would eventually cause a number of women to not follow through with their plans – at least not in the form in which they had originally imagined when starting their education.
CHAPTER 5
BETTER THAN AVERAGE:
CAREER-ORIENTED STUDENTS WRITE ABOUT THEIR GOALS, IDENTITY,
AND SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

As we have seen in the preceding pages, non-traditional students especially, although trying to live up to expectations of well-rounded femininity, took seriously calls to be “world citizens” and to utilize their expertise in a public and professional fashion. This chapter takes a closer look at the ways in which career-oriented college women attempted to reconcile the mixed messages in the educational setting. Drawing on a select number of diaries and letters, I focus particularly on the way in which the ideology of individualism and the educational mantra of personal growth clashed with the rising hetero-normative pressures in the postwar collegiate setting that accompanied the spread of neo-Freudian theory and adjustment psychology. In women’s writings, both sets of debates left visible traces. The postwar valuation of non-conformity and personal integrity, however, threw in doubt the validity of a one-size-fits-all model of the female gender role. Moreover, elitist assumptions that had long been central to the collegiate model of higher education encouraged young women to see themselves as part of a select group of expert. Challenges to gender norms combined with ideals of elitism and individualism to open opportunities for young women to reformulate notions of femininity and of their expectations of partnerships. In the pages of their journals and letters and in interactions with their male and female peers, culturally literate college women actively engaged in this debate.
While this chapter highlights the intellectual resourcefulness of young women, it also points to potential pitfalls of their identification with elitist notions of education and the ideals of individualism. College women’s writings show that they internalized calls to individuate and to excel at the same time that countervailing pressures to be feminine persisted. Confronted with clashing messages, they experienced confusion. In their attempts to formulate personal standards, they found support from like-minded peers. Yet despite the presence of a support network, we will also see the potential limitations of the coping strategies adopted by educated young women. The elite discourse of individualism did not take into account gender specific normative pressures and structural obstacles affecting women. Emphasizing instead the importance of personal integrity, individual effort, and self-awareness, it set standards of performance that were unrealistically high.

That career-oriented college women tried hard to reconcile conflicting messages about shape and purpose of their education is easily obscured by the amount of space the subject of dating takes up in their personal writings. Especially once men flocked back to college campuses after the end of World War II, accounts of dates and mixers filled the writings of women. For a broad variety of women, boys seem to have been more important than books. Even highly ambitious students sacrificed study time in order to meet young men. The fact that career oriented college women were no exception to this rule shows their susceptibility to peer pressures. The personal writings of some career-oriented students, however, offer intriguing insights about how exactly these women interpreted the purpose of their dating encounters. On the one hand, they accepted the heteronormative notion that dating was essential to facilitate their maturation as women. On the other hand, however,
they also emphasized that the activity served, rather than conflicted with, the development of their academic and professional goals.

That career-oriented college women saw dating as an activity that served their own individual purposes shows clearly in the correspondence of Vassar College student Ruth Silver, a highly politicized Jewish American whose interests ranged from economic justice to race relations. I found Ruth’s letters in the papers of Allard Lowenstein with whom she maintained a regular correspondence. In the 1950s and 1960s, Allard Lowenstein would become a prominent Civil Rights and antiwar activist and successfully run for the New York Congress as a Democrat. While I do not have biographical detail about Ruth Silver aside from what I found in her correspondence, it is clear that she shared Lowenstein’s interests, his passion for politics, and his sense of civic responsibility.333 Already as a Vassar student, she applied for internships at newspapers and magazines. It is not clear whether she was successful in this, but she clearly aspired to a professional career. After graduation, she wanted to pursue a Masters degree in a social science at Harvard. In the letters to Allard, she frequently discussed politics and philosophy. She also discussed her reasons for dating. “I succeeded,” she informed her friend,

in enchanting, more or less completely, a definitely dull young man…. I am good and sick of the whole stinking business. I guess it’s been good for me though. Otherwise I would have stuck to my music, books, politics etc. and thought I was a completely capable person. Now I know that there are new worlds to conquer – no matter how distasteful – and that if I want to be worth anything as a writer I will have to learn about them.”334

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333 The Allard Lowenstein papers are in the Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. For biographical information on Allard Lowenstein and his circle of friends as a student see William H. Chafe, Never Sop Running: Allard Lowenstein and the Struggle to Save American Liberalism (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

334 Ruth Silver to Allard Lowenstein, 01-05-1946, box 2, folder 25, “correspondence (incoming), January 1946,” Allard Kenneth Lowenstein papers, Southern Historical
The connections Ruth Silver draws between dating and her broader political and cultural interests are telling. In her mind, hetero-social experiences were connected to her overall development. To become a whole, modern, and “completely capable” woman, she needed experiences with the opposite sex no less than intellectual inspiration. Other students also shared this conception of becoming a whole woman. Only a few years later, Alice Gorton decided that it was time for experiences with the opposite sex. Vacationing after taking her College Entrance Examination in 1950s, she went on a date with a male acquaintance. Just like Ruth, she emphasized that it was not romantic infatuation that led her to do so, but a broader quest for development: “I just came home from a date with [Gordon],” she recorded in her diary. She was disappointed in the whole affair and emphasized that she had not enjoyed necking with him: “He slobbers and is a glutton,” she vented. “Oh the … horror of his kisses.” Yet, Alice felt that she needed to learn to enjoy (hetero-)sexual encounters in order to develop fully as a woman. Although she had “not the slightest bit of affection for Gordon nor he for [her]” and both were “together simply for the experience of being with the opposite sex,” she benefited from her interactions with him: She “was learning,” she wrote. The learning experience, however, was not just related to adjustment to a feminine role. It would also serve her well in her desire to become a writer. As Alice articulated at a slightly later point, she believed that a writer ought to formulate ideas “from a mind full of experience.” The raw material of literature, she believed, needed to come from

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Collection, Manuscripts Department, D. H. Wilson Library, Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

life itself. Her dating encounters thus were steps on the way of becoming an author. “It will make a good story,” she recorded right after she returned from her first date. In a diary entry, the aspiring young writer processed her experiences: “I have seen all the facets of Clifton Beach: I have been there as an innocent child, a watchful adolescent, a frustrated hopeful girl, now as almost a prostitute in the pure meaning.” As we can see, normative pressures to leave behind the developmental stage of a “frustrated” adolescent mix with dramatic flair and self-dramatization in this journal entry. Clearly, Alice felt that her dating encounters were not only compatible with her goal of becoming a writer, but connected.

As the women in these examples shared a wish to write for a living, one might argue that their attitudes are not representative for all but a small segment of women aspiring to literary fame. It needs to be said, though, that Ruth and Alice were not unusual. Among the mementos of her college life Bowling Green State University student Maxine Campbell kept over the years, was a cartoon that featured a student couple. The young man in the picture looks disheveled and confused. His messed-up hair and the fact that he has to adjust his tie suggest that the couple just finished a necking session. The young woman, by contrast, does not appear aroused at all. Her skin is not flushed, and her fashionable hair-do is still in order. Instead of adjusting her clothes, she is writing frantically into a book with the label “Diary.” The caption to the cartoon shows that what she wanted to gain from the encounter was

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336 About her idea of writing see Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 33, box 1, folder 7, “December 1950 - May 1951.”
material for her writing. “I like to get it all down while it’s still fresh in my mind!” she is quoted as saying.337

Although an isolated cartoon cannot convey what college women in general expected from their dates, it does offer information about recognizable cultural types. Even though Maxine had no literary ambitions, she must have found the drawing sufficiently poignant to preserve it as part of her memories from college life. Apparently, there was at her mid-western public university, just as at Vassar and Smith Colleges, at least a handful of women who dated for the sake of experience; and not to get “hitched.” Considering that this type was sufficiently visible to become satirized in a student publication, we may safely assume that we are dealing with more than just a few isolated coeds.

The determination with which some women sought out dating experiences reflects the growing familiarity of American youth with new theories of development. Although the influence of modern sex experts had already been growing during the interwar period, it was only with the postwar expansion of the student body that psychologically and psychoanalytically-informed theories reached a wide audience. This discourse, however, did not simply continue the conversation among past experts. Rather, the Freudian and neo-Freudian theorists whose writings women encountered in college complicated older models of sexual development, thereby pushing female adolescents to actively pursue normalcy through the collection of experiences with the opposite sex.

The spread of Freudian psychoanalysis was particularly consequential because it changed perceptions of cause and effect of homosexuality. While in the interwar period

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337 Maxine Joyce Campbell, College Scrapbook, box 1, Volume 3: “College Scrapbook, May 1945 – February 1947,” Mickey (Maxine) Campbell Welker papers, Center for Archival Collections, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio.
sexologists and advice writers had tended to see sexual orientation as inert, postwar psychoanalysts linked it to passage through a series of developmental stages. The quality of interpersonal relations between a caregiver and a child essentially determined the outcome. Exposed to the influence of a maladjusted parent, a child would grow up to be a homosexual. Moreover, this sexual deviant might reproduce his or her own pathology in the next generation. As Freudians believed that homosexuality could exist in a “latent” stage, they saw possible suspects even among heterosexually married spouses. These they saw actually as particularly dangerous because they would, as parents, reproduce their own psychic problems in the next generation.338

The implicit threat of homosexuality as a result of developmental failures made an increasingly diverse group of women susceptible to normative pressures. Ruth Silver and Alice Gorton here represent the group of usual suspects. As a result of their personal backgrounds, they had lacked exposure to the dating rituals of youth in their early adolescence. As newcomers to the collegiate setting, they experienced crises of their youthful sense of self. None of them explicitly mentioned a fear of homosexuality in their writings. Yet, although neither was attracted to her partner, both obviously felt they had to work at becoming normal, well-adjusted women. Feeling that they had missed out on opportunities in their early adolescence, they tried to make up for developmental deficits. The full extent to which normative pressures had increased in the postwar period, however, shows in the fact

that even class privilege no longer shielded a psychoanalytically literate woman from identity crisis. Unease or ambivalence towards the female sex role sufficed.

How difficulty it became for postwar college women to sustain a sense of normalcy shows poignantly in the papers of Laurie Worcester. At first sight, Laurie, a student at Smith College from 1948 till 1952, epitomized the upper class coed ideal. She hailed from New York’s Upper East Side and before Smith went to Brearly, a prestigious prep school in Manhattan. She liked to don lip-stick, dress up in a lady-like fashion, and kept an eye on her figure. She also had her share of proposals for dates. Her popularity on campus notwithstanding, Laurie referred to herself as potentially “abnormal.” Central to her fear was that she did not seem to feel the right way about her contacts with the opposite sex. On dates and at mixers, she felt self-conscious in the company of men. A mature woman, however, ought by now have moved beyond such a reticent attitude. As she had not, Laurie feared being stuck in an immature developmental stage. She would “die if [she] had to have a boy up [to her room]” the young woman confessed to her mother. Soon, her apprehensions about dating struck her as merely the tip of an iceberg of personality flaws. Like countless students in past and present who had left their families for college, she missed her parents. Already feeling self-conscious about her development, however, the ordinary pangs of homesickness suggested a problem on a deeper level. “Will I do this every time and never be able to graduate from home?” she asked her mother when she was back at Smith after a break. If she did not acquire some maturity soon, Laurie feared, she might “end up” as an old maid,
“taking care of [her mother] in a little house in Mt. Kisco.” If she did not sever the umbilical cord to the home soon, she feared she would have to lead life as a spinster.

Like Alice and Ruth, Laurie did not explicitly mention that she feared being a homosexual. Her fear that she might never manage to separate from her mother and the parental home, however, shows her concern about her maturity. To postwar audiences literate in the language of psychoanalysis, “immaturity” implied at least the possibility of developing homosexual leanings; either in a latent or an expressed version. As a consequence of the spread of psychoanalytically informed notions of development, the question of whether or not they were at ease with their feminine sex role therefore became a major worry of coeds.

The quality of normative pressures also changed in the postwar period as a result of changing courtship customs. Although dating had entered student culture already in the 1920s, the practice had already undergone substantial changes in the course of only a few decades. With early roots in urban, working-class neighborhoods, it entered the middle class through groups of self-consciously modern college youth, who, influenced by European psychology and sexology, saw mixed-sex leisure activities as part of their education in well-roundedness. This cohort gradually established dating as a part of campus life. Initially, however, especially the insistence of young women on their right to collect experiences in

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autonomous encounters with young men had struck educators as a disconcerting individualism that endangered normative family roles.\textsuperscript{340}

By the 1930s, college dating had lost the aura of individualism. It maintained, however, its link to elite prerogative. Tight Depression era budgets put caps on the adventurism of youth. On college campuses, affluent students affiliated with prestigious fraternities and sororities dominated social activities. With that, dating became one of the ways through which class and gender hierarchies were perpetuated. When sociologist Willard Waller looked at customs on the campuses of private and public institutions, for example, he found that the dating choices of students were restricted by the existence of an exclusive “rating” system. Highly conscious of their position in the “social scramble” for popularity, students remained within their status group. Male members of prestigious student organizations occupied the top positions. While they enjoyed “class A” ranks, the women they chose as dating partners gained their status by proxy. This system through which class and gender norms were reproduced, Waller in 1937 gave the label the “rating and dating complex.”\textsuperscript{341}

By the post World War II period, campus dating was once again changing. Gradually, the “rating and dating complex” gave way to a culture that valued commitment.


Campus publications noticed the change: As the University of Michigan fraternity paper *Michigander* contended in 1951, “pinning girls” had become “the most popular extracurricular activity even for the most resolute bachelors.” With that, the social standing of women was no longer linked to the number of highly rated men they managed to attract. It was, however, still linked to how well they performed their gender role. The successful coed was now a woman who had demonstrated that she was capable of holding a steady partner. The ultimate pinnacle of success was an engagement ring. A cartoon Smith College Alice Silverman pasted into her scrapbook in the early 1950s put a humorous spin on the increased normative pressures that ensued. The drawing shows two casually dressed young women observing feminine looking peers showing off their engagement rings. As the single women walk by, one says to the other “I’m beginning to feel insecure.”

College women whose ring fingers lacked adornment had good reasons to feel under pressure. The decisions of women who went steady or got engaged while still working on their degrees received substantial public support. An early commitment to one man indicated a readiness to enter into the family model of breadwinner-husband and domestic-wife that many public commentators saw as an essential prerequisite for national stability. Moreover, major authorities of the psychoanalytical profession applauded the pattern as well. According to leading scholar and neo-Freudian Helene Deutsch, a psychologically healthy woman would not only desire a child, she would also strive to create the most ideal condition for the reproduction of the next generation. In order to do so, she would aspire to enter relationships.

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that promised security. Against the background of this cultural context, the choices of women who already went steady during college and married in their best childbearing years enjoyed the support of pronatalists and mental health experts.

The influence of this new value system was readily noticeable on campus. Postwar college women among themselves promoted new ideals. In coed- and single-sex environments alike, female students celebrated those of their peers who had managed to attract a steady partner in ways that amounted to special kinds of graduation ceremonies. Laurie Worcester described the dynamic in a sarcastic letter to her parents: “Well, here we are again,” she wrote: “Sunday morning breakfast with the … Oh, you-lucky-girl-to-be-getting-engaged… girls.” “We have had one engagement this week,” she elaborated, “and K S’s is coming Saturday, much applauded by all.” While already during the war, female students had written to their families about the engagements of acquaintances and friends, they now provided statistics. “At least eight juniors or seniors had either been pinned, become engaged, or made plans for marriage after school was out,” wrote Alice Silverman about her second year at Smith College. In consequence, she added, in 1948 her entire class descended into “sophomore slump.” A few years later, another Smith student informed her family that the total number of her housemates who were engaged had risen to five, and a Mount Holyoke woman remarked: “About the 10th married girl in our class.”


Career-oriented college women, however, followed a separate path in their dating behavior. Surrounded by growing numbers of women eager to find a committed partner, they remained skeptical of the value of early attachment to a man. Judith Raskin, a Jewish-American who had attended public schools in New York City and Yonkers, New York, for example, was clearly a career-oriented student. She had picked Smith College because of the good reputation of its Music Department. A highly talented singer, she knew from the onset of her studies that she wanted a career in the opera. She was socially active and dated a number of young men at the same time. In a letter home, she explained her dating choices to her parents. She wrote: “It’s not that I’m fickle (oh no!) but I’ve seen Gary more recently than Mark + since I can’t see them both, I really should see the one I saw least recently.”

In January of 1946, she wrote her parents about a fraternity pin she thought she had lost at her last visit home. Yet even though accepting a pin from a young man usually went along with a mutual commitment to go steady, Judith kept seeing other men. About her peers’ increasing eagerness for finding a husband, she had only words of mild mockery. About the offspring from family she and her parents knew well, she wrote: “Practically all those Birches are getting married soon Bern tells me – The fools!” A month later she wrote in reference to a peer who got engaged: “Must say Judy S[,] is pulling a fast one. Never thought she’d be the first to fall (Sucker!).” In contrast to these women around her, Judith Raskin planned to use her college education for what she had planned: to hone her talent and lay the basis for a profession. She was planning to get out of college, establish herself in a career, and not allow

346 Judith Raskin to parents, 10-08-1945, box 2, folder 1-2, Judith Raskin papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Archives.

her hope for an eventual marriage to cut short her plans for development as a whole person.

“Fret not, fond parents,” she joked in a letter, “you have at least 4 – 6 more years to enjoy me in my youth. Notice, I didn’t say ‘to support’ me!!”

As Judith Raskin was writing immediately after the end of World War II, the lack of self-consciousness about the absence of a steady partner might indicate that pressures to go steady had not yet spread among coeds. There is evidence, however, that career-oriented college women of the 1950s were still not keen on committing themselves early to just one man. In fact, their journals suggests that at a time when gender conservatives promoted domesticity and motherhood as the pinnacle of development, students with professional plans associated it with a flight into security. Alice Gorton, the aspiring writer from an Ohio suburb, for example, in early 1952 reflected in her journal on her goals for her social life. She wanted, she wrote, “have many boys date me.” College weekends, she considered a success when men in the plural paid attention to her. “It was glorious,” she wrote after returning from one party as a freshman. “I kissed many - + wandered. … I charmed about 3 dateless boys. What an Experience.” She wanted “fun” but not “involvement” or “responsibility”. “More men please,” she wrote at a point when she was particularly content with college life.

Although Alice eagerly accepted dating opportunities, she was skeptical of the value of committing herself to one man early. She could not picture marriage as a particularly fulfilling state. After talking to a newlywed peer, she wrote that even this young spouse sounded “mildly bored” talking about “marriage & babies” and she described the nuptial

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348 Judith Raskin to parents, 11-07-1946, box 2, folder 1-2.

349 Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 65 (back), 32, 35 (back), box 2, folder 14, “January - August 1952.”
While a sophomore, Alice’s dreams for her own future centered not on families and children, but on having a glamorous job and an exciting love life. Recording a day-dream in her journal she wrote in the summer of 1952, that she wanted to “write successful salable stories,” land a “job on [The] New Yorker,” have an “apartment, beautiful clothes,” and love affairs at the side. “What a great life this would be.”

Happiness, this fantasy implies, in Alice’s mind came as a result of individualistic fulfillment, adventure, and fame; it was not brought on by being a loving wife and mother.

The views on marriage and commitment that Alice recorded in her journal were not consistent. At times, Alice did, in fact, dream about being someone’s wife. Her own longing for love, however, struck her as a weakness. Up to her senior year, her journal entries in which she described her wish to be the objects of a man’s love are almost always paired with or closely followed by reflections about what motives might be at the basis of such a longing on her part. As she speculated, it indicated a fear of the unknown and a flight into security:

Got scared coming down thinking of planning my future. Post-grad work – a job. This business of life is pretty terrifying – new vistas, from which I will never retreat. Look at marriage as a safe hole?

The link she drew between the marital state and a problematic flight into convention and conformity also shows in an entry she entitled “Criteria for a ‘Nice’ Girl:”

She has the goal in life to prepare herself as best she can to make herself worthy of some ‘nice’ boy and to bring up his children to be ‘nice’ people. … She believes a woman’s place is in the home. … She has a set of strict ethical values gleaned from parents, church, and … social mores, to which she

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350 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 84 (back), box 2, folder 15, “January - August 1952.”

351 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 132, box 2, folder 15, “January - August 1952.”

352 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 121, box 2, folder 15, “January - August 1952.”
rigidly adheres to + will defend as the ‘right way of life.’ … She is in the main a conformist because she knows that she will in the end be happiest that way.  

The frequent reference to what was considered “nice” and “the right way” indicates that Alice was aware that many of her contemporaries evaluated the ideal roles of women very different from herself. The label “nice,” she expected, went to women who wanted from college little more than preparation for motherhood and domesticity. She could not help but wonder, however, whether the choices of nice girls were not simply the effect of their susceptibility to tradition and conventions. Her journal thus suggests that in spite of the spread of commitment around her, she had internalized the need to be non-conforming and individualistic just as acutely as heteronormative pressures. In a marriage with traditional division of roles, she suspected, a woman would waste her potential.

That Alice was not exceptional in her views, we can see in the writings of Margaret Hall. When this woman started her studies at Bryn Mawr in 1951, she was already engaged and expected to drop out of college before completing her degree. After a long and painful process of soul searching delineated in the pages of her diary, however, she broke her engagement. As a major motivation, she named her fear that she would cut short her development. “I cannot marry now. Perhaps this means never. Perhaps it does,” she wrote. Even if she was missing out on her one chance for marital happiness, Margaret felt she had to risk it because something important was at stake: her own personal growth. As she wrote about one night when she missed her former fiancée:

Last night I ached to run to him [Bill] and feel the arms about me, and the love and goodness. But that is harbor, and I have just set out to sea. That is

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353 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 65 back, box 2, folder 15, “January - August 1952.”
safety, and rest, and peace and the end of mutual striving with this passionate
seeking, and that is the death of being forced to learn.  

Margaret subsequently received more offers for marriage. However, she turned down
a total of nine candidates who proposed to her. This included a man whom she, by the time I
met her in 2003, remembered as one of her life’s great loves. That she refused marriage,
although each time it caused her considerable personal turmoil, shows the strength of her
conviction that there was something suspicious about early commitment: it would, she
feared, hamper her development. No longer “forced” to learn, she would stagnate. She was
able to imagine arriving eventually in the “harbor” that was marriage. At first, however, she
needed to concern herself with her own individual growth and interests.

Margaret, like Alice, was not consistent in her views. She, too, experienced bouts of
longing for love and she clearly felt normative pressures coming from her peers. Like the
Smith College student, however, she also justified her own choices as legitimate departures
from a pattern that might be right for some women but ought not to be followed just for the
sake of convention. In 1955, for example, she wrote to an aunt that more and more of the
women around her were preparing for marriage:

All my best friends are getting engaged this month, it seems, the traditional
pattern symbolized in lovely (tiny) solitaire diamonds and fixed futures. I am
– eternally – slightly disengaged over the whole process. A nice position
because it is so voluntary. …

Emphasizing that she was “voluntary” in her abstention from a common pattern,
Margaret here thus argued that she was single now because she had consciously stepped on

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354 Margaret Hall, diary, entry dated 04-26-1953, diary vol. 7, “Miscellaneous, 1949-
1953,” private collection.

355 Margaret Hall to “Aunt Julia,” postcard dated 02-21-1955, private collection.
this path. While in her diary she did not dwell on the “conformist” values of her peers in the same way Alice Gorton did, her entry still indicates that she shared with the Smith student a desire to separate herself in a positive manner from the women around her. Her friends might prefer the safety of “fixed” roles. By contrast, she was not afraid to embrace the freedom to make individualistic decisions. Like Alice, she noticed that a “traditional pattern” was having a renaissance. Like her peer, however, she was also acutely aware of a countervailing expectation that she ought to use her opportunities in college to develop her intellectual and academic potential to the fullest. This goal, she felt, she could not meet by spending her social time going steady.

For many college women, avoiding commitment to just one man was certainly often motivated by practical reasons. This would have been particularly the case for those who lacked access to money. Scholarship student and English major Sandra Iger, for instance, was like Margaret already committed to one particular young man when she started her studies at Mount Holyoke. She had met Richard Kohler as a high school student in Queens. In 1957, Richard then went to Columbia University and Sandra departed for the small town of South Hadley, Massachusetts. Whenever they were united in New York City, both acted like a steady couple. For their separation, however, they had made a “little agreement.” Both would meet other people of the opposite sex and “have fun.” It is not clear who came up with this first. At least initially, Richard seems to have enjoyed the opportunities for varied dates more than Sandra. Yet, although Sandra found many of her dates with “college boys” rather “dull,” she continued to stick to the agreement. Had she and Richard insisted on exclusivity, she would have lost out on most of the opportunities for excitement campus life had to offer. Formal events, dances, and fraternity parties, were reserved for couples. Although women
among themselves often went to movies or soda parlors, Sandra’s lack of financial resources would have put even this option out of her reach.\footnote{Sandra Iger to Richard Kohler, 09-21-1957, 10-21-1957, box 1, folder 3, September – October 1957, Sandra Iger Kohler papers, Mount Holyoke College Archives.}

Financial reasons also factored into why Indiana farmers’ daughter and scholarship student June Calendar did not limit her dating opportunities to one partner. In 1958, she got engaged to a man named Don, with whom she had been going out for some time. This notwithstanding, she continued to see other men. In her case, no “little agreement” sanctioned her actions. Yet although she was self-conscious about her lack of commitment to Don, she also did not want to miss out on opportunities. As she mused in her journal at one point, she “suppose[d she] ought to quit dating Jack.” She could not “see any reason to miss the number of movies [she] would miss,” however. A few days later, she went out with yet another man whom she did not tell about her engagement. For this, she attracted the criticism of a female peer who found out about it. The scolding did not cause June to change her behavior, however.\footnote{June Calender, diary, entry dated 04-10-1958, 05-12-1958, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.} Like other women, too, she felt she had a right to fulfill a personal desire rather than to follow convention.

Although financial circumstances certainly influenced the dating behavior of many women, I still argue that the ideology of individualism was a contributing factor. That this discourse left a strong trace among women on college campuses is corroborated by Mirra Komarovsky’s 1953 study of Barnard College students. In her survey, the professor of sociology found the same division among women in regards to postgraduate goals that my subjects also noted. “The largest group” of about half of the respondents, she writes, “looks
forward to motherhood and homemaking as the ideal design … without any misgivings or reservations.” Only a minority of 20% of the respondents to her survey fell into the category of “determined career girls.” Yet, the rhetoric of individualism threw in doubt the validity of one-size-fits-all prescriptions for the female gender role. College women, found Komarovsky, generally tended to “oppose any restrictions” in regards to how a peer wanted to organize her life after graduation. “No woman,” they argued, “should be coerced by law or public opinion to follow either [a] traditional or [a] modern [life path].” The “decision” on whether to have a full time career, to combine a profession with marriage, or to lead an exclusively domestic life should be “left to the individuals concerned.” Responding to her findings, Komarovsky warned that these young women did not seem aware of the lack of material and structural support for women who wanted to have it all. This lack of realism notwithstanding, her survey supports that ideals of individualism constituted a strong counter-discourse to the promotion of traditional female roles.

That college women were susceptible to ideals of individualism makes sense considering the intellectual environment of their time. As a previous chapter has shown, female students were prominently exposed to cutting-edge disciplines like culture and personality study and to cultural criticism. Central arguments of theorists and writers from within these disciplines could easily be interpreted as challenges to the promotion of social adjustment to a conventional female role. The work Escape from Freedom, by émigré analyst Erich Fromm, which, as their private papers make clear, many college women of the 1950s read with interest, serves as an example. As he argued here, “the majority of normal

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358 Mirra Komarovsky, Women in the Modern World; Their Education and Their Dilemmas (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953), 92-99.
individuals” responded to the “fear of aloneness and powerlessness” that accompanied the modern condition by taking flight in conformity. As a “mechanism of escape” a person “adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns; and … therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect [him] to be.” Fromm labeled this widespread and automatic response to confusion and fear “normal”. He did not, however, attribute to it a high value from the standpoint of personal or social development. The ultimate in “human strength and happiness,” he instead argued, an individual achieved by understanding the true make-up of his or her personality, talents, and needs and by choosing a life path accordingly. Personal integrity in his work was a greater virtue than giving the appearance of being “normal.”

Fromm’s theories clearly reverberated in the writings of women who argued that their conscious departure from common, rigid, or fixed patterns was a virtue rather than a developmental flaw. Young women with goals and outlooks they perceived as marginal in the culture of their peers just gained from the postwar discourse positive encouragement and they could draw on widely read theorists in defense of their aims.

Women looking for discursive support to step on a different path in life than the one adjustment psychologists imagined for them could find further fodder in Freudianism. As outlined in the first chapter, the neo-Freudians who continued Freud’s work in the United States generally promoted the traditional female role. The founding father of psychoanalysis himself, however, did not portray allegedly typical feminine values in a light likely to appeal to career-oriented college women. As Freud argued in his 1930 Civilization and Its

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Discontents, women had been the main caretakers of the family throughout human history. As such, they had become more invested than men in the values of love and security. These female interests were necessary for the survival of the species. For society to advance, however, these values ought not to become dominant. In more advanced societies, the “very women who in the beginning, laid the foundations of civilization by the claims of their love” now “come into opposition to civilization and display their retarding and restraining influence.” Trying to keep the male members of the household tied to the security of the hearth, they interfered with their individuation and prevented them from being able to do “the work of civilization” that Freud saw as “the business of men.”  The influence of this critical view of allegedly typical female values and interests in American culture shows clearly in the general discussion about the welfare state, consumerism, and national strength at a time of war and Cold War that I have outlined in the first chapter. At a time when proponents of adjustment psychology encouraged women to modify their expectations and to conform to conventional social roles, classic Freudian psychoanalysis and the literature on conformism thus cast a critical light on the patterns most common and typical in a culture. As such, they offered career-oriented college women powerful incentives to abstain from conventions they saw as spreading among their fellow female peers.

The popularity of the ideal of non-conformity among female students suggests that against the background of their specific historical situation the messages about the ideal role of college women was growing increasingly conflicted. As the link between the “work of civilization” and the “business of men” in the work of Freud illustrates, women were not the

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intended audience of the postwar debate about individualism. The literature on conformity cast the alleged *male* flight into security as a problem. At least a substantial proportion of women, however, missed the gendered thrust of this discourse. This was likely a product of their specific historical circumstances. Cold War rhetoric portrayed the educated young in general as a group with special skills and responsibilities. Moreover, as the last chapter illustrated, the growing political divisions in the nation heightened among students the sense of being a group apart. Here, non-traditional students especially experienced themselves as, by virtue of their education, more rational and better informed than family and peers from home. The postwar celebration of individualism thus intersected with the elitism in the collegiate setting to provide powerful disincentives for women to contend themselves with an allegedly typical role. Evaluating behavior portrayed as *typical* or even *normal* through an elitist lens, they judged it as merely *average* and lacking in cultural importance. The individualism that public commentators portrayed as a prototypically American trait, by contrast, they saw as the mark of a superior person.

The hierarchy of values inherent in the promotion of individualism unfortunately entailed the devaluation of the roles that most women in the post World War II U.S. still fulfilled. When college women claimed supreme self-awareness and personal integrity as a justification for non-traditional goals, they easily denigrated the choices of a majority of their sex. Ideals of non-conformity and individualism thus fed a negative image of women as a group in the culture-at-large. In Alice Gorton’s journal entry “Criteria for a ‘Nice’ Girl,” we have already seen one young woman describing the choices of the majority of her peers as the result of a “rigid” and “conformist” outlook that in the context of the postwar intellectual discourse was marked as distinctly negative. The writings of Indiana farmers’ daughter June
Calendar offer further evidence for such a dynamic. June had returned home to attend a friend’s wedding during Thanksgiving break of 1956. In some respect at least, this visit was a disappointment. While June in college had felt she had made important developmental progress to become an educated, albeit also feminine and sophisticated woman, the hierarchy of popularity in Versailles had not changed. She felt once again like an “outcast.” Turning to her journal to vent her frustration, she focused on one young woman who enjoyed the reputation of being particularly “cute.” Linking adherence to conventional gender roles to a flawed personality and lack of education, she wrote: “I don’t like her. … She’s strictly low class – the kind who has not training enough or has enough drive to do anything but get married. And she isn’t cute at all!”

Like Alice Gorton before here, June here insinuated that women with outlooks different from her own had a somewhat deficient personality. Her peer had no drive to develop her potential. Because of this lack of stamina, she would remain a member of an uneducated lower class. June, by contrast, claimed to have, by virtue of her own superior personality, the determination to transcend her upbringing and gain access to upper middle-class status.

The defensiveness in June’s diary entry should also, however, give us pause. Diaries do not provide unmediated insights into writers’ minds and souls. In fact, diary writing is often taken up at a moment of personal crisis. Especially in the kinds of introspective journals that I use, diarists often try out different personas. Writers in these instances function as their own “mythmakers” who often draw on literary models to put a positive spin on a situation.

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361 June Calendar, diary, entry dated 11-25-1956.
experiences as painful. When young women thus compared themselves to peers who had different views, they might not necessarily show a stable sense of identity but express their uncertainty. Women’s insistence on the superiority of their outlook might in fact reflect the extent to which they felt under challenge. And indeed, although the discourse of individualism offered career-oriented young women leeway in defending their choices, the strategy had a pronounced weakness. As in American political culture, the ideology was so strongly linked to ideal male interests and traits, when adopted by women it easily carried a taint of gender deviance.

The extent to which students with professional aspirations insisted on the superiority of their interests indicates that they were aware of potential challenges to their strategy. Domestic-minded students for their part, however, could also no longer refer with confidence to the naturalness of their choices. In their case, the misogynist portrayal of conformist traditional wives and clinging mothers raised the stakes to find new justifications for old roles. Students with domestic interests were thus pushed to the defensive by the same ambivalent discourse on gender than “career girls”. That both groups of women tried to resolve internal conflict by throwing doubt on the value of alternative choices is suggested by Mirra Komarovsky’s study. Here, she cited a representative statement of a member of the majority group of homeward bound women in response to women with professional goals: “Of course some women dislike housework and may be happy working, but thank heavens, I

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Komarovsky did not further elaborate on why this student was thankful for her lack of dislike for traditional female tasks. The quote echoes, however, the contemporary literature that linked a woman’s distaste for domestic responsibilities to a neurotic internalization of male values. For postwar audiences, such a mindset carried just as many negative connotations than the reference to rigid conformism utilized by “career girls.” There is thus evidence that, because of the mixed messages coeds encountered about their cultural role, young women of various outlooks were pitted against each other.

The diversity of views on gender in the student culture, however, also opened up opportunities for women to create support-networks. In fact, in spite of signs of tensions between college women, diaries and letters show that career-oriented students gained important support from female peers. Once women grew aware of the diversity of outlooks among students, one way to deal with confusion was by actively seeking the company of like-minded individuals. Non-traditional students bonded in particular with women who also expressed a desire for careers and who shared their intellectual interests. Her honors course of study in English literature, for instance, put Ohio suburbanite Alice Gorton in touch with a number of like-minded women at Smith. With a woman nicknamed “Poof,” she exchanged

 Komarovsky, *Women in the Modern World*, 93. Influential postwar psychiatrist Karl Menninger echoed this evaluation of women’s choices. He conceded that some women might not want a child. Childlessness in a woman, however, was a phenomenon he only sanctioned under certain circumstances. For some women, he wrote, it was certainly better not to procreate. Here, he included especially women who were psychologically too disturbed or lacked the intelligence and the right kind of home to offer a child all that was necessary to thrive. For all other women, however, Menninger argued that only an extraordinary alternative calling justified childlessness. Unless her aptitude for a profession or art justified why a psychologically and physiologically healthy woman would refuse to make a procreative contribution to the nation, he could not see the lives of childless women as equal in value to those of well-adjusted mothers. See Karl A. Menninger, *Love Against Hate* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1942).
opinions on books and authors. Poof aspired to a profession in the arts and at the time she befriended Alice toyed with the thought of transferring to a more career-oriented institution. Like Alice, she was infatuated with literature critical of conformism and drawn to authors who celebrated individualism. While Philip Wylie was among Alice’s favorite authors, Poof favored Russian émigré Ayn Rand. In particular, she called her 1943 novel *The Fountainhead*, her “bible.” In this work, Rand cast her chief protagonist “Howard Roark,” loosely modeled on the modernist architect Frank Lloyd Wright, as the personification of an independent-minded non-conformist and Poof strove to live up to his example.  

From Alice’s journal, we glean that she saw in Poof a role model and a confidante. When both met, Poof was already more confident about her talent. While Alice was still hesitant to expose her creative writing to critics, for example, Poof willingly showed hers to peers. Outspoken and daring, the woman at first intimidated Alice. In talks with Poof, however, the latter gradually grew more confident. Eventually, she felt she could talk to her as “an equal.” As she wrote in 1953: “Good talk with Poofy today … I talk to her as an equal finally, which is a very good thing.” A little later, she gushed: “She is the star across the sky. She pushes me to think.” She would even go so far as to say that: “If it [was] possible to love a girl, [she] believe[d] [she] love[d] her.” At the same time, Alice formed a similarly close relationship with a woman named “Judy,” who was also majoring in literature. Both felt a

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364 Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, on inspiring and/or supportive interactions with female friends see for instance 12 (back), box 3, folder 17, “September 1952 - February 1953,” 65, 71 (back), box 3, folder 18, “September 1952 - February 1953.” For Alice’s reflections on Poof’s philosophy see diary, entry not dated, 82 (back), box 3, folder 21, “February - September 1953.”

365 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 7 (back), box 3, folder 20, “February - September 1953.”
bond because of the interests and outlooks they had in common. They attended talks and classes together and discussed books and term papers as well as their social life. Judy fondly nicknamed Alice “Gort” and wrote her letters when separated from her during vacations. “Je vous miss muchly,” Judy joked in a letter in March of 1953 and called her Spring break vacation an “exile” during which she was separated from a peer she felt understood her like few others around her.366

Bonding with women who shared her interests and outlook also became an important element of Susan Sperry Borman’s experience at Stanford University. This becomes clear from a diary entry she made right after receiving a letter from a female peer in 1956: “It is a thing to realize, suddenly, in just talking with a person or through reading a letter that their minds are searching and working just as yours is.” The woman she was referring to in this case was “Mary Charlotte” whose writing clearly impressed her: “that letter sounded … wise …, searching and discussing,” she wrote and added that she “would like to sit and talk to [Mary Charlotte] at a round table or some other academic place.”367 From the same entry, we also learn about “Holly,” another female peer, who became very important to Susan as a friend and source of inspiration: “I’m talking about … how Holly and I have been talking about the letter,” she wrote. She expressed some problems with Holly’s personality and style. As other journal entries indicate, Holly had successfully cultivated the persona of a self-confident career-bound woman, which the introverted Susan found a bit hard to take. She

366 Alice Gorton, diary, letter pasted on 21 (back), box 3, folder 20, “February - September 1953.”

367 Susan Sperry Borman, diary, entry dated 10-19-1956, Susan Sperry Borman Delattre papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.
also clearly felt, however, that Holly was a like-minded person and hoped that she would become a friend.

It’s funny about how I react to Holly. I don’t give much credit to what she says when she says it, or her ideas, but then I find myself doing and/or thinking the same things, sometime later. Perhaps it’s because I don’t think much of her manner of self-expression. But what she expresses is true more than I know now, and … I’ll never find a more faithful friend.\textsuperscript{368}

Susan and Alice’s descriptions of female peers suggest that career-oriented college women found among fellow coeds not only friends, but role models. They were drawn to women who shared their interests and goals and who projected confidence to the outside. From such women, they gained important support. For one, these women could assure them that they, too, had the potential to lead unconventional lives. Stanford coed Susan, for instance, gave Holly her journal to read and gained confidence after the friend’s positive feedback. Alice Gorton’s self-assurance, meanwhile, also grew when she experienced herself as conversing as an equal with a woman she admired. Moreover, when insecure young women found same-sex peers to admire, they also gained proof that their own dreams were not built on thin air. Believing in the intellectual potential of a female friend showed that a woman had in fact the potential to be academically and intellectually gifted. Giving positive feedback to female peers could serve to affirm hopes that untypical female life courses were in the realm of the possible. Considering that in the formal curriculum, women were rarely if ever mentioned as relevant producers of culture, science, or art, such affirmation was important.\textsuperscript{369}

\textsuperscript{368} Susan Sperry Borman, diary, entry dated 10-19-1956.

\textsuperscript{369} Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 18, box 3, folder 20, “February - September 1953.”
Like-minded female friends also offered important assurance that it was possible to combine brains and femininity. The peers career-oriented college women bonded with were, like them, active in the campus social and dating scene. They did not present themselves as bookish grinds, but as sophisticated, modern, individualists. By personal example, they showed that smart women were appealing to men. Moreover, they could lend important verbal support in times when insecurities spiked. Dressing for a date one evening in November of 1956, for example, Susan Sperry Borman’s had felt insecure about her appearance. Her friend Holly, however, assured her that she did not lack feminine appeal. How important this service was to Susan shows clearly in her journal: She had hoped she would “look nice tonight,” Susan wrote. Holly assured her that she had exceeded this goal by far:

she told me that I looked like an angel, and how gracious I was. She is so dear, so dear. … No one can make me feel so wonderful by saying things about me as Holly can.  

Alice Gorton’s friend Judy offered similar assurance. Alice struggled with weight issues throughout her stay at Smith. Constantly trying to lose pounds but never quite content with the results, her friend assured her that she was not only thin, but downright “emaciated.” Although a modern day feminist familiar with the prevalence of eating disorders among female undergraduates cringes when reading such words, Alice was likely to take the comment as a compliment. She also clearly tried to serve as a supportive influence in Judy’s life. As the latter wrote from her Spring break “exile,” she would find it “awful” if she did not have her “Gort” to “write and moan to. Ending her letter with a poem to the friend, she asked her to:

370 Susan Sperry Borman, diary, entry dated, 11-09-1956.
... try to be patient with me
For, I need your faith in me
Until I can get some in myself.371

Julie’s letter to Alice illustrates once more that college women tried to actively create support networks of like-minded peers by whom they felt understood. Yet her mentioning of her lack of faith in herself also reflects how difficult the postwar collegiate setting made it for a young woman to develop a sure sense of herself.

Although friendships between career-bound college students existed, there is proof that the bonds between these women stood on a shaky foundation. Alice’s journal contains ample evidence that friends rallied to each other’s support, especially after encounters with fellow coeds who disparaged the value of their goals or criticized their behavior. The arguments through which they tried to reassure each other, however, indicate the extent to which they felt under pressure. In conversations with friends, just as in their private diary entries, women could thus once again justify departures from a norm only through recourse to notions of superiority. In her journal, for instance, Alice Gorton described her response after she noticed that groups of her peers shunned her friend Poof because of her untypical goals and personality. Alice tried to give her support: She had “faith” that Poof would “do something great sometime,” and stressed that she “genuinely liked her.” She also reminded her of their shared belief in individualism and critical self-awareness. Some women might have different outlooks and they seemed to be happier than the ambitious peer. But this, she emphasized, was just because they did not have her potential. Quoting her own words, she said she had “gestured towards the living room” of their dorm and said: “‘Even though you

may be … unhappy, be glad you aren’t a vegetable like those… [followed by a list of names].”  

How Poof responded to this statement, we don’t know. If she accepted the idea that personal integrity was ultimately worth the price of loneliness and suffering, she took on a high standard to live up to.

That the way in which Alice tried to support Poof in the face of adversity might not have been exceptional is suggested by the journal of Susan at Stanford. In this case, one of Susan’s peers had insinuated that she was suffering from a personality flaw. “I think girls can be the meanest things in the world,” Susan confided in her journal.” As preceding journal entries show, prior to this incident she had publicly criticized one of her fellow coeds. While the diary is silent on what exactly transpired between the two, it is clear that Susan already felt that some of her peers found her opinionated, competitive, and insufficiently social. Already then, Susan had feared that with these judgments, they were calling her femininity into question. She began to fear that she might appear “sharp and striking and rather hard” and that she might turn into an outsider. These fears only gained support through her argument with the fellow coed. One evening when Susan returned from a shower to her dorm room, the student greeted her with the words: “‘Susie, you are queer. You are really queer.’” Susan, who recounted the incident in her diary, was shocked and hurt. She knew, she wrote, that “girls” tended to “say things like you’re queer to make themselves feel better.” The comment did, however, bring to her

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372 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 123 (back), folder 19, “September 1952 - February 1953.”

373 Susan Sperry Borman, diary, entry dated 10-02-1956.
mind the danger that “all [her] thinking and everything will make [her] such an individual that [she]’ll be alone.”

In the midst of Susan’s personal crisis, like-minded female friends rallied to her side. Like Alice’s support of Poof, their advice rested on the ideal that because Susan’s outlook and personality were superior to those of her challengers, the price of ostracism was worth paying. “Molly came in to talk (sic) to me,” wrote Susan. As she assured her, she understood her conflict well: she was “afraid” to alienate her peers. This was a price, though, that she ultimately had to pay to keep her personal integrity and individuality intact: “And then she told me she was alone now,” wrote Susan, “and that it was the most wonderful feeling.” Susan’s insecurities persisted. Yet, she took Molly’s words seriously. In the diary entries she made right after the above incident, she pondered the possibility that she might in fact end up an isolated “queer.” She consoled herself that as long as there were people like Molly who shared her outlook, she would not have to suffer such a fate. Moreover, she felt she owed it to herself and others to remain committed to her goals. She believed she had the potential for excellence. As such, she also had a “responsibility.” In a diary entry in which she reflected on her conflict between conformist pressures and her sense of her own personality and goals she wrote:

You have got to believe, Susie, that something good and excellent and above all others is going to come out of what you are doing. Even though you feel it pull you away, even though it makes you feel abnormal and insufficient and out of it, you have got to do it, because by not doing it, you are another (sic), and you’re not working with what is inside of you. Maybe I feel as though I don’t want to do it, but I’ve got a responsibility

374 Susan Sperry Borman, diary, entry dated 10-12-1956.
and I have to forge ahead and do it, do it, do it, because that’s the way I do things, with all of myself and take the consequences as they come.\textsuperscript{375}

It was after having been called “queer” that Susan sought a closer affiliation with the outspoken Holly. She increasingly felt a bond with this woman by virtue of their shared idiosyncrasies. “I think I’ve been underestimating Holly way way too much,” she wrote and continued that: “for all her talking and expressing, there is a lot there, a lot, and I think I’m going to appreciate it more and more.” As in the case of Alice and her circle of friends at Smith, the bonds that tied together Susan and her female confidantes thus depended on a shared sense of superiority over women with conservative ideas about gender and the shape and purpose of their education.

Although the personal writings of some women suggest that they tried to create support networks with like-minded female friends, their statements also indicate how precarious was the foundation for the bonds between these women. My evidence here is mainly anecdotal. Same-sex friendships among postwar college women, while they received ample attention during earlier periods, have so far escaped the attention of historians. For my own study, I found few women who discussed their same-sex friends in any detail. June Calendar, Margaret Hall, and Dori Shaffer, for instance, barely ever mention other female students in their writings. We should not interpret these silences to mean that same-sex friends did not matter in these women’s lives, though. A close reading of Margaret Hall’s journal shows that she had at least one peer whom she considered like-minded and with whom she exchanged views and opinions. An isolated entry from her senior year says: “Judy M[.] is one of the few females I know who’s either frank enough or like enough,” to talk to

\textsuperscript{375} Susan Sperry Borman, diary, entry dated 10-12-1956.
her in a way that made her feel “understood.” UCLA student Dori Schaffer, meanwhile, also rarely mentions other women in her journal. From her mother, who annotated her daughter’s journal before publication, however, the reader learns that Dori had a close friend named “Rose” to whom she turned for support and who joined her in many events and activities. The relative absence of female friends as topics in women’s writings is therefore not necessarily a reflection of reality. Like the frequent recourse to notions of superiority by some women, it illustrates the difficult environment in which these young women operated.

Postwar homophobia imposed limits on the extent to which women would turn to members of their sex for comfort and support. Among psychoanalytically literate youth in particular, close attachments between women were stigmatized. In support of this thesis, one of the comments in Alice Gorton’s diary is telling. As she wrote about her friend Poof, she would say she loved her “if it was possible” to have such feelings for “another girl” (emphasis mine). Alice was, however, not sure if the feelings women had for each other could possibly be labeled “love.” As postwar experts and common opinion would tell her, intense feelings ought to be directed at a member of the opposite sex. Similar emotions for a same-sex friend were suspect. In her journal, Alice Gorton was not afraid to ponder the possibility that she might feel love for an admired female. Yet, with fears of homosexuality at a new height during the post World War II period, many female students would have

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376 Margaret Hall, diary entry, dated 04-17-1955, diary vol. 13, “Bryn Mawr Senior 1955.”


378 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 7 (back), folder 20, “February - September 1953.”
censored themselves when reflecting on female friends for concern of what their feelings might show about themselves.

How difficult it could be for a culturally literate young woman to be at ease with her feelings for a same-sex peers shows in a number of sources. The letters of Janet Brown, the Mount Holyoke student who after college came out as a lesbian, give no hint that her feelings for other women might have been in any way intense. Social events she mentioned to her parents always included men. Whether this was because Janet at this time did not feel attracted to other women or was censoring herself is impossible to ascertain.\(^{379}\) That a student would have been well-advised to fake enthusiasm about heterosocial campus events even if she did not feel it, on the other hand, is clear. Already in 1945, Patricia Beck at Bennington College had been intensely self-conscious about the way in which her environment would label her friendship with the young wife of a faculty member if her frequent talks and visits were known: “Long talk about Barbara about things. She made me feel good. I admire her more than any woman I know. Psych. doesn’t approve.”\(^{380}\) With growing dispersion of psychoanalytic advice in the mass media, the stigmatization of female friendships only increased. In the case of a young Antioch woman studying at Antioch in the 1950s, the fact that she preferred associating with one close friend instead of groups of women already led to rumors of lesbianism spreading.\(^{381}\) College women were thus well advised to downplay the importance of women in their lives and a fear of discovering feelings they would have seen

\(^{379}\) Janet Brown papers, Mount Holyoke College Archives.


as problematic and suspect might very well have kept them from writing about same-sex peers in introspective journals or in letters home.

Fashioning themselves as a superior group was part of a strategy of female peers to ward off potential challengers in a homophobic environment. This tactic had clear limits and pitfalls. By claiming to be exceptional specimen of their sex, women created extremely high expectations for themselves and their friends. The need to live up to standards of excellence could easily strain relationships between women and later chapters will develop this point further. In addition to pressures caused by their notions of exceptionalism, students’ internalization of heteronormative standards also prevented them from seeking too close or too exclusive support from other women. With pressures to demonstrate to self and other that they were unusually self-aware and gifted rather than neurotic, career-oriented college women thus did ultimately not feel that they could or ought to live without men.

While friendships between career-oriented female students might have rested on shaky foundations, they still played an important role in assuring young women of the legitimacy of their goals and outlook. That students with professional aspirations felt they had access to a working support network shows in the fact that they did not try to hide untypical interests in their interactions with men. On the contrary, when I reconstructed interactions between dating partners, I actually found that women expected from the men they dated the same support they gained from female friends. Personal doubts and conflicts notwithstanding, they thus believed that at least some college men would agree with them that a woman could be attractive and an intellectual at the same time.

A number of diaries allow us to reconstruct how the expectations of writers in regards to their interactions with men developed over time. From Alice Gorton’s journal, for
instance, it is clear that after the newness and thrill of her first dates had worn off, she began to distinguish between first and second “rate” men. The men she ranked as second class resemble her first date at “Clifton Beach”: They “serve[d] the purpose” of giving her an opportunity to practice her adult sex role. About the men she went out with in these cases, she wrote that she was “pleased” to receive their attention but she was not “thrilled or excited” about them. She was actually “a bit bored” by them. Mainly, she kept accepting them because she preferred them to the alternative of spending a weekend without male company: “Horrors!” she wrote when, at a rare occasion, she found herself without “a date for [the] coming weekend.”

While especially at first, dates had an alibi function for Alice, she soon met men by whom she clearly wanted to be coveted as a dating partner. These were men she labeled as intelligent and sophisticated, and whom she considered to fall into a first “rate” category. By the end of her first year at Smith, a Dartmouth College student named “Richard” had become a frequent subject in her journal. In her own words, Alice described him as “fascinating,” and as a “great light” and “brain” who “work[ed] on … many levels of subtlety” in discussions. She also wrote about a man named “George” that he was “extremely intelligent” and that she had enjoyed her date a lot. A “Chase,” meanwhile, had impressed her for his knowledge of Talcott Parsons and she hoped he would take her out again.

382 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 28 (back), 9-10 (back), box 1, folder 6, “December - May 1951.”

383 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 40 (back), box 1, folder 7, “December - May 1951.”

384 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 28 (Dick), box 2 folder 14, “January - August 1952,” 8 (George), 41 (Chase), box 1, folder 6, “December - May 1951.”
Alice’s diary provides evidence about her own behavior on these dates. As she at a later point quoted a friend who had observed her attitude, she was no “maternal and admiring [foil] for … lovers.” Instead, she was “assertive” and “showed [her] own wit.”385 Letters of her dating partners confirm that this was also how her male friends perceived Alice. Dartmouth College student Richard, for example, wrote: “You are one of the few people that interest me… and your letters interest me because I like to hear what’s going on in your mind.” A “Marc” Alice was seeing in the spring of 1952 also found her ideas intriguing: “Tell me about yourself, your dates, your school, your latest ideas, and above all, your … thoughts about life, sex, communism, death or what have you.” At about the same time, Alice had also told a Princeton date that she had been “somewhat of a tomboy” and that she planned to “be a writer.” The man was intrigued: “I would be most interested to read one of your compositions,” she wrote her.386 Although it is possible that Alice pasted only letters into her journal that showed her in a flattering light, she apparently went on a good number of dates during which she was not trying to hide her own interests, goals, or intelligence.

Margaret Hall at Bryn Mawr had dating encounters of a similar quality. Although she arrived on campus already prepared to don the role of an educated wife-to-be, Margaret’s ideas about what she expected from her interactions with men changed over time. Until the end of her sophomore year, she remained engaged to Bill, a student at the United States

385 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 107 (back), box 3, folder 21, “February - September 1953.”

Naval Academy at Annapolis. When starting her education in 1951, she wrote about him that he was her “very dearest friend.”387 In the course of her studies, however, Margaret began to doubt that her fiancée and she were intellectually compatible. He did not share her growing interest in literature, poetry, and philosophy. As she remarked in retrospect about him, he thought that the main purpose of her stay at Bryn Mawr was to turn her into an educated wife and mother. That this was not what she herself wanted her education to yield, Margaret developed gradually while meeting other men than Bill.

Ironically, it was Margaret’s fiancée himself who introduced her to the first of a number of college men who suggested to her that a man and a woman could be on the same page intellectually. In 1951, Bill introduced her to Frank, another Annapolis student, at the Princeton-Navy football game. Frank, too, had brought a date. Yet although his female partner sat right next to him in a crowded diner, he talked mostly to Margaret who was intrigued by his wide-ranging literary interests. Her first good impression was only confirmed when Bill informed her that Frank was “a star man,” the Annapolis term for a student who ranked “in the top 5%” of his class. How important this information was in Margaret’s mind shows in her memory of the conversation. Years later, Margaret still remembered that Bill told her about Frank’s “IQ of 175.” Then, Frank sent her a notebook of his favorite quotations. After reading what she described as “succinct quotations concerning ethics, aesthetics, philosophy, and human relations,” she felt as if she had met “a kindred spirit, a soul mate.” As in Alice’s case, letters by male dating partners show that she was not trying to hide her intelligence or conceal her interests. Frank and her would not see each other again.

for three years. When they met again, however, they instantly reconnected. The letters Frank wrote her right after their reunion shows that her intelligence and her broad interests had been the main reason why he had not been able to forget the meeting. It had been “clear to him” he described his first impression, “that [she] had … a brain (and used it).”

Margaret broke her engagement two month after running once again into the “star man” Frank. To turn their reunion into the reason for why she ended her relationship, however, would be simplistic. In fact, Margaret’s expectations of relationships with men changed over time as a result of her overall college experience. She soon developed a sense of herself as a potential future scholar and intellectual. Moreover, she met other college men with whom she had conversations about intellectual and literary topics that she never had with Bill. With evidence that it was possible for men and women to converse as intellectual equals piling up, she found more and more faults with her fiancée. He could not keep up with her, she now felt. “This year has been a constant growing” for her, she wrote, but “somehow it just no longer seems as though [she and Bill] were growing in the same direction.” The weekends they spent together now struck her as “stop-thinking times, which [was] not what [she] want[ed] [her] life to be.”

Margaret thus ended her engagement not because she

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388 I have reconstructed Margaret’s dating career based on a mix of evidence. The journal she kept as an undergraduate shows her growing doubts about her impending marriage and her thoughts regarding the interests and intelligence of her fiancée. My account of the first meeting between her and Frank is based on Margaret’s diary and an unpublished essay titled, “Address Unknown,” 12th revision,” which includes extensive quotes from Frank’s letters over a series of years. Margaret has since donated her correspondence to the Bryn Mawr college archives, but I was unfortunately not able to visit the repository after she had done so. For details on the above and also on her infatuation with “Peter,” the man she met after Frank see Margaret Hall, diary, especially entries dated 04-04-1953, 04-25-1953, 05-22-1953, 04-07-1955.

389 Margaret Hall, diary, entry dated 04-28-1953.
found a new romantic partner but because college had changed her expectations of her own potential and of what she expected in her relationships with men.

Stanford coed Susan Sperry Borman’s dating career resembles that of Alice and Margaret in essential aspects. Like her East Coast peers, she wanted to find companions who were intelligent and whose interests matched her own. This shows in the development of her relationship with an upper-class man she met in her first year. In her journal, Susan described “Harry” as a “smooth” college man and she was instantly smitten. Yet, whether he was a good match, she was not sure. His personality and penchant for parties at which a lot of drinking took place, made him popular on campus, but these attributes did not automatically turn him into Susan’s idea of a desirable companion. A journal entry she made during this time shows us the qualities she wanted a dating partner to possess: “Lord, if I have him over-estimated,” she wrote after one of their early dates and felt herself reminded of a story she once read. “He is struggling, he is; and all I can think of is that man in that story who went to look at his wife’s I.Q. before he married her, because that’s what I wonder about with Harry.” Like this fictional spouse, Susan did not want to get attached to a man who lacked intellectual potential. Shortly after, however, Harry took her to a lecture on existentialist Christian ethics. Then, in the summer of 1957, he and Susan both joined a research project in psychology funded by the Ford Foundation. As a proud Susan wrote her parents, work of this kind was normally reserved for graduate students. That she and Harry were allowed to join although they were still undergraduates seemed to have assuaged her doubts on her


391 Susan Sperry Borman, diary, entry dated 11-03-1956, folder 16, box 2, folder 16-21, “College Writings.”
companion’s intellectual potential and their compatibility.\textsuperscript{392} Harry continued to be a topic in her journal for almost another year.

Multiple factors influenced these three career-oriented college women’s focus on the intelligence and interests of their potential partners. Concerns about social standing were certainly among them. In her journal, Alice Gorton, for instance, tends to highlight the Ivy League backgrounds of dating partners and throughout her stay at Smith avoided going out with students from the University of Massachusetts, the nearby public state university. This attention to a dating partner’s background, however, was not simply an attempt to match this standard of popularity in the student culture. Rather, Alice felt that the attention and admiration of prestigious partners affirmed the legitimacy of her individual goals in the eyes of others. By dating “first rate” men, she hoped to gain leverage in clashes with peers over gender norms. This shows, for example, in one of the comments the Smith College student made about Dartmouth College man Richard: She liked “to be seen with him,” she wrote in 1952, because she felt she “could defy anyone with him behind [her].” In this journal entry, Alice did not say whom she was seeking to defy and why. Considering the frequency with which she pondered the legitimacy and value of her goals in her diary, however, it is likely that she was trying to show potential challengers that she was indeed a superior woman and not a gender deviant. With an Ivy League man at her side, she had evidence that instead of suffering from a developmental flaw, she was getting closer to her goal of becoming “admired - outstanding … intelligent – way above all.”\textsuperscript{393} Although Alice thus sought to
shine in the reflected light of a man of high status, the ultimate goal of this was to affirm her identity as a woman with untypical goals.

An interest in the intelligence of dating partners, of course, also suggests that women were thinking about the attributes of future husbands. The postwar upsurge of pronatalism, coupled with the spread of standardized testing in higher education, drew heightened attention to the IQ scores of the educated young. In the student culture, this changed the definition of membership in an elite. While before the Second World War, family background and social affiliations of college men had formed the basis for status, criteria for membership in the postwar elite were changing to include intelligence ratings. Career-oriented college women’s attention to IQ scores reflects their eagerness to gain prestige through association with members of high status groups.

In their attention to the status and prestige of dating partners, Alice, Margaret, and Susan certainly reproduced elements of the rating system that sociologist Willard Waller saw at work in the late 1930s. Yet while the collegiate members of Waller’s high status groups reproduced traditional middle-class notions of gender, the reflections I found in at least some women’s journals suggest that progressive notions of more egalitarian relationships had spread among students. If Margaret, Alice, and Susan are any measure, career-oriented college women wanted relationships with men with whom they had intellectual and cultural interests in common. As suggested by the fact that they were not trying to hide their own intelligence, they expected such like-minded men to accept them as thinkers and experts in their own right. As long-term dating partners, they coveted men who treated them as partners in intellectual as well as romantic adventures.
That attitudes like those displayed by my three diarists were shared by at least a substantial proportion of college women is once again supported by sociologist Mirra Komarovsky’s 1953 study. Among the twenty percent of her respondents who came to college already sure that they wanted careers, she found a pronounced sense that men would no longer contest a woman’s “right” to have it all. “Men” she writes, to these women “are not the antagonists in a contest but are partners.” They fully expected to one day “marry a man who recognizes that a woman, too, needs a vocation” and to support them fully in the realization of their aims.\(^{394}\) Considering that I found similar views, we can safely assume that we are confronted here with a substantial minority.

At least a significant minority of postwar college women was thus actively engaged in the re-conceptualization of companionate partnership. Finding first champions among radicals in the 1910s, the companionate ideal made inroads into the middle class in the course of the 1920s when proponents offered it as a way to reform the institution of marriage. The model parted with patriarchal conceptions of the marital union and its emphasis on duty and obligation. Instead, it promoted relationships in which each partner would find his or her emotional, spiritual, and sexual needs met. A reform of gender roles to include more egalitarian intellectual and economic relations was initially a part of reformers’ agenda. By the late 1920s, however, proposals to restructure the institution of marriage had fallen victim to the rise of adjustment psychology.\(^{395}\)


\(^{395}\) As Rebecca L. Davis has recently argued, the acceptance of the companionate ideal in the urban middle class was much slower and more contested than historians have tended to assume. See her “‘Not Marriage at All, but Simple Harlotry’: The Companionate Marriage Controversy,” \textit{Journal of American History} 94, no. 4 (2008): 1137 - 1163. For
Adjustment psychologists changed the subject of reform from the structural and legal basis of marriage to the responsibility of the individual. Pioneers of the burgeoning marriage counseling movement such as sociologists Ernest Groves or former pronatalist Paul Poepenoe were concerned about the social consequences of women’s increasingly public roles, the declining number of births in the educated middle-class, flagging marriage rates of female college graduates, and the growing demand for divorce. Rejecting the notion that the institution of marriage was in need of radical change, they argued that spouses needed help in adjusting their expectations. Especially educated women, the argument went, needed to learn to put their individual desires on the backseat. Already while young, they needed to learn that marital harmony demanded sacrifices. College, instead of fueling individualism among women, ought to teach them that childrearing and domesticity equaled in value a career in a profession. By the time the United States was hit by the Depression, goals of economic and intellectual empowerment of women had therefore already fallen by the wayside. After the end of the Second World War, as I have outlined earlier, the debate about adjusting female higher education to answer new pronatalist and cultural concerns, continued.396

As the marriage counseling movement had come into its own by the late 1940s, there can be no doubt that college women were aware of it. Yet the writings of non-traditional students show clearly that they wanted to go beyond sexual equality and push for intellectual and economic egalitarianism. This, I argue, was a product of their considerable cultural


396 Mirra Komarovsky gives an excellent summary of contemporary arguments in support of “a ‘distinctively feminine curriculum.” See Women in the Modern World, 3-17.
literacy and their access to a working support network. Despite their undeniable confusion and insecurity, a substantial proportion of college women believed that at least some members of the educated young would support their individualistic goals. Here, female peers aware of the same theories and books offered ideological and personal support. Meanwhile, dating relationships with men who seemed genuinely curious about women’s professional goals and aspirations indicated that the time when a male spouse would accept a woman as his intellectual equal and economic partner had come. There was thus on the post World War II campus a window of opportunity to remake gender. The next chapter will show what happened to ideas about partnership once different expectations about sexuality held by men and women meet upon each other in the dating culture.
As the previous chapter has shown career-oriented college women found support for their outlook in the student culture despite the normative pressures around them. Attitudes regarding gender roles, the purpose of higher education for women, and postgraduate goals were sufficiently diverse to accommodate a variety of views. The ideology of individualism enhanced by the Cold War legitimated idiosyncratic decisions and offered students a way not only to defend atypical goals but to portray them as superior alternatives to domesticity and motherhood. Moreover, from encounters with men as dating partners, young women gained the sense that they would indeed be able to have it all after graduation. From men who shared their views on culture and politics, female students with professional goals expected support for their wish to combine career and family. Although there is evidence for defensiveness and insecurity in women’s writings, their exposure to campus life did not automatically result in conformity.

In this chapter, I will focus on how mid-twentieth century developments in the history of sexuality, paired with the discourse on a male crisis that I have described in chapter one, played out in the student dating culture. Career-oriented college women chose as dating partners men with strong academic interests and aspirations for social leadership. As such, these men matched exactly the stereotype of the effeminate establishment liberal and “egghead” academic which Cold War partisans of the left and right held responsible for the national and cultural crisis. As a result, the men whom career-oriented college women were dating grappled intensely with questions of their own gender and sexual normativity. In the
pages that follow, I reconstruct the intimate experiences of these men and the women they
dated in the student dating culture.

This chapter and the next focus on examples of students who were (hetero-) sexually
active before marriage and whose private records offer insights into how they experienced
their intimate encounters. From the start I want to emphasize that I often do not know what
acts women actually engaged in. Because sexuality was a highly controversial topic during
the Cold War, the sources yield more silences than explicit evidence. Even in their
introspective writings, women broached the topic of sex only hesitantly. On the one hand,
this was a result of female reticence. On the other, it was the effect of women’s lack of access
to reliable information. The conflicts (hetero-) sexually active women were experiencing
were not necessarily the consequence of premarital intercourse. They stem rather from the
fact that they were dating and at least at times engaging in a range of activities that they and
their contemporaries experienced as illicit. Here, two women in particular stood out because
of their unusually detailed personal papers. In each case I know that they had premarital
intercourse at some point. Their experiences, as this and the next chapter will show, were
similar in important aspects. Although I cannot generalize on the basis of these women’s
stories, I can situate them in a larger context. Considering the discourse on sexuality, the
curtailed nature of college women’s social autonomy, and their limited access to reproductive
information, my subjects’ experiences were a logical result of their situation and therefore
likely shared by others.

College women who began dating in the collegiate setting of the 1950s did so in an
environment in which standards of morality and expectations of sexual behavior on a date
were in transition. This transformation of “manners and mores” had been underway for some
time, but the Second World War accelerated the pace of change by loosening the traditional bonds between youths, parents, and home communities. Mobilization pulled Americans away from the towns in which they had grown up and into factories, military bases, and even overseas. Targeted as defense workers and military personnel, women experienced unusual geographic mobility and made substantial financial gains. The proportion of jobs available for women rose from twenty-one percent before the war, to fifty-five percent after 1941 and many of these paid significantly higher wages than the white and pink-collar occupations women had traditionally filled. As auxiliaries, volunteers, and eventually as official members of the military, women joined the armed forces.\(^{397}\) The possibility of carving out spaces and lives independent from families and spouses also opened up new erotic opportunities. The way in which young women took advantage of new vistas is particularly reflected in the phenomenon of adolescent girls flocking to military bases to meet servicemen. Deemed “khaki wackies” and “Good-time Charlottes,” they became a particular focus of social commentators.\(^{398}\) They were not the only young women, however, whose behavior gave children’s agencies and Juvenile Court judges cause for concern. More and more girls also smoked and drank in public, joined gangs, or acted in other ways that suggested defiance of traditional family authority and gender norms. Arrest figures for statutory offenses reflect the

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determination with which civic authorities and public health experts attempted to contain these changes. Nonetheless, it was undeniable that in the context of the social disruptions of the war the social and sexual autonomy of young women was increasing. 399

Although college women did not make the same financial gains as their working sisters, they were still affected by the social and economic upheaval of the time. As the wartime contributions of coeds tended to take the form of voluntary labor, female students’ autonomy did not increase as a result of better finances. The war did, however, make it increasingly difficult for college officials to maintain genteel conventions of supervised courtship. The nature of the challenge shows nicely in the correspondence of Mount Holyoke College student Alice Rigby who, one evening in 1944, right before the onset of Spring, received a visit from a serviceman. The young GI who called on Alice found himself frustrated in his desire for a date by the housemother “Miss Smith” who turned him away. Miss Smith here followed a standard procedure. On the basis of English common law principles, since colonial times American institutions of higher education had acted as moral guardians of their charges. Honoring this responsibility to watch over the morality of a student in loco parentis, Miss Smith certainly expected her actions to find the approval of the Rigby family. Yet Alice’s parents complained. Mr. Rigby in particular was incensed. He would not claim that anyone in uniform was automatically a “gentleman,” he wrote in a letter

399 U.S. Children’s Bureau figures for the 1930s through the early 1940s show a ratio of the rate of male to female delinquency of 6 to 1. This margin, however, began to shrink in the course of the war and in its aftermath. By 1946, girls constituted one out of every four juvenile delinquents in court cases. See Rachel Devlin, Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Adolescent Daughters, and Postwar American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 53.
of complaint to the college. Yet a man serving his country did not deserve a rude rejection from a housemother.  

Alice’s father’s angry response should not be confused with moral laxity on his part. In fact, the above case was one of mistaken identity. The reason why Mr. Rigby was so outraged that the young man in question was denied access to his daughter was because he trusted the man’s credentials as a respectable “gentleman.” A cousin had introduced Alice and the GI. Yet, while the way the young man was treated by his daughter’s moral guardian offended Mr. Rigby, Alice was more aware than her father of the context in which Miss Smith had acted. As she knew, the suspiciousness of her housemother was based on a phenomenon many college officials and students perceived as a problem. Men from nearby military basis had repeatedly shown up on campus grounds in search for female company. This challenge to the sheltered atmosphere of a rural women’s college was not something college officials took lightly. “What Miss Smith did wasn’t wrong” Alice tried to explain the situation to her parents: “You can’t blame her for being suspicious – they have had trouble with ‘cruisers.’” The nature of the problem was also explained to the Rigby elders by the reply they eventually received from Dean of Residence Catherine P. Robinson. In defense of Miss Smith’s actions, she tried to convey the dilemma Mount Holyoke faced in the attempt to balance patriotic support for the troops with its responsibility as guardian of the morality of its female charges:

As you may imagine, running a girls’ college located four miles from a flying field and eleven miles from an Army training center and being hospitable, but

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400 Letter dated 02-07-1944, folder 6, “correspondence, March - May, 1944,” Alice Rigby papers, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

401 Alice Rigby to family, 03-04-1944, folder 6, “correspondence, March - May, 1944.”
not too hospitable, is like charting a course between Scylla and Charbydis. …
We have, on the whole, had very friendly relations with the men at Westover [Airbase] … After a dance, however, we have occasionally had trouble with service men who come to the College not to call on a particular girl, but to pick up an acquaintance with anyone around the campus. This we try to discourage.402

The correspondence between the Rigby family and Dean Robinson poignantly illustrates a dilemma that existed for not just Mount Holyoke. Educators of young women in general faced the unintended consequences of officially sanctioned policies. Assuming responsibility for the moral integrity of their female charges was part of institutions’ official mission. As part of their patriotic duty, however, they also encouraged female students to spend their free time volunteering as junior hostesses at USO events. The fact that older women were present during these events as chaperones illustrates that the breaking of standards of respectability was not included under the definition of service. But women were encouraged to make themselves available as companions and show servicemen a good time. Moreover, the media portrayal of the voluntary hostesses blurred the distinction between genteel coeds and “khaki wackies.” In articles about the patriotic duties of college women and sorority girls, women who boarded trains and buses to meet a serviceman in the context of carefully chaperoned USO events were commended for their service to the nation. Yet a few pages further, a reader often found magazine features about women who traveled on their own in search of erotic adventures.403 That in this context, some GIs hoped that encounters

402 Dean of Residence Catherine P. Robinson to Mr. and Mrs. Rigby, 03-11-1944.

with coeds would also go beyond dancing and polite conversation shows in the letters of yet another Mount Holyoke student.

The letters of zoology major Grace Gray offer insights into the atmosphere at officially sponsored USO events at her college. Writing on the day of the 1943 “Victory Ball,” In a letter to her parents Grace described how the dance affected campus life. Long before the official start of the event, men from the nearby Westover Airbase flooded college grounds. “Tonight is the Victory Ball,” wrote Grace, “and already there are a lot of men on campus.” She did not intend to go because she had “lots of work to do.” Most of her peers, she informed her parents, however, had different priorities: “All the kids are going,” she wrote and “most” young women did so “with blind dates.”

Grace spent the night of the Victory Ball in the science lab. Yet, when her “gang” of female friends returned from the event, they let her in on what had transpired. Apparently, the maintenance of official standards of morality had been difficult. Grace shared her information with her family:

It seems that the boys in the service, … are pretty demoralized. … They aren’t one bit sure that they are fighting for anything worthwhile. … Therefore, they are determined to get as much pleasure out of every moment as they can, as long as they are still alive. A good number of them brought their own liquor along and got drunk during intermission. Many … attempted … to persuade the girls that since everything else was accelerated at this time, it was necessary that court-ship be accelerated too. … So ended the effort of Mt. Holyoke girls to be patriotic and show our fine and noble service-men a pleasant evening.\(^{404}\)

Grace’s description of the dance was hardly an unbiased account. As she had told her parents before the event, she was content with just watching her friends have a good time. It

\(^{404}\) Grace Gray to family, 04-21-1943, box 1, folder 9, “correspondence, April 1943,” Grace Gray papers, Mount Holyoke College Archive.
made her feel “proud” to watch her peers take off for a night of entertaining men, like “ducklings [going] for [a] swim.” The words she used in her letter, however, also show that she felt old fashioned and inexperienced by comparison to her peers. The “ducklings,” she informed her parents, participated in mixed-sex campus events regularly: for them, the Victory Ball was “far from their first swim!” To herself, by comparison, Grace referred to as a “rather senile fat old duck.”

In spite of her insistence that she preferred lab work and studying to socializing with servicemen, Grace had been self-conscious about her decision. Considering that her studiousness earned her the stigma of the grind, she might have exaggerated the negative aspects of the Victory Ball in an attempt to make herself feel better about turning down a social opportunity. When “the kids” returned from their adventure with shocking tales, she could feel validated in her decision. “Well, I’m just as glad I didn’t go!” she wrote her parents.

She might be old-fashioned, but at least she did not have to put up with drunken servicemen who tried to take her for a ride.

While it is possible that Grace exaggerated those aspects of the ball that affirmed her choice not to attend, it is apparent that Mount Holyoke College struggled to enforce moral standards on campus. Describing in her letter to her parents the experiences of her clique of female friends, Grace had put the onus for the breakdown of morality on the shoulders of the “boys in the service.” Other accounts make clear, however, that coeds were not necessarily damsels in distress. That educated young women tried to carve out new erotic opportunities shows, for example, in the correspondence of Alice Rigby, who, in 1944, told her parents about two female peers who got in trouble for violations of moral regulations. As Alice wrote

405 Grace Gray to family, 04-17-1943, box 1, folder 9, “correspondence, April 1943.”

406 Grace Gray to family, 04-21-1943, box 1, folder 9, “correspondence, April 1943.”
her family, the students were suspended for four days; a punishment she described as “tough.” She felt “awfully sorry for them,” she wrote her parents but she also supported the decision. Her peers’ behavior, she argued, was giving Mount Holyoke a bad reputation. She felt “very Puritan,” about her attitude, she wrote her parents, but she did believe that they had “brung (sic) [their punishment] on themselves.”\footnote{Alice Rigby to parents, 04-02-1944.} In this letter, it is not clear what exactly the women in question had done to attract official attention. At the very least, however, they had tried to evade the college’s attempt of control of their social and sexual behavior. This by itself, we can see from Alice’s letter, already concerned not only the administration, but also parts of the student body. By looking for social and possibly erotic opportunities independently, the students were blurring the boundary between patriotic coeds and morally dissolute “khaki wackies.” As such, they constituted a danger to the reputation of all women at Mount Holyoke College.

The evidence for a breakdown of moral standards at Mount Holyoke College is particularly significant for our understanding of how the war impacted the collegiate setting. Of all the Seven Sister women’s colleges, Mount Holyoke was the most isolated one. That even in a small community like South Hadley, Massachusetts, mores and standards were slipping thus suggests the extent to which wartime developments created problems for institutions dedicated to the higher education of women.

We should not underestimate the extent to which contemporary observers perceived the wartime slippages in discipline and morale among college women as a problem. Boundaries of permissible sexual activity in middle-class youths had been expanding through the interwar period. Older courtship conventions like “calling” and the practice of
chaperonage increasingly gave way to “dating.” Even in the conservative advice manuals written by Emily Post, the “Chaperone” was labeled a “vanishing … convention.” Yet, college campuses were anachronistic spaces in this context. Charged with the supervision of morality in loco parentis, they held on to the genteel model of supervised courtship. Young ladies were allowed to gain experiences with the opposite sex in the context of organized mixers or by meeting gentlemen “callers” in the semipublic space of their dormitory’s parlor. When coeds accepted the invitations of cruising servicemen, they therefore accelerated the speed with which an upper middle-class model of courtship steeped in the collegiate tradition was dissolving. This development was alarming, on the one hand, because it fed wartime concerns about the convergence of male and female behavior. Coeds who tried to evade their alma maters’ attempts of moral supervision displayed a sexual agency at odds with traditional notions of feminine passivity in courtship. In the sexual realm, they seemed to be acting more and more like men. The extent of the problem, however, went beyond the challenge to female gender norms.

Educators of women were alarmed not by the changing behavior of women per se; but because this development occurred at a time of challenges to middle-class homogeneity in general. That coeds challenged moral rules and regulations was, after all, not a new phenomenon. Depending on undergraduate tuition payments and faced with growing

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408 D’Emilio, Freedman, Intimate Matters, 258.

numbers of women who saw in the collection of experiences independent of the supervision of adults a part of their well-rounded education, colleges had to make concessions to accommodate modern youth. The introduction of Deans of Women and the adoption of rules and regulations served to enforce official morality. Yet, campus life also offered considerable leeway. The angry letter of Alice Rigby’s fathers shows that as long as parents trusted that their daughters would meet “gentlemen” on their dates, they accepted college dating as a matter-of-fact. Yet the correspondence between the Rigbys and Mount Holyoke College also illustrates the particularities of the situation in the 1940s.

In assessing the nature of the morality problem during the war, the distinction between gentleman callers and “cruisers” is key. As Dean Robinson’s letter to Mr. Rigby shows, the college was not opposed to the visits of young men in principle. When hosting patriotic events for servicemen, however, the college opened its doors to GIs from a variety of backgrounds. In this context, the maintenance of middle-class culture and values became a more urgent matter. From the many servicemen wartime coeds met as part of their role as patriotic helpmeets, gentlemen callers were still welcome as potential beaus. Respecting the mores and conventions of courtship, they demonstrated their knowledge of and respect for genteel college convention. “Cruisers,” on the other hand, lacked the credentials of potential beaus for genteel coeds. They were either ignorant of collegiate traditions, or disrespectful. In any case, their behavior might give young women the wrong idea. In an attempt to maintain class homogeneity, Mount Holyoke College attempted to shield its charges from men who might introduce to them behavioral models and moral examples that were irreconcilable with genteel values.
If educators of women had expected that the end of the war would also bring back the times when coeds met only with “gentlemen” callers, the GI bill crushed their hopes. Veterans, as I have described in chapter four, helped transform the behavioral conventions and expectations in the student dating culture. After their experiences in the World War II military, middle-class men were no longer as likely to conform to collegiate conventions than preceding cohorts of college men. Moreover, of the many men who took advantage of government subsidized higher education, a substantial proportion came from a non-elite background.\footnote{Daniel A. Clark, "The Two Joes Meet. Joe College, Joe Veteran: The G. I. Bill, College Education, and Postwar American Culture,” \textit{History of Education Quarterly} 38, no. 2 (1998): 165-189.} Once again, developments at Mount Holyoke College, the most remote and least easily accessible of the Seven Sister colleges, illustrate the extent of change.

The letters of Mount Holyoke student Mary Browning offer a window into how the influx of new students changed the campus dating culture. Mary, who was born in Baltimore, Maryland, and started her education in South Hadley in 1947, kept up a regular correspondence with her mother. From the information about Mrs. Browning’s background, it is clear that Mary was a traditional coed. Her mother, born in Mystic, Connecticut, was a Wellesley Alumna. She had majored English in 1916 and married her husband who later obtained a Ph.D. in psychology from Johns Hopkins. Maybe Mrs. Browning shared with her oldest daughter stories about her own collegiate experiences. In any case, when Mary was about to go to her first freshman mixer at the private Amherst College, she expected to meet proper young gentlemen in a genteel setting. There would be, she wrote her mother, a “big Freshman dance” to which “all the Freshmen from Amherst [were] invited (sic) … to meet the Freshmen from Mount Holyoke.” She continued that she was hoping at this dance to line
up an escort for the main social event of the semester: “This dance is supposed to let you find
one that you could ask over to the big fall formal dance put on by the Senior year book
committee.” Mary was looking forward to both: “I want to go awfully badly.” When the
young women returned from the Freshman dance, however, she was disappointed. The male
students did not match her expectations of eligible and appealing beaux. “Most of the boys
were quite peculiar,” she wrote her mother. Their behavior had shocked her. They “had been
drinking,” she wrote. She also found them unappealing in their looks: “Some of them were
pretty horrible looking,” the disappointed young woman informed her parent in the letter.411

It is of course possible that Mary had the bad fortune to attend a dance with an
unusually high number of unattractive college men present. It is more likely, however, that
ethnic and class backgrounds other than the Protestant gentility that she had anticipated
tainted her impression. Apparently, Mary had expected that as a student of one of the
prestigious Seven Sister Colleges, she would meet men who matched her own background in
culture and class. She found, however, a surprisingly diverse body of male students. In
explanation of the young men’s peculiarity, she wrote to her mother: “not only were boys
from Amherst present, but also some from Mass. State and Springfield.” Had Mary been
aware of the demographic and social developments in the east coast valley that she picked as
her new home for the next four years, she would not have been surprised. Massachusetts
State (renamed University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1947) was originally founded as
one of the first public land-grant agricultural colleges in 1863. Already in 1931, it had
outgrown its original limited mission and broadened its curriculum. The most significant spur

411 Mary Browning to mother, 10-05-1947, box 1, folder 3, “correspondence, September
1947 - June 1948,” Mary Browning Nelson papers, Mount Holyoke College Archive.
in growth, however, occurred as a result of the boost in enrollment through the GI Bill. By 1954, the institution featured a student body of more than 4,000.\textsuperscript{412}

While the GI Bill opened up educational opportunities for many young men, their chances to find a dating partner in the classroom were a different matter. Although coeducational since 1892, Massachusetts State, just like other universities in the nation, rejected many of its female applicants to make room for veterans. In the face of this uneven ratio of male to female students, women from the nearby Seven Sister colleges beckoned as potential dates. The GI Bill thus introduced men from non-traditional college backgrounds to the circuit of formal mixers, parties, and dances that had long been a staple of collegiate culture. This mixing of classes in the public relations battle of the Cold War represented the success of United States democracy. If Mary’s letter is any measure, however, genteel coeds were not necessarily infected with the spirit of democracy when it came to finding dancing and dating partners. Mary was not just appalled by the drinking and the looks of the students she had met. She drew a link between their behavior and demeanor and their status as public university students. By virtue of what she assumed was a family background different from her own, she rejected them as potential beaux.

That in the Browning household there was in fact a certain cultural snobbery against men from ethnic and class backgrounds other than their own shows even more poignantly in the letters of Mary’s younger sister, Louise, who went to Wellesley. Writing to her sister about a dance at her school in 1947, she at first gushed about a “Harvard senior” who had saved her from having to finish a dance with a partner she did not like. It was “just like in a

\textsuperscript{412} Ronald Story, “The Ordeal of the Public Sector: The University of Massachusetts,” Story, ed. \textit{Five Colleges: Five Histories} (Amherst: Five Colleges, Inc. and Historic Deerfield, 1992), 51-78, see especially 52, 60.
fairy tale,” she told her sister. “He cut in on me just when I was dancing with the most horrible drip going.” Unfortunately, the man soon disappeared again, exposing Louise once again to unwanted attentions:

And … then I met another person who appeared to have a crush on me. … It was horrible, -- especially since all his friends were Jewish. So I suppose he is one, too, even though he didn’t look like one. … What do you suppose is the matter? I don’t look Jewish, do I? 413

The class and ethnic bias that shows in the letters of the Browning sisters gives a modern reader pause. Before condemning them too harshly, however, we need to consider their age, lack of experience, and the fact that they had only just left behind their parental homes. Having been brought up in a sheltered Protestant middle-class household, neither sister had been exposed to diversity before. The prejudices that emerge in their letters therefore say more about the older Browings than about the young women who wrote the words. In fact, Mary’s attitude soon changed. She started going steady with a young man from another vocationally oriented and public institution: Worcester Polytechnic Institute (Worcester Tech). Yet with that, as we will see, her difficulties of adjusting her expectations to a campus life that no longer operated along the norms of genteel mores were only beginning.

The letters of the Browning sisters offer only snapshots of experiences. They do, however, hint at the ways in which the diversification of the student body in the wake of the GI bill affected the campus dating culture. Young women who had experienced a sheltered upbringing now met men who were older than traditional college men, more experienced, and less likely to stick to official standards of courtship. Having been exposed to military

413 Louise Browning to Mary Browning, 10-14-1947, box 1, folder 3, “correspondence, September 1947 - June 1948.”
culture, they displayed behavior that sheltered coeds could not possibly reconcile with their expectations of “fairy tales” in which chivalrous gentlemen treated them like ladies. The drinking Mary referred to already hinted at one facet of this development. Veterans on the GI bill were hardly the first college men who brought a flask to a date or dance, however. Far more significant in the context of postwar higher education, was the way in which their sexual expectations changed campus life.

Veterans’ who went to college or university on the GI bill entered a social milieu very different from the one they had just left behind. The culture of enlisted men in the World War II armed forces was highly sexualized. Although officially, control and containment were the policies adopted in regards to the sexual behavior of GIs, lenience and accommodation was increasingly the reality. Monthly lectures and films encouraged servicemen to abstain from sex, but at the same time counseled them in the use of condoms. GIs openly displayed pictures of pin-ups and received cheesecake magazines through the mail. Sex was a frequent topic among enlisted men and visits to prostitutes a common way to spend time on leave. The general atmosphere in the U.S. armed forces was that men needed sex and that they were entitled to find these needs met.414

When former GI’s returned to civilian life, they brought with them attitudes towards sex that they had learned in the military. Veterans often resented obstacles to their erotic and dating opportunities. Their commitment to challenge established mores and conventions on college campuses reached into the area of morality and dating. More importantly, their

refusal to accept the curfews and regulations that impeded their access to dating opportunities was contagious. By the early 1950s, male discontent on college campuses across the nation took the form of sporadically occurring so-called “panty raids.” In protest against their curtailed access to dating partners, college men at these occasions stormed into women’s dormitories and sorority houses to capture female underwear as trophies. Beginning first on the campuses of larger universities, they soon entered the collegiate setting as well. In the spring of 1953, Princeton University students could be seen marching through town to chants of “We want girls, we want sex, we want panties.” By the time the U.S. government discontinued veteran benefits after the Korean War, the dating and sexual expectations of these older and more experienced men had therefore left a trace on the student dating culture for good.

College women noted the changes in the sexual climate of campus life. Similar to their wartime predecessors, many here put the responsibility on the shoulders of men. However, their letters also allow us to see that some coeds were exercising a sexual agency of their own. As Mary Browning’s letters inform her mother in 1950, Mount Holyoke was suffering the effects of a series of “scandals.” For one, there was the example of a young heiress who used her trust fund money to elope and explore the country: “During the past 2 or 3 months she has been traveling around,” wrote Mary. “She got as far as Florida.” By the time Mary told her mother about this incident, the heiress was petitioning the college to allow

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her to reenroll. In the meantime, however, “another senior [had] packed up and took off.”\(^{416}\)

Moreover, Mary’s letters also suggest that the “scandals” on campus were not just limited to an increase of wanderlust among young women. Female students also actively violated boundaries of appropriate sexual conduct:

> Other (sic) scandal is the fact that another girl had an abortion – and then the campus cop found 4 or 5 contracepts (sic) around the grounds after Snowball week end. … All this is very upsetting to the administration. We’re supposedly going to have a required assembly on this serious subject.\(^{417}\)

When it required students to attend a hearing on the topic of behavioral standards, Mount Holyoke College was not acting alone. Responding to the visible changes in the courtship behavior of college men and women, Bowling Green State College, for instance, condemned what it saw as “emotional exhibitionism” on campus. In an editorial for the student newspaper, the school tried to define the line that separated acceptable from unacceptable actions. As the writer opined, good-bye kisses and handholding were acts “quite normal and within reason” and did “not violate the moral code properly expected of college students” However, the current trend was an increase of unreasonable “demonstrations” of affection. As the writer stressed, unnecessary prolonged embraces while kissing good bye,” and “uninhibited indulgences” would not be tolerated. A student engaging in such conduct should expect to become “the target of administrative action.”\(^{418}\)

\(^{416}\) Mary Browning to mother, letter not dated, ca. 01-29-1950.

\(^{417}\) Mary Browning to mother, letter not dated, ca. 01-29-1950.

\(^{418}\) College Scrapbook, box 1, Volume 3: “College Scrapbook, May 1945 - February 1947,” Mickey (Maxine) Campbell Welker papers, Center for Archival Collections, Bowling Green State University.
In their attempts to change the behavior of individual students, administrators in higher education were fighting a growing trend. The 1953 publication of the second Kinsey report made particularly clear the extent to which norms were changing. After his earlier findings about men had already come as a shock, the impact of the female volume was virtually explosive. Close to fifty percent of American women, the study exposed, had coitus before marriage. Not only were many women no longer saving themselves for marriage, they masturbated, petted, and engaged in same-sex activities at rates that were unexpected to all but the most jaded of observers.\textsuperscript{419} In regards to college educated youth, the one thing that might have consoled cultural conservatives was that despite Kinsey’s figures, the persistence of a double standard of behavior still motivated young women to limit the intensity of sexual exchanges on a date.\textsuperscript{420} Yet over the course of the 1950s, signs for an unraveling of this dynamic were building up. As sociologist Ira Reiss would put it by the early 1960s, educated women had become “half-willing” as boundary setters at best. Americans, he advised, should expect “a continued trend toward … permissive codes.”\textsuperscript{421} In the immediate post World War II period, however, college administrators were not ready yet to accept the spreading sexual culture as a fait accompli.

\textsuperscript{419} Alfred C. Kinsey et al., \textit{Sexual Behavior in the Human Female} (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1953), 282-345

\textsuperscript{420} This was found, for instance, by Clifford Kirkpatrick, Sheldon Stryker and Philip Buell in: “An Experimental Study of Attitudes Towards Male Sex Behavior with Reference to Kinsey Findings,” \textit{American Sociological Review} 17, no. 5 (1952): 580-587.

While college administrators were not willing to give up the struggle to reproduce traditional morality, the approach they adopted differentiated sharply according to the gender of their charges. Institutions of higher education imposed increasingly stringent rules and regulations on their female students. Curfews in most schools limited only the social mobility of women. Rules for visitors and callers in single sex colleges specified in often excruciating detail how a young man and a woman ought to interact with each other. Rules required doors to remain open, and feet to stay on the floor. Attempts to maintain control by providing scripts of moral and appropriate behavior became only more pronounced in the course of the 1950s.\textsuperscript{422} The treatment of college men, however, was different. Although some institutions maintained official curfews for men into the 1960s, male students in general faced fewer obstacles to their social mobility. An Amherst College student described the permissive attitude of his alma mater: “We have lots of freedom here, … About the only restriction is no kegs of beer in the dorms.”\textsuperscript{423}

The different treatment of the sexes reflected the persistent influence of a sexual double standard that held women up to higher standards of respectability. It also illustrates the fact that it seemed increasingly impossible to insist on restraints of the sexual energies of male students. As panty raiders and disgruntled veterans had made clear, more and more male students saw it as their right to express their sexuality in active and assertive ways. Yet while administrators no longer felt they could insist on constraints on the physical urges of men, they still hoped to channel the libidinous energies of the educated young into

\textsuperscript{422} D’Emilio, Freedman, Intimate Matters, 264-265.

\textsuperscript{423} “Richie” to Richard Kohler, 09-23-1957, box 3, folder 1, “June - August 1959,” Sandra Iger Kohler papers, Mount Holyoke College Archives.
appropriate channels by restricting access to the young women who would ideally one day infuse the middle-class home with traditional values and ethics.

Judged from their official responses, the educators of women seemed to have moved very close to the camp of post World War II religious conservatives. Insisting on the necessity of holding on to a firm official standard of morality, proponents of a fundamentalist position were gradually growing in influence in the Cold War nation. Their beliefs and philosophy showed particularly clearly in the response to the publication of the two Kinsey studies of the sexual behavior of humans (1949 and 1953). The evidence of frequent rule breaking and of a diversity of moral codes suggested to Kinsey and his team of researchers that an adjustment of official prescriptions was in order. Religious fundamentalists, however, disagreed. Articulating his stance on Kinsey in a book-length publication, Roman Catholic Archbishop Fulton John Sheen argued, for instance, that Kinsey merely gave an “air of scientific goodness” to “exaggerations and perversions” that would be clearly recognizable as “evil” if it was not for the mantel of social science.\footnote{Fulton John Sheen, \textit{Three to Get Married} (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951), 16.} Fulton here responded to the publication of the first Kinsey report on men. In comparison to the reaction of American religious leaders to the second study, his tone could almost be called mild. Linking notions of female purity and national identity, the editor of a Catholic newspaper wrote about the 1953 report that it was “the most direct and devastating attack upon Christian civilization” since the “Revolution in Russia in 1917” and a “dirty, beastly attack upon American womanhood.” An Indiana chapter of the National Council of Catholic Women, meanwhile, in a letter to the President of Indiana University where Kinsey was teaching, likened Kinsey to the
perpetrators of the Nazi holocaust against the Jewish people. “We have seen in Nazi Germany what can happen to men when the traditional idea of moral law is questioned and then scoffed at.” Among religious conservative Americans, this evaluation was widely shared. These Catholic voices were of course on the conservative edge of American religious thought. Yet when it came to the subject of female sexuality, even liberal mainline Protestants took a hardliner position. Kinsey’s report reflected “moral anarchism” and “absurd hedonism” was Reinhold Niebuhr’s verdict in Christianity and Crisis. The tone of the national debate was clear: Moral standards and behavioral expectations might be changing. The trend, however, needed to be resisted rather than condoned.425

While the higher education setting certainly reflected elements of this resurgent religious conservatism, evidence from the students themselves suggests that the question of morality was not answered through recourse to an absolute standard of right or wrong alone in this setting. The correspondence of Mount Holyoke student Janet Brown, who discussed Kinsey with her parents, illustrates the point. Janet’s parents had sent her a clipping of an article by Archbishop Sheen. In her reply, Janet summarized his view: “although no one does right, there is still an absolute right,” she wrote. This, she added, was “the accepted viewpoint.” Yet, significantly, Janet did not stop her musings here. In reference to Sheen’s article, she wrote she found him “rather good” but also labeled “some of his points … rather

425 R. Marie Griffith, “The Religious Encounters of Alfred C. Kinsey,” Journal of American History 95, no. 2 (2008): 349-377; 363, 368-369. Griffith argues in the article that the response of mainline Protestants to the Kinsey report was actually more diverse and less hostile than it has been portrayed in the historiography. For the most part, however, a positive reception of and active engagement with Kinsey’s ideas took the form of private exchanges between mainline Protestants and Kinsey and vice versa. The tenor of the public discussion of, the second volume especially was overwhelmingly negative if not alarmist.
doubtful – like [his] attitude towards the validity of Kinsey.” Janet here was referring to the Archbishop’s uncompromising condemnation of the scientist. Yes, she admitted, most people would agree with him that there was “an absolute right.” But she could not quite reconcile that with what she was learning in her social science classes: “most social sciences take the stand that right is conformity with group mores.” Janet was clearly confused. She asked: “May I keep the article a week or two until I get other’s opinions on it??” Janet did not return to the subject of the Kinsey study in her letters. But her correspondence illustrates an important point. Exposure to higher education challenged arguments based on fixed, universal truths. Their awareness of theories about the naturalness of the libido for both sexes and of the cultural specificity of values and mores had the potential to turn educated youth into religious skeptics.

Although in the intellectually sophisticated setting of higher education, arguments based of religious fundamentalism were not likely to win many students’ hearts or minds, mid-century philosophical trends offered a way to acknowledge cultural relativism and modern sexology while still promoting conformity. The main influence here came from the functionalist school of social analysis. The way in which this paradigm influenced the advice literature directed at middle-class teenagers shows nicely in one of the period’s most popular examples of the genre: Evelyn Millis Duvall’s Facts of Life and Love (1950). Having earned her Ph.D. in Human Development from the University of Chicago, Duvall had studied in an interdivisional department in which students drew on insights from Anthropology, Biology, Sociology, and Psychology. She also had a background in liberal Christianity. A scholarship

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from her local Church for which she had taught enabled Duvall to graduate from Syracuse University in 1927. She started to write about family and marriage issues first in magazines like the *Christian Home*. During the war, she helped organize Marriage and the Family courses for enlisted personnel for the United States Armed Forces Institute. Subsequently, she joined the newly established National Council on Family Relations and authored some of the most widely distributed high school textbooks. She lectured frequently in front of young audiences and at these occasions collected questions by and responses of adolescents concerning sexuality, dating, and marriage. In *Facts of Life and Love*, she presents her evaluation of this material to the American public.\(^{427}\) The book clearly reflects the influence of the functionalist paradigm on her thinking and the way in which it enabled her to reconcile Protestant morality and social science.

Duvall’s emphasis on maintaining traditional sexual mores and family structures shows in her warning against premarital sexuality. Although she presented the presence of strong sexual urges as a “normal” fact of adolescence, she warned youth against permissiveness. Once floodgates of instinct were opened, she emphasized, physical urges would be hard to stop. Immensely “strong and insistent,” the sex drive would “press for completion.” Because of this, premarital sexual contacts easily culminated into “a problem [which] in our country [was] popularly known as ‘getting into trouble.’” Although many such troubles confronted youth of today, Duvall informed her readers, when “people” used the phrase, they were virtually always using it in reference to “the pregnancy of an unmarried

girl.” For any young woman who finds herself in such a situation, she writes, the consequences will be severe. “Getting into trouble … at best … is disillusioning, often painful … . At worst it can wreck [a girl’s] whole life.” She conceded that this attitude towards out-of-wedlock pregnancy was not based on a universally valid moral imperative. It was a cultural convention. Yet the way a culture evaluated a behavior could not be separated from how a person experienced it. Combining relativism with cultural determinism, she wrote that the “attitude of the general public” would inevitably “increase the seriousness of the problem.” Considering this context, rules against certain conducts served a functional value. Offering safe standards to live by, they protected the individual and shielded society from the costs of deviant behavior. “When a girl defies these safeguards she places herself in a highly vulnerable position. Better by far is willing conformity to the standards of one’s culture, based upon one’s intelligent awareness of why such restrictions are important.” Facts of Life and Love thus clearly illustrates functionalism’s contribution to the perpetuation of the status quo. Duvall combined an acknowledgement of the relativity of standards with an emphasis on the functional value of conformity. While youth today might possess considerable freedoms, she argued, a mature and intelligent person understood the consequences of deviance and would therefore abstain from defying social mores. 428

The conservative direction of Duvall’s analysis notwithstanding, it is important to note that she urged both men and women to conform to traditional sexual mores. In line with a long-standing dichotomous view of the meaning and quality of sexuality for the sexes, she argued that women were “less easily excited by sex stimulation and more slowly moved to

demand sexual contact” and could therefore “stop love making more easily than the average male.” For this reason, it has “down through the ages … been considered the female’s responsibility to keep relationships under control.” Duvall did not see male biology as an excuse to express urges and desires at the expense of society and the individual, however. The need to comply with conventions extended to the males of the species. Boys, no less than girls, she writes, would spoil their chances for “a happy marriage and family life” by defying their society’s rules and regulations. “Sowing of wild oats so often means the harvest of a crop of thistles,” she warns. A mature and intelligent boy recognized “that sex behavior is a matter of responsibility for both sexes.”

Duvall thus suggested to youths of both sexes that they had a responsibility to not give vent to their individual desires at the expense of others. While she here presented conformity as the sign of a young person’s intelligent comprehension of what would ultimately be best for him or her, she painted the alternative in distinctly unattractive colors. Youth who refused to play to society’s rulebook, she wrote, were hardly laudable nonconformists. Rather, their behavior was the result of their upbringing in dysfunctional families, of ensuing psychological problems, and of a lack of education. These factors Duvall saw as potential dangers in families across the social spectrum. Yet, she also linked low class status to an individual’s inability to conform. Her frequent mentioning of “certain neighborhoods” in which problem families and individuals congregate draws a clear connection between sexual non-conformism and social marginalization. A low class position in Duvall’s functionalist paradigm was the result of a lack of impulse control. Here, the consultant of the National Council of Family Relations drew on a larger literature that applied

429 Ibid., 247-248; 82.
individualistic and psychologizing interpretations to analyze the social position of lower class and non-white populations.\textsuperscript{430} The growing popularity of this line of argumentation in the postwar period suggests that in the face of widespread challenges to traditional middle-class values, an emphasis on the importance of traditional standards of sexual behavior and gender performance was becoming more pronounced. This link Duvall illustrates poignantly through the example of “Viola.”

The character of Viola in Duvall’s book serves as a powerful illustration for the consequences awaiting a woman who failed to maintain control over her “appetites.” “Viola was a creature of strong desires and lusty appetites,” writes Duvall. She went through life following her impulses “without considering the consequences.” When she entered adolescence, “she gave complete reign to her feelings and could not stop the behavior that led to” the expected result: “her pregnancy.” Only now, that she was dangerously close to ruining her chances for happiness forever did she finally “get the counseling guidance that helped her come face to face with herself and start the process of growing up emotionally.” Yet while Viola saw the errors of her ways eventually, a person who rejected expert help in becoming a “reasonable, sensible person’” would have only him or herself to blame for the consequences. As Duvall closed a section on the sexual challenges of youth: “your sex life,” and hence your social position, “is yours to choose.”\textsuperscript{431}

The paradigm that underwrites Duvall’s highly popular book accounts for a lot of the power and influence of official morality in the collegiate setting. While a fall from grace and

\textsuperscript{430} An early example is for instance John Dollard, \textit{Caste and Class in a Southern Town} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937); also see August B. Hollingshead, \textit{Elmtown’s Youth} (New York: John Wiley, 1949).

\textsuperscript{431} Ibid., 80; 95.
social status was the stick that kept students committed to their administration’s standards of morality, the air of mature responsibility bestowed on those students willing and able to comply was the carrot. Student publications and personal writings reflect clearly that the emphasis on personal responsibility and the social utility of regulations left an imprint in the collegiate setting. Student self-government organizations emphasized the need for the individual to control personal passions and individualistic desires for the benefit of the whole. As the Smith College Student Government Association put it: “maintenance of … social honor [was] the responsibility of each member of the student body.”

This was not just an official line. Female students complied with official regulations and actively policed and enforced them. Some served on judicial boards while others supervised their peers’ compliance with curfews and other dating regulations in an unofficial capacity. As Beth Bailey argues, college women who served on honors and judicial board in the 1950s through the early 1960s did not hesitate to use the power of their office to the full extent. Disciplinary measures students imposed on peers were often more harsh than administrations would have demanded. Occasionally, isolated students attempted challenging moral rules and regulations. This was the case at the Women’s College of the University of North Carolina in 1953, for example. Yet, despite the students’ arguments that the rigid requirements clashed with the veneration of individualism and contradicted the school’s claim to educate them in the values of social responsibility, the proposal went nowhere.

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433 Student compliance is discussed in Bailey, “From Panty Raids to Revolution.” For the Women’s College of the University of North Carolina see Betty Robinson to Noel Phyllis Birkby, 02-21-1953, box 8, folder 117, Noel Phyllis Birkby papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College. Also see Women’s League/Women’s Self-Government
their own reputation as female students or because they identified with their institution’s agenda, a majority of coeds accepted the need to adhere to codes of conduct that had been agreed upon as beneficial safeguards and yardsticks. Unfortunately, the official codex of regulations and the behavioral expectations women confronted on an actual date at times diverged quite significantly.

The discrepancy between official morality and behavioral expectations on a date became apparent to Alice Gorton when she started dating “fascinating” Dartmouth College man Richard in 1952. The clash over moral standards put a damper on her developing relationship with the academically minded young man. Alice clearly wanted a close friendship with Richard. In her diary, she still described him as one of the most important acquaintances she had made at Smith, even after they had had a falling out. Richard, as mentioned in the previous chapter, was important to her because the fact that the suave and intelligent Ivy League man was interested in her raised her self-confidence and increased her standing among her peers. In addition, she sincerely enjoyed the conversations and intellectual banter. Her enjoyment of the friendship was dimmed, however, when Richard wanted her to consent to sexual acts for which she was not yet ready.

Insights into sexual activities of postwar college women are hard to come by. Even in their diaries women often make only vague references to acts they engaged in. The underlying reason here was often fear that peers, parents, or other authority figures might get a hold of private journals. In addition, however, women also lacked a language to describe their actions. “Love making” is the almost universal term they apply when referring to

Association/Association of Women Students Records, Center for Archival Collections, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio.
activities on a date. Yet, which acts, specifically, they included under this term tends to be obscure. This lack of access to a terminology illustrates that postwar college women, just like previous generations of middle-class female adolescents, lacked information about sex.

Although lectures and courses on marriage education were increasingly part of their reality, women’s inability to describe body parts and desires suggests that they were learning more about morality and the need for role adjustment than about the physical and emotional aspects of sex. The lack of a language to talk about desires was an additional causal factor for the silences around sex in women’s writings. In cases in which women did broach the topic, their writings point to further consequences of their sheltered upbringing. These students did not know for sure which kinds of sexual activities carried a high risk of leading to pregnancy, and which did not. They were either not able to name the birth control methods used at dating encounters, or misspelled their names. Coming from women who were unusually literate and educated about topics not related to sexuality, such spelling errors suggest that they rarely encountered discussions of contraceptives in print. College women’s education about sexuality and morality thus prepared them only inadequately for the time when they were alone with a man on a date.434

Considering the silences that surround sexual encounters, Alice Gorton’s diary entries are a very important source. As already mentioned earlier, Alice habitually pasted letters from dating partners into her journal. Among them is one that Richard wrote her in response

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434 See for instance Mary Browning’s reference to “contracepts:” Mary Browning to mother, letter not dated, ca. 01-29-1950. The usually articulate Alice Gorton also was unable to name the birth control methods she was using at a later point in her dating career. For a student complaining in her diary about the lack of information about the physical aspects of sex see also Timmerman (pseudonym) Family Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.
to a disagreement about the question of how far to go sexually. Here, the young man had pushed for a level of sexual intensity with which Alice was not comfortable. She had refused her consent. Not wanting to lose the man as a friend and consort, she then tried to explain her reasons in writing. Unfortunately, this letter has not survived. Yet, because in his reply Richard paraphrased Alice’s arguments, we can see how she had tried to justify her actions. Women, Alice had argued, could not just “go around fooling with [any] man” because they had their “reputations to protect. … There [were] other, cheap, girls that [did] that,” [have sex] but women like Alice would not want a man like Richard “to get the wrong idea.” Moreover, “there’s a danger too.” Richard could not “expect” her “to enjoy” sex when there was the “possibility of conceiving [a child].”

Whether the question of how far they should go centered on the question of intercourse cannot be answered conclusively. Considering her lack of access to information about sexuality, it is unclear whether Alice mentioned her fear of “conceiving” because Richard’s had wanted to sleep with her. What we can say with surety, however, was that he wanted to engage in sexual activities that were more intense than anything Alice was willing to do. To justify her stance, Richard’s summary of her arguments shows, Alice drew on a catalogue of prescriptions that were firmly in line with the thrust of the postwar advice literature. Reminding him that only a “cheap” woman would consent to sex outside the context of a committed relationship, she referred to the official moral standard and the link between female sexual behavior and social status. Considering that society would judge her actions based on conventional mores, she had no choice but to conform. If she did not, she

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435 Alice Gorton, diary, Richard to Alice, letter pasted between pages 6 and 7, box 2, folder 13, “January 1952 - August 1952.”
risked loosing her reputation. But if Alice thought that by refusing Richard’s advances, his opinion of her would grow, she was wrong. The tone of his letter was downright sarcastic. About her argument, that she needed to heed social conventions, Richard thought little. “Really,” he wrote, he “just couldn’t care less about the ‘we girls have …’ line,” he told Alice. Ignoring what she said about her fear of pregnancy, he attributed her refusal of consent to sexual repression. “Go rape a bedpost, girlie,” he bluntly suggested. He even accused her of contributing through her behavior to the higher than expected figures of male homosexuality which the first Kinsey study (1949) had made public only a few years earlier: “Its (sic) you [repressed women] who make the homosexuals, especially when you become a parent.”436 Denying any legitimacy to Alice’s expressed wishes, Richard thus argued that her stance was merely a conventional “line” and that her behavior was ultimately a root cause for broad social problems.

Richard’s impatience and irritation with his partner’s sexual reticence was not exceptional. Social science data from the postwar period shows clearly that many college men were dissatisfied with the amount of sexual activity on a date and pushed increasingly hard for intercourse.437 My own sources, whenever they yield insights into the perspective of men, affirm this. Male student appear aggravated and frustrated when women try to set limits. Like Dartmouth College student Richard, they lacked patience with their partners. In 1950, for instance, the Worcester Tech student who had by that time offered Mount Holyoke student Mary Browning his pin, broke up with her. Questioned by her mother about the

436 Alice Gorton, diary, Richard to Alice, letter pasted between pages 6 and 7, box 2, folder 13, “January 1952 - August 1952.”

437 D’Emilio, Freedman, Intimate Matters, 262-263.
reasons for the break-up, Mary named their differences in regards to their sexual expectations. Her boy-friend had felt that she and he “had 2 entirely different concepts on love + sex.” Elaborating on the issue further, Mary wrote that she “wouldn’t go in for all the necking he wanted” and that ultimately, this was the main reason for why the relationship did not last.438 Another young man, a University of North Carolina student, after a date in the early 1950s wrote in his diary that, instead of listening to the arguments of his partner “Charleen,” he should have been more forceful. He wrote: “I should have moved in, short of rape for which she is too strong anyway.”439 Another male student in 1950 wrote to the boy-friend of a Mount Holyoke student that he was already frustrated at the thought of his upcoming Friday night date. He was determined to “press harder than usual,” but he was sure that he would be “hit by the usual barrage of no’s.” He was clearly fed up: “Goddam it!! Just the thought of going through the old bullshit for the umpteenth time. What a wear + tear on my poor testicles.”440 As these voices show, college men increasingly wanted to go further sexually, and at earlier stages of their relationships, than the women they went out with were comfortable with.

While the lack of patience and sympathy displayed by college men does not endear them to a modern day feminist, we need to put their voices in context. These men received confusing messages about the sexual behavior of women. From the public media, they

438 Mary Browning to mother, 01-15-1950.

439 Philip Kennedy, diary, entries not dated, ca. early 1950s, box 5, folder 197, “Kennedy, Philip (journal),” Frank Hunter Kennedy papers, Southern Historical Collection, Manuscripts Department, D. H. Wilson Library, Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

gleaned the impression that female sexual behavior was in transition. On college campuses, meanwhile, at least some women were defying traditional prescriptions. With female sexuality changing across lines of class, the distinction between girls who were nice and those who were “cheap” was getting blurred. This phenomenon, conservative cultural commentators saw as symptomatic for a cultural crisis. Yet in the collegiate setting, familiarity with Freudian psychoanalysis gave it an air of normalcy. In fact, Richard’s sarcastic response to Alice’s objections suggests that he felt that by refusing his advances, she was acting in violation of her own needs and desires. Not only would her behavior turn her into a repressed woman who reproduced her own pathology in the next generation once she became a mother, heeding convention would also not be to her benefit, personally. Sexually frustrated, she would be left to “rape a bedpost.” Richard’s impatience with Alice’s sexual reticence thus suggests that college men’ growing psychoanalytical sophistication was causing them to reformulate traditional definitions of female respectability. A bad woman, in their eyes, might no longer be the one who gave in to her desires, but the one who out of cowardice or neuroticism insisted on reproducing an official morality that was out-of-step with the insights of modern science.

Before we look at postwar college men as a vanguard of sexual egalitarianism, however, we need to consider the data provided by surveys of student opinions. Studies conducted among college students make clear that a double standard persisted into the early 1960s. Defiance of official morality for women still yielded a high cost. Women who did not act as the limit-setters in sexual relationships and who consented to sex or heavy petting with casual partners often found themselves abandoned.441 Once labeled as “cheap,” they lost their

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441 D’Emilio, Freedman, Intimate Matters, 262-263.
ability to attract economically upwardly mobile young men and with that one of the main
gateways to middle-class status for women. Men’s responses to the sexual reticence of their
partners therefore cannot be interpreted as a dramatic switch in attitudes towards female
sexuality. Male students struggled to reconcile perceivable changes in female conduct with
older notions of morality. The insistence with which college men pushed their partners in
sexual encounters, however, was not just a response to the actions of women. Instead, men’s
dating behavior illustrates pressures peculiar to the Cold War era that were influencing male
students and that resulted in a heightened level of self-consciousness and insecurity about
their sexuality and gender performance.

Educated young men in the post World War II period were likely to question their
sexuality and masculinity for a number of reasons. For one, they were increasingly exposed
to a framework of male gender and sexual performance that emphasized assertiveness and
aggression. These vernacular attitudes that were conveyed in interpersonal contacts between
men, through jokes, and innuendos, had long coexisted with an official middle-class morality
articulated in the print media. In the context of the expansion of the military apparatus and
the reestablishment of the draft, however, an unprecedented number of young men from a
variety of backgrounds were initiated to it in the decades after World War Two.442

While vernacular masculinity and sexuality had long carried an association with the
sexual cultures of the lower classes and non-white races, the growing influence of Freudian

442 Historians have studied “vernacular” sexuality, defined as a body of thoughts and
feelings that coexisted with the official morality of the middle class as articulated in print,
in particular for the nineteenth century. See Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, Rereading Sex:
Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America (New
York: Knopf, 2002); Christine Stansell, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York,
theories of development increasingly naturalized these traits. In works of psychoanalysis, the male role in the sex act is that of an initiator of reluctant women to the sex act. As Helene Deutsch argued in her influential two-volume *The Psychology of Women* (1944/45), for example, a normal woman’s role in intercourse was passive and her desire had a strong masochistic streak. It was thus a man’s normative role in the sex act to awaken his partner’s desire. Bestselling books such as Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead* (1949) and Grace Metalious’ *Peyton Place* (1956) both reflected the spread of this masculine ideal of a man who, by breaking the resistance of his female lover, enabled her to enjoy her heterosexuality. In both works, the sexual initiation of the female protagonist takes the form of a rape-like scenario in which a resisting female is conquered by a man who knows better than she the true nature of her desire. The popularity of working-class male heroes in Hollywood movies and the launching of *Playboy* in the early 1950s also indicate the spread of vernacular sexuality as the new norm into the middle class.\(^{443}\) In the post World War Two context of an expanding mass media and military apparatus, an increasingly homogenous set of expectations of male sexuality and gender performance was therefore spreading. This masculinization of middle-class culture combined with their psychoanalytical literacy to turn college men into a group particularly likely to experience feelings of insecurity about their sexuality.

Cold War political and social developments only heightened the potential for male students to experience sexual anxiety. To understand the hostility with which college men

reacted to reticent female partners, we need to return to the debate about the effects of over-consumption and mass culture on the nation’s male elite that I have described in detail in the first chapter. This discourse of an alleged male crisis was escalating by the early 1950s as a result of increasing homophobia. The publication of the first Kinsey study on men raised awareness of male homosexuality among Americans of all walks of life. Kinsey’s revelations of the higher-than-expected number of men attracted to members of the same sex was covered in all the major magazines of the time and discussed on the floor of Congress. Once alerted to the subject, the mass media further heightened awareness of homosexuality. In the sex-segregated units of the World War II military, many young people had experienced a gay or lesbian coming-out. After demobilization, this generation contributed greatly to the expansion of a homosexual bar culture. This subculture blossomed particularly in port cities on the East and West Coast. As a result of media exposes, however, the existence of what seemed like a virtual sexual underground became common knowledge. When then, in 1950, Undersecretary of State John Puerifoy released information about the firing of ninety-one allegedly homosexual employees a full-fledged sex panic ensued.

While sex panics in themselves were not new, the Cold War intellectual and political context made the situation unique. Americans’ growing awareness of homosexuality was particularly significant because sexual non-conformity and political unreliability were tightly linked. Within the expert community, the evaluation of homosexuality reached from diagnosis of psychological immaturity and maladjustment to congenital perversion and mental illness. Inherent in any of these labels, however, was the

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idea that a homosexual lacked the personal integrity and character structure necessary to function in a social or political leadership position. This association made it possible for Conservative partisans to capitalize on Puerifoy’s revelations. What the undersecretary seemed to prove was that the masculinity -- and hence the political reliability -- of the educated establishment was wanting. The situation enabled Senator Joseph McCarthy to attack East Coast patricians as effete and inefficient “eggheads.”

For college men, meanwhile, the situation increased pressures to project a virile and assertive masculine persona. For this embattled elite, proving their masculinity through sexual prowess beckoned as a possible option.

For young men in liberal arts programs and the Ivy League, the Cold War discourse on masculinity was especially problematic because by virtue of their student status and interests, they fit the model of the establishment patrician. Their masculinity deviated from the increasingly popular model of the take-charge, assertive, virile, go-getter. In addition, they spent large amounts of time in the sex-segregated atmosphere of Ivy League classrooms, student dormitories, or fraternities. College men’s responses to their female dating partners thus reflect a Cold War climate in which personal health, political reliability, and potential for leadership was intimately linked to male sexual and gender performance. Against the background of a debate about widespread male immaturity and susceptibility to feminization, accepting the limits a woman tried to impose on sexual exchanges on a date suggested that a

man had failed to shake off maternal influences and internalized feminine values. Not surprisingly then that young men who were themselves trying to come to terms with identity and sexuality lacked the ability to relate to the concerns of their female partners. From their perspective, sexually reticent women were no longer “good girls.” Instead, they could be looked at as culprits. As Richard accused Alice, it was they who “made the homosexuals.” In the form of a domineering mom or as scheming, manipulative Cinderella, women could be held responsible for the weakness of men and for the nation’s woes.

Cold War ideological developments thus resulted in normative pressures on men and women that were diametrically opposed. Even though the advice literature linked the ability to maintain impulse control to maturity and adjustment for both sexes, partisan attacks and cultural anxiety about softness made it especially difficult for culturally literate college men to identify with these prescriptions. Dating encounters between insecure young men who scrutinized their inner selves for signs of weakness on the one hand, and women who tried to insist on an official, albeit contested, standard of morality, on the other, easily turned bitter.

When college men held women responsible for keeping the nation committed to conservative sexual morality, they had a point. The majority of college women resisted increased pressures for premarital intercourse. As we know from Kinsey and other social scientific studies, female rates of premarital intercourse remained stagnant till the mid 1960s. Indeed, my evidence shows that some coeds resolved the question of the right course of action on a date with relative ease. This was the case, for example, for Leilah Dushkin, a young woman who started her studies at Smith College in 1949. One of the first things she noticed when she attended a social event at nearby Amherst College was the extent

446 D’Emilio, Freedman, Intimate Matters, 334.
to which student leisure activities centered on sexual activities. A “usual Saturday night,” at Amherst fraternities, she wrote her mother, involved a limited number of activities: “beer, singing, beer, dancing,” and most of all, “sex, sex, sex.” A “darkened room” was set aside for the sole purpose of necking and petting, and, as Leilah pointed out, couples took full advantage of the accommodation. As Leilah had stayed away from the darkened room, she did worry whether this had earned her a reputation as “a terrible prude.” A “long, long talk with [fellow student] Tooky,” however, assuaged her concerns. As “Tooky” assured her, a “girl” did not “have to neck, drink + smoke to get a man.” The “nice” ones would even expect her to say no. Reassured in her attitude, Leilah was confident that she did not have to change her moral outlook for the sake of staying involved in campus life.  

The way in which Leilah broached the topic of sexuality in her correspondence with her mother is unusual. While most mid-twentieth century college students answered in opinion polls that they could not talk about sexual matters freely with their parents, the exchange between Mrs. Dushkin and her daughter is remarkably open. Leilah freely discussed the “boys [she had] been out with” and her “luck” to have so far been able to avoid particularly “wolfish” ones with her mother. This openness had a lot to do with Leilah’s background. Unlike many other women of this study, she was not a first generation college

447 Leilah Dushkin to mother, 10-31-1949, box 1a, folder 1, “correspondence: family,” Dorothy Smith Dushkin papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Archives. For another example of mother-daughter exchanges about dating see the papers of Mount Holyoke student Mary Browning Nelson (Class of 1951). Again, the young woman’s mother had attended college herself. In this case, she was a Wellesley alumna. Mary Browning Nelson papers, Mount Holyoke College Archive.

student. Leilah’s mother had herself attended Smith College, graduating in 1925 with a degree in music. Mrs. Dushkin had also spent time studying in Paris where she met her future husband and Leilah’s father. She still occasionally came to campus to perform her compositions. As a professional artist, familiar with campus life, who had in her own youth enjoyed a considerable degree of independence, Mrs. Dushkin was likely to respond in a non-judgmental way to her daughter’s struggles to adjust to student culture. Having thus met in her mother a woman who was a sympathetic and helpful source of advice, Leilah might then also have been encouraged to express her confusion in front of a female peer.

Leilah’s access to a sympathetic mother, however, was unusual in the mid century context. As a previous chapter illustrated, few families could relate to the social challenges daughters faced in campus life. Female students from families without college culture experienced that their education gave them access to knowledge and information their lesser-educated parents lacked. Considering this, they were unlikely to seek out parental advice in questions concerning appropriate behavior. When it came to a touchy subject like sexuality, moreover, the fear of parental sanctions only added incentives to be silent. Family backgrounds thus influenced the extent to which a woman felt comfortable asking for clarification in the confusing environment of the student dating culture.

While family backgrounds predisposed especially non-traditional students to experience confusion over sexual morality, their responses to dating pressures were also shaped by their cultural literacy. How familiarity with contemporary debates about the state of American nationhood and culture influenced the way a college woman saw her sexual role and responsibility in a relationship shows forcefully in the papers of Sandra Iger. Sandra, who had grown up in Queens, New York, wasted no time after starting to study at Mount
Holyoke College in 1957 as an English major. Recognized by the faculty as especially talented right away, the scholarship student was exempted from freshman English and the same year already joined the staff of the literary magazine *Pegasus*. Sandra’s strong interest in cultural and political debates shows vividly in her correspondence in which she broaches topic reaching from Civil Rights to colonial independence movements. Before her freshman courses even had a chance to get her busy, she was already reading David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*. 449

While Sandra was starting her education in small-town South Hadley, her high school sweetheart Richard Kohler was beginning his studies at Columbia University. He, too, read *The Lonely Crowd*. Like Sandra, he found Riesman’s thesis that in the contemporary, corporate economy, individualistic and “inner-directed” values had given way to “other directedness” a poignant social commentary. That both soon interpreted their own experiences through the lens of Riesman’s analysis shows in the attention they paid to the question of being sufficiently “inner directed”. Neither wanted to allow peer pressure to cower them into conformity to group norms and both took care to emphasize their individuality. It was Richard, however, who first drew a link between the problem of “outer directedness” and sex. As he wrote her by late September of his freshman year: “[L]ove you, my virgin indignant,” and he called his label a “combination … of Riesman’s analysis and Kohler’s [his own] frustration.” 450

449 Both had their own copy of Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowed*. See Sandra Iger to Richard Kohler, 08-13-1957, box 1, folder 2, “January – August 1957,” Sandra Iger Kohler papers, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

450 Richard Kohler to Sandra Iger, 09-26-1956, box 1, folder 3, “September - October 1957.”
The basis of Richard Kohler’s frustration becomes clear from the letters the two students sent back and forth to each other. At regular intervals, Sandra visited her boy-friend in New York. During these visits their erotic encounters became gradually more intense. Yet when Richard wanted to sleep with Sandra, the latter felt that things were moving too fast. The act would have great “significance,” she argued. “If [they] were older and more sure of what would become of [them], [she] would not feel wrong in loving [Richard] fully, in every way.”

The way things were, however, she did not feel she should consent to intercourse. The reasons she listed, which were in part practical, in part emotional, vividly reflect her internalization of the notion put forward by experts that the act of coitus carried grave meaning and consequences and ought not to be engaged in as part of a casual relationship:

We are seventeen years old; we still don’t know if we will be married. If we had relations now we would feel tied to each other. … I know that it would be just about impossible for me to love anyone else without deep guilt and unhappiness. Also, carrying on an affair from now on till the time we married, which wouldn’t be till we finished school, would be tortuous.

Sandra’s arguments failed to convince Richard, however. As his response shows, he took from the discourse at his disposal different lessons than his girl friend. Referring to psychoanalytical theories, he accused Sandra of having a “virginity complex.” Utilizing the literature on mass society, he argued that his wish indicated a laudable individualism. Contrary to the “170,000,000 people” who just followed what they were “watching [on] T.V.,” he proudly asserted that he had “lost [his] reservations and [had] little guilt to dredge for final mental freedom about sex.” Sandra, he implied, was a herd animal. Eventually, he

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451 Sandra Iger to Richard Kohler, 11-08-1957, box 1, folder 4, “October 24 - November 19, 1957.”

452 Sandra Iger to Richard Kohler, 01-10-1958, box 1, folder 6, “January 5 - 20, 1958.”
gave her an ultimatum. If she “[would not] have intercourse with [him] willingly, [he would] look for girls who will.”

When reading the letters between Richard and Sandra, it is easy to see them as behaving in predictable and stereotypical ways. While Richard pushed, Sandra held the line. The dynamic is more complicated, however. For one, it is not a logical development that Richard would turn into a man who tried to pressure his partner into sexual activities. When he and Sandra parted for college, the two self-ascribed “virgins” had both been committed to a “wholesome” perspective. Both wanted to finish their education, including graduate studies in literature, before taking their sexual relationship to the next level. When their erotic encounters became more intense, Richard in fact struggled with feelings of shame no less than Sandra. How intensely Richard himself felt conflicted about his sexuality shows in the fact that, prior to presenting Sandra with his ultimatum, he had written her about his fears that, should she continue to hold the line, he would eventually have intercourse with a girl he had no feelings for. That in sex devoid of deeper feelings he saw something highly immoral and potentially dangerous, we can see in the outline for a novel he was planning to write and which he sent Sandra. In it, a “guy like [him] loves a girl like [Sandra] who goes to a Holyokeish college.” Because “Sandy” refuses to have intercourse, however, the male character “gets infatuated” with another woman who consents to the sex act with him. Afterwards, the male protagonist realizes that his infatuation had been but “momentary physical passions (sic)” instead of “true spiritual love.” The consequence is his downfall and ruin: “horrified and ashamed … he drops out of his college and becomes a bum, bitter and wretched.” Eventually, he “plunges from a first-story window and … dies in huge

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453 Richard Kohler to Sandra Iger, 01-06-1958, box 1, folder 6, “January 5 – 20, 1958.”
Although Richard called the idea for his story “hypothetical in toto,” we can see in it clearly how deeply the young man was still steeped in traditional middle-class concepts of morality. Sex just for the sake of physical gratification was not something he could easily imagine as a positive thing. Only a few month after he had sent Sandra his outline for a novel, however, Richard called sex “an amoral expression of instincts” that could “be indulged with more than one provided one is sure of contraceptive efficiency,” that was “a natural desire for one sex toward the other and alone [was] not love.”

That over time Richard “revised [his] thinking about sex,” illustrates the extent to which exposure to student culture had the potential to homogenize assumptions about male sexuality and gender performance. Introverted and literary-minded, Richard suffered personally in the masculinist atmosphere at Columbia, where, as his letters show, he met men who boasted about their sexual experiences. Increasingly perceiving his “virginity” as a handicap, he grew more and more self-conscious. The extent to which he felt out-of place among his male peers shows in the fact that he called himself a “misfitted egghead.” From the pain of this personal crisis, the literature on mass society provided somewhat of a respite. Reading about the damage caused by consumerism and mass culture at least enabled Richard to situate his own dilemma in context. At the same time, however, his growing background in the literature on mass society also heightened his sense that he needed to find a way out of his dilemma.


455 Richard Kohler to Sandra Iger, 01-06-1958, box 1, folder 6, “January 5 - 20, 1958.”
The way the literature on mass society affected Richard shows in the increasingly emotional nature of his letters. Right after he had devoured Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), a book about the manipulative techniques in the advertisement industry, he wrote a letter to Sandara. He hated “COMMERCIALS AND THEIR ASSOCIATIONS,” he vented in capitalized letters. Repeatedly, he expressed his disgust and frustration with society and the way in which he jumped from rants about consumerism to complaints about sexual mores shows clearly that he had come to see sexuality as central to the problems that affected him personally and the nation as a whole:

> Sex is neither holy or impious. … sex is so gruesomely treated and stupidly dealt with … The U.S. in particular, I think, is nuts in this fashion. … America must lead or be led. Today she stinks. … Russia is admirable. Cruel, worse than Hitler, but admirable … The people are enduring. They seem so crushed to Western eyes but I’m sure we’re worse off. 170,000,000 people watching T.V. shit. Poor US.”

Confronted with her boy friend’s anger and frustration, Sandra felt embattled. His accusations that she did not love him fully hurt her. His charge that she had a complex put her on the defensive. But she also found it increasingly difficult to mount counterarguments in response to his. Answering one of the letters in which Richard presented to her a “thesis on sex,” she wrote: “The most difficult problem in answering your letter is the fact that I in theory agree entirely with the ideas you expressed.” She once again brought up the fact that she felt handicapped by social norms. She was “afraid – of the feeling of guilt that [she] might and probably would have … of becoming pregnant, and of the emotional chaos that would cause in [her].” She added, however, that she did not think that these objections were legitimate: “I don’t think I should feel that way” she wrote. Richard, she added, struck her as

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456 Richard Kohler to Sandra Iger, 01-13-1958, box 1, folder 6, “January 5 - 20, 1958.”
“ready for things that [she was] not mature enough to take yet.” She was “ashamed of [her]self for [her] cowardliness.” In spite of the clear line on official morality in the female collegiate setting, Sandra took to heart her partner’s arguments. Despite the fact that her gender put her in a more vulnerable and more closely scrutinized position, she did not feel that these factors were sufficient as a justification for her continuous refusal of intercourse.

That despite her internalization of prescriptions against premarital sex, Sandra wrote her partner that she was in theoretical agreement points to the existence of a strong counter-discourse to sexual conservatism in the student dating culture. And indeed, Sandra’s case was not an anomaly. From the diary of Alice Gorton we can also see that even though she had rebuffed the advances of her Dartmouth date Richard, the practical and emotional factors on which she had based her objections were increasingly losing legitimacy in her mind. After Alice lost Richard as a result of what she eventually called her “puritanical” side, the Smith College student continued to confront the question of how far to go sexually on her dates. The entries she made at this early phase of her dating career reflect her internalization of the stigma attached to premarital intercourse, but they also show that she was struggling with countervailing pressures. Increasingly, she was beginning to think that she had a personal responsibility to defy conservative prescriptions. “Dating fulfills both a physical and a mental need in each sex,” Alice pondered at some point between December 1950 and May 1951. Considering this physiological reality, she mused, cultural mores needed to be

457 Sandra Iger to Richard Kohler, 01-10-1958, box 1, folder 6, “January 5 - 20, 1958.”

redefined. Evaluating a dating encounter during which she had stopped short of actual coitus but nonetheless crossed a line of permissible sexual behavior in her own mind, she wrote:

A subjective definition of the word ‘bad’ is now in order. Old fashioned morals, the ‘it just isn’t done’ type is gone for unfortunately it is done. Also ‘just because’ is out for inquiring minds. I think each should develop his own ideas – not a rigid code.\footnote{Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 54, box 1, folder 7, “December 1950 - May 1951.”}

This entry in Alice’s diary suggests that she, too, found in the student culture strong incentives to doubt the legitimacy of official prescriptions and to link the subject of sexual morality to the pitfalls of mass society. The young woman evaluated conservative mores against the backdrop of an intellectual discourse in which “rigid” belief systems were thoroughly discredited. Moreover she mused that especially educated people like herself—those in possession of “inquiring minds”—would have a responsibility to arrive at a new morality individually. In this notion she had at least in part taken her cues from the young men she went out with. Referring to one of her dating partners, she wrote that he lived by the motto ‘do what I want and not what I don’t want.’ This, she concluded, ought also to become her own attitude. Unfortunately, she “always” experienced “an exhaustive self-searching process to find out what I really want.”\footnote{Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 54, box 1, folder 7, “December 1950 - May 1951.”} Alice’s greater struggles to come to terms with her needs and wants was of course grounded in the fact that as a woman, she was exposed to greater risks and more stringent regulations. Her “self-searching” was therefore the result of a double standard. Yet, like Sandra, she accepted the example of her male dating partner as her model. Interpreting her personal struggles as shortcomings and doubting the legitimacy of her
feelings, she felt she should be able to have sex like a man. She was even considering that it might be her personal responsibility to challenge the status quo so that society could progress.

That Sandra and Alice felt that they ought to model their own behavior after that of their partners shows a deference to the needs of men that was firmly in line with a conventional female sex role. That they identified with their partners’ arguments, however, we also need to see in the context of their own intellectual pursuits. In fact, when we look at the authors and books that left a particularly vivid impression on these young women, it is no longer surprising that they found their partners’ arguments convincing. Both women were immersed in an intellectual setting in which the fate of man in modernity was intimately linked to sexual mores. In Sandra’s case, it was her own study of the work of British author D.H. Lawrence that she conducted independent from the direct intellectual influence of her partner, that enhanced the credibility of his arguments. “Have you read ‘Sons and Lovers’ by D. H. Lawrence?” she asked her boyfriend after he sent her his “thesis on sex” from Columbia. “There is something very similar to [your] idea … in it.” Sandra here referred to Lawrence’s critique of “the machine age.” Under conditions of modernity, Lawrence argued, men and women found it difficult to express all facets of their being and become “whole” as spiritual albeit also sensual beings. Alienated from their true being, they were forced into an existence demanding the denial of certain aspects of their self. Some banished physical passions completely and concentrated on the life of the mind. Others went the opposite extreme and indulged in lust devoid of meaning. To experience life authentically, Lawrence argued, men and women needed to combine all the facets of the self in “phallic” love relationships based on physical and spiritual intimacy. Unfortunately, the persistence of
conservative sexual mores in the modern West, made it difficult for both sexes to achieve wholeness.\textsuperscript{461}

While Sandra thus found the link between a cultural crisis and conservative sex mores confirmed in the work of an author whose work she was studying on her own, it was also here where she learned about the way in which women contributed to the perpetuation of this dismal state of existence. Although Lawrence saw both sexes as victimized by the machine age, his work featured prominent female characters who negatively influenced the physical and psychic health of men because of their attitudes towards sex. These are women who allow their minds to dominate their being, who repress their instincts, and who try to impose their own will and values on the men who love them. The latter meanwhile, are driven into misery by the domination of such cold and purely ego-driven females. Either, because they deny themselves sensual pleasures, or by going to the opposite extreme, they are doomed to never reach happiness and wholeness.\textsuperscript{462}

The fact that Alice Gorton in the early 1950s was intrigued by books that transported the same thesis illustrates that we are dealing here with an important influence. Alice, too, would eventually start reading the work of D. H. Lawrence in the context of her honors course of study in English. Long before that, however, she already found similar ideas than those expressed by Lawrence in the work of an author she read in her free time: popular essayist and fiction writer Philip Wylie. Here, she also found a particular version of the role


\textsuperscript{462} An example for this harmful female influence is for instance the character of “Hermione Roddice” in Lawrence’s \textit{Women in Love} (1920).
she as a woman could play to help alleviate the cultural crisis. Wylie nowadays, as I stated in the first chapter, is particularly remembered for his writings about “momism.” As mothers and partners of men, he argued, women controlled the definition of morality, their families’ “purse-strings,” and thereby kept the United States steeped in emasculating consumer- and conformism. Wylie’s novels also, however, feature female protagonists whom he portrayed as new types of women who could work side-by-side an invigorated breed of man to solve the contemporary cultural crisis. These women had freed themselves from the shackles of convention and conformist pressures. They rejected the teachings of “Mom” and the peer pressures of her younger version, “Cinderella.” It was this new model woman whom Alice Gorton found immensely appealing. Determined to change her behavior in sexual encounters, she adopted Wylie’s work as her dating manual. After one of her dates as a freshman in 1951, for instance, she wrote in her journal that the night had been “good in Wylie’s terms.” She had “followed [her] instincts and got rid of much nervous repression.” A little later she was “rereading” Wylie’s novel Night Unto Night, a book that was released as a motion picture starring Ronald Reagan in 1949. Alice recorded that she read it “with great profit” and found especially helpful “naturally” what she learned here about “the technique of making love.” Inspired by what she read in Wylie, she felt that she was finally learning the right lessons about sexuality. While others might “learn from early attraction + experience,” she had to learn from “reading + late practice.” She closed the paragraph by saying “Thanks P. Wylie.”

An even stronger incentive for sexual non-conformism she encountered at a later

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463 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 40, box 1, folder 7, “December 1950 - May 1951.”

464 Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 40, 42, box 1, folder 7, “December 1950 - May 1951.”
point when in the course of her readings she came across an essay on “free love.” In it, she found the author linking the ability of individuals to engage in love relationships outside the security of marriage to the superior mindset of rational minded people free of psychological fears and hang-ups. “Hey!” she wrote and quoted from her readings: “Free love [was] possible between truly free people … who have … complete control over irrational … impulses.” As demonstrated by the exclamatory remark she made upon finding this statement, she was glad to find additional support for her developing theory about sex.

As Sandra and Alice read a great number of books in college, it is telling that they paid particular attention to authors who emphasized a link between sex mores and cultural conditions. As their dating partners had already drawn the same connection, it is possible that they turned to these books after the same men suggested that they should read them. Yet, neither is there evidence for this, nor would the recommendation of certain readings automatically lead women to arrive at the conclusions they did. Considering the way in which many Cold War intellectuals applied the cultural lag paradigm, a reader could just as easily draw from the discourse the argument that, before behavior could change, a new morality first needed to develop. The work of Wylie, Lawrence, and of other writers did not automatically lend itself to the interpretation that the time for sexual non-conformism had arrived. When women did draw this conclusion from their readings, they were therefore reading selectively.

I would argue that Alice and Sandra extracted from the literature at their disposal the messages that spoke best to their own subjective experiences. Considering their situational

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context, it is not surprising that they were drawn to these authors. Despite his attacks against “moms,” Philip Wylie, for instance, offered a sympathetic look at the restrictions and contradictions faced by the young generation. In the current United States, he argued, they were constantly bombarded by sexually inciting suggestions. But as the values in the nation had not yet caught up to new realities, an old-fashioned morality demanded restraint. Kept in a constant state of nervous excitement, it was not surprising that contemporary youth felt troubled. Such a portrayal would undoubtedly appeal to students who were confused about their own feelings and the social demands in their environment. Meanwhile, the stereotype that women were responsible for the perpetuation of a conformist and conservative culture also matched the daily reality of female students. Against the background of the student run honors system, the charge that women impeded the individual from coming-to-terms with sexual needs would not have appeared far-fetched. Moreover, in the context of a peer culture in which there existed competing ideas about the particular value of their non-domestic goals the model of a woman who was idiosyncratic, albeit superior to the majority of her sex would have appealed to students like Alice and Sandra.

That both young women did indeed feel that the cultural criticism they read described their own situation is supported by their own words. In Sandra’s case, the way she described her life as a Mount Holyoke student increasingly resembled the way Lawrence portrayed existence in the machine age: In college, she wrote in 1961, it was impossible to live as a “whole person.” Here, she had to be “a brain … rather than whole, rather than utterly me. The complete me.” She did not “want to be separate things at different times.” Yet, “three quarters of [her] [were] dissolved and left behind with [Richard].”⁴⁶⁶ Alice Gorton at Smith,
meanwhile, in her response to female peers who delivered conservative moral advice reproduced the stereotype of the conformist and inauthentic Mom that she encountered in the work of her favorite author. In response to criticism from one of her housemates, she wrote: “[F]inally [Nancy] broke out with the motherly advice with which her dramatic little heart has been overflowing.” The woman had struck “many admonitory poses” and delivered her advice. “Ye Gods,” commented Alice, “I couldn’t help smiling – hard fight. But she was so serious + so enjoying her role.” In both women’s writings, the personal appeal of the theories their male partners were pitching at them is apparent.

Although I do not believe that Sandra or Alice picked up the books they read merely as a result of manipulation by the men they dated, their writings clearly show that they internalized the idea that their sexual behavior and the manhood and well-being of their partners was directly linked. That other culturally literate women interpreted their role in similar ways is suggested by the frequent expressions of guilt that accompanied refusals of intercourse. Bryn Mawr’s Margaret Hall, for instance, after one dating encounter wrote in her diary that she “hate[d]” feeling that she was “doing wrong with another person, against both natures.” Although her journal does not offer a lot of context or background, it seems apparent that she was castigating herself for meeting neither the needs of a partner nor her own. Stanford University student Susan Sperry Borman in her diary also increasingly questioned her motivation for wanting to save herself “for one man.” She found sexual

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467 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 77, box 3, folder 18, “September 1952 - February 1953.”

encounters that exceeded a certain limit “debasing.” Yet she wondered what really caused her to insist on limits: “Do I really do this because I want to keep myself (sic) pure,” she wondered, “or because I know it is a cruelly ensnaring way of leading some guy on and subordinating him to me? As she sometimes feared, she might just be trying to exercise power in an illegitimate way. “My criteria is,” she pondered self-critically, “you’ve got to be so crazy about me buddy, that you’ll do anything for me before you get anywhere with me.” “Doggone it,” she concluded, “it’s just another way of completely dominating somebody, of making myself the complete master, isn’t it?” 469

The fact that most college women continued to abstain from premarital intercourse vividly illustrates the influence of postwar conservatism. The self-incrimination and guilt that shows in the introspective writings of some of them, however, shows the strength of a parallel discourse that not only incited women to express their sexuality, but erected a forceful new imperative. If heterosexual desire needed to be expressed for the individual and the nation to develop, then how could one possibly continue to say no? This question would have struck culturally literate young women as particularly urgent because public commentators widely agreed that the psychological problems of individuals, the state of the nation, and homeland security were connected. Especially highly educated and ambitious female students were thus forcefully pushed towards defiance of official morality. How this influenced their college careers over the longer run will be the subject of the next chapter.

469 Susan Sperry Borman, diary, entry dated 10-10-1956, box 2, folder 16-21, “College Writings,” Susan Sperry Borman Delattre papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.
CHAPTER 7

COLLEGE WOMEN AND

MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY MYSTIQUES

Betty Friedan - herself a Smith College graduate - in her 1963 bestseller *The Feminine Mystique* described what struck her as the common story of women of her educational background and generation. 1950s college women, “taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or presidents,” surrendered to fear that too much education hurt their chances to catch a husband. They dropped out or they played dumb. By the mid 1950s, she wrote, sixty percent of college women left college before completion of their degrees either “to marry, or because the were afraid too much education would be a marriage bar.” Instead of trying to achieve in their own right, they contended themselves with a “‘Ph.T’ (Putting Husband Through)” degree. “The suburban housewife” at this time became “the dream image of the young American women.”

Friedan conceded that she had the benefit of hindsight. Nonetheless, her evaluation of this trend was harsh. It was “easier to built the need for love and sex into the end-all purpose of life, avoiding personal commitment to truth in a catch-all commitment to ‘home’ and family’.” These housewives “adjusted” to the feminine mystique and once they made this commitment contended themselves “to live through their husbands and children.” They “want only to be loved and secure, to be accepted by others, [and] never [made] a commitment of their own to society or to the future.” The nation’s most highly educated

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women thus seemed to perform with a vengeance exactly that flight into conformity which, as her readings in psychology and cultural criticism at Smith College in the 1940s had taught Friedan, was endangering American democracy and social progress. Rather than tackling the challenge of making an autonomous decision for their future, women donned a prepackaged role, essentially allowing others to define the parameters of their existence.471

Indeed, many passages in diaries and letters of college women affirm Friedan’s observations. By the time their studies were coming to an end, women who had once imagined to have it all sounded a different tune. Smith College’s Alice Gorton, who had started her dating career convinced that only “vegetables” would content themselves with a domestic life, by her junior year declared herself ready for love: She had “so much potential love, tenderness + giving pent inside [her] + no object.” She wanted “to let the floodgates loose + float on the tide.” Stanford University’s Susan Sperry Borman already as a freshman expressed this longing. “I do want a man,” she wrote in 1956. She wanted to be needed and worshipped and held close. Her fellow California coed Dori Schaffer wrote that she was “sad and alone and discouraged” and wanted to “have someone to make happy, someone [she could] please.” Instead of dreaming about accomplished futures as professionals or artists, these women now dwelled on their potential for love, care, and nurture. They also increasingly were won over to ideas about femininity that sounded suspiciously like an

471 Ibid., 187. For Friedan’s education at Smith College, the courses she took, and the professors she worked with, see Daniel Horowitz, Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).
essentialist *mystique*. Diarists grew infatuated with the idea of feminine intuition, instinct, their closeness to nature, and their special kind of “woman wisdom.”

But what did women actually mean when they wrote these words? Did their desire to be held close and be loved necessarily mean that they wanted to do nothing but be a wife and mother? Did their longing for safety and acceptance mean that they just wanted to fit in with the crowd? And did their infatuation with gender difference preclude the goal of achievement in their own right? In this chapter, I draw on a number of detailed diaries and collection of letters to shed light on these questions. As I will show, the women in question did indeed follow in the footsteps of the majority. They married early, had children, and put their own goals for graduate studies and careers on the backburner. This, however, was not the automatic result of their conversion to a *feminine mystique* as described by Friedan. In fact, women formulated ideas about their distinctive feminine needs and desires that – although they entailed parallels to the conservative discourse on female domesticity – did not preclude professional aspirations. Women emphasized the centrality of their reproductive role in the make-up of their identity to gain leverage and authority. They responded to their experiences in a college setting in which stereotypically male interests and traits were granted superiority and in which male needs were treated as entitlements. In this masculinist culture, insistence on feminine distinctiveness was a remarkable assertion of agency and the product of experience and a realistic weighing of options. The fact remained, however, that many women, despite a refusal to subscribe to narrow and essentialist notions of their role opted –

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at least temporarily -- for motherhood and domesticity. In this chapter, I link this outcome to a dynamic I see as the on-campus equivalent to red baiting in the nation at large. The experience of being sex and gender baited caused college women to see themselves as vulnerable, powerless, and isolated. Just like some adult left-wing radicals who became disillusioned with the cause of public social action and national reconstruction they embraced the notion that progress would only evolve from within small communities. By the end of their studies, they were won over to the idea of the complementary couple as a small utopia. I will also show, however, that women tried to hold on to their core values.

Select letters and diaries offer interesting insights into the way relationships between college men and women developed over the course of their studies. The correspondence of Margaret Kennedy, a student at Duke University in the early 1950s, and one of her suitors is one example. By virtue of her family background, Margaret was a traditional coed. Her father, Harvard graduate Frank Hunter Kennedy, was a senior partner in a Charlotte, North Carolina law firm. Margaret’s social coming-out was featured in one of Life Magazine’s special debutante editions. Despite the facts that she bore all the markings of a Southern belle, however, Margaret in college developed non-traditional aspirations for a woman of her class. By the time she was finishing her third year as an undergraduate in 1951 she was entertaining thoughts of writing professionally. As she wrote to an admirer, she had “always wanted to write” and had been repeatedly “told that [she] should write” by others.473 It is clear that when she wrote these lines, Margaret had not yet developed the necessary confidence in her talent: “I’ve been told that I should write, and I want to. But is that

473 Margaret Kennedy to Andy Adams, 08-12-1951, box 4, folder 140, Frank Hunter Kennedy papers, Southern Historical Collection, Manuscripts Department, D. H. Wilson Library, Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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enough?” she asked her pen pal. That she had gained the confidence to discuss her ambition at all, however, was the result of her recent experiences as a student. Duke University had awarded her the Angier Duke regional prize. Founded in 1925 to enable financially disadvantaged North Carolina students to study at the university, the award was redesigned as a merit-based scholarship in 1948 and granted annually to two women and four men of outstanding academic promise. In 1950, Margaret was one of the recipients. Yet, while her education was beginning to encourage Margaret to see herself as a potential active contributor to her culture, her partner had a different idea about her role.

The collection does not include a lot of information about the background of the men who wrote Margaret. It is clear though, that when she was starting her studies in 1949, the seventeen-year-old had a romantic relationship with a nineteen-year old student named Ken. Where exactly Ken went to college is not clear but the letters he sent Margaret between 1949 and 1951 show that he saw the purpose of Margaret’s education different from his own. For himself, Ken imagined a career as an academic. In a letter to his sweetheart, he shared with her his vision of their ideal future together: He could not wait to live with her in “a small house on a university campus.” He imagined to spent long nights “reading and looking at [her] over a book,” of “watching her sleep, snuggled close to [him].” Yet while he saw his own studies as leading up to a career as a professor, it was not part of his plan that Margaret would develop academic or professional ambitions of her own. As a passage from a letter to Margaret illustrates, he saw as the main purpose of her studies the development of her character and her femininity.

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Ken to Margaret Kennedy, letter postmarked 11-15-1949, box 4, folder 132, “Kennedy, Margaret, September - November 1949 Correspondence.”
Your work is that of preparation – of becoming a woman – of cheering me up – of continually pointing out our goal to my near-sighted eyes – of keeping me from becoming self-centered - … and most important of all of becoming an individual – I am so very demanding – and tend to be dominating – You must preserve your personal integrity. Never commit suicide. Always make your own decisions and always make me think I made them.475

Ken’s conception of female individuality here is interesting. Although he had clearly absorbed the emphasis on “personal integrity” so pervasive in the postwar literature, his letter shows that this discourse could easily serve a gender conservative agenda. Although he encouraged Margaret’s individuation, he expected her to do so mainly for the purpose of serving his own ego-needs. Ken wanted a wife who was a helpmeet, not a woman who challenged a traditional role division in marriage. His gender ideals become even clearer in a letter he sent Margaret after the latter wrote him that some of her friends had been critical of her relationship. Annoyed by the criticism, Margaret had defended Ken in front of her peers. Yet while Ken was flattered that she would risk alienating her friends, her anger was not something he could reconcile with his view of his future wife as a model of patience and benevolence. After calling her his “poor darling,” he used the occasion to outline in detail his theory of male and female nature:

Do not alienate yourself from your friends because of me. … It is a man’s duty to protect those whom and those things which he loves. A woman is too delicate to do this. Your courage is wonderful, but courage without armor is futile. … Be more sympathetic. It is your nature. Love [your friends] for their gullibility and pity them for their ignorance. … Never struggle against nature, seek your goal within her limitations.476

475 Ken to Margaret Kennedy, letter postmarked 11-15-1949, box 4, folder 132, “Kennedy, Margaret, September – November 1949 Correspondence.”

476 Ken to Margaret, letter postmarked 09-18-1949, box 4, folder 132, “Kennedy, Margaret, September - November 1949 Correspondence.”
As Margaret’s half of the correspondence has not survived, it is not clear how she thought about Ken’s vision of her role. There is evidence, however, that her partner’s reflections about gender roles were at least in part motivated by a fear that Margaret might be changing. As Margaret told a male acquaintance in the fall of 1950, she was beginning to feel that her stay at Duke was putting a strain on her relationship. The man in this case assured her that surely she was just imagining this. Yet that Ken feared that her education might turn his girl friend into a more independent woman shows when he sought reassurance that she would still be content with the role of helpmeet and muse: “Once you said you would be content to achieve through me,” he asked her in one of his letters after Margaret had just started her studies at Duke: “Do you still feel that way?” His insecurities regarding this question explain the urgency with which he emphasized his need for her: “Remember me and my Love,” he wrote: “You are my Reason and my explication logically for this mess we call a world. I need you and always shall.” In a follow up letter, he assured her that she was “the fulfillment of [his] soul” and without her, he “would be condemned to unhappiness – a man tormented by his soul.” Ken’s fear that his partner might develop new ideas about her role shows further in his frequent reminders of the value of a complementary division of roles. “A man and a woman combine to form a whole – a plurality,” he wrote. There should be no competition between partners. If Margaret thought that either one of them “[could] even win a contest,” it would be as if “the two hands of one body tried to prove the predominance of one.”

Interesting parallels exist between the correspondence of Ken and the letters Richard Kohler sent to his partner Sandra Iger at Mount Holyoke. Although in high school in Queens,

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Richard had bonded with Sandra over their shared interest in literature and politics, he was treating her less and less as an intellectual equal as his college education progressed. Instead, he presented himself increasingly in a superior role. When Sandra picked up a few faddish words and phrases used by her peers, he criticized her writing style as “other directed.” When she sent him her poetry, he condescended that they were “nice enough” but not sophisticated and he added that “[he] love[d] [her] in spite of [her] poems.” No longer seeing his “girl” as an intellectual equal, Richard instead became enamored with a view of Sandra as someone who, by virtue of her sex, occupied a sphere entirely separate from his own. She lived, he informed her, in “a magical world of whimsy and enchanted fancy which often startle[d] [him], and always amuse[d] [him].”

And once the couple had decided on marriage, he spelled out exactly how he conceived of their respective roles.

> I want to give you a nice home and a wonderful family. I want to protect you and be a male husband, not an intellectual companion. … You are so truly a woman I feel shy with you, even while wishing to master you as a male.

There is evidence that Sandra was uncomfortable with the changing dynamics in the relationship. From a visit to New York at which she had gone out with Richard and some friends, she returned to Mount Holyoke dissatisfied with the way her partner had treated her. The extent of her irritation shows in the fact that the scholarship student, chronically short on funds, invested into a long-distance call. While we have no way of knowing how this talk transpired, Richard felt he needed to continue the conversation in writing and it is from this letter that we can glean the nature of Sandra’s complaint. Richard, she felt, had monopolized

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479 Richard Kohler to Sandra Iger, 05-08-1961, box 7, folder 1, “April 19 - May 8, 1961.”
the conversation and ignored her. Defending himself, Richard did not deny the charges. Sandra, however, should not take his behavior as a sign of disrespect. “If [he] seem[ed], unfortunately, to ignore [her] publicly, it’s simply that [he] bask[ed] in [her] presence, and, feeling it around [him], [was] able to turn [his] attention more to the others who may be present.” Without her, however, he could not function. She was, he stressed, “the treasure of [his] life and all [his] thoughts revolve[d] around [her].” He “desperately” needed her. “Thinking of [her],” he pleaded, “redeem[ed] [him],” and he needed her “to save [his] own soul.” For evidence that his devotion was sincere, he even provided quotes from letters he had written to male friends. He was “mentally, spiritually, and emotionally dead,” he quoted himself, whenever he was not around Sandra. It was only “when, on weekends,” he saw her, that he “enter[ed] time, and therefore, life.”

The letters Ken and Richard sent to their sweethearts illustrate more than the long-distance romances of teenagers. The rhetoric they used reflects their awareness and internalization of central elements of the post World War II discourse on masculinity, mass culture, and the family. In liberal and conservative family discourse alike complementary family roles were cast as central to the survival of democracy and national stability. As Adlai Stevenson had put it in 1955, the home offered an educated woman a chance to create a sphere protected from the contamination of mass society in which “Western man” could maintain his wholeness and integrity. This model of the ideal couple not surprisingly appealed to young men in Ken and Richard’s situation. As students exposed to a masculinist campus culture, both of these young men encountered performance pressures in regards to their sexuality. Moreover, both aspired to, and could reasonably expect to enter, a

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480 Richard Kohler to Sandra Iger, 01-16-1961, box 6, folder 2, “January 2 - 16, 1961.”
comfortable middle-class existence after graduation. They wanted to marry and assume an academic job. Each of these goals carried negative connotations. Their dreams of comfortable homes and families connoted an interest in conformity and security and the taint of effeminacy. Against the background of mass cultural criticism, their aspirations for academic careers were likewise suspicious. While the expansion of the apparatus of higher education was opening up jobs for young academics, the growth of colleges and universities also meant that these institutions increasingly resembled large impersonal corporations in which employees needed to perform as other-directed grey flannel men. Considering the self-consciousness that Ken and Richard in all likelihood experienced, it is hardly surprising that they were attracted to the ideal of a marriage based on mutually exclusive gender roles. Positioning their partners as models of femininity would enable them to assume the properly masculine complement: they would “master” them as males. Yet while against the background of the crisis of masculinity discourse it is not surprising that college men identified with this version of the ideal couple, the question remains whether and if so, why, it appealed to their partners.

The model of partnership Richard and Ken presented to their girlfriends clashed in important aspects with the latters’ evolving identity as academically accomplished women. Naturally, it was flattering to be called the person a man needed for the survival of his soul. Yet, Margaret and Sandra were also asked to content themselves with a helpmeet role. Even though Richard and Ken talked about their partners as important muses and catalysts, their letters show that they did not expect them to have ego-needs on their own. Such a passively supportive role in a partnership clashed with many female students’ budding sense of themselves as potential future experts and producers of culture. Moreover, it contradicts my
own findings at the end of chapter five and the contemporary study of Mirra Komarovsky that show that a substantial proportion of college women expected to find in their partnerships intellectual equality and cooperation across traditional gender divisions of labor. There is no evidence that either Sandra or Margaret argued for an alternative definition of their role. Yet it is also clear that neither Ken nor Richard felt that they could take for granted that their lovers would slip into the role they imagined for them. More than just the romantic hyperbole of teenagers, the rhetoric in their letters illustrates that both felt the need for a sales pitch for a model of partnership they found appealing but to which their partners might have responded with hesitance. Lacking direct evidence for female resistance to this construct, the matter has to rest on speculation in the case of Sandra and Margaret. The diaries of Alice Gorton and Margaret Hall, however, offer more conclusive evidence about women’s ambivalent feelings about the role division their partners imagined as ideal in a modern marriage.

Smith College’s Alice Gorton met her future husband, the Korean War veteran George Hart, the summer before her senior year. When they met, George was a philosophy major at Yale but he was already disillusioned with the course of study and considered a job in the corporate economy as an alternative. As such, he did not march the profile of the kinds of men Alice had been drawn to up to this point. About his professional plans, for instance, she at one point dismissively wrote that he would be a “button puncher.” Moreover, from the start there were warning signs that marriage to George would entail a great degree of compromise on Alice’s part. That George held much more conservative ideas than Alice

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481 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 91 (first mention of George), 104 (“button puncher”), box 3, folder 21, “February - September 1953.”
about how an educated young woman should conduct herself shows for instance in his response to his girl friend’s adventures when a group of bohemian men from New York City’s Greenwich Village paid a visit to the small town of Northampton, Massachusetts.\(^{482}\)

That the Beat subculture that was taking shape on the West and East Coast in the early 1950s would appeal to a career- and literary minded female liberal arts major like Alice makes a lot of sense. As Wini Breines has shown, young, white, middle-class women who rejected suburban life as conformist and stifling were drawn to ideas of “wildness and originality” embodied in the figure of the Beat poet and other social outsiders.\(^{483}\) When representatives of the New York Beat scene arrived in the college town of Northampton Alice eagerly took advantage of the opportunity to get to know them. That she was doing so, although she was already going out with George, reflects her belief in her entitlement to a considerable degree of social autonomy. In line with her previous attitude towards the purpose of dating, she saw meeting what she called the “slicker” types from “the village” as her right. Her journal shows that she found her brush with bohemia exciting. “They are fabulous people like us,” she gushed (emphasis mine), “– we talk – what an experience!” At her meeting with the men, Alice talked about literature, drank and smoked, and pondered the future. The “only way to find yourself” one of the Beats told her, was by dropping out of society and traveling. Alice playfully adopted the jargon of the visitors. When the campus police stopped her for riding her bike without a light on, she joked that she, too, now had her own Beat story to tell: “Man! fuz busted me! Riding with no light!” she quoted herself as

\(^{482}\) Alice Gorton diary, entry not dated, 94 - 95 (back), box 3, folder 24, “February - September 1953.”

telling a friend. Yet this joke also indicates that, despite her fascination with the visitors, Alice had no intention to become a bohemian. She might ride her bike without a light on, but the thought of getting “busted” for a more serious offense appealed to her no more than the idea of dropping out of college. In a diary entry that followed a night during which she had partied with the visitors, she wrote that just like her “books, imagination” and her “written words,” adventures with “types” like the Beat poets fed her “thirst for life.” Her adventures with the “slicker types” Alice therefore did not see as a dangerous transgression, but as a legitimate social adventure. In consequence, she did not have qualms about sharing her experiences with George. Now, however, she learned that her dating partner adhered to stricter notions of appropriate female behavior. After Alice told George about what to her had been an exciting exploit, he got “mad.” He did not like her “adventuring” at all. At least for a short time, Alice considered that he might have turned his back on her for good. After a while he phoned. “Glad he called – not mad anymore,” wrote Alice. The incidence had taught her, however, that George had different ideas about how an educated woman ought to conduct herself.

George’s disapproval of Alice’s adventurism reflects discomfort with young women’s growing social autonomy and mobility that was typical of postwar Americans of his class and generation. Yet it clashed with the ideas about an ideal partnership that Alice had formulated in her diary so far. This incident was not the only warning sign that George might hold more conservative ideas about gender roles than she. George expected to “take

484 Alice Gorton diary, entry not dated, 108, box 3, folder 24, “February - September 1953.”

485 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 108 (back) - 113, box 3, folder 24, “February - September 1953.”
the lead,” she wrote. He did not expect his partner to be an intellectual equal. Rather, he expected her to play a passive and supportive helpmeet role. From Alice’s diary, it is clear that she was aware of this. In fact, she deliberately and consciously adjusted her behavior to conform to his expectations. After she had already started to see George regularly, for instance, she went out on a movie date with one of her older male acquaintances and another student couple. After this double date, the two females exchanged opinions. From Alice’s record of this conversation, it is clear that both women were at this time changing their dating behavior:

Joanie said that this sort of thing was a different type of fun than with George + Dick. We were more assertive and showed our own wit instead of being maternal and admiring foils for our lovers.486

Alice added to this entry that she preferred the “George-type fun.” She also insisted that “George [was] it.” Yet despite these remarks, it is also very clear from her journal that she felt ambivalent about him. Alice wrote that she would have to “adopt a pose” and “[force herself] into the conventional marriage pattern” for her relationship with George to work.487 As she noted herself, she was ”vacillating, wanting George + missing him, … + at the same time thinking perhaps I don’t love him.” In another entry, she wrote she was “finding fault with George.” She reminded herself that she did not want to become just “a rubber stamp” of a dominant male. She kept seeing other men and continued to toy with different options for

486 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 107 (back), folder 24, “February - September 1953.”

487 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 131, box 3, folder 21, “February - September 1953.”
work and study after graduation. Eventually, however, Alice shoved her doubts and apprehension aside. On September 11, 1954, she married George Hart.\(^{488}\)

Only a few years later, in 1956, Margaret Hall met her future husband Robert “Blake” Reeves at a Radcliffe Graduate Center dance. Margaret had by then graduated from Bryn Mawr and was pursuing a Masters in Education at Harvard. On first view, the couple seems ill matched. Blake and Margaret had little in common. Once he proposed, Margaret’s diary shows that she articulated her concern that their lack of shared interests might cause problems in the future.

I remarked that he had lots to say about physiology, and I about English and education, but what had we to say to each other? He said that that would solve itself when we had done a lot of things together, and developed a communal past.\(^{489}\)

That Blake was less worried than Margaret about their lack of shared interests reflects the fact that he adhered to a different definition of complementary marriage than Margaret. Since she had broken her engagement with her first fiancée Bill, Margaret had wanted the significant men in her life to share her passion for literature. She had been drawn to men who were intrigued by her ideas and intelligence. Blake neither shared her passions nor did he treat her like an intellectual equal. Intellectual compatibility in his view was not essential for success in marriage. A shared leisure life would give spouses sufficient material to talk about. As Margaret’s journal entry shows, she was aware of this fact. However, she also adjusted her behavior to the different expectations of this man. She was “not very brilliant and just

\(^{488}\) For signs of doubts and expressions of ambivalence see Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 38, 49, 78 (back), 88, 90, 109 (back), box 3, folders 21 - 24, “February – September 1953.”

\(^{489}\) Margaret Hall, diary, entry dated 10-14-1956, vol. 19, “June 1956 to June 1957.”
rather amenable,” when she was with Blake, she wrote. Just like Alice, Margaret responded with a great degree of ambivalence to Blake. At one point she wrote that she could “imagine so easily getting engaged to Blake. Getting married to him. … cooking for him. Bearing his babies, … and loving him so very much.” On other days, however, she doubted that he was “very bright.” Although he seemed “sturdy and reliable,” he might also be very unsuited to her intellectually. In 1956, she applied for a Fulbright grant. She kept going out with other men and continued her studies. This notwithstanding, she married Blake in June of 1957. Margaret continued her coursework in Education for a while, but ultimately, she did not finish her degree at Harvard.490

The question why these two women agreed to marry men for whom they clearly had ambivalent feelings begs for an explanation. Already before Margaret and Alice met their future husbands, however, changes in their outlook became apparent in their journals. As both women’s studies progressed, they became increasingly intrigued by notions of an archetypal or instinctual femininity that they gleaned through their in-class and extracurricular readings in the fields of anthropology and culture and personality. To Alice Gorton, these ideas about femininity were introduced in the context of her honors work in literature during her junior year in 1952/53. Searching for a thesis topic, she encountered the work of British literary scholar Gilbert Murray by which she was instantly intrigued. Quoting Murray, she wrote that there was a need to analyze literature for the “undercurrent of desires and fears and passions, long slumbering yet eternally familiar, which have for thousands of years lain near the roots our most magical dreams.” Subsequently, she honed in on a thesis

490 Margaret Hall, diary, see entries dated 09-30-1956, 12-17-1956, vol. 19, “June 1956 to June 1957.”
topic. “This is the great subject,” she wrote. She would write about “the archetype from the collective unconscious.”

Alice here had come across the postwar revival of the work of Swiss psychologist and Freud critic C. G. Jung. Although Murray himself had not read Jung, literary scholars counted his essay “Hamlet and Orestes” as one of the first analyses that applied the concept of a transhistorical archetype to the interpretation of literature. From her honors course of studies, Alice was familiar with the writings of these scholars.

As the title of her senior thesis, “The Artistic Use of Myth in Certain Poems of William Blake and T.S. Eliot,” shows, Alice did indeed follow through on her scholastic plans. Even more significantly, she began to apply the anthropological theories to make sense of her own experiences during her junior year. With growing frequency, anthropological concepts appear in journal entries about Alice’s own life and identity as a woman. “Archetypal patterns: … woman, femininity, fertility,” she jotted down at one point and at another described her belief in “the collective unconscious + the possibility of a priori knowledge.”

While these entries might still have been inspired by her thesis research, the way in which her readings influenced her identity show in changes in the way Alice was rethinking her developmental goals.

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491 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 152, box 3, folder 19, “September 1952 - February 1953.”

492 Alice read for example Maud Bodkin, who, in Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (1934), combined Murray and Jung. For contemporary discussions also see Lauriat Lane, Jr., “The Literary Archetype: Some Reconsiderations,” Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 13, no. 2 (1954): 226-232.

493 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 156, box 3, folder 19, “September 1952 - February 1953.”
Alice’s infatuation with the idea of a female archetype entailed a significant change in her attitude towards motherhood. Alice liked to dream about her future after graduation and she frequently recorded these fantasies in her journal. She imagined herself as a successful writer and saw working for the magazine *The New Yorker* as a particularly fascinating career. Often, she dreamed about moving to New York City where she would have exciting love affairs with men in addition to literary fame. When Alice was a sophomore, for instance, she recorded the following scenario:

New plans about my future … disappearance … to a steel town. Work in a bar, love … of a …. Streetcar named Desire type. … Loss of baby. Perfect … happiness for two years. I continue to write successful salable stories. … No kids. He is killed, I am completely desolate … I go to New York, apartment, beautiful clothes, a gorgeous desirable sensual satisfied wise + loving woman. Job on New Yorker, honored, respected, a literary light.494

Obviously, this entry does not reflect a realistic plan for a postgraduate career. It is a fantasy that was in all likelihood triggered because Alice saw the actor Marlon Brando in the 1951 movie version of Tennessee Williams 1947 play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Countless other young women probably engaged in similar fantasies. The entry illustrates nonetheless Alice’s desire for independence and individualistic fulfillment. The young woman imagined literary fame and the reward of an exciting love life as a consequence of her own daring actions and talent. Motherhood, by contrast, does not figure as an appealing option in the scenario. That in her fantasy Alice allowed her offspring with her glamorous lover to die shows that she was aware that the presence of children would make it difficult to combine a

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career and a marriage. Alice’s discovery of “the great subject” of the female archetype, however, entailed a reassessment of motherhood.

The development in Alice’s thinking becomes clear in a journal entry she made during the spring of 1953 while spending a college break with her family in Ohio. To work on her thesis, she had taken a book by C. G. Jung. Her reading of *Psychology and Religion* (1938) was interrupted, however, when her slightly younger brother returned from a party. Having had too much to drink, the young man got sick and Alice cleaned up after him. Afterwards, she turned to her journal. The actions, she mused had a deeper meaning.

I know dimly now the love + dedication and the joy that mothers know. It is a wonderful thing – this doing things for others without expecting or requiring the slightest thanks. … I am proud of myself and proud to be a woman. … An archetypal feeling – I am now part of the tradition of motherhood.495

The desire for literary fame and individualistic fulfillment that had characterized the earlier daydream is clearly absent from this entry. Instead, Alice emphasized the satisfaction she had gleaned from acting in a selfless way. Not even expecting gratitude from her inebriated sibling, she insisted that she was content to rest in the sense that she had become part of a long tradition of women who devoted themselves to the well-being of others instead of to their own ego-needs.

Striking parallels exist in the way Alice Gorton and Bryn Mawr’s Margaret Hall came to write about herself. Margaret’s journal is less detailed than Alice’s. She neither commented extensively on her readings nor did she record her dreams. It is still clear that over the course of her studies her reproductive role became more central to her identity. In

495 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 22 (back), folder 20, “February - September 1953.”
May of 1953, for example, she described an experience in which she had felt particularly in touch with her femininity. In this entry, she expressed a concept of women’s nature as instinctual, physical and closely in touch with nature: “My bra was loosed for once, and for some odd reason it caused me the most primitive feelings… a sharp identification with land, and being a woman and a bearer of children.” Being a potential mother here clearly struck Margaret as one of the most key components of her nature. She also, like Alice, emphasized that as a result of her reproductive role, she possessed particular traits, insights, and interests that set her apart from men. Women, she wrote to a friend in 1955 “never see as men do; they aren’t made to fight their battles as men do; they don’t understand as men do.” If they were a “good member of [their] own sex,” she believed, women had intuitive insights. They could “use woman-sensitivity for others’ good,” or apply a particular kind of “woman wisdom.”

The parallels in the journals of Alice and Margaret suggest that over the course of their study they were increasingly won over to the idea that because of their potential role in reproduction they differed in essential aspects from men. Considering that this emphasis on divergent gender traits and interests also informed some of the most conservative expert writings of the postwar period, it looks as if normative pressures in the shape of a “mystique” of essential femininity had finally caught up with these women. It is important to note, however, that neither Alice nor Margaret experienced this interpretation of their female nature as an imposition from the outside. Both experienced their ideas as authentic. To Margaret, it seemed that her own physical sensations affirmed the central importance of her potential as a “bearer of children” in the make-up of her self. The extent to which Alice, too,

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identified with these notions, meanwhile, shows in the determination with which she held on to them even after an expert authority belittled them. In 1953, to gain some advice on the material she was planning to use for her honors thesis, she approached a Smith College psychology professor about C. G. Jung. From his response, it was clear that he thought little about the analytical value of Jung’s work. It did, he dismissively stated, appeal only to women and artists. It was not scientific. Alice’s response shows, however, that by this time she trusted her own insights more than those of her professor. She vented that he was a “stupid Man!” and had “absolutely no imagination.” She declared with pride that she was now finally “beginning to formulate [her] own beliefs, including the collective unconscious + the possibility of a priori knowledge.”

Even though the man had, by virtue of his sex and position, an authority that Alice lacked, her confidence illustrates the extent to which she experienced her beliefs as satisfying.

To understand why the concept of an archetypal femininity appealed so strongly to Alice and Margaret, we need to look at the events that preoccupied them at the time when they formulated these thoughts. Here, their journals remind us of the frequency with which postwar college women experienced sexual conflicts, which the preceding chapter already illustrated. In both women’s cases, the notion that their reproductive potential equipped them with distinctive qualities grew in appeal at a time of mounting stress in their intimate lives. Even though she stopped seeing Dartmouth College man Richard, for example, the question of whether or not to have intercourse again and again posed itself to Alice Gorton. As a junior at Smith, she was still dating multiple partners but Jim, a young man she knew from

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497 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 156, box 3, folder 20, “February – September 1953.”
her hometown of Lakewood, Ohio began to appear frequently in her journal. Jim was the son of an art critic for a newspaper from Alice’s hometown. A well-read liberal arts student who possessed all the accoutrements and intellectual prerequisites for membership in a cultural elite, he was the kind of man whose company Alice enjoyed. In regards to his sexual demands, Jim presented a similar challenge than Dartmouth College’s Richard. But by the time she was going out with Jim, Alice was no longer as strongly committed to holding the line than she was a semester earlier. She did not want to lose another dating partner because of her “puritanical” attitude. Moreover, her own readings and deliberations had eroded her belief in the legitimacy of a sexual double standard. She was no longer able or willing to argue that only “cheap” girls expressed themselves sexually. Rather, she had begun to believe that an exceptional and non-conformist woman owed it to her own development and the men she went out with to, as she had put it, shed “nervous repression.”

Alice and Jim’s sexual relationship became progressively more intense. By start of her junior year, although she still had not consented to intercourse, she was clearly performing acts she knew many of her contemporaries would consider illicit. This shows in her ambivalent stance towards her actions. In her diary she described her growing sexual experiences as progress. Aside from her close circle of female friends, however, she concealed her activities from her Smith College peers. She was clearly concerned that her reputation would suffer if the extent of her sexual experimentation became common knowledge. Nonetheless, it is similarly clear, that she and Jim were considering going all the

498 The nervous repression comment is from Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 40, box 1, folder 7, “December 1950 - May 1951;” for “puritanical” see 27, box 1, folder 14, “January - August 1952.”
way in the near future. This shows for example, in a letter from Jim. Alluding to a recent intimate encounter, he wrote:

What you have done or will do has nothing to do with the fact that I will always receive you with the pleasure you have given me. What I have done or will do has nothing to do with the fact that my silence will always be dedicated to your best interest.\textsuperscript{499}

Jim’s letter makes possible a number of insights into Alice’s sex-life. Already, she and her partner had engaged in acts that they were not comfortable to admit to in public and they were considering going even further in their sexual relationship than they had so far. Alice’s response to the letter also enables us to glimpse how deeply ambivalent she felt about her activities. She wrote that she was “overwhelmed” by “emotion.” She “reread [the letter] several times.” It is clear that she was not entirely sure what to think about it. “It was a good letter – exactly fitting our situation,” she wrote, but Jim’s promise to keep his “silence” in her “interest” also irritated her. She “could get mad” when she thought about “the crack about keeping silent for my own best interests.” Yet she could not quite explain her reaction to herself: “This is so strange, (her emphasis)” she wrote in reference to her anger and to the fact that she felt “drained” and “without … joy.” The question of how to respond to Jim’s letter now took all of Alice’s attention. Even though she was in the midst of working on a paper, she dropped her academic work and set to the task of composing a response.

I will now write the best letter that I am capable of – all the honesty, the maturity that I possess. Also dignity and warmth. It must be the perfect opus in construction, subject matter and penmanship. All shot are plans for study… His letter was a masterpiece, let’s make mine one too.\textsuperscript{500}

\textsuperscript{499} Jim to Alice Gorton, letter not dated, approximately September 1952, pasted in Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 38, box 3, folder 17, “September 1952 - February 1953.”

\textsuperscript{500} Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 38 - 40, box 3, folder 17, “September 1952 - February 1953.”
Alice’s response to Jim’s letter offers us an important snapshot into how difficult it was even for culturally highly literate women to cope with the ambivalent climate surrounding female sexuality. In her irritation, we can see that she was becoming critical of the gender dynamics of her sexual encounters. It is also clear that she lacked a language to express herself. We see here the extent to which the perspective of women was denied legitimacy in the student dating culture. Alice was used to an environment in which female students were regularly reminded of their social obligation to meet the needs of others, where the views of men were endowed with special prestige, and where references to the sexual double standard were seen as a “line” of repressed or manipulative women. Her “strange” inability to locate the exact source of her irritation shows us poignantly that she had internalized these messages.

Although in the dating culture of self-fashioned sexual liberals, which Alice frequented, students argued that the sexual double standard was no longer a legitimate argument against intercourse, the effort the young woman put into composing her response also illustrates the persistent stigmatization of female sexuality. She was not exaggerating when she expressed her wish to write “a perfect opus.” She composed multiple drafts before she sent a final version of her letter. The level of attention she devoted to the task shows that she assumed that Jim’s opinion of her depended on how he would interpret her motivation for giving in to her sexual desire. Alice knew that a woman could get away with acts that middle-class society generally considered illicit only under certain circumstances. Against the background of an expert discourse that linked the lack of impulse control to the vulgar sexual behavior of low class women, she would have to maintain the impression of acting in a self-
aware fashion and of being in control of her impulses. Alice’s attention to detail is thus her attempt to portray herself in control of her desires. Unlike the kind of woman who got herself in trouble she had to present herself as a rational free-lover. If she succeeded to prove her dignity and maturity, Jim would see her as a laudable non-conformist. If she failed, however, he would see her as a vulgar specimen of her sex.

We do not know how Jim responded to the letter but he and Alice continued to go out. At times when she felt at her most confident, Alice experienced herself in control and insisted that she was collecting important experiences. During these times, she rejoiced in the sense that she was becoming the kind of “fascinating” woman whom an “old worldly wiseman” (sic) like Jim would be attracted to. Eventually, she also agreed to take the relationship to the next level. When she consented to intercourse, however, she became even more vulnerable to suffer personal conflicts as a result of the ambivalent atmosphere surrounding the subject of female sexuality.

Thanks to Alice’s high level of self-scrutiny, her journal provides an unusually detailed account of how she experienced intercourse. She and Jim devised a plan. Officially, Alice was spending the weekend at the New York City home of her college roommate’s family. One night, however, she spent with Jim in a rented room in Brooklyn. The morning after, Alice turned to her diary to evaluate the experience. Her entries show that her initial interpretation was positive. She was able to portray her actions not as a fall from virtue but as the act of a woman who had successfully freed herself from the influence of cultural taboos. “This is fascinating,” she wrote into her journal. She had felt only “happiness,” she insisted,

“[n]o panic, nervousness, possessiveness.” The following day she continued her reflections.

Feel no different on this day of reaction except very tired. … it is an experience + I am learning much. Perpetually surprised by the ease + simplicity. Why the hell do people make such a damn fuss. … Let me live in awareness. ‘Alice fell from virtue somewhere in Brooklyn.’ Marvelous … So happy!

Unfortunately, Alice’s delight in the “ease + simplicity” of her affair was of short duration. In the historically and gender specific situation in which she experienced her first coitus, it was impossible for her to maintain a positive attitude for very long. A gender gap in regards to information about sexuality worked to her disadvantage. Alice’s ignorance about birth control soon caused her to agonize about the possibility of being pregnant. Although Jim used a condom, Alice was not able to name the device and did not trust its effectiveness. Returning to Smith College, she spent hours alone brooding in her room. “Nervous from smoking too much,” she wrote: “wonder if I conceived.” Once her period set in, Alice recorded in her diary that “Birth control sure [was] a marvelous thing.” But Alice’s internal conflicts did not just stem from her inability to control her fertility. They were also a result of the fact that she was utterly isolated from the possible insights and perspectives of other women.

502 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 82 (back), box 3, folder 18, “September 1952 - February 1953.”

503 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 82 (back), box 3, folder 18, “September 1952 - February 1953.”

504 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 85, box 3, folder 18, “September 1952 - February 1953.”
The ambivalent discourse of female sexuality negatively affected Alice’s ability to access her support network of female peers. The young woman normally recorded her important conversations in her diary. As there is no record of a talk with any of her friends about her post-coital anxieties, I assume that such a conversation never took place. This is all the more remarkable, as Alice had involved her friends in her plans in the days leading up to her Brooklyn trip. At a minimum, she needed the cooperation of her roommate to meet her lover in Brooklyn. Moreover, Alice knew from a number of her female friends that they, too, had slept with men with whom they did not have an exclusive, steady, relationship. She also had discussed with friends the example of another Smith College woman who dropped out to have a child and refused to marry the father. In their private conversations, Alice and her friends had admired this woman’s actions. A fear that her friends would condemn her for meeting a lover in Brooklyn could therefore not have been the reason why Alice remained silent.

That Alice did not seek the help and advice of her friends was a consequence of the linkage between a woman’s sexual performance, her intellectual abilities, her personality, and as such her social status in general. The onset of self-doubt and shame in the aftermath of her affair raised the specter in her mind that she did not possess sufficient maturity and self-awareness after all. If she was not a rational woman in control of her impulses, however, she could only be a vulgar bad girl. Shortly after the Brooklyn trip, she described herself in her diary as “unclean” and “weak” and as a woman who resembled an “animal” and a “throwback” in evolution. She was “bad, bad” wrote Alice and should not be allowed to even

505 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 65, box 3, folder 18, “September 1952 - February 1953.”
“touch clean” women anymore.\textsuperscript{506} That even a culturally highly literate women like Alice thus obviously internalized the stigma attached to female desire illustrates poignantly how difficult it was for women in the specific situational and discoursive context of the postwar period to experience their sexuality in a positive way.

In the aftermath of her Brooklyn affair, the tenor in Alice’s diary changed. She increasingly felt like she was making a mess of her life and feared that she was on the wrong developmental track. She was “just drifting into messes,” she had “no honor, no maturity.” She also at this time became critical of the literature of individualism popular within her circle of friends. She emphasized the interdependence of all social groups on one another and she described herself frequently now as a person who was tender and giving and ready for love.

The diary entries of Margaret Hall reveal less about her dating encounters but a careful reading shows that she, too, was unable to experience her sexuality in a positive way. At the start of her college education, Margaret’s engagement to Bill had offered her some protection from sexual conflicts. Bill was sexually conservative and did not pressure her to go beyond her comfort zone. Margaret lost this safe space, however, when, after having broken up with her fiancée, she was pushed and pulled back into the dating culture. As she described herself in a letter to a friend, she became quite “a sucker for a good-looking man, or an interesting mind. Preferably both.” Like Alice, she was going out at this time with young men who shared her interest in literature and who seemed willing and able to accept a woman as an intellectual companion. These cultural liberals, however, also expected her to be

\textsuperscript{506} Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 109, box 3, folder 18, “September 1952 - February 1953.”
sexually more liberal than she was comfortable with. Moreover, as Margaret did not commit to any particular young man, the sexual acts that occurred in the context of such relationships would by definition be casual. For Margaret this constituted a dilemma. As she at one point remarked in a letter to a friend, she had been getting into a number of “man predicaments” after leaving Bill.  

While at Bryn Mawr, Margaret managed to keep her affairs from growing too intense. She avoided situations in which she found herself alone with men. As she wrote about this time in retrospect, she adopted as her motto to “stay out of trouble, stay out of bed.” It became more and more difficult to avoid sexual entanglements, however, once Margaret started graduate school at Harvard. “Why do dorms permit young men to have young women in?” she asked at one point. “Oh dear,” she continued her journal, “it does sound as though there had been a scandal. There wasn’t. Kissing, and hugging, and some petting.” These activities, Margaret in her journal refused to label as “evil.” Culturally no less literate than Alice, she was aware that sanctions against premarital sex were but a cultural convention. Nonetheless, she clearly experienced intense personal conflicts. “Is that evil? Hands outside one’s clothes, across one’s breasts?” she asked. She was aware of cultural relativist interpretations of sex mores: Were she “in a different society,” her actions would not be considered a taboo, she knew. Nonetheless, her sexual encounters left her with a nagging sense of self-doubt and shame. “Mommy … would dispise (sic) my lack of wisdom and control,” Margaret recorded. This reference to the need for, on the one hand, “wisdom” and, on the other hand, “control” poignantly illustrates that the postwar discourse on

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individual responsibility combined with the ambivalence regarding female sexuality put her in a double bind. Her confusion about the appropriate course of action suggested a lack of maturity. Her experience of desire, meanwhile, alarmed her as an indication that she might be incapable of controlling herself.

A fear of what her personal conflicts might reveal about her character prevented Margaret, just like Alice, from turning to other women as sources of advice. Her relationship with her mother was not close and she did not broach sexual topics in front of her. But Margaret also lacked female confidantes among her college peers. This was not just an effect of the under-representation of women in graduate departments. Already at Bryn Mawr, Margaret had not been comfortable discussing the topic of sexuality with other women.

There is no evidence that during these times she was performing acts considered illicit. She did not consent to intercourse; she did not even seem to have engaged in heavy petting. Yet, from whatever angle she looked at it, her performance in sexual encounters raised fears that she might become one of those socially marginalized actors who got themselves in trouble for their lack of “wisdom and control.” Even for a professor’s daughter from a rural country estate, sexual performance had become a stronger status marker than her class.

The difficulties culturally literate women experienced in the attempt to come to terms with their sexuality are highlighted by their response to the Kinsey reports. As these studies offered statistical data that demonstrated the frequency with which moral codes were violated, one might assume that college women welcomed the news and appreciated the information. Curiously though, very few women even mention the Kinsey studies in their personal papers. Margaret and Alice are two of only a few women who talked about them at
Yet, even though both women took note of the publication of the Kinsey’s material, they found it of little help. The way in which Margaret responded in her journal is telling:

[T]here are as many conflicting standards among my fellow Bryn Mawrs as among the young men who feature so prominently in Dr. Kinsey’s pages. This I suspected – but did not know for sure.509

Considering the impact the Kinsey studies had in the nation at large, this is a surprisingly curt response. But Kinsey was not really offering Margaret new information. The 1949 study on men confirmed that students conducted their intimate relationships in a variety of ways. The information supported the notion that in the final analysis it was up to the individual to decide on the right course of action. “One tries to decide What is Right … and learns that … Right is a relative thing,” Margaret commented on the report. She clearly wanted to hear something else by this point, though. From the comments she made immediately after this sentence, we can see what she was looking for. If one was “lucky,” she wrote,

one learns what the flexible, inevitable Right is for one’s self. That which must be. That self-made cave within which one is at peace with self and soul.510

As indicated by this comment, Margaret had gained little from Kinsey’s aggregate data. She was not interested in what was typical or average, but in what was “Right.” As her mentioning of the flexibility of standards shows, she was not looking for a universal norm. Morality was “self-made” and individualistic. Her craving for peace, however, illustrates the

508 One example would be Janet Brown, whose reaction to Kinsey I discussed in the previous chapter. See Janet Brown to parents, 01-30-1949, box 1, folder 6, “January 30, 1949 - June 30, 1949,” Janet Brown papers, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

509 Margaret Hall, diary, loose sheets inserted in diary vol. 13,” Bryn Mawr Senior 1955.”

510 Margaret Hall, diary, loose sheets inserted in diary vol. 13, Bryn Mawr Senior 1955.
strains caused by sexual encounters that left her either with a sense of guilt for not meeting the needs of partners, or with a sense of shame for doing so. The fact that Margaret at this time took up Yoga and meditation further illustrates the intensity with which she craved some kind of yardstick other than the refrain of individual choice and responsibility. She was actively looking for answers to questions that affected her sense of well-being and challenged her identity.

It is telling that Alice Gorton, too, found Kinsey’s studies of human sexuality of little help. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953) was published the same year she went to Brooklyn to consummate her affair. Not surprisingly, considering her preoccupation with how to interpret her actions, Alice read the report. She learned from it that her behavior was not unusual: “The Kinsey report on women makes me typical, but a bit more ‘sexy’ than average. Good.” This curt comment, however, was the only reference in a diary composed of often page-long reflections on readings and how they relate to the author’s life. Alice, too, therefore did not find in Kinsey’s report what she was looking for. As the entries that increasingly appear in her journal reveal, she was reeling under a sense of having to live up to other people’s ideas and expectations. “I have the idea now that I am not much of my own,” she wrote, “just a hodge podge of other peoples ideas + desires + drives – from books + friends.” Her own needs and interests, however, seemed to be getting lost. Alice shared with Margaret a longing for a source of advice that would offer her a respite from conflicts and tensions. She wrote that she wanted “there to be a core of me-ness somewhere!” She, too, began to practice Yoga. Only a few pages after she described her desire for a “core” she wrote that she wanted to be more attentive to her own well-being: “I am me,” she wrote, responsible only to myself. And I’ve got to learn to take care of that self.” Alice here was
clearly starting to feel that she was being shortchanged. She wanted her own needs to be honored and respected.\(^{511}\)

The evidence for how urgently Alice and Margaret craved a respite from personal conflicts puts their infatuation with notions of female distinctiveness in a new perspective. We need to see this as an attempt to exercise agency and to protect their self-interest. Alice and Margaret were both becoming aware that the gender dynamics in their environment put them at a disadvantage. When it came to sex, college women carried the brunt of the burden of risk for defying conventions. They were the ones who had to fear pregnancy or who risked official sanction for violations of moral regulations. Moreover, although sexual performance and social status were linked for both sexes, loss of impulse control carried a heavier stigma for women than for men. Women’s arguments based on practical objections, social norms, or fear of consequences, however, had routinely been denied legitimacy. As we have seen from a variety of case studies, college men tended to interpret their partners’ difficulties to express themselves sexually as personality flaws. In this context, it is no longer surprising that Alice and Margaret experienced the notion that a woman’s identity and sexuality was inextricably linked to her reproductive potential as authentic.

Why Alice and Margaret felt they had gained a genuine insight into their authentic self becomes clear if we consider the possible benefits of summoning biology or a primordial past in dating situations. This line of argument offered women opportunities to exercise agency and a respite from personal conflicts. For one, the idea that a woman’s sexuality was linked to her reproductive role explained to Margaret and Alice in positive terms the roller

\(^{511}\) Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 108 (back) (Kinsey), 84 (back) - 86 (hodge podge), box 3, folder 21, “February - September 1953.”
coaster of emotions that routinely ensued as a result of sexual encounters. It allowed them to see their difficulties to come to terms with their desire not as a sign of repression or a personality flaw but as the logical consequence of their nature. Moreover, they gained an argument to counter male demands to meet their needs. If women as “good members” of their sex were not made to be “like” men, they ought not to be expected to live up to male expectations. Yet, in contrast to explicit references to gender-specific needs, the argument allowed women to plead an ultraistic motivation. Alice and Margaret could argue that they were acting in the best interest of the nation and the human race. They were neither stringing men along, nor following their own desires. They could not help it and for the sake of the future generation, this was a good thing. When these young women adopted the notion that their reproductive role was central to their identity, they were thus picking selectively from a variety of different discourses the one that best seemed to serve their own interests.

Considering the frequency with which college women encountered male demands to act against their own self-interest, we need to see their infatuation with anthropologically inspired notions of womanhood as an attempt to exercise authority not as a selling out to a feminine mystique.

Looking once again at the events that coincide with Margaret and Alice’s emphasis on their female distinctiveness we can see that they indeed gained a respite from personal conflict and dating pressures. From Margaret Hall’s journal, for example, it is clear that she applied notions of an archetypal force beyond her control to legitimate her own needs and interests in dating encounters. In a letter to a friend, for instance, she attributed it to a growing

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512 Margaret Hall, diary, entry dated 04-20-1955, journal vol. 13, “Bryn Mawr Senior 1955.”
“woman wisdom” that she had not gotten herself into any “men predicaments” for a while. The usefulness of this notion of her intuitive femininity also shows in another journal entry. Reflecting in 1955 on her reasons for refusing consent to coitus with another graduate student, she expressed her guilt and sense that she was violating her own and her partners’ nature. “I wish I could resolve this feeling” of “doing wrong with another person, against both natures,” she recorded. She also wrote, however, that she had no choice. It was “the inevitable result of [her] emotional make-up.” The impulse to say “No” came to her “like a night force … There is no appeal; I cannot quite ignore it.”

Alice Gorton similarly saw in the “possibility of a priori knowledge” a potential yardstick in dating encounters. After discovering the “archetype from the collective unconscious” for her honors thesis, Alice emphasized only a page later in her diary that “sex and physical love” should be done only in “secret loveliness.” Later in the course of her studies, she specified that “the sexual act is to be carried (sic) out only within a context of regard and concern for the good of another.” In this, she saw an answer to an urgent need. She had found a rationale for a valuable and ethical course of action. As she recorded, she had come “knocking on the door of a higher plane of existence.”

Christine Stansell and Nancy Cott have illustrated a historical precedent for the dynamic we can see at work here for women in the early Republic. In the period immediately following the American Revolution, the lives of men and women were affected by rapid economic change. As a consequence of urbanization and the expansion of the mercantile

513 Margaret Hall, diary, entry dated 09-30-1956, diary vol. 19, “June 1956 to June 1957.”

economy, both sexes were drawn away from home communities and farms and thrown
together in a public realm in which power relations were being redefined and contested.
Women sought new economic and political opportunities and participated in debates about
the nature of femininity. From the onset, however, even the most privileged women started
out from a position of disadvantage. They not only lacked economic opportunity and political
rights, they also suffered the effects of a misogynist discourse that portrayed them as
irrational and corrupt. Denied entitlement to participate in the polity on equal terms with men
and labeled personally and politically unreliable by virtue of their sex, women were
vulnerable to victimization in their relations with men. In this context, Nancy Cott argues,
writers of advice books and sermons countered the pernicious stereotype of women as carnal
and cunning with the idealized version of a “passionless” woman. This ideal female lacked
physical passion, maintained a distance from the corrupting influences of the public sphere,
and devoted herself to matters of spirituality and morality. Eventually, these notions became
codified in a new norm of true womanhood and as essential traits of all women. Cott shows,
however, that women initially participated actively in the creation of the ideal. Literate
women and their evangelical allies presented moral and physical restraint as ethically
superior choices. Women were drawn to these notions because they offered them strategic
benefits. They gained a sphere of authority and sexual agency. As she put it: a way to say “no
with conviction.” It was only after the medical profession took control of the discourse, Cott
argues, that the notion of passionlessness acquired an anti-feminist connotation. Before that,
however, conforming to the ideal yielded strategic benefits for women who found themselves
in a vulnerable position.\textsuperscript{515}

\textsuperscript{515} Nancy F. Cott, “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology,
Cott’s interpretation encourages us to take a closer look at how exactly Margaret and Alice conceived of their identity and nature. If they emphasized their reproductive role primarily for strategic purposes, the ideal might have influenced their goals for the future less than one might assume. Indeed, if we take a closer look at their writings we soon see that even though they were increasingly arguing that their reproductive role was central to their identity, Alice and Margaret had not turned into gender conservatives. In Margaret Hall’s case, the complexity of her thoughts on gender becomes clear in a letter she wrote to “Peter,” one of her male partners. The immediate point of reference in this case is not clear. Margaret clearly, however, was writing to insist on the legitimacy of her own feminine perspective. She “never was a feminist,” she begins her explanation. Shortly after distancing herself from a label that carried a heavy stigma in the post World War II period, she delineated a concept of masculinity and femininity that can be seen as an articulation of “difference” feminism. “Women are not men,” she wrote Peter: “They never see as men do; they aren’t made to fight their battles as men do; they don’t understand as men do.” Yet she did not emphasize these points in support of a traditional gender role. Margaret’s allusion to female distinctiveness was meant as a challenge to her friend to take her seriously. He should not hold her up to a male standard but accept her for what she was. In that case, he would realize that as a woman she had just as much to contribute to human progress as he: She was not “a mediocre masculine mind … possessed of some learning,” she argued. She was “Separate but equal; equal but different.” She had all the characteristics “anyone has to have to be a good female” but “unless one is a good member of one’s own sex, one hasn’t a very good chance to be a

good member of [the] human race.” Margaret here clearly was not surrendering her goals to accept a helpmeet role. She argued for a model of gender parallelism in which the distinct contributions of men and women were honored and respected.

Margaret’s letter to Peter was not the only instance in which she reflected on gender. From other writings, we can also see that, although she labeled certain personality traits as feminine, she was not a biological essentialist. In the diary entry in which she reflected on why she found it impossible to consent to intercourse, for example, she referred to “the inevitable result of [her] emotional make-up.” The factors responsible for her “make-up,” however, she did not see as merely biological. Its “origins” were “many.” They not only derived from her desire to be a good member of her sex, but also from “remnants of religion,” and the fact that she was brought up in an “inner-directed, conscience-ful (sic) New England family.” Gender differences in Margaret Hall’s thought were thus not simply the effects of biology. A diary entry she composed in the spring of 1955 further shows that she also did not see men and women as possessing mutually exclusive traits. “How does one ever effect a working relationship between one’s hard, tough, sensible, practical, strength-loving masculine directness, and one’s gentle, tender, loving & giving, helpful, self-less desires…?” As we can see, she assumed that either sex possessed certain traits that society conventionally attributed to the other. For her, a human being was only whole if he or she

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516 Margaret Hall to Peter, 04-20-1955, diary, vol. 13, “Bryn Mawr Senior 1955.”

517 Margaret Hall, diary, entry dated 09-30-1956; Margaret Hall to John, 10-15-1956, pasted into diary, vol. 19, “June 1956 to June 1957.”

had achieved a balance between his or her masculine and feminine side. A fully developed human race, meanwhile, would grant opportunity to either sex to contribute to its progress.

Margaret’s writings offer us important insights into how exactly she defined her particular version of femininity. Her feminine mystique was not gleaned from the idealized portrayal of domesticity and motherhood in popular culture. It was based on a sophisticated theory. We can see in her writings similar conceptions of gender identity as they were also developed, for instance, by the anthropologist Margaret Mead. Mead, like Margaret in her letter to Peter, drew on a rhetoric of rights to be a self-realized member of the human race when she defined male and female. “A person without full sex membership is worse off than a man without a country,” she wrote for example in a 1935 Fortune article. Sex membership in Mead’s work referred to the male or female reproductive role. Because of it, she saw women in a separate category than men. Yet while she saw male and female as biological categories, she saw masculinity and femininity as cultural constructs that varied from one society to the next.

A look at Mead’s thought makes clear that Margaret was influenced by a similar definition of female distinctiveness. Margaret also echoed Mead’s line of thinking when she insisted on the value of gender difference. As Mead argued on a number of occasions, modern Western societies had so far failed to tap into the unutilized potential of women to make their own distinctive contributions to human progress. She here found feminists and gender conservatives equally at fault. While the former had tried to press women into a male mold, gender conservatives inflicted just as much damage by insisting on mutually exclusive sex traits. Being exposed to unrealistic demands at their sex role performance Mead argued,

made men and women likely to suffer psychological damage. If a culture insisted that certain traits belonged only to one sex, then any person who detected a trace of them in him or herself was likely to become neurotic. Alternatively, if women were asked to fit themselves into a male mold, they would have to deny parts of themselves. Considering this theoretical basis, it thus seems unlikely that Margaret Hall was selling out to gender conservatism when she glorified “woman wisdom” and her own role as a “bearer of children.”

Alice Gorton’s diary provides evidence of a similarly complex definition of femininity. That college had not turned her into a biological essentialist shows for instance in an entry she composed as a senior. What were the limits to “human … freedom” she pondered? She identified distinct “limitations” some of which she labeled “absolute” and others “relative.” Under the latter she listed individual and clearly changeable factors like “appearance” and “economic state.” Under absolute limitations she listed “sex” and “social conditioning.” Yet although Alice here expressed a degree of determinism, she did not think that just because they belonged to the same “sex” all women shared the same limitations. Even “absolute limitations” she wrote, were “different for each.” She echoed in this entry a line of thinking about gender that was also developed by experts who clearly supported progressive gender roles for women. Mirra Komarovsky in Women in the Modern World


(1953), for example, addressed the essentialism of contemporary anti-feminists. Drawing from a variety of studies, she offers evidence of greater variations in character and ability from one individual to the next than could be found between men and women as a group.522

From the writings of Alice and Margaret it thus becomes clear that even after they put motherhood at the center of their identity, they did not turn into gender conservatives. Their particular version of a mystique of “primordial” femininity and “woman wisdom” was sufficiently complex to accommodate gender progressive outlooks. Even more so; not only was their version of femininity reconcilable with non-domestic goals; their adoption of the concept actually contributed to their academic successes. This was for one, because the discovery of a moral yardstick in dating encounters eased tensions in their sexual lives and freed up psychic spaces to concentrate on academic topics. Moreover, the discovery of material that reflected their own subjective experiences enhanced the satisfaction these students gained from their studies. In Alice’s diary in particular, we can see how her discovery of “the Great Subject” for her honors thesis had a far-reaching positive impact on her self-confidence. Once she started work on her honors theses she wrote: “I’m interested, I’m working on what I want. … I feel great.” Her self-confidence received a clear boost. She felt she could talk on equal terms finally with some of the women whom she admired as particularly talented. Right after a diary entry in which she described her love for the “rich symbolism, the personal mythology, [and] the mystical dogma” in one of her readings for her thesis, she added that she had a “Good talk with Poofy today ... I talk to her as an equal finally.” That Alice was at this time at the height of self-confidence also shows in the fact that

she was increasingly expressing her personal idiosyncrasies in front of Smith College peers. She decorated her study carrel with a “ghost + skull” and after the college painted over her art, she redecorated it with “an inverted black cross.” Her peers also increasingly noticed her as a student who stood out positively as a “good kid” albeit one that was highly intelligent. As Poof told her, some of the younger students in particular “considered [her] as a god.” The extent to which her satisfaction with college grew during this time also shows in another one of Alice’s diary entries. Entering the English seminar room one day and finding it empty, Alice described paying tribute to her alma mater and the opportunities it offered her: “I went down on my knees to say ‘thank you.’ …I am very humble. How can a girl be so really lucky?”

A surge in self-confidence was not the only positive change we can detect at this point in the journal of Alice Gorton. By the time she was a junior, she was also for the first time formulating a clear and realistic postgraduate goal. Alice had always had the ambition to combine a satisfying career and a fulfilling love life. Her ideas about her professional métier, however, had in the past tended to be rather vague. She regularly recorded daydreams of literary fame as a writer for The New Yorker or as a novelist. As she herself wrote in her journal, however, these were “dreams of glory” and in moments of low confidence, they struck her as daunting and unrealistic. With discovery of her honors thesis subject, Alice’s career plans became more realistic.

\footnote{Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 143, 145, box 3, folder 19, “September 1952 - February 1953.”}

\footnote{Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 123 (back), box 3, folder 19, “September 1952 - February 1953.”}
The writings of mid-century college women in general reflect the male bias in the curriculum. Female authors, artists, or experts are almost entirely absent. Alice, too, in her journal tended to focus on male authors as the most important influences on her own thinking. The discovery of her thesis subject is an exception. Here, the immediate inspiration was a book by a woman: Maud Bodkin, whose work on British literary critique Gilbert Murray inspired Alice to hone in on a thesis topic: “This is the archetype from the collective unconscious in Bodkin’s book which I must buy for my own. This is the great subject.”

Her research in myths and anthropology had introduced her to examples of women as accomplished producers of culture and knowledge.

We cannot underestimate how remarkable it was for a 1950s college woman to refer to a female academic and to express admiration for her work. In women’s diaries and letters, I found almost no references to women as shapers of culture and contributors to knowledge. This reflects an academic environment in which almost all role models were male. Female scholars historically lacked prestige in comparison to men, but Cold War changes in higher education heightened their marginalization. As one study put it, in the eyes of hiring committees, female applicants had not only low prestige, they were “outside the prestige system entirely.”

Universities rarely recruited or admitted women to positions other than

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525 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 152, also see 159, box 3, folder 19, “September 1952 - February 1953.”

526 The only notable female who occasionally shows up in women’s diaries and letters is British writer Virginia Woolf. Carolyn G. Heilbrun describes her own education in an academic environment almost entirely dominated by men in *When Men Were the Only Models We Had: My Teachers Barzun, Fadiman, and Trilling* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

instructor. Women’s Colleges had traditionally been among the few spaces where female academics received high positions. Yet as a result of the post World War II anti-feminist backlash, options here were shrinking. By the late 1950s, male faculty members would outnumber female ones at Alice Gorton’s alma mater. At the time when she was attending Smith College, this trend was already visible. The postwar curriculum further contributed to the lack of images of women as thinkers and intellectuals that would have been attractive to female students. Undergraduates rarely encountered examples of women who had made important contributions to science, art, and the professions in their classes.

The invisibility of women as scholars, their clustering in low status positions, combined with stereotypes of old maids and spinsters explains why female students always never commented on older women in academia in ways that suggest that they saw them as role models. Female academics tended to lack the prestige of male colleagues. Women who were acknowledged experts and specialists in their field, meanwhile, struck students as exceptions who must have had to deny themselves feminine fulfillment in order to get where they were. Alice Gorton’s journal reflects these larger difficulties of her peers to imagine women as contributors to culture. Maud Bodkin stands out as a female author in a diary filled with quotations by almost exclusively men. Nonetheless, the example of this scholar had an impact. Prior to her reference to the literary critic, Alice did not comment on female teachers. This changed, however, for a short time during her junior year. When she started the work on her thesis, the first person she considered as an advisor was the T. S. Eliot expert and

professor of literature Elizabeth Drew. In Alice’s journal this woman was the subject of a rare positive entry about an older female academic:

Miss Drew spoke in chapel today. Everyone was charmed and I was so proud of her. … Also in looking at her, I thought that it would be a fine life of hers. I wouldn’t mind it. As long as you are good at what you are doing + don’t get bored.  

It is no coincidence that this positive reference appeared at the same time that Alice had become intrigued with the work of Maud Bodkin. Alice had found in Bodkin a female scholar who discussed academic subjects in a way she could personally relate to. Discovering an intellectual affinity with a learned woman of an older generation had the potential to contradict the pernicious stereotype of the repressed old maid teacher. It alerted Alice to the possibility that other female academics might have expertise to offer to her. Moreover, it enabled her to see these older women not as exceptional characters but as charming women who led a “fine” life. This meant for Alice that she was able (at least for a time) to consider college teaching as an appealing career option. For women trying to break into academia, gaining access to an instructor position was often already no small feat. This was especially the case for the time when Alice was ready to graduate as with the gains in prestige of academia, coupled with the upsurge of numbers of college graduates, men increasingly coveted post-secondary teaching posts. As a career plan, however, teaching was definitely more realistic than the dreams of literary fame that had dominated Alice’s journal so far.

Margaret Hall’s journal shows a similar dynamic of growing self-confidence combined with a realistic adjustment of career plans. That the young woman believed in her ability to break into academia shows in her postgraduate actions. By 1956, she was enrolled

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in a Masters program in education and she applied for a Fulbright grant to go to Great Britain. This course of action also reflects that her ability to realistically assess her career option had grown. Originally, Margaret strove for a career in English. This highly competitive field offered women few opportunities but it had the prestige of a male dominated profession. With her growing comfort in a gender separatist position, however, Margaret was beginning to consider more realistic and achievable options for herself. Having just started out at Harvard, she wrote a friend about her plans for the future. The letter shows that she had scaled-down her ambitions. Yet at the same time, she remained committed to a life in which she was not the helpmeet/dependent of any man but a woman who had a sustaining career of her own. She wrote her friend about her new course of study:

And this won’t be like English, with no openings for women unless one is a brilliantly original scholar. There’s a place for the roundly, soundly intelligent person… and me for it! Not at the expense of a personal life, but in conjunction with a roundly, soundly interesting one. … To find my métier is still such a joyous thing… And I won’t have to worry about anyone’s reaching clutching fingers towards The Little Woman… nor about becoming a hard person, either.  

The letter offers interesting insights into the growing sophistication of Margaret’s social analysis. She had clearly come to an understanding that in order to break into a high status field “like English” she would have to prove herself as exceptionally driven and talented. She also understood that these standards of super-performance applied only to women. In this letter to a male friend, she did not broach the topic of fairness of this double standard. Yet she also clearly did not accept the notion that in order to take a professional position, she ought to prove herself as an exception to her sex first either.

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529 Margaret Hall to John, 10-15-1956, pasted into diary, vol. 19, “June 1956 to June 1957.”
Were Alice and Margaret unusual? The papers of Stanford University Susan Sperry Borman and the diary of Dori Schaffer, a coed at the UCLA, show that they, too, were grappling with questions about the nature of femininity. In 1956, the assignment to write a paper on “social techniques” triggered an extensive diary entry on the question of authenticity by Susan:

>[A]s far as I’m concerned social techniques are just a means to an end, and they don’t really reflect someone’s personality. … They represent a conformation to some system that is supposed to bring success along a given line of endeavor, and they aren’t you at all, they’re you using some tricks you’ve learned or seen to get what you want.

Susan then tried to come up with examples from her own experience to illustrate her thesis and she drew on her dating encounters to make her point.

I am confused about how I act with guys. Is it fake or isn’t it? And more than that, is it wrong or isn’t it to feel that way? Sometimes I think I’m just kidding myself along about feeling so feminine and protected, because it couldn’t be farther from me if it wanted to, and then, other times, it all seems almost natural.  

As the entry shows, the college freshman was unable to formulate a conclusion. The assignment had clearly caused her to wonder, however, which aspects of femininity were based on nature, and which were just a cultural convention. Two years later, in the same state, Dori Schaffer went to a “housewarming” with students who were, like her, studying Sociology.

As I talked I came up with the thought that I should like to investigate the differential effects upon the personalities of children raised traditionally by family, and children raised in state nurseries.

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530 Susan Sperry Borman, diary, entry dated 10-21-956, box 2, folder 16-21, “College Writings.”
This reflection on the impact of environmental factors on the development of children then also led her to reflect on the cultural basis of femininity: she believed that “almost all differences between men and women are culturally conditioned, not biological or innate.”

Among more than just a few isolated students, these entries suggest, the question of what constitutes the basis of femininity was up for debate.

Without finding and analyzing additional personal writings from female students from the immediate post World War II period, it is impossible to say with certainty how large a group of female students we are dealing with. I can say, however, that none of my subjects had to dig up obscure pamphlets or tap secret resources. The evidence I found adds another dimension to the growing body of revisionist works on women in the 1950s that show this generation as a bridge between the pre-war progressive feminist movements and the sixties. At the same time that women in labor and civil rights organizations continued to work for feminist goals, female undergraduates grappled with definitions of femininity and examined the cultural and biological origins of gender roles.

The women whose voices we have heard nonetheless are a paradox. They present us with evidence for impressive personal and intellectual growth. Over the course of their education, they learned to identify and to articulate their interests. They became able to select from clashing messages those that best served their needs at any given moment. Faced with


conflicting demands from others, they insisted on the legitimacy of their interests. Moreover, they learned to evaluate their options realistically. The fact remains that college women married young in disproportionate numbers and put their own career plans on the backburner. Margaret Hall and Alice Gorton followed in the footsteps of a majority. They also selected as their mates partners who did not share their progressive gender beliefs. It is still not clear what exactly happened here. The remainder of this chapter will examine this question.

Looking at the personal stories of a small number of college women it soon becomes clear that a strategy that might have given some women authority and sexual agency in the days of the Early Republic no longer worked in the mid-twentieth century. Women’s intellectual resourcefulness was ultimately no match for the forces rallied against them. In the context of the mid-twentieth century sense of a male crisis the normative pressures working on college men and women inevitably clashed. Against the background of a pervasive sense of male entitlement, any feminine mystique, whichever way it was defined, was a weak counter-discourse. Women never gained more but a temporary respite from doubts about their performance as feminine women and as sexual beings. Because these matters carried such immense implications for social status and notions of political and mental reliability, they resulted in psychological damages young women were badly equipped to deal with.

The link between sexual and gender performance and notions of intelligence, status, political reliability, and mental health explains why a dynamic I will call sex and gender baiting gained the power to generate a toxic mix of guilt, shame, and fear that made it difficult for young women to follow through with post-graduate plans. Under sex and gender baiting, I understand public challenges of the way in which some women performed as sexual and gendered actors. I use the term “baiting” in reference to red baiting in the larger
polity and I see parallels in the way in which in each case private and political experiences intersected. College women who either personally became the object of gossip, slander, and public sanctions, or who witnessed the effects of these factors on others, over the course of their studies realized their vulnerability and lack of support. Their heightened sense of personal vulnerability combined with their awareness of political events to increase their commitment to silence and secrecy about their own innermost feelings.

Sex and gender baiting occurred in sometimes subtle, sometimes overt ways, but the most important aspect of the phenomenon was its pervasiveness. Because sex and gender roles were in a transitional stage, there literally was no right way for women to perform. It was this confusing situation, as we have seen, that Alice and Margaret tried to escape when they emphasized their feminine distinctiveness. By doing so, however, they highlighted qualities about themselves that in their academic setting carried little prestige. Here, ideals of individualism and notions of exceptionality were valued most highly. How this hierarchy of values opened up new sources of conflict, we see vividly in the diary of Alice Gorton. Alice’s diary contains ample evidence for stimulating talks with other women in the honors program. Her journal also shows that the strength of the ideal of individualism encouraged Alice and her friends to look at women in highly dichotomous terms. This, as we shall see, caused them to look with suspicion at their own desires for security, love, and community that were labeled as feminine and as obstacles to “progress” in the discourse on Western civilization.

The hierarchical ranking of attributes deemed necessary for national progress had the potential to undermine young women’s attempts to formulate realistic and achievable notions of self. This shows in Alice’s response to Poof, a woman whose intelligence and daring social behavior she admired. Both women had initially bonded over their belief in the value
of personal integrity and non-conformity. Both tried to live up to their ideals in their private lives. Poof, however, defied conventions more openly. Early on during her junior year, Alice wrote that she was “getting altogether too talked about.” The exact nature of the activities that got Poof into trouble is not clear. From a reference about rumors circulating about her, including “negro kissing, making out, sexy dances” we can infer that Poof frequented mixed-race bars and hang-outs and dated African-American men.533 But it is equally possible that once Poof attracted attention for any kind of inappropriate social behavior, rumors took on a life of their own. Alice journal entries at a later point reveal that Poof had premarital intercourse. Whether this was already why she was “getting … talked about” at the earlier occasion, however, is impossible to say. Whatever Poof might have been doing, though, within her circle of friends her actions were not unusual. Alice in her journal refused to condemn Poof because, as she wrote, she had “lived almost as she.” But whereas Alice after her Brooklyn adventure had privately redefined what she wanted from a relationship and why, Poof – at least in public - did not. Rather, she responded to an increase in criticism by fortifying her defense. In talks with Alice she argued that she would be a writer, that she was seeking “unique experiences,” and that the uproar among her peers just indicated their conformist mind-set. Her motto, as Alice quoted her, was: “Sex - a terror to the coward, [a] treasure to the bold.” Poof therefore continued to insist that her actions were not only legitimate, but marked her as a superior, because non-conforming and self-aware woman. Considering her own recent experiences, Alice was skeptical. “Granted she is having unique experiences,” she wrote, “but can she learn and evaluate them so they do her any good?”

533 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 105, box 3, folder 19, “September 1952 - February 1953.”
Face-to-face with the friend, however, she was not able to hold her own. “I don’t know how to talk to her,” she wrote and asked herself: “Why am I so inarticulate when it really matters?”

The way in which Alice responded to her friend’s arguments illustrates the extent to which in her circle of friends, young women continued to hold themselves up to standards of personal integrity and individualism. It also shows her difficulties to grant legitimacy to needs and desires that were gendered feminine. The question of how to evaluate Poof occupied Alice for months. She second-guessed what her own longing for comfort and security really said about her. In comparison to the individualism and non-conformity displayed by her friend, these needs seemed to mark her as an inferior person. The question of the comparative worth of her own and Poof’s outlook still occupied her the summer before her senior year. At home with her family in Ohio, she read Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*. Poof, who, according to Alice, considered this book her “‘bible,’” had repeatedly referred to its main protagonist, the radically independent and non-conforming Howard Roark, as a model. At home and away from the student peer culture, Alice arrived at a perceptive and critical evaluation: “There is interdependence + no one is as strong as Roark.” She described Poof as reading selectively in the volume, “accepting the freedom for individuality, missing or ignoring the stated need for discipline.” But back at Smith, her insecurities soon got the better of her again. Here, she soon reverted back to a dichotomy of, on the one hand, people who lived in radical independence from the needs and opinions and, on the other hand, those who craved approval and community out of weakness and lack of talent. “How can one steer

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534 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 105 (back), 123 (back), 131, box 3, folder 19, “September 1952 – February 1953.”
a course between what one admires and would like to be – the integral man,” she wondered, “and what gives one pleasure – being with people, … and being happy?” Poof, she pondered, was proving through her uncompromising stance that she was a superior person. She, by contrast, had “neither the talent as an excuse nor the courage necessary to be a [Howard] Roark.”535

Alice’s journal entries offer insights beyond the dynamics in her friendship with Poof. Her reading of The Fountainhead was critical and sophisticated. Her knowledge of alternative theories combined with her personal experiences had thrown in doubt the validity of the radical individualist perspective. Alice understood clearly that in a complex modern world an ethical human being would not and could not act like a Howard Roark. But, as soon as she was back at Smith, she could no longer act on her insights. Using the same arguments Alice had routinely heard from her dating partners, Poof, echoing Ayn Rand, spoke with the authority of a male voice. The young woman’s inability to hold her own in confrontations with the peer reflects the extent to which female students privileged male arguments, male values, and male needs even a homosocial setting. Because of this, the likelihood that a female student would internalize that she had to prove herself an individual devoid of stereotypically feminine needs first, before she could even aspire to a life or career not typical for her sex, was large.

By the end of her junior year, the personal pressures created by high performance standards had taken a toll on Alice’s self-confidence. Her belief in her own ability to actually make a contribution as a member of a profession or as a writer progressively declined. “I am

535 Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 17-17 (back), 9-10, 29 (back), box 3, folder 20, “February - September 1953,” and 68, 83 (back), folder 21, “February - September 1953.”
pretty sure that I will never be a great critic or a great poet,” she wrote. She also became less and less able to picture all but the most unusual women as amounting to anything in the public sphere. “No wonder nothing much great has come from a woman’s college,” she recorded towards the end of her junior year. She now also changed her mind about Elizabeth Drew as her thesis adviser. Instead, she chose to ask a male faculty member who, although at the beginning of his academic career, still struck her as a better academic mentor by virtue of his sex alone. “Having a man” she wrote, would be “stimulating” especially as the was “a young one.”

Was Alice maybe just a particularly insecure woman? A look at other women’s writings suggests that we are faced with a larger dynamic. The way in which the friendship between Stanford University coeds Susan Sperry Borman and her friend Holly developed, illustrates that more than just a few Smith College students held traits and interests culturally labeled as feminine in low esteem. Holly and Susan befriended each other as freshmen in 1956 after they discovered an affinity in terms of their intellectual and social interests. Both wanted to write professionally and neither was going steady. Susan, however, soon started to go out with a young man named Harry on a regular basis. Her journal offers only vague references to the nature and extent of her sexual experiences but it is clear that the longer she saw the man, the more did the question of how to interpret and define her relationship with him concern her. Eventually, Susan told Holly that she thought she was “falling in love” and that she might marry Harry.

536 Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 9-10, 29 (back), box 3, folder 20, “February - September 1953,” and 68, folder 21, “February - September 1953.”

537 Susan Sperry Borman, diary, entry dated 11-01-1956, box 2, folder 16-21, “College Writings.”
Considering the prevalence of conflicts over sexuality in the student dating culture, it is likely that Susan wanted to ease internal conflicts by redefining her relationship with Harry. Defending her actions as an expression of love would allow Susan to silence some of the turmoil that was so easily the consequence of premarital sexual experimentation for women. That she was indeed planning to settle for him is far from clear. In fact, although Harry was her most frequent dating partner, she kept going out with other men as well.\(^{538}\)

Yet, while Susan might have managed to alleviate some tensions in her life by justifying an increase in sexual intensity by emphasizing the loving and committed nature of her relationship, it put her friend Holly on the defensive. In response to Susan’s declaration of love, she emphasized her own commitment to steer an individualistic course. Susan quotes her as saying: “‘I am alone; I will never love a man completely’.” In her journal, Susan speculated that a personal neurosis might be at the root of the friend’s attitude. “Is she denying everything but her mind so that she will be able to live only with it,” she mused. Was this a rationalization in place of “the real reason” that she had been hurt by the “injustice done her” by judgmental others? In a letter to her parents Susan also wrote that she thought Holly would benefit from psychological counseling.\(^{539}\)

This notwithstanding, Susan could not help but feel inferior in comparison to her friend. “I think she is, in these things an unequitable (sic) person. I admire her individuality and her determination to be thus; it reminds me of all the other great artists one hears of.” In contrast to this idealized figure of the exceptional

\(^{538}\) See Susan Sperry Borman to parents, 04-12-1957, box 3, folder 24, “1957, letters to parents.”

\(^{539}\) Susan Sperry Borman, diary, entry dated 05-12-1956, folder 16-21, “College Writings,” Susan to parents, 05-20-1956, box 2, folder 23, “letters to parents (Minneapolis), Sept. - Dec. 1956.”
woman, her own desire for love and popularity now struck Susan as inferior. It seemed to show that she was simply destined for a helpmate role. “I am wife material,” she wrote.

This I am never sorry of and never could be, but it seems disconcerting and vaguely degrad ing that such should be the thing that I must admit will be my life. It seems to put Holly in a class somewhere above me.  

What we see in these journal entries are more than squabbles between competitive-minded friends. They illustrate how as a consequence of growing normative pressures in the post World War II collegiate setting young women who all in their own way tried to find a balance between the demands of femininity and their non-traditional goals were pitted against each other. College women who wanted careers and who acted in socially idiosyncratic ways were united by the experience of strain and conflict. Poof and Holly in all likelihood experienced the same self-doubts as Alice or Susan. Susan and Alice, meanwhile, had not parted with professional goals. There was, however, no sympathetic public discussion of the conflicting and gender-specific pressures affecting them. Their main recourse in defense of personal idiosyncrasies was to notions of free choice and self-awareness. These ideologies, however, demanded that they figured out their difficulties all by themselves. Questions of gender performance thus became an issue even between female friends. Doubts about what their choices, wishes, and needs indicated about them distanced them from each other.

Parallels in other journals suggest that other women, too, interpreted their difficulties to make sense of clashing messages and normative pressures as personal weaknesses. Margaret Hall, for example, also continued to hold herself up to a standard of super-performance modeled after an unrealistic ideal. She, too, was incapable of granting

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540 Susan Sperry Borman, diary, entries dated 05-12-1956, 11-05-1956, folder 16-21, “College Writings.”
legitimacy to her own need for security and comfort. “What do I want?” she asked herself in her journal during her senior year in 1955: “To marry, I suppose …” She, too, here did not mean a withdrawal into domesticity. She was still planning to go to graduate school and have a career. But she wanted a partner in her life with whom she could share the pleasures and pains of life, love, and work: “Someone who could come home with me at vacation time to the inlaws, someone who would be met by my friends as my husband, someone I’d come home to and be come home to by, all my life.” The acknowledgement of having these interests in security and comfort, however, triggered a fear of failure. She called herself “a mediocre above-average” who might be “above average in brains,” but who was “not brilliant enough to justify [her] idiosyncrasies.”

In the diary of California coed Dori Schaffer, meanwhile, the effects of her investment into notions of exceptionality and individualism also show in the fact that, once she admitted to herself that she was “lonely” and wanted “a man to love,” she also could not help but see this as a personal failure and defeat.

I have admitted that I am a woman. I have admitted that I am like 99% of the feminine sex: I want my own man. This is a horrible admission, to me. I have been denying and fighting this for three years. But had it not been true that I was deep inside, mostly woman, like every other, I would not have had to fight it so hard.

The voices of these young women illustrate the extent to which the post World War II ideology of individualism was rooted in misogyny. Although this discourse encouraged students to aspire to non-domestic goals, their internalization of the notion

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541 Margaret Hall, diary, entry dated 01-10-1955, journal vol. 13, “Bryn Mawr Senior.”

542 Dori Schaffer, diary, entry dated 07-24-1957, also see entry dated 06-07-1957, Schaffer, ed., Dear Deedee, 106, 92.
that interests, traits, and concerns, stereotypically labeled feminine lacked value backfired once women tried to readjust their concept of self and their goals in more realistic ways. Conflicts about what their needs and desires might reveal about their character put a heavy strain on women’s female support networks. With each group gender-baited in their own way, women tried to protect their fragile sense of self. Their silence and defensiveness, however, kept intact a gendered hierarchy in which men and exceptional women occupied the upper ranks. The nation’s best-educated women thus contributed to an increasingly polarized concept of femininity with “brilliant” super-achievers on the one side and placid, conformist “wife material” on the other.\textsuperscript{543}

The standards of performance in the college setting disadvantaged all women. Against the background of polarized constructions of womanhood and femininity, coeds read their perfectly ordinary feelings of ambivalence towards goals and wishes as personality flaws. In this situation, in which self-doubts thrived easily, an increase of sexual conflicts could have devastating results. We have already seen how private conflicts over how to interpret their feelings and actions in sexual encounters preoccupied women. The strains that grew out of these privately experienced doubts pale, however, in comparison to the damage caused once sexual issues became public.

Examples of young women who were officially reprimanded by their colleges reveal the devastating effects of public exposure of their private acts. In early 1953, Smith College student Poof was called in front of the Smith College judicial board for a defense only vaguely defined as “disorderly conduct.” It is not clear what the charges

\textsuperscript{543} Margaret Hall, diary, entry dated 01-10-1955, journal vol. 13, “Bryn Mawr Senior;” Susan Sperry Borman, diary, entries dated 05-12-1956, 11-05-1956, folder 16-21, “College Writings.”
entailed. As Poof did not leave any personal record of her own, we only have Alice Gorton’s diary to rely on. From this source, we learn that Poof feared to be pregnant. The nature of the sentence suggests, however, that a curfew violation was the official charge. Poof was “campused,” a sentence that essentially amounted to a housearrest. This restriction on her autonomy, however, was not the only consequence of the public reprimand. Although Alice’s diary does not describe the events that transpired, the style of the writing suggests that she was shocked by the intensity with which her peers conveyed their disapproval of Poof. “The stares,” Alice wrote in reference to fellow students’ reaction. She described them as lacking compassion and playing their role as hypocritical arbiters of morality: “Absolutely no feeling and acting a part.” As a public violator of official morality, Poof had to run the gauntlet of their peers and Alice now described her as a woman who “fell.” She exclaimed: “There is so much horror and failure! What will happen to her now?”

We should not attribute Alice’s exclamations of “horror” and “failure” to hyperbole. The experience she describes was in all likelihood traumatizing for the parties involved. Although we have no way of assessing how Poof experienced her public exposure personally, it in unlikely that she was left unscathed. Present-day studies reveal the devastating and far-reaching effects of bullying and sexual slander on the budding identities of young female victims. Yet Alice’s diary also shows that the public

544 Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 7 (back) - 8, box 3, folder 20, “February 1953 - September 1953.”

545 See for instance Leora Tanenbaum, Slut!: Growing Up Female With a Bad Reputation (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999); Emily White, Fast Girls: Teenage Tribes and the Myth of the Slut (New York: Scribner, 2002); Elizabeth Comack, “Sluts and Slags: the Censuring of the Erring Female,” in: Gillian Balfour and Elizabeth Comack, eds.,
exposure of moral offenders had consequences for more than the women who had the bad fortune of getting caught in the act of violating a rule. The punishment of one woman also enhanced the sense of fear, self-doubt, and isolation among those who stood by. Alice was such a bystander. In her diary and in personal conversation, she refused to criticize Poof. But in public, she remained silent. She castigated herself for her failure to come out in defense of her friend. “I could perhaps have helped her,” she wrote, “had I the strength of my convictions and enough self-confidence to speak my mind.” She was, however, terrified that she would herself be implicated by Poof’s actions. “When she fell, I fell,” she wrote. As it turned out, Alice maintained her a public image as a “good kid.” The strategy she used to protect her reputation nonetheless backfired. Alice could not shake the sense that she had a duty to speak up in defense of actions that in theory she would not condemn. She experienced her failure to come to Poof’s defense as a personal failure. As a result, her doubts about her character only grew and her self-confidence suffered another blow. With that, the satisfaction Alice had only recently gained from working on her honors thesis, declined.  

Considering the clash between official morality and actual behavior in the student dating culture and the influence of ideals of non-conformity and personal integrity, we can assume that more women than Alice felt guilty for not coming out in defense of a friend. Guilt, however, was not the only negative feeling bystanders took away from

Criminalizing Women: Gender and (In)justice in Neo-Liberal Times (Black Point: Fernwood, 2006).

546 Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, (back) - 8 (“Poof in trouble”), box 3, folder 20, “February 1953 - September 1953,” 143 (“They all seem to term me as a ’good kid’”), folder 19, “September 1952 – February 1953.”
watching another woman publicly reprimanded for actions many students practiced in private. Such public censures also brought to the fore fears about the meaning of their sexual and gender performance. When private acts were exposed, college women were forced to see themselves through the eyes of unsympathetic others. They now found confirmed what they had already suspected about themselves during times when their confidence was low: They were neither ethical lovers nor laudable conformists. They simply had no impulse control.

Alice’s diary entries from her junior year show poignantly the far-reaching implications of student gossip and slander about a woman’s sexuality. As mentioned at an earlier point, the Smith College student maintained a reputation as “a good kid”. After her Brooklyn adventure, however, rumors about her began to circulate. These in particular took the shape of speculations about Alice’s family background. “Nancy asked me if I were Jewish? Apparently there was a great conversation … about me + my religious inclinations. A laugh but a sober thought on gossip.” The rumors did not stop. While Alice was with her family in Ohio, a friend told her about it: “Judy just told me that the rumor was going around that I was Jewish. … I call myself tolerant but I don’t like people thinking I’m Jewish.”

On first view, it seems surprising that students would make Alice’s ethnicity and religion an issue at all. At the time Alice was writing, however, the Cold War search for political subversives heightened suspicions against individuals who in any kind of fashion deviated from conventional expectations. On the nation’s campuses, gender and

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sexual non-conformism had long been linked to other stigmatized labels. Considering the nationwide upsurge of anti-communism, it becomes clear why the question of who might be “Jewish” or not was on students’ minds. The American left had long born a reputation of being un-American and dominated by Jews. Moreover, since 1951, the Jewish couple, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, was on death row, hoping for an appeal of their death sentence for treason. By the time Alice went home for summer break of that year, they would be executed. Against the background of the widely publicized Rosenberg trial and the HUAC investigations in the early 1950s, it is hardly surprising that Alice was concerned about the spreading rumor. The gossip among Smith College students suggests that the domestic Cold War brought to the fore an undercurrent of prejudice that had long existed in the genteel student culture but that had lost legitimacy in recent years. A woman who acted sexually in ways not officially approved invited speculations about her character and political reliability that against the backdrop of the political context were likely to terrify young students.

The link between political events and student’s personal experiences, however, is complicated. By 1953, Alice and her peers had certainly grown aware that their campus was not shielded from the nationwide search for political subversives. That year, Smith College English professor Robert Gorham Davis was called to testify in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee about his affiliation with the Communist

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548 For Cold War context see for example Ellen Schrecker, Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998); Lisle Abbott Rose, The Cold Comes to Main Street: America in 1950 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).
Party.\textsuperscript{549} In Alice’s diary, we can see the chilling effect of the domestic Cold War in her heightened emphasis on the value of privacy. Returning from a meeting at which students had discussed their Davis’ appearance in front of HUAC, she wrote: “Everyone’s personal thoughts, opinions and actions should remain inviolate unless they choose to reveal them.”\textsuperscript{550} It needs to be said, though, that prior to her Brooklyn affair, Alice had shared with her friends an irreverent attitude towards political events off campus. She and her friends had mocked McCarthy when he spoke on campus. They read literature that was considered controversial or shocking in the nation at large and they attended public talks by left-leaning individuals like the Socialist Norman Thomas.\textsuperscript{551} Like other college women, Alice had enjoyed the relative safe space of an academic setting in which controversial ideas were at least discussed. Her attitude was also possible because she shared with her friends an identity as members of an intellectual elite that was not affected by the prejudices of the masses. It was only after she realized her vulnerability to sexual slander that Alice’s fear of scrutiny from the outside grew. Cold War political events were therefore not the only factors in the development of Alice’s thoughts. Rather, her personal traumas heightened her awareness of the reality of political danger. Private experiences intersected with public events to shape Alice’s perception of her situation, her options, and her abilities.


\textsuperscript{550} Alice Gorton, diary, entry not dated, 6 (back), folder 20, “February – September 1953.”

\textsuperscript{551} Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 103 (back), 145, folder 19, “September 1952 - February 1953.”
The threat of sexual slander combined with her heightened awareness of political
dangers to unravel Alice’s self-confidence. That by the time of Poof’s judicial board
sentence she was in the midst of a personal crisis shows in the increased attention she was
paying to the question of control over her body. Immediately after the friend was picked
up by her parents, Alice recorded into her journal: “The first thing is to conquer the body
to win respect. Let us please do so.” In another entry, she wrote about the need to keep
herself “clean” and “hide [her] badness.” Repeatedly, she emphasized the need for
“Discipline.” This growing stress on self-control extended into various aspects of Alice’s
life. The thought that her roommate might have heard her snoring at one point, for
instance, terrified her. At communal meals, she grew extremely self-conscious when she
took a second helping of food. Her dieting, a common preoccupation of college women
by mid century, at this time also took extreme forms. In at least one instance, she purged
after a meal. These entries show a young woman under severe pressure and illustrate
poignantly how easily issues of sexual and gender performance could lead to a profound
crisis of identity.\footnote{Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 130 (back) - 131, 84, folder 24, “February -
September 1953.”}

Sandra Iger’s experiences a few years later offer additional insights into the
effects of sex and gender baiting on young women. Sandra attended college when the
worst excesses of McCarthyism were over. Nonetheless, she suffered the consequences
of resurgent classist and anti-Semitic prejudices that were brought to the fore in public
sanctions of private behavior that clashed with Cold War official morality. By her senior
year in 1961, the Mount Holyoke College student and her partner had regular intercourse.
In her letters to Richard, Sandra described her sexual relationship as a source of pleasure. Yet she also experienced it in an atmosphere of secrecy and ambivalence about female sexuality. For the couple to be able to meet in New York City, Sandra had to sign out under false pretenses. Her correspondence suggests, that this situation was wearing on her. In letters she referred to feelings of “self disgust” and she started to dread going to sleep for fear of nightmares. She objected when Richard used frank language to describe their love making and instead emphasized the spiritual aspects of sex in her letters. In the summer of 1959, Sandra asked Richard to officially announce their intent to get married and he did so. While an engagement might have alleviated some of Sandra’s internal conflicts, her sneaking suspicion that her history of clandestine sexual activities revealed something shameful about herself was confirmed by the way her peers’ responded to an official reprimand for “false registration.” In February of 1961, the college discovered that Sandra was signing out under false pretenses to spend nights with her fiancée. By the time she returned to her dorm, the news of her rule violation had already spread among housemates, college officials, and fellow students. Sandra was notified that she had to appear in front of the judicial board, an arm of the Student Government Association. Her letter to Richard vividly conveys how traumatizing she found the prospect of having to discuss her private affairs in front of a jury of her peers. “You don’t know how hard it is

553 In one of her letters she wrote that “One of the most wonderful things” she had witnessed “in this past year” was that she had “seen [Richard] change from a boy to a man.” He was now “stronger, more purposeful, mature, inspiring” and she was, “proud to have caused some of the change.” Sandra Iger to Richard Kohler, 09-25-1959, box 3, folder 2, “September 1959.” In an earlier letter, by contrast, she had objected to Richard’s use of the phrase “lay you.” She wrote that it made her feel like “a whore.” Sandra Iger to Richard Kohler, 01-15-1958, box 1, folder 6, “January 5 - 20, 1958.” For Sandra’s fear of nightmares see Richard to Sandra, 01-16-1961, box 6, folder 2, “January 2 - 16, 1961.” On their engagement see the letters in box 2, folder 8, “May 1959.”
for me to sit down and try to write to you," she wrote Richard. From her peers’ response she could already tell that she would not be facing a sympathetic audience. A fellow student, “Marian,” the chairperson of the Judicial Board, led the attacks against her. She experienced herself as lacking any allies. She did not mention a single person who came out publicly in her defense. Rather, she described her peers as gathering to condemn her. In her letter, Sandra described the setting to which she returned as one where everyone seemed to engage in,

dirty gossiping, talking about my clothes, my personality, etc. Mrs. Willey contributed the thought that if I’d signed out wrong this past week, I’d probably been doing it all along, and dear Marian agreed. Then came Marian’s last remark about not knowing whether she wants me to graduate. Well, I found out all this hate that night … I couldn’t take it all, and I felt so alone. … I have to go before Judicial Board Thursday night.\textsuperscript{554}

As this snapshot of what was clearly a traumatizing experience for Sandra reveals, her peers felt that her sexual behavior justified a sweeping condemnation of her entire personality. Here, the comment about her “clothes” is revealing. In spite of its founder’s original intent to reach women with modest financial resources, Mount Holyoke College by the late 1950s featured an overwhelmingly upper middle-class student body.\textsuperscript{555} Sandra, however, was a Jewish woman from Queens who attended college on a scholarship. Her letters show that she was very concerned when Mount Holyoke raised tuition in 1957. Considering her financial difficulties, we can assume that she did not


dress in conformity with the genteel coed ideal. When fellow students thus slandered her “clothes” and her “personality” they highlighted her minority and outsider status. The judicial board incident therefore touched Sandra’s sense of self in complex and devastating ways. It fed her nagging sense that her acts and her sexual experiences revealed something shameful about her person. Moreover, it alerted her to her precarious position as a scholarship student and Jew in the collegiate setting.

Clashes with the arbiters of official morality in Sandra’s case, like in Alice’s, fed misogynist stereotypes and disillusioned her with her education. Subsequent to her public reprimand, her opinion of her peers declined. While she had early on experienced herself as a part of an “intelligent minority,” she increasingly felt isolated among her fellow female students. Moreover, her sense of what she could gain from her education at Mount Holyoke was affected negatively. Her letters no longer show her enthusiasm for readings and ideas. Disillusioned with fellow members of her sex and reeling from blows to her self-confidence, she drew closer to Richard. Even though her correspondence does not allow us to trace the development of her thoughts about him in detail, a response she left in retrospect on an alumnae questionnaire suggests that by her graduation year she was won over to Richard’s idea of complementary marriage: “In 1961 I thought I’d be the supportive, self-sacrificing wife of a great poet,” she wrote here. What she had to relearn over time was “to be a poet [her]self, to be an equal partner in a marriage [and] to be far more selfish than [she] thought [she] would be, was, should be.”

For Sandra’s initial impression of being part of an “intelligent minority” see Sandra Iger to Richard Kohler, 11-12-1957, box 1, folder 4, “October 24 - November 19, 1957.” For 1991 reunion questionnaire see: folder “biographical material” box 7, folder 8.
As her marriage ended in divorce, Sandra in retrospect might of course evaluate her decision different than she did in 1961. But considering her experiences at the end of her stay at Mount Holyoke, it does not seem incredulous that self-sacrifice would play a part of her motivation to marry Richard Kohler. By the time she was ready to graduate, sex and gender baiting had eroded her confidence. At the same time, conflicts over sex fed a wish for redemption. Marriage to a gifted young poet whose career she would further might very well have struck her as a selfless and worthy sacrifice. That this was the effect of a larger dynamic is suggested by the sentiments expressed in the journals of Margaret Hall and Alice Gorton. Both met their future husbands during a time when they had suffered serious damage to their sense of self. Although they still felt ambivalent about marriage, they no longer trusted their own feelings. As a consequence, they interpreted their ambivalence as just another sign for their flawed personality. She could not “see far beyond [her] ego,” wrote Alice in an entry in which she questioned whether or not she loved George. She felt she needed to learn “that unselfish love that wishes for the other’s happiness above you own.” She vowed to “keep [herself] clean” and to “force herself into the conventional marriage pattern.” “I must learn to work with George,” she wrote during a time when she had not made up her mind yet about becoming his wife.  

Years of trying to reconcile clashing messages about her gender performance also caught up with Margaret Hall. By 1956, she recorded in her diary that she wanted “years of faith and loyalty given to someone to reassure myself that I can, that I am not hopelessly egocentric and inbound and unsharing.” Shortly after, marriage with Blake became a real

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557 Alice Gorton, diary, entries not dated, 94, 131 - 131 (back), box 3, folder 24, “February - September 1953.”
possibility. Still ambivalent, Margaret approached her mother. Three months before the wedding, in March of 1957, she turned to her for advice. Her mother’s reaction, however, fed all the doubts about her personality that her experiences in college had already nourished. Mrs. Hall reminded her daughter of the pain she had caused her first fiancée when she ended that engagement three years earlier. Margaret turned away from the talk feeling selfish, guilty, and undeserving. Her mother’s remarks were one of the final deciding factors that caused Margaret to follow through with her marriage plans.558

It is clear from the evidence that Alice, Margaret, and Sandra decided on marriage at a time of low self-confidence and under the influence of shame and guilt feelings. These factors might very well have caused them to agree on compromises that they later regretted. It is important to note how they saw their decision at the time they made it, however. What we see in Margaret and Alice’s journal is that the timing of their marriage proposals was also in some way fortuitous because it offered them an option to adjust their plans while holding on to their core values. By the time George Hart and Blake Reeves proposed, neither Margaret nor Alice could any longer see herself as an example for an exceptionally driven super-performing woman. At a time of low-confidence there partners now suggested to them a role which, against the background of mid-twentieth century intellectual debates, they could see as equal to, if not even superior in value to achievement in a professional capacity. After all, cultural critics argued that success in the public sphere came at the price of inauthenticity and conformism. The private realm, by contrast, was cast as a privileged space in which the individual could express his or

her authentic, creative, self. Cultural criticism thus offered literate young women an
option to portray their choices not as a selling out but as a responsible and mature
acceptance of a culturally and politically relevant role.

That it was indeed important to Margaret and Alice to cast their marriages in line
with their core principles is reflected in their journals. Prior to marrying George Hart, for
instance, Alice Gorton recorded a catalogue of principles that were supposed to form the
basis for her marriage. She dated and signed what she referred to as a “contract” and sent it to
George who in turn agreed on the terms. The document begins with a declaration of “love” as
“freely given” and “willing service” to the loved one; followed by the stipulation that,
although important, love ought “not [to be] all absorbing.” Then, under point nine, the
document affirms a dominant role for George: “No single thing should be considered more
important than the chosen life work of the man,” it said. Considering that the couple would
have to move depending on where George entered graduate studies and later where he found
work, Alice here surrendered authority in many important decisions pertaining to her own
life. She also declared herself willing to not compete with George on his turf. “Each
member” of a “partnership … [was] assigned to specific jobs.” This, however, would not just
grant an authoritative role to George. It also secured an area of expertise for Alice. Each
spouse, they declared, ought to carry out their respective job “as well as possible so that pride
of accomplishment is duly felt and acknowledged.” In all areas except work, the “contract”
defines Alice’s separate role and responsibilities as equal in worth to those of George. Each
spouse would have an area of expertise that would not be intruded on by the other. In such a
“union for a manifold purpose,” “the mystery of the separate selves” would be “inviolable.”
And in the context of such a collaborative unit, Alice and George saw a “much greater”
potential for accomplishments than that which could ever be made by “single selves.”

Clearly, it was important to Alice to define her marriage in line with her believe in free choice. Significantly, by asking George to sign the contract, she also tried to make sure that he granted her a role that, although it was parallel to his own, was nonetheless comparable in worth. 559

By agreeing to a marriage based on the model of complementary roles, Alice gave up her ambitions for public achievement in her own right. Considering that her recent experiences had challenged her belief that such accomplishments were in her reach, settling for the indirect social influence the contract model seemed to offer, however, was not unreasonable. What Alice here gained was a reprieve from having to defend her authority and expertise in front of her mate. After the strains of competitive and bantering dating encounters, this must have been an appealing compromise. Alice would renounce her own ambitions for the time being and work in support of George’s. In return she received from her partner a written promise that he would value the specific contribution she brought into the marriage on an equal plane with what he accomplished by virtue of his “chosen life work.”

A marriage contract drafted in a personal journal is of course a lucky find. Other women’s diaries and letters yield far less information on the ways they imagined their marriage. There are, however, striking parallels in Margaret Hall’s diary. Even though she did not present her suitor Blake with a document to sign, she, too, pondered the pros and cons of a marriage to him in her journal. Like Alice, she cast her decision as a free choice made after careful deliberations of her options. And just like her peer, she saw in entering a

559 Alice Gorton, “The Fourteen Points,” diary, entry not dated, 121-122 (back), box 3, folder 24, “February - September 1953.”
collaborative union with a worthy man the best way to leave a positive imprint on society as a whole. This emerges in an entry she recorded shortly before accepting Blake’s proposal for marriage. Comparing what she could expect in a marriage to Blake, Margaret once again articulated her impression that they lacked common interests. This, however, she now no longer saw as a handicap. True, she could not “identify with him,” like with men who shared her passions, but she could “ally [herself] with him.” That each partner would bring complementary attributes into it, would make the marriage “qualitatively” better than a marriage of equals. For her, this meant “cooking for him. Bearing his babies,” instead of furthering her career. But just like Alice, she saw her role as a noble compromise for the good of all:

> Considering my feelings for Blake, there is no moment of question …. Blake, like heaven is a compromise; he is the compromise for the Greater Good. His good, my good, and the Good we might do and be together. …. Oh, nothing can compare with this; there is nothing, and no one, to compare this feeling with. It is relatively close to absolute.  

The popularity of mass cultural criticism in the student culture made it easy for Alice and Margaret to present their choices in line with their core principles. When they argued that they settled for a private role as a conscious and voluntary sacrifice for a greater good, they could cast their decision as an act of individualism and free choice. They could see a domestic role as one that was culturally significant, albeit more selfless and noble than its alternatives. Yet, as we know not only from Betty Friedan’s questionnaires but also from women who responded to her after reading *The Feminine Mystique*, or who wrote their own memoirs, many college women who made the same decision experienced the way in which it played out as disappointing. They had

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560 Margaret Hall, diary, entry dated 12-17-1956, vol. 19, “June 1956 to June 1957.”

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successfully avoided becoming part of a lonely crowd, but they found themselves as part of a lonely couple. They might continue the reading, they might volunteer, they might even create art and literature within the walls of their marital homes. They frequently felt, though, that neither their society nor their husbands actually rewarded their efforts with the kind of recognition, which, according to the way their “jobs” had been portrayed, ought to have been their due. Unfortunately for these women, their political and sexual coming–of-age had occurred at a time when it was exceedingly difficult for even the most culturally literate of them to formulate ideas of femininity they could embrace but also realistically live by. The mid-twentieth century perpetuated at least three influential mystiques: the myth that a longing for community equaled weakness, that life as part of nuclear couple alone provided meaning, and the myth that only brilliance and exceptionality justified idiosyncrasy.
EPILOGUE

Sexual conflicts, my case studies show, touched all facets of women’s identity at once. The mixture of guilt, shame, and fear, which female students experienced, in part grew in the context of a Cold War political climate hostile to any kind of rule-breaking. They gained momentum, however, because sexual and gender performance was imbued with wide-reaching implications. As long as questions of sexuality remained linked to notions of class status, political reliability, and mental health, the intersection of private experiences and public events produced a toxic mix of guilt, shame, and fear that made it difficult for 1950s female college graduates to embark on idiosyncratic life paths.

While college women’s decisions were understandable the consequences were problematic. Female undergraduates contributed to the production of an increasingly narrow standard of conduct to which all women, indiscriminate of their ability or willingness to conform were held up. As such, they helped reproduce a hierarchy of worth of different female roles that heightened the psychological strains on women who took different paths. Moreover, college women also helped perpetuate a stifling silence around female sexuality that kept in place the same dynamic in which they had entangled themselves.

Without class and heterosexual privilege the option to seek fulfillment by proxy in a valorized private sphere would not have been imaginable. That said, however, we also need to acknowledge that their familiarity with the cultural discourses and their standing as collegians opened up pressures specific to educated women of middle-class status and heterosexual identification. Studying drop-out rates and dissatisfaction among MIT students in the early 1960s, Benson Snyder wrote:

Some students live and function well with a level of almost constant tension that others find incapacitating. The problem for students (and for
all of us), however, is not only how much anxiety we can stand, but the range of defenses against anxiety available in a particular environment as we attempt to cope with its presence.\textsuperscript{561}

Diaries and letters of women who came to college with professional aspirations point to the limitations of the range of defenses available to career-oriented female students in the mid-twentieth century. Public commentators turned to college women as fixes for a range of social problems. Women were supposed to smooth the transition from elite to mass higher education, from a producer to a consumer society, and to stem the tide of growing sexual permissiveness. In their alma maters, they learned to take themselves serious as thinkers and potential experts. But even women’s colleges with a long history of encouraging achievement failed to meet the needs of their charges at this difficult time. Many educators continued to support and encourage academic ambitions. At the same time, however, they too fed into the polarized image of womanhood among students when they emphasized that professional success would be available only for a particularly driven and dedicated elite. These expectations of super-performance were realistic considering the real obstacles for women to break into academia. But in the absence of a sympathetic and public discussion of the gender-specific factors that shaped their lives and options, the mantra of free choice and individual responsibility put too high a burden on the shoulders of very young women who were left to deal with clashing messages about their roles on their own. An emphasis on social responsibility meanwhile alerted especially those women who due to their cultural literacy seem cut-out to embark on unusual life paths to question the ethics behind their actions and wishes.

College women suffered real damages as a consequence of the difficult environment in which they came of age. Fortunately for most, the effects were not irreversible. Many women might have gotten married in haste and in search of redemption. Yet what they took with them from their years in college was a toolbox to interpret the world and oftentimes a formal degree. Over time and often in fits and starts, many women ended up getting it all after all. While staying home for a number of years to raise children, Margaret Hall continued to write. During the 1950s, she published theatre reviews in the Concord Journal and a parody in the Harvard Crimson. Beginning in the mid 1960s, she published short stories under various pen names. She divorced Blake Reeves in 1964. Sandra Iger, on her 1991 Mount Holyoke College reunion questionnaire, also listed “poet, teacher” as her profession. She possessed, by then, a Master and a Ph.D. (1966, 1971) from Bryn Mawr. She was no longer married to Richard Kohler. Susan Sperry Borman (Delattre) married right after college and had two children. In the 1970s, she earned a graduate degree in dance from the University of Tennessee. She, too, divorced her first husband. She co-authored two books, which were both published in the early nineties: The Woman Who Lost Her Heart: A Tale of Reawakening (1992) and The Woman Who Found Her Voice: A Tale of Transforming (1997). Alice Gorton (Hart) also continued to mature as a writer. After earning her Masters degree from Utah State University in 1970, she taught writing and in 1982 published a first book of her own poetry: Prints and Poems. Sadly, she died at the age of fifty-five. Her husband George, to whom she remained married until her death, in 1988 published a second volume of Alice’s poetry under the title To Fly Once More. June Calender married Joel Potash and remained his wife until 1980. After her divorce, and after her children were
grown, she began to write plays and work as a professional script reader. She eventually moved to New York City where she is still doing “way off Broadway” plays. She also travels widely and is at present working on a biography of a Tibetan traveler whose diary she happened to find during one of her journeys.562

Women’s course changes at middle-age again reflect their ability to realistically assess their options and interpret the cultural landscape. Because by the time the 1950s were coming to an end, conditions for female college students and graduates were changing. In the pages that follow, I will briefly sketch some of these developments and their effects on women who went to college at the end of the period covered here. The contrast with the earlier cohorts will illustrate the factors that had to be in place to enable female students in large numbers to develop a sense of entitlement to a professional job or academic position without feeling the need to plead exceptional brilliance as their justification.

The late 1950s and early 1960s in many respects resemble the period discussed in the preceding chapters in terms of the conflicting and ambivalent messages women received about gender roles, sexuality, and the purpose to which they ought to put a higher education. Moreover, popular bias against women who turned their back on domesticity continued to be strong. A 1957 “Womanpower” study by the National Manpower Council pointed out that, “Americans have had and continue to have severe reservations about married women with small children working outside the home.” Emeritus professor of Economics at Vassar Mabel Newcomer illustrated the effects of this climate in her study of women in higher education

562 The biographical information on Alice Gorton, Susan Sperry Borman (Delattre) and Sandra Iger (Kohler) can be found in the collection of their papers. Margaret Hall (Whitfield) kindly shared her current curriculum vitae with me. My information about June Calender is from an email exchange: June Calender, correspondence with author, email dated 07-11-2008, 07-12-2008.
published two years later. College women continued to worry that academic achievement and the pursuit of professional careers would disqualify them for romance. Putting the goal of marriage first, they neglected to plan for careers in a directed fashion.\(^{563}\)

Although these studies highlighted continuities in women’s situation, they were already evidence for a break with the past. After the peak years of the GI bill in 1956/7, veteran benefits phased out. Slots in higher education opened up for an increasingly diverse group of women. Coinciding with this growth in numbers, the Soviet launch of the first satellite into space reinvigorated the debate about the shape and purpose of higher education. In response to what seemed a Soviet advantage in science and technology, many public commentators again turned the utilization of “womanpower” into a matter of national defense. Women’s desire for education thus once again overlapped with national need. This time, however, the focus shifted from addressing individual motivation and appealing to social obligation, to a discussion of class and gender specific structural obstacles in higher education. Proposals included offering funding for low-income students, increasing the proportion of women in the sciences and professional programs, instituting continuing education programs and allowing married students and mothers to take part-time courses. Funding for these programs materialized only slowly and administrators and politicians were slow to implement the recommendations. Already before material effects were notable, however, the public discussion of discrimination made it possible for students to see their own difficulties as the consequence of systemic forces instead of a personal shortcoming.

The effect of a public debate about gender and class specific factors in higher education combined with a diversified student body shows clearly in the private writings of college women from the late 1950s on. In contrast to older cohorts, career-oriented students were less likely to express disillusionment with college life and frustration with peers by the end of their studies. Their correspondence also shows a shift in how achievement oriented students experienced the norms and values of campus life. This shows, for instance, in the letters of Rosemarie Cox, a student at Mount Holyoke College from 1957 to 1961. Rosemarie hailed from a socially prominent family in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. Having always been one of the “brainy” kids in high school, she greeted college as an opportunity to reinvent herself. Rushing from one extracurricular activity to the other, she tried to turn herself into a successful social leader. By the time she was a sophomore, however, the young woman had become critical of the women in whom she had at first seen models of social prestige. “Perhaps you can’t realize the real danger of women’s college activities,” she wrote her parents. “So often girls caught up in them can’t see the trees for the forest. “Not that they were not all “good students.” In fact, she added, her peers were certainly all intelligent and they “do care about ideas.” It was just that that their idea about what to do with their education struck Rosemarie as somewhat limited. “Their main interest in life” she wrote her parents, was “in the long run to get married.” What she had by then decided, was that she would owe up to her different interests. Her folks should not be “surprised if [she was] not elected class president next year,” she wrote. If they expected to be able to “to [read] little bits about [her]” in her high school alumnae paper, they would probably be disappointed. Potential damage to her social standing aside, she was planning to concentrate on those subjects and activities that interested her instead of investing all her efforts into being a well-
rounded co-ed. As Rosemarie believed, in the long run, this was the smarter path to pursue.\textsuperscript{564}

Kathleen Adelia Henley from Quincy, Massachusetts, shared a similar view of her well-rounded peers. Kathleen graduated from Smith College in 1959 with a major in science. She relied on a scholarship to finance her education and had to borrow money to be able to go to Spain for her junior year. Rooming with an upper middle-class peer, she at this occasion found herself directly exposed to a woman who had all the prestige of a model coed. Kathleen’s letters reflect her awareness of the differences in their outlooks and styles. There is no sign, however, that she was intimidated or that she tried to mold herself after this woman’s example. “She is a solid dating machine that keeps going on the oil of a completely abstract philosophy,” Adelia wrote her parents. Quoting the woman she wrote that she wanted to “perfect herself (through philosophy and the study of psychology etc.)” and then “marry a business man and live a comfortable life with the next dinner party being her chief preoccupation.” She seemed to have no idea “that anyone ever does anything different,” and probably could not imagine that “half of the people [she knew] existed,” added Adelia. If she ever picked up any work, “it would be volunteer work and she would be well surrounded by other young ladies out to make themselves well-rounded individuals.” Should this woman “by some trick of fate” ever find herself in a regular work environment, she quipped further, \textsuperscript{564} Rosemarie Cox to parents, 11-13-1958, folder 3, “correspondence, October 1958 - February 1959,” and 03-14-1959, folder 4, “correspondence, March - July 1959,” Rosemarie Cox papers, Mount Holyoke College Archives.
she “would be too occupied with being well-rounded and analyzing her fellow workers to get any feeling of vitality from it.”

Career-oriented and non-traditional college women had of course already in the past tried to portray model coeds in a negative light to justify their own deviation from campus norms. Yet while this had often taken the form of a claim of superiority and exceptionality, there is no such defensiveness in Adelia Hanley’s writings. Although intrigued by her peer, it is obvious that she found her idea of spending life as a gracious hostess and volunteer worker detached from her own reality. Moreover, even her peer’s reference to “philosophy and … psychology” no longer sufficed to make this Quincy native doubt the legitimacy of her own ideas and goals.

That Kathleen could afford to respond with irreverence to the example of a model-coed needs to be seen in the context of the growing visibility of longer-term socio-demographic trends. Between 1950 and 1960, wage work became an experience for more and more women across lines of class. During this period, the labor force participation of mothers with children under the age of 16 rose from ten to 24 percent. To participate in the postwar consumer boom, many families drew on a second income and many of the women entering college at this time were able to do so at least in part because their mothers helped shouldering the economic burden. Women who began their education at this time were thus

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increasingly likely to have female relatives who were working outside the house and to meet upon peers for whom this pattern was also a reality. Among young couples only slightly older, students found further examples along the same lines. College youngsters in the 1950s might have emphasized their belief in mutually exclusive gender roles. They quickly confronted economic realities, however. The times fashionable rejection of materialist conformism aside, young couples were not immune to the lure of postwar consumerism. They might have lampooned the life-style of suburban Babbits, but they certainly wanted to be able to travel, go to museums, art shows and the theatre, buy books and build a record collection. Often having married before they had established a secure economic footing, many young wives therefore worked out of necessity. Participating in middle-class culture on the income of a single breadwinner, was simply no longer a realistic expectation in the new economy. Smith College student Irene Stiefel was only one woman who thus learned through daily interactions with fellow students that more and more mothers worked for wages. “All the women who were there worked and had children,” she informed her family in Kansas City, Missouri, about the guests she met at a cocktail party. It was “interesting to hear” she added, that “they all expressed the same opinion … -- they’d go mad if they didn’t get out.”

Student sentiment indicates that, even though, as Mabel Newcomer had pointed out many Americans still did not condone wage labor for married women with children, college women increasingly saw remunerative labor as a reality for average members of their sex regardless of marital status or class. This shows in the fact that even women like Rosemarie

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567 Irene Stiefel Starr to family, 12-22-1960, Irene Stiefel Starr papers, Smith College Archives.
Cox, who were of upper middle-class background, were beginning to see the wage labor of wives and mothers as an ordinary fact of life. In 1958, Rosemarie and two fellow students protested their alma mater’s policies in regards to “father’s day.” Mount Holyoke College had designated this particular day to encourage fathers to visit their daughters. A mother’s equivalent to this “father’s day” did not exist. To Rosemarie and her friends, this seemed contradictory to the goals of an institution dedicated to the education of women. By granting special attention to fathers, the women argued, the college implied that only men had obligations to their careers while a mother could abandon her responsibilities at any given moment to rally to a daughter’s side. By acting as if women could drop their duties at the spur of the moment, Mount Holyoke was ignoring that many of the students’ mothers worked. The least the college should do, they proposed, was to name the event a “parents’” day to recognize the equal economic and familial responsibilities of women and men. Rosemarie and her friends thus saw wage work as a common feature in the lives of modern-day, middle-class mothers. This was an important change in comparison to the preceding generation that had felt like pioneers in their desire to combine work and marriage. With growing visibility of female labor force participation, by contrast, women could think of their goals as part of a common pattern. While these women, as their writings show, were still surrounded by many female peers who flaunted upper middle-class views on gender roles, the latter’s power to set standards had clearly worn thin.

That Rosemary Cox and her friends took the initiative to make their discontent with policies public also reflects a significant shift in the political climate on campuses.

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nationwide. Here, student activities by the late 1950s took far more dramatic forms than the relatively mild protest against a father’s day. Beginning in 1958 and gaining momentum with the sit-in movement that began in 1960, young men and women increasingly protested central policies and practices of the Cold War state. In 1958, Cornell students formed an auxiliary to the Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy (SANE). The same year, students at Susan Sperry Borman’s alma mater Stanford protested nuclear testing.\textsuperscript{569} Although she was originally worried that the demonstrations would get out of hand or be red-baited, Susan joined the protesters. The whole issue, she reported, had gripped the entire campus.

Beginning in 1958 with a “Youth March for Integrated Schools” and gaining momentum with the first sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina, young Americans also increasingly took a public stance on black civil rights. Among those who participated was Dori Schaffer who had recently moved to New York City for her graduate education. In protest of southern desegregation, she and her friends picketed stores from the chains that practiced segregation in their southern branches. “Today the NAACP and I struck for the liberty of the negro,” she began an entry she made in her journal in February 1960. “Nearly 100 persons were on the picket line.”\textsuperscript{570} Meanwhile in South Hadley, Massachusetts, Rosemarie Cox attended a talk on Civil Rights. “There have been few times when the placid Mount Holyokers have been so enthused,” she wrote home. They were “all tired of [their] passiveness.” Subsequently, the young woman joined a group organizing a picket of Woolworth. And fellow Mount Holyoke


\textsuperscript{570} Dori Schaffer, diary, entry dated 02-13-1960, Schaffer, ed., \textit{Dear Deedee}, 182.
student Sandra Ward Nichols began working with the campus “Peace Group” to protest her alma mater’s plan to built bomb shelters on campus.\footnote{571} Student support of social causes was of course hardly a new feature. Already in the past, politically motivated women had found outlets for their beliefs in campus religious organizations, the NAACP, through letter writing campaigns, or by writing to the editors of newspapers. Others, like the cultural rebel Poof, challenged prejudice by breaking with taboos against interracial dating or socializing. What these efforts had in common was that they occurred in the context of small groups or in the shape of provocative individual action, however. The activism of the late 1950s, by contrast was large-scale and public. Moreover, it increasingly enjoyed the backing and support of influential adults.

By the late 1950s, the image of the student protester had undergone a gradual but significant change. Writings of public intellectuals increasingly challenged the notion that public discontent was a sign of personal neurosis. Domestic civil rights activists’ successful exploitation of Cold War rhetoric also eventually left Washington with little choice but to support desegregation. Sensitive to the spread of nationalist movements in the so-called third world and eager to gain allies against the Soviets, Cold War officials increasingly came out in support of Civil Rights protesters. Although legislative actions followed only slowly, this rhetorical backing from high places undermined the perception that public discontent could only be the product of anti-American subversive intent or a neurotic personality.\footnote{572} Picketing

\footnote{571} Rosemarie Cox to parents, 10-08-1959, folder 4, “correspondence, March - July 1959,” Sandra Ward Nichols to mother, 01-14-1962, Sandra Ward Nichols papers, folder 4, both Mount Holyoke College Archives.

\footnote{572} For a sympathetic portrayal of discontented youth see Paul Goodman, Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized System (New York: Random House, 1960); for the Cold War state’s response to the Civil Rights movement see Mary Dudziak, Cold
youth were thus no longer necessarily seen as radicals donning a revolutionary stance or as maladjusted discontents. Many of their fellow students would have perceived the young men and women who showed up at a picket line as a cross section of America’s college population.

The growing number of protests and the shifting interpretation of the roots of student discontent changed the quality of campus life for all students. Even at the height of the student movement in the late 1960s, committed activists made up only a minority of college students. Yet, student activism fed an image of the current generation of educated youth as a cohort united by their willingness to challenge entrenched patterns and open to trying something new. This potentially emboldened even the majority of students who were only tangentially involved. Like most of their contemporaries, the women of this study were not among those who made a name for themselves as student leaders. All of them remained in college and, while they participated in an occasional campaign, made no full-time commitment to a particular cause. That the new activism nonetheless affected them we can see in the journals of Dori Schaffer and June Calender and in the correspondence of Rosemarie Cox.

Dori Schaffer had been a supporter of the African American struggle for Civil Rights since high school. She joined the NAACP and wrote letters and a newspaper article on behalf of the cause. She also took private action contesting her landlord’s “Gentleman’s Agreement


… about negro tenants” by taking in a young African American woman who needed a
temporary place to stay. Among her peers, however, Dori initially found little support or
encouragement. First at Scripps and then at the UCLA, she felt that most fellow students
cared little about segregation. Even her partner found her activism quirky and insignificant.
As a result, her activities only reinforced her sense of being an outsider and at times, her
frustration became so strong that she began to contemplate suicide. The glum and pessimistic
tone in some of Dori’s journal entries, however, stands in stark contrast to her writing once
she joined direct action campaigns. On “the picket line,” she rejoiced, she felt “worthwhile
because all of us are fighting, not accepting injustice.” As one of the highlights of these days
she mentioned a dinner of “fried chicken with … students and friends,” who had all
participated in the pickets. With these men and women she had “talked and talked until 3
a.m.” “I love being involved,” she rejoiced. Dori’s enthusiastic response illustrates how the
new activism affected young women like her in a positive fashion. On the picket line, she
could feel part of a crowd of outspoken and confident youth who challenged past patterns.
Here were men and women who did not see Dori’s ideals and personality as quirky or
suspect, but who shared her outlook and affirmed its legitimacy.

The new activism had a similarly positive effect on the education and experience of
Rosemarie Cox. Rosemarie graduated from Mount Holyoke determined to pursue a career in
law. As such, she entered a highly competitive and male-dominated field in which women
had historically struggled to gain a foothold. Entering Harvard Law School at a time when
the student movement, triggered by southern sit-ins, enthused and energized growing

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574 Dori Schaffer, diary, entries dated 09-22-1957, 02-13-1960, in Schaffer, ed., Dear
Deedee, 114, 182.
numbers of her peers, however, she found a community that accepted and supported the goals and personality of an ethical minded and aspiring “lady lawyer” like herself.

Judith Richards Hope described the environment for young woman at Harvard in the early 1960s in her memoir *Pinstripes and Pearls*. Like Rosemarie Cox a graduate of the Class of 1964, Hope recollected the experiences of the women of her cohort through interviews and an analysis of their private writings. As she argued, discrimination from male peers and professors certainly existed. There was also, however, a substantial number of men who did not feel threatened by the intrusion of women into a formerly all-male bastion. These were the men with whom female law school students socialized after hours and with whom they worked on cases. As we learn from Hope’s biography and from Rosemarie Cox’ letters, this crowd also included men who accepted that a woman might want fulfillment in marriage but also as a lawyer in her profession.  

Rosemarie Cox met her future husband, Jon Masters, in law school. The scion of a Park Avenue family certainly could not have suffered from a lack of dating opportunities. As Hope described the Princeton man and veteran, he was sophisticated, charming, and good looking. Not surprisingly, Rosemarie’s self-esteem was boosted when he showed a romantic interest in her. Her letters also show that she felt accepted by this man as a woman and a thinker. He had a “lovely gift for making [her] feel most ‘womanly’,” the young

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576 For biographical information on Jon Masters and a description of Rosemarie’s and his courtship see Hope, *Pinstripes and Pearls*, 115-116.
woman wrote her parents. In the “middle of a heated political discussion,” Jon would break off [and] say, ‘I like your hair that way,’ and continue right on with an analysis of Kennedy’s foreign policy.” She was quite “set … aflutter,” she assured her folks.\footnote{Rosemarie to parents, 01-19-1962, folder 9, “correspondence, September - February 1962.”} In addition to the support she gained from fellow female law students, the acknowledgment of her goals and personality from a romantic partner helped affirm Rosemarie Cox in her goals and ambitions.

A similar positive change shows in the journal of Indiana University coed June Calender after she befriended a group of young liberals from the East Coast. When June started her education in 1956, her experiences in many ways resembled that of her East Coast predecessors Alice Gorton and Margaret Hall. Although she originally began her studies with vague plans to enter politics and to write, she was soon left with the impression that her only option to lead a meaningful life would be to become a sophisticated “lady” who used her education to facilitate her husband’s career. By 1958, the child of farmers from the small town of Versailles was ready to devote herself to the career of her fiancée, the upwardly mobile Don.\footnote{Like other diarists, June vacillated in her decision and expressed doubts about the advisability of marrying Don. On June 04, 1958, however, she accepted his proposal even though disagreed on the number of children they wanted to have. June wanted two, Don four. On the progression of the courtship see June Calender, diary, especially entries dated 02-27-1958, 04-10-1958, 05-04-1958, 05-10-1958, 06-04-1958.} The appeal of middle class domesticity, however, dissipated when newcomers to her alma mater once more raised her expectations into relationships and her own postgraduate opportunities.

In contrast to Dori or Susan, June did not seem to have been politically active. Yet she identified as a liberal and supported the Democratic Party. In staunchly Republican
Indiana, this by itself was a radical position and June often felt out of place in circles of peers and elders. This sense of her outsider status had become increasingly burdensome to the young woman. Fortunately for her, however, the diversification of the student body brought her increasingly in contact with East Coast students. By the summer of 1959, she was immersed in a campus life quite different from the one she had grown used to while going out with Don. Commenting on her new friends she wrote: “We all read the N.Y. Times and talked about art, Eastern Colleges, etc.” She enjoyed “long, hard political + literary” discussions and especially cherished that this crowd accepted her simultaneously as a thinker and as a woman. Amongst the group of East Coast liberals was Jewish American Joel Potash; a medical student who, the summer before, had come to Bloomington to pursue his parallel interest in studying literature. Clearly interested in her sexually, Joel took her opinion about politics and literature seriously; and he expressed this openly in front of his friends. “The wonderful + amazing thing,” June described the experience of one of these encounters, “is that I was never made to feel awkward or unwanted even tho (sic) I felt awfully inferior. They treated me as a worthy person ... Never felt so good in mixed society.”

Her encounter with Joel Potash and his friends changed June’s expectations of her postgraduate options. Her fiancée Don saw as the purpose of her education that it would turn her into a well-educated wife and mother. June’s diary suggests that Joel asked her what she was planning to do after graduation. At this occasion, the young woman must have told him that she had once planned to write professionally but that she did not think that women could actually produce art that measured up to that of men. To June’s surprise, the young man disagreed. “He came over in the afternoon bringing a copy of short stories by Eudora Welty

579 June Calender, diary, entry dated 06-29-1959.
for me to show me that there really are good women authors." In June’s environment, this statement was a rare but much needed departure from the masculinist and misogynist currents in higher education.

Joel Potash and his crowd of bohemian-looking friends left Bloomington when the summer was over. June’s encounter with these young liberals, however, had changed what she expected to gain from her college education and how she imagined her future. After some soul-searching, she broke off her engagement with Don. June soon backpedaled when the man offered a reconciliation. She never regained the sense that this choice was right, though. Eventually, the need to make a decision was taken out of June’s hands because Don met “a nice nurse” and ended the relationship. Yet, even though in this case, the young woman had not made the conclusive decision, her diary shows that she was gaining confidence in her goals and her manner of self-presentation. No longer trying to fit the mold of a “lady,” she increasingly showed her idiosyncratic side on front of peers. It was better for people to suffer than to live “in a state of self-etherized happiness brought on by too much ‘good, wholesome Americanism,’” she told one of the men she dated in 1959. The goals of “big car, big house, the proper prestige products” now meant little to her she wrote. She was “beginning to ‘think’ to stop accepting and to question” the value of a “‘typical American life.’ What she wanted instead was to live authentically. She knew “positively,” she insisted, “that writing is the one thing I have to cling to no matter how uncertain everything else is.” And here, she no longer felt she needed to be brilliant to justify her decision. She might never be able to “reach the high notes” but she owed it to her “own true self” to try.

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580 June Calender, diary, entry dated 07-01-1959.

581 June Calender, diary, see entries dated 07-06-1959, 07-07-1959, 07-08-1959.
June’s emphasis on authenticity and individualism does of course sound familiar. Like other women before her, she drew on the mass culture critique popular in parts of the student culture. In her case, however, the context in which she encountered these ideas had changed. In the nation at large, dissent had become increasingly public. Against the background of Civil Rights protests, third world independence movements, and other challenges to the Cold War policy consensus, personal discontent no longer bore the stigma of neurosis and personality flaws. What previous cohorts had feared was personal could be seen as systemic. Although it is not possible to reconstruct how exactly June’s fellow students responded to her transformation, she clearly felt as part of a larger group and even of a respectable tradition of thought. “[Don] had no conception of [her] suffering,” she wrote. She had recently come to understand, though, that “the uncomfutableness (sic) [she]’d always had with religion & conventional standards was not unique.” She continued, that, “during the last 50 years almost every one has had to face the same problems.”

Communal support clearly enriched June’s college experience and contributed to her growing self-confidence. Moreover, the sense that a critical mass of people was ready to publicly question tradition positively affected her ability to cope with challenges in her sexual life. As mentioned earlier, candid accounts about how women experienced premarital sex are rare finds. Fortunately for this study, June Calender’s first intercourse took place under very similar circumstances to that of Alice Gorton half a decade earlier and both women turned to their diaries to evaluate the experience. Neither June nor Alice was in a committed love relationship with their respective partner. Each one explained their decision for intercourse as part of a broader project to collect experience. Neither had access to a method of birth control.

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582 June Calender, diary, loose sheets of paper, dated 12-21-1959.
they could completely trust. These parallels aside, however, Alice and June experienced the aftermath of their actions in very different ways.

With Joel Potash returned to the East Coast and her engagement with Don broken, June found herself without a marriage proposal in sight when her college education neared its end. For many of her predecessors, this had been the time in which fears of a lonely life raised the appeal of marriage. June, too, did not remain without a male companion for long. In a philosophy class, she met and befriended “Bob” and started dating him. Although she felt a strong “attraction” for the man, June did not think about Bob as a prospective husband. She liked Bob’s “strong … sensuality + his iconoclastic frame of mind,” but “only that, nothing more.” Sensual and iconoclastic, Bob soon brought up the question of intercourse and thereby confronted June with the common dilemma of avowedly non-conformist women of her generation. Bob “doesn’t believe in conventional morality,” she wrote. June added that she, too, had become “more rebellious + less afraid.” Nonetheless, her “childhood Puritanism and … new freedom from the social facades [were] fighting.” Like Alice Gorton in 1953, June eventually decided that she ought to sleep with Bob in spite of her fears. Based on an assessment of her menstrual cycle, June determined a safe date for the encounter. In late 1959, the couple rented a room in a hotel and like her peer at Smith College half a decade before her, June subsequently turned to her journal to evaluate the act. “Well,” she wrote. “Very matter of factly, … with no nervousness, no apprehension, with a pretense that [she] had done the same thing before,” she had “spent the night in a motel sleeping, nude, with a man.” A “spiritual quality,” she pondered, was clearly absent. In fact, she almost felt that a gender role reversal had taken place. Bob, she thought, “felt it more deeply than [she] did.” He had “felt much less matter of fact, though it should have been the opposite.” She insisted,
however, that despite this departure from the normative script, she would not have wanted her first intercourse to occur any other way. “This is what I have been wanting,” she recorded. “I have needed this + am very glad for it to have happened so simply, with no great emotional fuss, no feelings of shame or guilt and absolutely none of the self-consciousness that deep emotionality would have meant.” Sleeping with Bob, she insisted, was simply a mutually beneficial arrangement, part of their friendship and bond. As she put it, it was “a part of [their] relationship, no greater, if as great, as [their] agreement on religion, philosophy, etc.” As a sexual actor, she could “give him a lot,” and “if that includes [her] body … it [did her] as much good as it [did] him.”

Of course, Alice Gorton initially described her first intercourse in an equally nonchalant tone. In the days that followed, however, she was soon gripped by escalating fears, self-doubts and shame. June, also, was no stranger to doubts. “Perhaps this is not the best attitude,” she commented about her lack of emotional involvement. Her emphasis on giving something of value to her sexual partner shows that she was not ready to see pleasure alone as a sufficient justification for a woman to engage in the act. But June’s reflections in no way resembled the emotional roller coaster ride that haunted the pages of Alice Gorton’s diary in the days after sleeping with her first lover. June was becoming more insecure about how exactly she felt about Bob. A lose sheet inserted into her diary indicates that Bob had become emotionally quite involved so that “suddenly, a relationship which [she] thought would remain on the light, sophisticated level became much more for him.” Bob, she elaborated, was “ready to love, to love deeply, and [she was] a likely choice.” June, however,

583 June Calender, diary, entries dated 12-12-1959, 12-13-1959.
did not reach for this chance to elevate their relationship to a higher level and thereby legitimate the act of intercourse.\textsuperscript{584}

I see June’s rejection of the security a committed relationship would have provided as a sign for her growing self-confidence and decline of normative pressures. Whereas Alice Gorton grew progressively more demoralized and fearful, she became “more rebellious + less afraid” than when she started her undergraduate course of studies. In contrast to her predecessor, she did not unravel under the pressure of reconciling her sexual behavior with moral codes. She felt no need to redeem herself for her action. Instead of longing for marriage, she continued to ponder her options for the future in consideration of her responsibility to her own authentic self and her desire to explore her limits. She decided to move to Boston. In this, she was partly motivated by her wish to live closer to Joel. But this was not the pilgrimage of a camp-following fiancée. June could not know whether Joel would marry her. The fact that he was Jewish and she had been raised as a Baptist had come up before as a possible obstacle to a marriage in the eyes of Joel’s family. She was not even sure that she would still get along with Joel after they had not seen each other for months. When deciding on her move, June thus took considerable initiative. She saw her move as a journey of discovery. She had to “draw [herself] out of [herself] and write,” she wrote and “make a life.” The question of what to do in the future, she ended, she could only “answer for [herself].”\textsuperscript{585}

One factor that certainly influenced how college women in the early 1960s experienced their sexuality was the availability of a new method of birth control. Throughout

\textsuperscript{584} June Calender, diary, loose sheets of paper, dated 12-21-1959.

\textsuperscript{585} June Calender, diary, loose sheets of paper, dated 12-21-1959.
the 1950s, women’s experience of their sexual relationships was often negatively affected by fears of pregnancy. They generally lacked information about the safety and workings of condoms or the rhythm method and often had only their respective male partners to turn to for advice. Alice Gorton, for instance, did not even know the name of the contraceptive she and her partner had been using. Moreover, while her lover had no doubts concerning the safety of condoms, the concern with which she monitored her menstrual cycle after the act shows that she did not share his faith. A decade later, Rosemarie Cox, too, still doubted that condoms were completely reliable even though her husband-to-be tried to assure her that they were. By contrast, when another women from her class told her about the birth control pill Enovid, Rosemarie felt that a “new world” opened before her. Maybe because it was recommended to her as a particularly fool proof method, because she herself would control this particular contraceptive, or because the recommendation came from a woman, Rosemarie saw the pill in a different light than the condoms Jon had so far been using. Unfortunately for her, Harvard University Health Services would not prescribe Enovid to an unmarried woman. 586 Other women, however, had more luck. As Bernard Asbell in his history of the new contraceptive shows, by the late 1950s, “millions of women were already ‘on the Pill.’” 587 Even before FDA approval of Enovid in 1960, women could get a prescription for menstrual irregularities and to alleviate other hormonal imbalances. And not all university health services were as squeamish as Harvard’s. Dori Shaffer began taking Enovid in 1959 when she was in graduate school at Columbia. And at Bryn Mawr in the mid

586 Recollections of Rosemarie Cox as told to Judith R. Hope, quoted in Pinstripes and Pearls, 114 - 116.

1960s, daughter of New Mexico cattle ranchers Lyle York and her roommate both got a prescription for “Ortho-Novum.” Judged from Lyle’s letter, Bryn Mawr’s health services informed parents in cases of students who demanded access to the contraceptive. In case they received “some sort of notice from the college,” Lyle, wrote, her parents should not get worried. The pills were simply for her skin irregularity. Yet despite the restrictions on access, Lyle’s letter also shows that she easily obtained a “2 months supply” from a compliant health professional.588

The importance of the pill as a catalyst for change, however, should not be overstated. Studies cited by Bernard Asbell have shown that the availability of a new contraceptive can not be directly linked to shifts in sexual behavior. At least as influential in how individuals experience their sexuality is “the social structure” and the “cultural and religious values” in which they operate.589 As the example of Rosemarie Cox and Lyle York shows, single women’s access to reliable contraceptives still depended on the attitudes of health care professionals and parents. Moreover, despite a gradual waning of normative pressures in the early 1960s, colleges actually tightened official rules and regulations pertaining to their female charges. What did change, however, was the degree of openness among college women regarding the sexual activities they engaged in. As letters and diaries indicate, the silence around sexuality was increasingly interrupted.

Some anecdotal evidence suggests that by the late 1950s, especially mothers who themselves had gone to college made an attempt to discuss sexuality with their daughters. In


589 Asbell, The Pill.
the car after a visit to Bard College in June 1958, one young woman’s mother unexpectedly turned to her daughter with the warning that she ought to “take the proper precautions” in case she decided “to have an affair.” This mother, herself college educated, here possibly remembered her own conflicts as a student and wanted to show her daughter that she was aware of the challenges playing out in the lives of young women. That was also the attitude of Dori Schaffer’s mother. As Dori wrote in her journal, Mrs. Schaffer had been raised very strictly. She was “chaperoned … until she was married” and not permitted to “date more than one boy at a time.” Because of this, Dori elaborated, her mother “bends over backwards and is very kind and permissive” when it came to the upbringing of her own child. In both cases, the daughters found it important to make their decisions independently and the prospective Bard student actually “resented” her mother’s insinuation. This notwithstanding, the cohort that reached college age when the 1950s were coming to an end were more likely than their predecessors to have a mother who was aware of the sexual realities of campus life. And although mothers’ advice might not always been welcome, the fact that these older women wanted to help their daughters negotiate difficult moral questions probably alleviated some of the moral dilemma female students experienced when it came to the questions of premarital sex.

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590 Anonymous, diary, entry dated 06-12-1958, Timmerman (pseudonym) Family Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.


592 Anonymous, diary, entry dated 06-12-1958, Timmerman (pseudonym) Family Papers.

593 Most researchers of female adolescent sexuality today agree on the benefits of open conversations about the pleasures and dangers of premarital sexuality between parents and daughters. In families in which such conversations occur, young women tend to have sex later than their peers, and, when they have intercourse, they are more likely to protect
Remarks in women’s letters and diaries also suggest that same-sex peers were becoming less likely to act as enforcers of a morally conservative outlook. At Bryn Mawr, for instance, the dating choices of Lyle York would at an earlier time have attracted plenty of negative attention. Her mother clearly would have preferred her daughter to stop going out with “Jews,” “Negroes,” and “beards” and start dating “Princetons, Yalies, etc.” Yet while Lyle admitted that her male friends might not match what her parents considered “straight arrows,” she did not feel she was risking her reputation among her peers. “Please don’t worry about my association with misfits,” she wrote in a letter to her mother. “Amid the general misfit atmosphere at BMC and Haverford [she] could never, no matter what [she] did get an unfavorable reputation.” The fact that Rosemarie Cox turned to a female peer for advice about contraceptives also suggests that she had gained confidence that this other women would not condemn her for seeking a safe way to have premarital sex. 594

As accounts of interactions with same-sex peers are not a large focus in women’s letters and diaries it is hard to make a generalization about these relationships. In general, however, the women of the last cohort experienced campus life as less stifling and conformist than their predecessors. Numerous acts of evasion of official regulations, combined with isolated incidents of public defiance, eroded the sway of conservative morality in their environment. Moreover, direct action campaigns publicly questioned traditional authority and values in general. It would take until the late 1960s before students launched a concerted


594 Lyle York to parents, 11-25-1964; for Rosemarie Cox see Hope, Pinstripes and Pearls.
challenge against parietal rules. Already, however, the more supportive context was changing the way women negotiated their relationships with men.

Just like their predecessors, the women who graduated in the late 1950s and early 1960s married young and often after very short engagement periods. In cases in which the sources provide sufficient material to evaluate gender arrangements, however, couples’ insistence on mutually exclusive sex roles had given way to an emphasis on the egalitarian and collaborative aspects of a relationship. Smith College’s Irene Stiefel, for instance, met her future husband Norton when she was a sophomore. Soon, the couple made marriage plans for the following summer. In the opinion of one Irene’s female acquaintances, this would mean the end of her interest in science: “Hortense seems to think that after I am married my interests will change, etc.” But Irene disagreed. Marriage and her interest in science were perfectly reconcilable, she insisted, and in support pointed out the agreement existing between her and her fiancé. “We don’t think so,” she wrote in reference to Norton’s opinion (my emphasis). And indeed, when Norton applied for graduate school at Harvard and MIT, Irene did the same. Moreover, once the two aspiring scientists had moved in together, Irene’s letters indicate that they made an effort to share domestic responsibilities so that both partners found the time to study for exams. “I wash, Nort dries + puts away,” Irene described her housekeeping routine. When Norton’s qualifying exams approached, this arrangement quickly slipped and Irene took on the main share of domestic work. Yet at least in theory, Norton and Irene agreed on a concept of gender roles that was distinctly more

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collaborative and egalitarian than those accepted from the onset by women of the preceding cohort.  

Increased egalitarianism also characterized the relationship between Mount Holyoke student Sandra Ward and Peter, the man she would marry. Both met on a blind date and quickly decided against a long engagement period. Yet even though their courtship followed the conventional script of a 1950s romance, marriage did not interrupt Sandra’s post-graduation plans. Having just recently returned from a Crossroads Africa project, she toyed with the idea of going back there. As an alternative, she considered a graduate degree in science. None of this seems to have perturbed Peter. Himself planning for graduate studies in the sciences, he encouraged his fiancé to apply for scholarships at the same schools he hoped to be able to attend. Rosemarie Cox, meanwhile, decided to marry the man who had such talent to set her “aflutter.” Just as in the case of the students mentioned above, her decision put no end to her professional training and she was glad to point out that her chosen husband agreed. “Jon [was] firmly determined that [she] should complete law school,” she wrote her parents, “for he is convinced that [she] should have a professional life of [her] own.”

That the male partners in the above-mentioned couples supported the idea that their wives ought to have careers of their own suggests that at least among a substantial proportion of men, attitudes had changed. Just like their female counterparts, college men were likely to have personal experiences with women who donned public roles. In college, they

596 Irene Stiefel Starr to family, 10-10-1959, folder 3, “correspondence, 1959.”


598 Rosemarie Cox to family, 03-11-1962, folder 10, “correspondence, March - August 1962.”
encountered peers whose wives worked to put their husbands through graduate school and professional programs. They might have mothers and sisters who held jobs while raising children. Warnings of adverse social effects from parts of the mental health profession were not likely to fall on fertile ground when every-day experiences suggested the ordinariness of a pattern. Moreover, cultural anxieties over the state of American masculinity had receded by the early 1960s. While thus economic realities and every day experiences increasingly encouraged men to see women as intellectual collaborators and colleagues, the decreasing normative pressure on male college students certainly added to their openness to try out new gender arrangements.

While more egalitarian conceptions of partnerships certainly owe a lot to men’s changing attitudes, I also think that they reflect women’s growing confidence in the legitimacy of their goals and values. National statistics indicate persistent hostility towards working wives and particularly towards women who wanted a professional career and not just contribute to the family income. That a college woman would meet a man who supported her ambition was therefore hardly a forgone conclusion. Yet while earlier cohorts entered relationships with men on terms that clashed with goals held earlier in their college career, the younger women engaged in fewer compromises. Rather than marrying in haste for fear of being left behind, they felt they could afford to hold out for a man who supported them in their goals and conception of a partnership.

Despite their greater optimism and self-confidence, however, this later cohort, too, faced difficulties when they applied for graduate school and professional programs. Irene

Stiefel, for instance, was disappointed when “[i]n spite of [her] good grades, [she] did not get accepted to Harvard or MIT.” About the reason why she was turned down, she was not entirely sure. It might have been, she speculated, because the schools did not think that a “liberal arts graduate” would have “sufficient background” to study physics. Moreover, she was married and did not plan to be a “full time physicist.” This, Irene might not have said directly on her application. By the early 1960s, however, public commentators frequently mentioned that college educated wives tended to prefer part-time to full-time professional work, because they put their family responsibilities first. Based on Irene’s marital status, an admissions committee likely assumed that she would want to follow this model. In any case, Irene got from her rejection from the two top ranking schools a clear message. As a woman, she was not considered a competitive applicant. While Norton might have a chance to excel at MIT or Harvard, she would have to content herself with a lower-ranking school.  

Rosemarie Cox, meanwhile, was among the few women of the Class of 1964 at Harvard Law School and she initially assumed that a degree from this prestigious program would open doors for her. Attending the 1963 reunion of her Mount Holyoke class, she wrote on her “Alumnae Report Card” that she was planning to “enter law practice in New York City” to “specialize in family law and matrimonial matters.” She could also imagine “work in public service with the District Attorney, the New York Legal Aid Society or as a clerk to a state or federal judge.” Two years later and with a law degree in hand, however, the reality of discrimination had caught up with her. “Am presently looking for a job with a law firm doing

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600 Irene Stiefel Starr to parents, 03-18-1961, folder 5 “correspondence, 1961.”
a substantial proportion of matrimonial law matters,” she wrote on a second questionnaire. “Finding it tough going! Lady lawyers are not as easily employable as one might wish!”

The experiences of Irene and Rosemarie once again reflect the fact that despite rhetorical encouragement of female achievement and ambition, the nation was still not prepared to accept women as the equals of men. Not only did admissions quotas keep the number of women in graduate school low, the women who were accepted faced discriminatory treatment as well. Especially in male dominated professions, professors were more comfortable focusing on men and women found it hard to gain access to the existing mentoring system. For those women who had gained entrance to coveted fields, this often meant that they felt unwanted and out-of-place. Those who aspired to combine family and careers were still seen as not adequately devoted to their chosen fields. Faced with more applicants than spots, admissions committees were reluctant to give a coveted position to a woman who might use her degree different than a man. Neither college administrators nor policy makers or employers treated the typical work patterns and values of the sexes as comparable in worth. The hierarchy of values that privileged the typical life and work patterns of men as the norm from which women departed at their own danger had clearly survived the end of the 1950s.

Continuities of discrimination not withstanding, however, the greater support women from the last cohort received from their peers sustained their sense of purpose in the face of adversary circumstances. These women were also more likely to share stories and insights


with fellow members of their sex and in the process develop a sense of gender solidarity. ‘Feminism’ was still an ideology they had difficulties identifying with. But whereas their predecessors had been haunted by cycles of self-doubt, the younger women grew more confident that their struggles were structural rather than individual by nature.

Where the importance of female camaraderie becomes particularly apparent is in the case of Rosemarie Cox, who, when visiting Harvard for the first time, seemed to have been apprehensive about the types of women she would meet there. She was pleasantly surprised that the “girls” she met were very likeable characters. They were “lively and interesting people,” she described the two students who showed her around campus in a letter to her parents. They had “a real dedication to the study of law” but at the same time were “gay and friendly” and “enjoyed life thoroughly.” These young women, she found “particularly nice,” not only possessed a joy de vivre she had not expected, they were also committed to support other members of their sex. The “thirty some girls in the law school,” she wrote, “seem to find themselves a special group with a certain esprit de corps which gives them and identity and common bond within the bigger law school.”

Judith Richards Hope in *Pinstripes and Pearls* describes the conditions under which a team-spirit as Rosemarie described it developed. Women made up only 15 of the 513 members of the class of 1964. Despite their small number, however, they were constantly exposed to other members of their sex. Most professors insisted on placed seating and positioned women next to each other in the front row of lecture halls. Women also boarded together in Wyeth Hall and had a separate “ladies room” in Harkness Commons, the building

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that housed the cafeteria. In the context of these encounters, Hope argues, older female students coached newcomers on “professor’s techniques” and on “how to handle those professors and male classmates who were openly antagonistic.” These women seem to have talked about more than just their studies. The fact that it was to a fellow college woman to whom Rosemarie Cox turned for advice on birth control suggests that in the course of her encounters with same sex peers she had learned to trust women’s expertise and to rely on their help in various aspects of her life.

While enrolled at Harvard, Rosemarie said in retrospect, she identified strongly with “the masculine aura of the law, its power and rationality” and refused to raise issues of gender discrimination in public. Yet, like other women of her class, she stayed in touch with her former peers long beyond graduation. As Hope reports, they all “kept sight of each other out of the corner of [their] eyes – watching what works and what doesn’t, cheering the successes and mourning (and learning from) the failures, seeking each other out when things [went] wrong.” These women’s experience at Harvard had thus apparently alerted them to the benefits of access to a network of other women. While they might not have identified with the label of feminist, seeing same-sex peers as appealing role models, respecting their opinions, and welcoming their help, was a necessary first step for gender solidarity.

The record of Rosemarie’s female classmates shows the clear benefits of access to a supportive network for individual women. Fifteen of the women who entered with her finished with Rosemarie at Harvard, four eventually obtained their law degrees elsewhere,

604 Hope, Pinstripes and Pearls, xix, 33-34.
606 Hope, Pinstripes and Pearls, xxv.
and only one woman dropped her plans entirely. But the consequences of a more positive student experience for women reached beyond the individual level. As the case of Dori Schaffer shows, her graduate school experience also pushed her into the direction of developing an increasingly sophisticated theoretical understanding of the struggles of women.

The fact that she had not allowed herself to be distracted from her goal to study sociology often “bolster[ed] [Dori’s] spirit.”\(^{607}\) When she began her studies at Columbia, she put the certificate granting “Professor Schaffer” access to the building in which the Social Sciences were housed in a frame and onto the wall of her room. As a dream the young woman recorded in the winter of 1959 shows, however, her discipline also confronted her again and again with sexist stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes. “Had a strange dream in which different writers discussed women and their plight,” wrote Dori. She then proceeded to describe it in detail:

One woman was claiming (falsely) that a woman today is free to enter almost any profession. As she walked away, a fat irate mother was screaming at her teen-aged daughter, “You’ll get yourself talked about so no boy will want you, … No one wants second-hand goods.” … And then in the dream Freud popped up out of nowhere considering a woman “masochistic” because she resigns herself to, and ultimately revels in, the aura of injury surrounding and touching her life. And then, Helene Deutsch, woman psychologist from Fordham University in N. Y. C., said that the constant factor in female development makes masochism indispensable to her acceptance of the whole of her sexuality.\(^{608}\)

The theories Dori here so perceptively cited continued to affect her self-image. Although reeling under the double standard, she could not imagine happiness without a

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\(^{607}\) Dori Schaffer, diary, entry dated 10-22-1959, in Schaffer, ed., Dear Deedee, 169.

\(^{608}\) Dori Schaffer, diary, entry dated 11-01-1959, in Schaffer, ed., Dear Deedee, 170-171.
sexual relationship with a man. Often feeling “lonely” for someone to love, she clung to a male partner who, as she admitted herself, “could not give [her] the reassurance [she] need[ed]” and who often disappointed her. Experiencing these struggles, however, increasingly peaked her interest in the structural and historical basis of attitudes towards the sexes. By October 1959, she was “composing an outline for a book about the woman question.” Women were, she continued, “without a doubt … a minority group” whose “place … could be explored sociologically.” Drawing inspiration from “Simone de Beauvoir’s Second Sex” and “Myrdal’s comparison of the position of women and the negroes,” she would pursue the “central question”: “What are the conditions fostering maintenance of oppression? What is the relevant ideology and false consciousness tending to bolster the status quo? And what are the conditions that could encourage change? Under what social conditions could women be expected to acquire true class consciousness to fight oppression?”

The development of Dori’s view was certainly to some extent influenced by her location. Columbia University had a close relationship with Barnard College which not only featured an unusually large ratio of female to male faculty members but whose women researchers were also at the pioneering edge of scholarship on women, children, and families. Barnard was also one of the first academic departments to institute a maternal

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610 One of the best-known scholars in this area was Mirra Komarovsky, whose book Women in the Modern World: Their Education and Their Dilemmas (Boston: Little Brown, 1953) was a sympathetic interpretation of the difficulties women like Dori faced.
leave policy, thus “acknowledging that it had faculty who might be mothers and who had special needs.”

The mere fact that structural analyses of women’s situation were available does not necessarily mean that a college woman would find this an appealing subject to study herself. Women’s issues were still treated as marginal subjects in academia. Until the 1970s, few departments considered them subjects deserving funding. Dori herself was aware of the lack of “special corporate funds and support.” For her to turn to this topic in this context, Dori needed first of all to have to come to believe in its legitimacy and relevance. Here, it was an important factor that the problems specific to women were increasingly broached in circles of her own peers. In her diary, Dori referred to “some women” who denied “the existence of hardship” and who did not “even admit the existence of compromises they [made.]” Yet although her detractors loomed large in her reflections, Dori’s journal also illustrates that female students were talking about the “compromises,” “inequity,” and “hardship” peculiar to the female sex. Inspired by the example of members of her own generation, the young woman then also applied an analysis she was already familiar with through her longer-time involvement with the African American Civil Rights movement. One year after 10,000 students had marched in New York City for integrated schools, Dori built on her understanding of racism to make a case for action against sexism: She had to admit that she

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had “been wrong” in the past. There was no individual solution to the “woman question”:

“Women must organize to fight discrimination as the negroes are doing.”

Two years after Dori wrote these words, newly elected John F. Kennedy, pressed by feminist supporters, established the “President’s Commission on the Status of Women” to study discriminatory practices in education and the workplace. When the commission published its final report in 1963, it highlighted the structural obstacles to equal opportunity faced by women and urged greater consideration of the specific problems that affected the female sex. The same year, Betty Friedan published the first manifesto of Second Wave feminism, *The Feminine Mystique*. Prior to these landmark events, however, college women were already coming to a new understanding of their situation and options. Encouraged by a lessening of normative pressures on campus, they were beginning to see other members of their sex not only once again as allies, but also as important contributors to culture, and to consider issues specific to their sex as topics meriting scholarly inquiry and political attention. This sense of their power and of the cultural value of their contributions would continue to grow in the course of the 1960s. The roots of change, however, were already firmly planted.

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