

# off our backs

a women's newsjournal

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Making the Case For Women's Colleges

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# Making the Case For Women's Colleges

By Glynis O'Leary

As I sit here writing this article, I am surrounded by growing piles of books, clothes, computer supplies, and personal belongings, all of which will soon make their way into various bags and boxes. At the end of August, I will pack up my little Honda and drive up to Massachusetts for my fourth and final year at Mount Holyoke College. One of the few Seven Sisters colleges that has not either gone co-ed or been absorbed by a larger co-ed university, Mount Holyoke College has become a place where women like myself have gone to expand their worlds, both academically and personally.

Over the past years, I have spent time with friends from high school who have chosen more popular college paths than I did. Only one other student from my small, conservative private preparatory school

chose to attend a single-sex college, so I was clearly in the minority. I found myself having to justify my decision at graduation party after graduation party, and I typically fell back on the traditional explanations: 80% of female CEOs graduated from women's college, women's colleges offer an academic environment free from "social distractions," and, of course, Mount Holyoke is one of the Seven Sisters, so I can't really go wrong with that kind of reputation!

Looking back on the conversations now, I realize that I was just as confused about my decision as my friends and relatives were. Now when I'm asked the question, "what's it like to go to a girl's school?" I respond much differently.

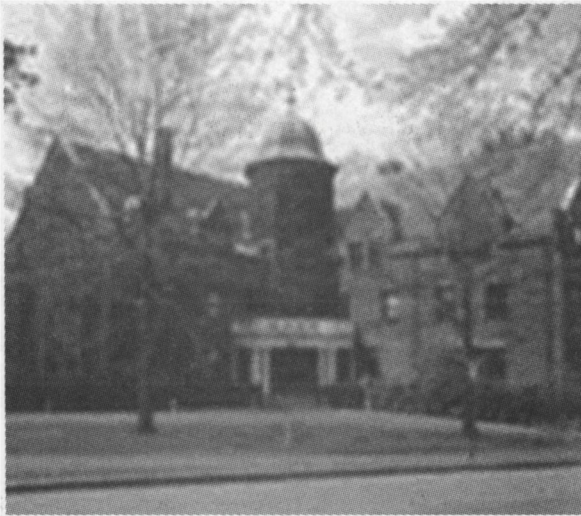
First, I am careful to correct my interrogator: "It's not a 'girl's school,' it's a women's college," I say. That's the easy part. The hard part is trying to make a skeptic understand the less tangible things that Mount Holyoke has taught me. I can't use the standard "it's given me confidence" line, because in high school, I was confident. I never had a problem keeping my mouth shut in class;

but I often had trouble finding someone who would listen. Very few students in my U.S. history class wanted to hear me lament the exclusion of women from our textbooks, and even fewer wanted to talk about the unique beginnings of second wave feminist movements. I had to struggle to address topics relating to women in my high school classes, and on the off chance women were mentioned, it was always in a sidebar, an anecdote, or a "special section" on women. I longed for the chance to have my herstory take center stage, and to not have it qualified with any "in spite of" or "because of" statements.

I've lived socially in an environment where phrases like "lesbian," "queer," and "bisexual" are said without hesitation. Unlike girls' high schools, women's colleges have long been safe spaces for women of any and all sexual orientations. Phrases like "sexual experimentation" lack the negative connotation they tend to have in other environments. Sure, we have terms like "LUGS" (Lesbian Until Graduation) and "BUGS" (Bi Until Graduation), but for the most part, these labels aren't taboo, and are instead indicative of the open, accepting environment in which we live and work. Unlike many of my friends at co-ed schools, I never



Mt. Holyoke: Clapp Laboratory



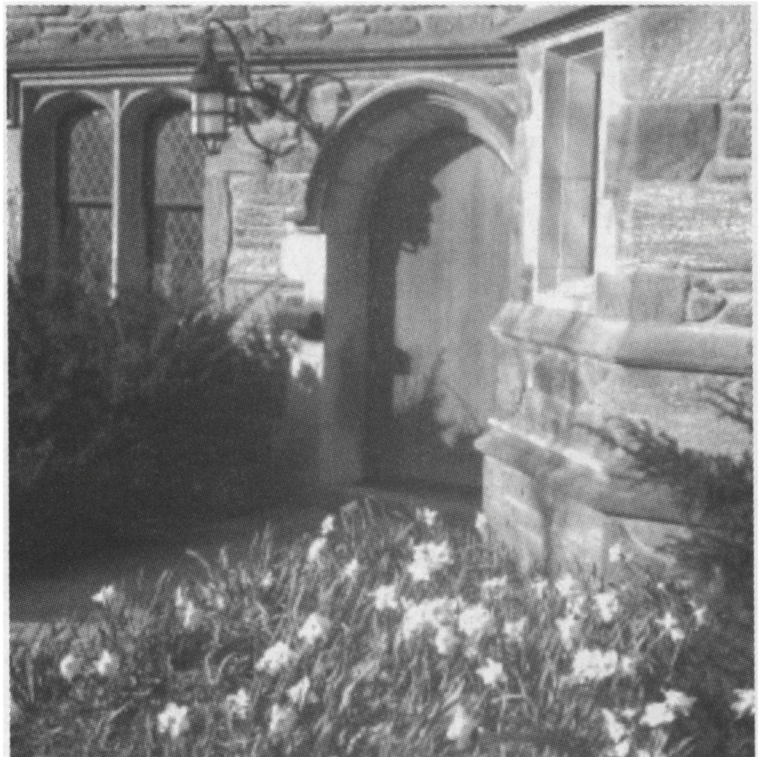
Mt. Holyoke: Safford Hall

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Unlike many of my friends at co-ed schools, I never think twice about walking across campus late at night or putting down my drink at a dorm party.

think twice about walking across campus late at night or putting down my drink at a dorm party. This is not to say that rape and sexual assault are not campus issues; however, the rates of violence against women are drastically lower on single-sex campuses than on co-ed campuses, and the internal safety felt outweighs any fear or apprehension among most women.

Living and learning in a female-dominated environment completely warped my world in the best way possible. Women's studies is not a department, but a frame of mind. Every class, without fail, relates itself to women, and what is most striking is the fact that I only notice this interwovenness when I step away from my environment. It's become second nature to me—something I never would have included in my "reason's I chose a women's college" speeches.

Looking back on what I've learned in my three years in a single sex environment, I realize exactly how valuable my experience has been. Never again will I allow my gender to come before me, after me, or without me. Living and working in an environment where female is the norm and male is unusual, and where women have all the privilege traditionally held by men, I have learned to fully inhabit my gender. ♦



A doorway at Bryn Mawr.