



The Company of Women

Single-Sex Education and Why It Perseveres

A study conducted by a research team at UCLA led by Linda J. Sax recently documented the benefits of an all-girls' education. It compared the experiences of female students from single-sex and coeducational high schools, and the differences between the two groups as they transitioned to college.

"We were surprised by a couple of things in our results," said Emily Arms, second author of the study's report. "Even after controlling for socioeconomic background and high school differences, we still found many differences between the two groups. We also noted differences between Catholic all-girls' and independent all-girls' high schools. The latter, for example, showed higher confidence in math and computer science, which is important because those are areas where women historically have been underrepresented."

The report made me think back to the early 1970s, when the climate for schools like Emma Willard was distinctly less friendly. The issue wasn't that single-sex education wasn't beneficial so much as that it was unfair to the excluded sex—and therefore, in the opinions of some, illegal.

At the time, feminists and civil rights groups, including the National Organization for Women and the American Civil Liberties Union, called for the elimination of sex segregation in education. And although single-sex private schools were not subject to laws governing public schools, they nonetheless felt pressure to go coed to keep their enrollments up. Clearly, the competition was about to get a lot tougher.

This pressure was arguably most intense at the college level. Led by Yale University in 1969, dozens of colleges and universities went coed.

Against this backdrop, Emma Willard too considered going coed, causing principal William Dietel to convene the Faculty Committee on Coeducation in November 1969 to explore the idea. "It was obvious," said Dietel, "that the larger boys' schools were going to go coed and that competition for good students was driving those decisions. I don't remember a lot of controversy within the Emma community largely because none of us was sold on the idea. But we did think the issue had to be examined as carefully and dispassionately as possible."

The backstory, of course, was that Emma Willard's resistance was based on its legacy as one of the first girls' schools in the English-speaking world to provide young women with higher education. Said Dietel, "We had little to gain by going coed or merging with a boys' school, which we also considered, but much to lose in terms of the school's record of achievement and leadership in female education."

During this time, various issues were posed to alumnae. How might going coed affect alumnae contributions to the school? Some 52 percent said their contributions would remain the same. Would alumnae send their daughters and sons to a coed EW? For daughters, 70 percent said yes; for sons, a surprisingly low 45 percent. Students at the time were polled too, but that produced no mandate.

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—Former Principal Bill Dietel

Probably most of the students attending Emma Willard in November 1971 will remember the fateful recommendation by the Board of Trustees against coeducation. But they may not remember the subtlety of the trustees' statement, which suggested pursuit of “functional alternatives” that might achieve some of the

same goals as coeducation. Such alternatives directly translated into Emma's exchanges with boys' schools, begun effectively when three enterprising students applied for independent study at Deerfield Academy the spring of 1972. The exchange program, which took place from the mid-1970s until 1981, was discontinued when two of the three boys' schools went coed. So there was yet more pressure for Emma Willard to do the same. [See page 10 for an essay by David Sweet, one of the “Deerfield boys.”]

What may be most surprising now is that interest in single-sex education is increasing. The Sax report noted it, as did Ilana DeBare, author of *Where Girls Come First*, a history of girls' schools dating back to the 1800s.

She agreed that while all-girls' schools were in decline 20 years

ago, today they are making an extraordinary comeback. And this trajectory seems to be getting steeper in the last few years. Since 2006, 94 new single-sex schools have opened in the U.S.; two-thirds of them are for girls.

Significantly, governmental institutions have begun to lend their weight in support of this trend. In 2002, the U.S. Congress added a provision to the No Child Left Behind law permitting single-sex programs. And in 2006, the U.S. Department of Education authorized single-sex classes in public schools.

So if demand for all-girls' schools is on the rise, why is that? With Emma Willard's bicentennial coming up in 2014, it seemed an opportune time to investigate. I asked 15 alumnae who graduated in the “zero” years between 1960 and 2000 what they thought. When they looked back, I asked, how had the school informed their lives? Though the world changed a great deal during that period, I wanted to determine what values they shared. And since I had them on the phone, I couldn't resist asking what they thought about the school today.

Meeting High Academic Expectations

“One of the messages I got from Emma Willard,” said Kendra Stearns O'Donnell '60, “was that I could do whatever I wanted. And this was before the feminist era.” That observation resounded through the decades. Ariana Gadd '00, 40 years O'Donnell's junior, used nearly the same words: “I felt as if I could be anything I wanted.”

The teachers conveyed that message of expectation in everything they did and said. Many of the alums remembered that the teachers were renowned for waiting out a student while she struggled, somehow, to respond to a difficult question. We couldn't avoid dealing with inadequacy, anxiety, or worrying that we didn't know the answer. There was nowhere to hide.

Furthermore, faced with the demanding curriculum, coupled with the increasing diversity of the student body, we had earlier and greater exposure to unfamiliar situations in which we didn't know how to react. So we had to mature.

And as the teachers believed in us, we, too, came to believe in ourselves. Lauren Dorgan '00 described how the self-confidence she developed helped her tackle almost any subject she was assigned to cover as a reporter. She recalled that freshman year she had to write a 30-page paper about weaponry in the *Iliad*. Many years later that project would help her, on 10 minutes' notice, interview a U.S. senator about the war in Iraq. “Emma Willard taught us to plunge into life,” she said.

Self-confidence, in turn, helped students find—and express—themselves. “EWS made me the person I am. The school put the substance inside me and gave me my voice,” said Elizabeth Aldrich Atcheson '70.

Patrice Savery '80 agreed: “We developed voices we wanted people to hear.” But she added that the professional world did not necessarily welcome the kinds of attributes that Emma Willard was so busily instilling. “Corporate America was not quite ready for strong, independent women. That world stymied our abilities and created quite a bumpy ride for us. As a result, many of my classmates are now working for themselves where they can be strong on their own terms.”

Emma Willard also taught students to take responsibility. “Boarding at Emma Willard,” said Donna Krupkin Whitney '70, “meant growing up apart from the influence of my parents, and that encouraged me to take responsibility for my decisions and actions.”

The school also encouraged students to take risks: experiment with a new subject, attempt a new leadership role, or embrace a wider range of possibilities in thinking through a complicated matter or making a decision. Said Atcheson, “I'm willing to take risks now because I developed a sense of strength and

competence from Emma Willard. When you're surrounded by thoughtful, strong, capable girls, and have thoughtful, strong, capable women to look up to among the administration, faculty, and alumnae, you're just more likely to become that kind of person yourself."

On the other hand, risk taking hasn't always worked out; several alums admitted to risks they took that led to failure. But in each case, they not only weren't ashamed of the outcome, but acknowledged that the experience had taught them something valuable about themselves or the situation. They expressed a matter-of-fact fortitude that impressed me.

The environment at Emma Willard also encouraged diversity and placed a high value on tolerance; it was okay to be different. "Being half Indian, I appreciated the diversity," said Gouri Orekondy Edlich '90. "To be with people who looked different to others—but like me—made Emma Willard feel like home." But being different was more than a matter of ethnicity or being from another country. Several alums commented that their shyness, immaturity, or nerdy character didn't exclude them from the community. They felt allowed to mature at their own rate without the fear of not fitting in and the judgment they might have experienced in other settings.

Thriving in the Company of Women

The single-sex and boarding aspects of the school had a big impact on the development of close relationships, which was cited as an important characteristic of the school by all alums. Even the day students said they benefited from exposure to the boarding environment, commenting that they often ate all three meals a day at the school and hung out in the dorms into the evening on school nights.

The boarding experience might be described as unrelenting togetherness in which you see each other through the best and worst of times. That, in turn, seems to hardwire a basic camaraderie, understanding, and trust. These friendships have not only continued for every alum, but also provided a foundation for establishing rewarding relationships with women in general later on.

"I've always had deep friendships with women, professionally and personally," said Atcheson. "I credit EW with that. In fact, at one of my first jobs, at an ad agency, I heard someone talking about women 'cat fighting' with each other. I was shocked that anyone would think women were competitive with each other just because they were women. It was one of those eye-opening moments."

All of these abilities—responding to high expectations, developing self-confidence and self-expression,


learning to take responsibility, taking risks, appreciating differences, and embracing strong relationships—are part of leadership. Many alums in various ways pointed to the same basic thing: Emma Willard instills in its students the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and commitment to become leaders to make the world a better place.

The school's graduates have quite a track record in this regard, whether in reforming state law, conducting important scientific studies, writing, singing, acting, or attending to the needs of children and the dispossessed.

Assessing the School Today

Most alumnae see the school today as more alive and welcoming than it might have been 50 years ago. They applaud the increasingly diverse student body in terms of the number of countries represented and its socioeconomic breadth. They also appreciate the school's greater focus on public and community service, commenting that the students have more opportunities to travel and do charitable work during school breaks. "Part of what EW does is make people feel they can do work whose value is not determined by the salary one makes," said Lucy Schwab Blythe '80. Edlich agreed: "The small community at EW fosters a social sense that volunteering and contributing matter."

So was it a good thing that Emma Willard didn't go coed? I didn't ask that question expressly, but enough alums volunteered their opinions that I wanted to include their thoughts. Most said it had been a good decision but were careful to note that single-sex schools were appropriate for some, but not all, girls. "It's a very viable option and an important one to keep alive," said Whitney.

Said Dietel, "I personally have no doubt whatsoever that we made the right decision against coeducation. I am fascinated that, on the eve of EWS's 200th anniversary, the school has expanded its mandate to champion the cause of girls' education worldwide. I think we have a second Emma Willard in Trudy Hall." 

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