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Duke History Revisited, Summer 2016

Success of the Second Sex:
Duke University's Demonstrated Efforts to Empower Women

Designing Duchesses

Orientation Week to graduation day, Duke women are formed, like the diamonds we're told at convocation we'll become, with pressure—between classroom and bedroom walls, on the field, in the dining hall, between relationships and internships, in mirrors and photos, in group messages and private counseling. Most of the largest-looming limiting factors for the growth of Duke women today are not new; rather, they're remnants of old plagues renewed by history's cyclical bent or invisible, nefarious influences that have been hushed but not eradicated by previous efforts.

Women at Duke have come a long way—1.8 miles and more than eight decades—since the Woman's College opened as a coordinate to the all-male neogothic wonderland in 1930. In the wake of the development of the Woman's College, students, faculty, and administrators have worked to carve out women's place at Duke University, acknowledging that their effort was to be done in a somewhat rigged system of larger societal trends. In its infancy, Duke catered exclusively to white, affluent, southern students, and conservative traditions and the Social Standards Committee told women undergraduates that their personal development at Duke would be that of “individuality within a provided framework.”¹ While *Design for a Duchess* pamphlets detailing the best ways to dress and behave to please male peers are no longer disseminated, those same rules have evolved into implicit pressures that reinforce the most obstinate hindrances to undergraduate women's growth.

In 1963, Duke admitted its first African American undergraduates, but it hadn't yet integrated the men's and women's campuses.² The segregation of men and women, by that time only in living space and regulation, coupled with the women's liberation movement of the '60s, spurred a great grumble among students on a national level. Duke's administration noted the discontent of its own female student body, who into the late '60s still had curfews and dress codes that didn't apply to their male peers. *The Chronicle*, at that time in the hands of nearly every student on campus each morning, was saturated with women students' complaints of the separate but unequal facilities³ as East campus fell into attrition, and soon administrators began discussing what they considered the inevitability of a merger between the Woman's College and Trinity. Juanita Kreps, Dean of the Woman's College after Alice Baldwin, in a robust document entitled the Womanpower Report, 1969-70, asserted:

We are now in an era that is for women markedly different from anything of the past—different primarily by reason of a surge for equality in all things. No woman's college will survive intact. Since ours is a woman's college only in the sense of academic administration and living arrangements, to “go coed” is not to go very far. Indeed, if we continue to get the quality of freshmen we have been admitting, and the quality of faculty

¹*Design for a Duchess* serial, 1942

² Duke Library Exhibits: “The Road to Desegregation at Duke.” 2013.

³ Steve Schewel (Durham City Council, former president of Associated Students of Duke University) and Bob Ashley (Editor, *Herald Sun*; former editor of *The Chronicle*, Duke University) in discussion with the author, June 2016.

we have been attracting, the quality of the graduates will continue to be impressive. The fact that administrative and residential arrangements exert only marginal influences on academic performance probably goes unchallenged, even among deans.⁴

That same academic year, administrators pieced together a plan to merge the colleges gradually, in residence, what remained of separate instruction, student government, and management.

The Merger, for Better or Worse

Quickly, however, the consequences of unifying the campuses proved less empowering in reality than planned. The student government, then Associated Students of Duke University, meant to represent the student body as a whole but was led by male students from the merger in 1972 until 1986, when Janet Nolting became the first woman elected to ASDU presidency.⁵ The Woman's Student Government Association had previously guaranteed women undergraduates leadership opportunities and the ability to advocate for the gendered issues they prioritized.⁶ The merger, intended to grant women the freedom they'd hoped for in their social lives, had coincidentally cost them their governing independence. Not only the leadership opportunities but the distinctly female voice the Woman's College students had developed dissolved when the student bodies merged. The dynamics of that sudden drop off are easy to imagine but not well documented. There are no meeting minutes that indicate whether women avoided taking leadership once men were in the room to do it or whether they weren't given the chance. What seemed like the teleological next step in the University's progress resolved the official regulation of women's social lives, but the written rules were replaced by an equally authoritative set of social structures in which men and women were on the same plane on paper but occupied very distinct levels of power in actuality.

Donna Lisker, who directed the Women's Center at Duke for eight years and now serves as Dean of the College and Vice President for Campus Life at Smith College, explained that this moment in the 1970s was one of national dissatisfaction. Women's colleges in the '50s and '60s were producing powerhouses and graduating amazing women, she said, "but it's not like they had a choice, it's not that they chose Smith over Harvard; they couldn't go to Harvard. They weren't allowed."⁷ The physical marginalization of women on the generally-considered inferior East campus coupled with the social regulations within its perimeter wall gave Duke women the notion that all-women spaces were symbolic of restriction and patronization, not empowerment. "Because these women now had a choice and now had access to the space they had so long been denied," Lisker noted, "I think it took a long time for them to recognize that there had actually been a loss there, that by integrating you lost something distinctive for women."⁸

Studying Women

As the remnants of *in loco parentis* slipped away and women students made their way into the residence halls of West campus, Jean O'Barr ensured that space was made for them in academia, too. As Director of Continuing Education from 1970-1982, O'Barr had worked with

⁴ Juanita Kreps. *The Womanpower Report, 1969-70*. Duke University Archives, 5.

⁵ Melissa Hendrix and Jean O'Barr. The Portraits Project: "Janet Nolting Carter - First Woman Elected President of the Associated Students of Duke University."

⁶ Robert Franklin Durden. 1993. *The Launching of Duke University, 1924-1949*. Duke University Press, 260.

⁷ Donna Lisker (Dean of the College and Vice President for Campus Life, Smith College; former Director of the Women's Center, Duke University), in discussion with the author, June 2016.

⁸ Discussion with Donna Lisker.

women who wanted to return to school—to finish a degree, to earn another—and learned in the process that the obstacles to reentry were imbedded in curriculum. When older women asked of their instructors why the content of female voices was absent from their coursework, their criticism was more often met with resistance than modification. It was unsettling for O’Barr to notice that they had a valid point that was largely dismissed and, worse, that these women eventually sunk into silence about it, accepting it as a status quo that couldn’t or wouldn’t be altered. At the same time, the initial discussions of Title IX tied the question of *who* was studying to *what* was being studied in higher education.⁹

After a year off, O’Barr returned to Duke in 1983 to launch its Women’s Studies Program. According to data O’Barr collected, Stanford established its Feminist Studies Program in 1980, Yale housed a Women’s Studies program by 1981, and Princeton founded theirs in 1982.¹⁰ In order for Duke to remain competitive with the universities it aspired to emulate, it had to accept the academic trends and offer undergraduates comparable avenues of study. To students now, the department’s existence is an expectation, not a shock, but at the time, to create an overtly and unapologetically political discipline and integrate it into the academic community at an institution like Duke was a massive shake-up. The first Annual Report for the program reveals that it spent its first few months justifying its existence. Even into its second year, the program held a panel discussion entitled: “A feminist perspective: does it make a difference?” Students seemed to think so, or at least were attracted to the idea that it could. In fall of 1983, there were 234 students in 11 courses. By 1985, enrollment had tripled, and about a quarter of students were men.¹¹

The program’s initial goals, according to a newsletter penned by O’Barr the first year of its implementation, were to eliminate errors of fact about women, to add knowledge about women, and to construct new theories once the errors had been sifted out and new insight mixed in.¹² This meant an active criticism of the courses that were being taught at Duke already, training students to recognize where women were absent or portrayed only in traditional roles in the courses through which they were preparing for their lives and careers. In April 1985, Trinity senior Melinda Moseley worked with O’Barr to draft “Women’s Studies and the Duke Curriculum: The Student Point of View,” a report on the student findings of the Introduction to Women’s Studies course from the previous fall. O’Barr had assigned the fifty students to conduct textbook and course evaluations from two other classes in which they were simultaneously enrolled that semester to discern how much of the prior two decades’ feminist scholarship had been incorporated into Duke’s general curriculum. Thirty three percent of those courses were found to be womanless, but a quarter were lauded as presenting women as equally influential in the course.¹³

⁹ Jean O’Barr. 1994. *Feminism in Action: Building Institutions and Communities Through Women’s Studies*. The University of North Carolina Press, 41.

¹⁰ O’Barr. 1986. “Duke Women’s Studies Program: A Comparative Perspective.” Duke University Archives, Women’s Studies Reference Collection.

¹¹ O’Barr. December 1985 Women’s Studies Program Newsletter. Duke University Archives, Women’s Studies Program Reference Collection.

¹² O’Barr. 1983. “The New Scholarship on Women: Stirring in or Stirring Up?” Duke University Archives, Women’s Studies Program Reference Collection.

¹³ Melinda Mosely and Jean O’Barr. 1985. Draft: “Women’s Studies and the Duke Curriculum: The Student Point of View.” Duke University Archives, Women’s Studies Program Reference Collection.

Women at the Center

So women, in a gradually inclusive sense, gained space in syllabi, but the conversations informed by feminist theory would start outgrowing the confines of classroom walls. Just after Women's Studies started making its imprint on student thought, a group of undergraduate women formed the Coalition for a Women's Center at Duke. The well-established resource we know today originally emerged from a leadership class assignment, in which Margaret Nelson, then a Trinity sophomore, and several classmates discussed starting a sort of women's club as their exercise in leadership. As Nelson recalls, the Women's Studies program still felt too academic, too separate from student life beyond lectures and the library, to provide advocacy for cultural change specific to Duke's campus. Jean O'Barr urged the women instead to convince the administration to open a Women's Center, something that would be more permanent than a club—a physical space, staffed and funded, that could serve as a lasting institutional resource on campus.¹⁴

In 1986, the proposal for the Women's Center began with a series of interviews with administrators gauging their support for and understanding of the need for such a space on campus. The Coalition surveyed both men and women, compiling and evaluating their responses to discern whose support they might have and who might not recognize that a Women's Center could offer resources beyond the reach of CAPS, the Chapel, and Residence Life. Jane Clark Mormon, Director of CAPS and faculty appointment to the Medical School Department of Psychiatry at the time, revealed in her interview that when she came to Duke in 1973, just a year after the merger, she was the first and only woman clinical social worker at the Student Mental Health office until 1976. The office served both men and women, but she immediately noticed that she had a waiting list of around 35-40 students who didn't want to see anybody else. There was a strong demand, especially among female students but also from men, for a female counselor. Dean Sue Wasiolek, Dean for Student Life, mentioned that a feminist label still held a stigma, and she worried that women students were slipping back into subordinate roles. Caroline Lattimore, Dean of Minority Affairs explained there was a lack of activism in support of black women. To her, Duke feminism still seemed divided. In addition to those concerns, the Coalition's analysis revealed that male administrators believed the Women's Studies Program offered sufficient support for women students—none mentioned relationship/sexual counseling or the need for female role models.¹⁵

The Coalition's full proposal is eloquently worded and well-researched, outlining the budgets, years in operation, staff, and programming of comparable universities' women's centers. The drafters included anonymous essays by students, men and women, straight and queer, of all different courses of study, citing their personal views on why a separate space for discussing women's issues, providing relationship/sexual assault counseling, and offering extracurricular programming was necessary for the improvement of student life. Above all, they pleaded for a safe space in which to talk about the struggles that felt taboo to express in the contemporary campus climate.¹⁶ Their arguments won the administration's approval and support

¹⁴ Margaret Nelson (Deputy Chief of Staff, New York City Council; former member of the Coalition for a Women's Center at Duke University) in discussion with the author, June 2016.

¹⁵ Coalition for a Women's Center at Duke. 1986. Task Force Proposal. Duke University Archives, Women's Center Records.

¹⁶ Coalition for a Women's Center at Duke. Task Force Proposal.

of the Women's Center, and by 1989, it held prime real estate on the West campus bus circle, taking over, symbolically as Nelson recalls, the space that previously housed a fraternity.¹⁷

This past semester, however, the announcement of the Center's move to East campus to free space for other student groups on West received mixed reactions from students and staff.¹⁸ In spite what now seems like constant construction, space is still finite, but the Women Center's relocation means that upperclassmen, all of whom excepting RAs live on West or Central, will have to take a bus to reach the resources that are often sought following some of the most traumatic and paralyzing moments of their Duke careers. On the other hand, the Center will be more accessible to first-years, hopefully developing an influence and relationship with the incoming class that will last throughout their four years.

Parsing Effortless Perfection

When Nannerl Keohane became Duke's first and thus far only woman president in 1993, she worked closely with the Women's Center and prioritized the evaluation of women's status at the University. A feminist scholar herself, Keohane communicated frequently with O'Barr, and in conjunction with the Women's Center, she implemented the Women's Initiative, an investigation into the treatment of women in faculty, administration, staff, and the student body at Duke.¹⁹ Donna Lisker was charged with the undergraduate arm of the research, deemed Duke Inquiries in Gender, a series of focus groups held in the 2002-2003 academic year. Emily Grey chaired the project her junior and senior years, reporting to both Lisker and Keohane.²⁰

Twenty focus groups, composed of men and women from every fraternity, sorority, and student group on campus, met in the fall of 2002 at the Women's Center to discern whether Grey's sense that implicit social regulations among undergraduate women were detrimental to their social and academic lives. The issues that most frequently emerged from the groups were body size and disordered eating, dating and hooking up, social status and hierarchy, safety and sexual assault, student leadership and activism, and classroom experiences.²¹

Out of those conversations, the term "effortless perfection" was coined into common campus parlance, defined as "the expectation that one would be smart, accomplished, fit, beautiful, and popular, and all this would happen without visible effort. This environment enforces stringent norms on undergraduate women, who feel pressure to wear fashionable (and often impractical) clothes and shoes, to diet and exercise excessively, and to hide their intelligence in order to succeed with their male peers."²² In the Women's Initiative report, Keohane wrote, "the ideal of 'effortless perfection' described eloquently by many Duke female undergraduates creates a climate for many students that too often stifles the kind of vigorous exploration of selfhood and development of enlightened respect for members of the opposite sex that one would hope to see at a place of the quality and character of Duke."²³ Lisker clarified Keohane's concern, explaining that "effortless perfection" was at the root of why many undergraduate women tailored their behavior to a set of unspoken norms and suffered in the process: "It's an expectation that's impossible, so it sets you up to constantly feel anxious, like a fraud, like a failure. The women in the focus groups said they were always thinking, *why is it so*

¹⁷ Discussion with Margaret Nelson.

¹⁸ Heather Zhou. April 8, 2016. "Students upset by plans to move Women's Center to East Campus." *The Chronicle*.

¹⁹ President Keohane Records. Duke University Archives.

²⁰ Emily Grey (Chair, Duke Inquiries in Gender), in discussion with the author, June 2016.

²¹ Duke Inquiries in Gender Report. 2003. Duke University Archives, Baldwin Scholars Records.

²² Duke Inquiries in Gender Report. 2003.

²³ Nannerl Keohane. 2003. Women's Initiative Report. Duke University Archives.

hard for me? Why am I struggling when everyone around me seems to be doing perfectly well with no issues? And of course they weren't. They were just maybe better at hiding the struggle."²⁴

Lisker cited the shocking suicide of a University of Pennsylvania freshman in 2014 to demonstrate the deadly nature of the unspoken and unseen pressure that women at elite universities take very seriously. Madison Holleran was beautiful, intelligent, a track star, and had no history of mental health issues. She left no warning sign, no red flags, but had spoken to friends and posted on social media just before jumping from a parking deck.²⁵ What stood out to Lisker was the dissonance between the always-smiling self that Holleran presented in her posts and the suffering one hidden behind them. That's precisely what effortless perfection demands of students. It's a suffocating set of standards that replaced the written regulations for Woman's College students with unspoken rules that can't be shed by a vote in a student government meeting.

The insidious nature of this severe anxiety to live up to impossible expectations and do so without revealing any sense of struggle means that the women who internalize it most intensely are also less likely to seek help because they feel their faltering a reflection of inadequacy. They're also considerably less likely to be offered help because they hide it so well. Like Hollerman, Duke women find themselves in an environment that provides them resources to assist in coping with and overcoming the stress of unrealistic self-expectations, but taking advantage of those resources requires admitting that they're in over their heads. For high-achieving students, that sensation is often akin to failure, and failure is the foreign stuff of nightmares. Left unchecked, the effortless perfection phenomenon has very real and preventable consequences, but encouraging women to go to CAPS counseling or the Women's Center may take more than the posters in our bathroom stalls. At the very least, by coining the term in their study, Duke Inquiries in Gender and the Women's Initiative provided data confirming to struggling undergraduates that they were far from alone in feeling that pressure. Normalizing the use of support services is the next step.

Recreating the Woman's College

In addition to reporting its findings, the Duke Inquiries in Gender project offered recommendations to combat the structural facets responsible for reinforcing stunted undergraduate women's development. Among these was the creation of the Baldwin Scholars program, a community of 18 women per class who would live in an all women's housing section, have at least two courses taught by female faculty in an all-female classroom, and complete a paid internship ideally mentored by a woman with authority in her field.²⁶ Donna Lisker was also instrumental in the program's development, recalling that "based on what we heard in the Women's Initiative, women were craving a space where they could be with other women that was not a sorority, that was not social, but where they could be their full selves, intellectual, silly, and where they would be supported and challenged and mentored and encouraged."²⁷

Colleen Scott, the Baldwin Scholars Program Director, deems the environment a "Woman's College oasis" within the coed framework of Duke,²⁸ and Lisker echoed the

²⁴ Discussion with Donna Lisker.

²⁵ Joe Kemp and Nina Golgowski. January 20, 2014. "University of Pennsylvania track star jumped to death over grades." *New York Daily News*.

²⁶ Colleen Scott (Baldwin Scholars Program Director, Duke University), in discussion with the author, June 2016.

²⁷ Discussion with Donna Lisker.

²⁸ Discussion with Colleen Scott.

sentiment. Nina Chen, a current Baldwin Scholar, described it as the most diverse group she has ever been part of and a space in which she and her peers feel they can be extremely vulnerable on intellectual and emotional levels. Many Baldwin seminar discussions elicited tears, she said, a display of authenticity rarely released in any other classroom setting.²⁹ According to Scott, unanticipated results of the program have been an above average mean GPA, high involvement in extracurricular activities, and a majority of participants doing senior thesis work. Part of that, she believes, is confidence, and part is seeing their peers succeed in things and feeling encouraged by their success.³⁰

Potential

The strength the Baldwin Scholars Program derives from its intimate size is also its most critiqued weakness. “It was never realistic to think it was going to change the entire campus culture; it was too small a program, but we had hoped, and I think we have been successful, in creating a small, diverse sort of seed group of women leaders who could do transformational things at Duke and beyond,” Lisker said.³¹ So outside of the 72 undergraduate women who benefit directly from the program each year, what more permanent, structural work can Duke do to empower its women?

The faculty, staff, and students that compose the campus population arrive with their own well-instilled values regarding women’s place and purpose, and for undergraduates, their four years here can only do so much to reshape them. For example, Grey, who now works with high school seniors applying to college, noted that the “effortless perfection” pressure begins while young women compete with each other in applying to highly selective schools, long before they even step foot on campus.³² In evaluating Duke’s efforts to empower women, it’s important not to hold the university responsible for the state of society; the question should be, rather, *in what ways is Duke reinforcing or stifling the success of women once they get here?*

Both Lisker and Scott asserted that the Greek system on campus, though fairly integral to alumni contributions, is one of the obvious culprits in maintaining a gendered hierarchy in student social life. Scott observed that sororities have a great deal of underutilized potential to influence campus culture, but as Lisker pointed out, that would require taking on structures of power that sometimes benefit them, too: “We heard all the time that if you’re going to go to a fraternity party, you have to expect to get groped, like that’s just part of the deal. And I remember asking *okay, why would you put up with that? Why would you go back if that happened to you even once?* But the thing that they articulated and articulated well was that there was and still is a social hierarchy at Duke, and there were people at the top, and getting attention from them, even negative attention, was sometimes preferable to no attention.”³³ Untangling the ephemeral social benefit from the long-term, conditioned tolerance of disrespect is far from simple, especially as post-graduation job prospects sometimes seem inextricable from undergraduate social circles.

Replacing undergraduate women’s reliance on imbalanced social relationships with networks of mentors is among the most auspicious solutions to the conundrum of conformity to unhealthy and belittling norms. Duke’s latest effort, the Penny Pilgram George Women’s

²⁹ Nina Chen (Duke University undergraduate and current Baldwin Scholar), in discussion with the author, June 2016.

³⁰ Discussion with Colleen Scott.

³¹ Discussion with Donna Lisker.

³² Discussion with Emily Grey.

³³ Discussion with Donna Lisker.

Leadership Initiative, promises to connect students with women mentors and alumni,³⁴ and the effectiveness of those relationships could determine for many women whether they value themselves according to impossible social standards or find a sureness of self knowing someone is there to encourage and support rather than compete with them.

In the same vein, Lisker, Scott, Grey, and Nelson all cited the importance of recruiting women to senior levels of faculty and administration. In the University's current presidential search, selecting a woman among the qualified many could speak volumes to Duke's commitment to creating not just effortlessly perfect Duchesses, but empowered, driven, confident, healthy, and happy women. Advocates and role models are invaluable in shaping undergraduate women's expectations for themselves and each other, and Duke has progressed enough decades from the days of an all-male institution to recognize its responsibility to provide a structure in which success is not determined by sex.

³⁴ Duke Student Affairs. 2016. The Penny Pilgram George Women's Leadership Initiative.

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