The Women’s College Advantage: Research Implications and Practical Lessons

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What do we know about Women’s Colleges?:

- Are women’s colleges as rich with educational opportunities for their students as proponents claim?
- Or, is the quality of women’s experiences across institutional types equivalent now that women outnumber and typically outperform men on coeducational campuses?

Conditions of Women’s Undergraduate Education

- Women have been the majority of undergraduates for more than 2 decades
- Women are more likely than male peers to hold high educational aspirations, to enroll in college, and to persist to degree attainment

Conditions of Women’s Undergraduate Education

- Since “chilly climate” study, the quality of the learning environment at coed colleges has been a topic of justified concern
- Negative relationship found between perceptions of campus climate and selected intellectual and personal development outcomes (writing skills, science knowledge etc.)
- Women underrepresented in leadership positions on coeducational campuses
- Persistent “micro-inequities” have damaging cumulative effect on women’s self-esteem, confidence

Women’s College Literature

- Women’s college students more satisfied with college experience
- Positive relationship between attendance at women’s college and alumnae career achievement
- Produce more graduates attaining doctorates in non-traditional fields
- More likely to produce “rising stars in corporate America”

Practical Questions for Women’s Education

- Are there real differences between women’s colleges and coed institutions in terms of quality of undergraduate experience?
- What evidence do we have of the educational benefits of attending a women’s college?
- What can we learn from women’s colleges about the conditions that matter for women’s education?

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Women students at coeducational and women’s colleges: How do their experiences compare?

Data Source and Analysis:
Sample
- NSSE data from 42,112 randomly sampled first-year & senior women at 294 different colleges and universities
- 4,676 women at 26 women’s colleges
- Survey years 2000, 2001, 2002
- Mix of institutional types

Hierarchical Linear Modeling


What is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)?

Undergraduate student survey that assesses the extent to which students engage in educational practices associated with high levels of learning and development

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Taking a look at NSSE:
- Based on effective educational practices
- Designed and tested for high validity and reliability
- Relatively stable over time
- High credibility of self-reported data
- Students will participate
- Actionable data
- Psychometric properties document on website

NSSE Survey

Student Behaviors
Institutional Actions & Requirements
Reactions to People & Environment
Student Background Information

Student Learning & Development

The Student Engagement Trinity

- What students do -- time and energy devoted to educationally purposeful activities
- What institutions do -- using effective educational practices to induce students to do the right things
- Educationally effective institutions channel student energy toward the right activities

More about NSSE...
- NSSE offers an annual snapshot of student participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development.
  - Results provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college.
  - NSSE items represent empirically confirmed ‘good practices’; they reflect behaviors associated with desired outcomes of college.
  - The time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the single best predictor of their learning and personal development.
  - Data belongs to the institution. Can be used for improvement, accreditation, promotion, and to inform decision-making in the undergraduate program.

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Research Questions

**Between Effects**
- Do women’s colleges differ from coed institutions in terms of students’ satisfaction, & the nature and frequency of contact with faculty, & activities associated with student learning? and in terms of the degree to which they foreshadow deep learning?

**Within Effects**
- Do students at women’s colleges from different backgrounds differ in their experiences?

Women’s Education Conclusions

- Results consistent with other studies showing women’s college advantage
- Women at women’s colleges more engaged, and make more progress toward college outcomes
- Women’s colleges transfer-friendly
- FY & seniors at women’s colleges report challenging academic experiences, more integrative learning

Variables

6 scales to represent engagement:
- Academic challenge (10 items)
- Higher Order Thinking (4)
- Integration (4)
- Active & Collaborative Learning (7)
- Student-faculty interaction (5)
- Experiences with diversity (3)

4 Self-reported gains scales:
- Supportive campus climate (6 items)
- Interpersonal support (3)
- Support for success (3)
- Satisfaction (2)

Women’s Education Conclusions cont’d

- Women’s colleges...
  - Support high student-faculty interaction leading to positive educational difference for women
  - Create classroom conditions that encourage FY & seniors to collaborate more with peers, actively participate in class, and integrate ideas
  - Foster environment that fuels women’s understanding of self and others, working with others; skills associated with career success and leadership
  - Help women develop quantitative skills
  - Facilitate opportunity to interact around difference

Limitations

- Highly selective women’s colleges not in NSSE dataset; however, little relationship between selectivity and engagement, & selectivity controlled in model
- Concerns about validity of self-reported gains
- Small effect sizes, yet magnitude and trend favor women’s colleges
- Self-selection bias has unknown effect, no controls for entering characteristics

Research Gaps and Lingering Questions

- Women’s colleges seem to illustrate what works for women’s education – how can we get more evidence of the programs, practices that matter?
- Under what circumstances do students at women’s colleges enjoy such high levels of student-faculty interaction?
- What practices support such high levels of diversity experiences? And highly engaged transfer students?
- Which effective practices might be transferable to coeducational institutions?
Institutional Data Gaps

- What distinguishes your educational program? What are the strengths and shortcomings?
- How do you know your students are getting the most out of their experience?
- What do you know about the experiences of different groups of students (racial-ethnic groups, transfers, adults)?
- Do you use NSSE or other assessment tools to examine the undergraduate experience?

College of St. Catherine:
NSSE Analysis and Policies Related to Increasing Student Engagement

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Presentation topics:
- CSC Overview
- Examples of effective educational practice and assessment
- NSSE uses at CSC
- Future directions for effective educational practice

College of St. Catherine
St. Paul, MN

- Located in the Twin Cities, with 20+ other Minnesota Private Colleges located within 60 miles
- Enrollment by Degree Program (5246 total)
  - Day Baccalaureate – 2014
  - Weekend Baccalaureate - 920
  - Associate – 897
  - Graduate - 1415
- Day baccalaureate student demographics
  - 22% Multicultural/International
  - 87% from Minnesota
  - 7% are parents
  - 28% are first generation college students
  - 38.3% are transfers
  - Average age = 22

Using NSSE to Examine the Baccalaureate Experience – Supporting At-Risk Students

- Supportive Educational Programs
  - Director of Student Retention Position
  - Bush Grant to support diversity initiatives
  - Special programs for at-risk students
  - Access and Success program for Student Parents
  - Newest programs for at-risk students:
    - Coach a Kate
    - LEAP to SOAR
    - Extended orientation for students and parents
    - Compass Testing
- Key NSSE Findings
  - 88% of seniors say the college provides the support they need to succeed academically
  - 88% of FY said their college experience has increased their confidence in what they can do

Using NSSE to Examine the Bacc. Experience – Active Learning and Enriching Experiences

- Enriching Educational Practices
  - CORE program – The Reflective Woman and Global Search for Justice
  - Assistantship Mentor Program
  - Student Affairs engagement and involvement is an important part of assessment
- NSSE Evidence:
  - Asked questions in class (FY) CSC-68%, Nat-62%
  - Participated in community service (FY) CSC-89%, Nat-80%
  - Compared with the national average, CSC students ranked their college higher in supporting their skills in contributing to the welfare of the community.
  - Compared with other women's colleges in NSSE, CSC students believe that faculty better help them understand women's issues and political and economic realities facing women.
  - Compared with the national average, CSC students ranked their college significantly higher in supporting their skills in working effectively with others

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Using NSSE to Examine the Baccalaureate Experience - Advising

- Key NSSE Finding
  - 3/4 of CSC students rate the quality of their academic Advising as good or excellent (2003)
  - We would like to see 100% of students say this!

- Changes in educational practice
  - Culture of Advising initiative – began in fall ’05. Elements:
    - First year seminar instructors are advisors for 1 year
    - Ongoing training for advisors
    - More involved advising (at least 3 appointments in fall)
    - Noel Levitz college student inventory
    - Philosophy changes – “intrusive advising”
  - Coming next: online registration

- NSSE Data – we anticipate an increase in these years:
  - 2007 – first year class in this new model
  - 2009 – senior class in this new model

Future Directions in Student Engagement

- New Residence Hall
- Learning Communities
- Initiative to improve quality of student writing
- Liberal Arts Learning Goals Assessment

Overall NSSE Uses at CSC


- Presented to faculty and staff at the annual Teaching/Learning Network and to the Board of Trustees
- Key Performance Indicators on 2005-2010 Strategic Plan
- Gauge campus progress over time, esp. in response to changes (new advising system, new facilities)
- Enrollment Management Team for retention planning, satisfaction, and policy development (exp., work study, nursing program enrollment, at risk student programming)
- Analysis for new initiatives (Greater Expectations, Liberal Arts Learning Goals)
- Sub-population comparisons (athletes, residents, etc.)

Curricular Practices Related to Student Engagement

- All students participate in service learning (COLL 200, typically sophomore year)
- All students complete at least one internship related to occupational choices; provides opportunities to learn networking, develop career-related skills; often leads to full-time employment
- In first year, students participate in collaborative projects (COLL 100-101)

Orientation Activities Related to Curricular Practices

- Summer read (intro to intellectual life of the College)
- Faculty feminist theorist presented history and legacy of women’s colleges
- Honor code signing
- Peer Mentors advising in residence halls (“Late Night Advising”)
- Academic Attendance Early Intervention Program

Co-curricular Practices Related to Student Engagement

- Dean’s Coffee
- Lunch with Faculty
- Sophomore Class Leadership Summit with faculty and student affairs staff
- Jan Term activities
- CORE analyzes data and oversees efforts to foster student engagement and improve retention
Orientation Activities Related to Co-Curricular Practices

- Ropes Course for first-year students
- Day students pre-orientation meet and greet pizza party off-campus
- Lantern tours of Old Salem
- Candlelight walk to Sister Oesterlein’s grave and sing alma mater and repeat Moravian Daily Verse
- S’mores and Tales of Salem

Opportunities Related to NSSE Data

- Enhance faculty-student interaction
- Enhance academic climate of the campus (honors symposia, enhance writing across the curriculum, more preparation for grad school, efforts to “tell the story”)
- Student leadership development
- Additional support for study abroad

Creating Conditions that Matter for All Women Students

- Individual Reflection
  - What is your reaction to the research findings and the ways in which women’s colleges engage their students (the panelists’ remarks)?
  - What concerns does this raise for you on your own campus? What changes can be made that will address your concerns?
- Small Groups - Implications for Practice
- Report out 1 main idea or theme

Effective Educational Practice Recommendations

- Increase opportunities for meaningful student-faculty interaction, particularly opportunities for research
- Expand advising practice to emphasize cocurricular leadership, understanding self and others
- Examine courses that present obstacles to women (i.e., high D,F, W rates) for their use of active and collaborative learning, and level of student-faculty interaction

Sweet Briar College

Alverno College

Learning intensive practice -
Sweet Briar, requires every student to take from 1-3 writing-intensive courses. Support through campus writing center.

Timely, constructive feedback -
Alverno College’s unique ability-based curriculum and emphasis on assessment provides students clear expectations and constructive feedback on performance.

Points to Ponder:

- Women’s colleges illustrate what’s important to women’s education – what can coed institutions learn?
- Under what circumstances do students at women’s colleges enjoy such high levels of student-faculty interaction?
- What practices support such high levels of diversity experiences? And highly engaged transfer students?
- Should more women consider women’s college education?

“Gender...is one of the most potent forces shaping human institutions, including education”
- Clifford, 1993