

New England Journal of Public Policy

Volume 6
Issue 1 *Special Issue: Women and Economic
Empowerment*

Article 6

3-20-1990

Providing Access to Power: The Role of Higher Education in Empowering Women Students

Margaret A. McKenna
Lesley College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp>



Part of the [Economics Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McKenna, Margaret A. (1990) "Providing Access to Power: The Role of Higher Education in Empowering Women Students," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol6/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Journal of Public Policy by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact scholarworks@umb.edu.

Providing Access to Power

The Role of Higher Education in Empowering Women Students

Margaret A. McKenna

Access to education opens the doors to future economic power — but are opportunities for women limited by the very way that institutions of higher education think about women students? Women comprise the majority of college students today, but the institutions they attend may not be serving their educational needs. This article explains that women's needs are different from those of men and illustrates how educators can respond to that difference, offering a "feminist environment" in which female students can meet their own educational goals.

American higher education has served as a path to advancement and enrichment for over 350 years. A wide range of postsecondary institutions have emerged, including women's colleges, public colleges and universities, and more recently, community colleges. Among the intended outcomes of participation in higher education is empowerment.

It has long been assumed that higher education opens many doors for college graduates. Chief among these is the role of the college degree as an avenue to economic power. With sheepskin in hand, a young college graduate has a world of opportunities opened up: business, education, management, law, medicine, ministry. However, it has also been the case that women's entry into these channels toward economic power has been restricted by a number of factors in society and, in some cases, by the way institutions of higher learning think about women students — how they learn, what their needs and aspirations are, and what they are taught in college curricula.

The Past

Women were prohibited from participating in early American higher education.¹ It was not until after the American Revolution that even education beyond the primary grades was allowed for women, and not until the mid-1830s did women begin to pursue postsecondary education.² The first women's colleges, such as Wesleyan Female College,

Margaret A. McKenna, former director of the Bunting Institute, Radcliffe College, is president of Lesley College, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

founded in Macon, Georgia, in 1836,³ were dedicated to providing women with the same education young men were receiving in the male institutions of Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Dartmouth. On today's college campuses, women make up 54 percent of all college students.⁴ But a closer examination of the composition of the female student population reveals some interesting characteristics. Among students twenty-five years of age and older, 57 percent are women.⁵ Part-time enrollment — that all-consuming solution for full-time workers and those with family and other obligations — is comprised of 57 percent women.⁶

While there are more women than men in our colleges, they are not evenly distributed throughout majors and disciplines. For example, among students enrolled in four-year institutions, women represent small percentages of those majoring in engineering (15%) and the physical sciences (28%).⁷ These statistics point to a need to focus on the extent to which American higher education institutions are meeting the educational needs of women, especially those who are over twenty-five and attend college part time.

The debate over the content and approach to educating women in colleges and universities has continued to the present day. In the past much of that discussion has been a covert attempt to find ways to stunt women's intellectual and professional development in order to confine them to the duties of home and hearth.⁸ The current debates are much more exciting and challenging and hold more promise of providing women with greater access to the channels of power that historically have been denied them. Today the debate centers on the question "Do women and men learn differently?" I begin with the assumption that they do. The implications of this assumption suggest that ways must be found to facilitate that different type of learning. One must, however, start with the belief that different does not mean less; different only means different.

Collaborative Learning Strategies

Current patterns of instruction emphasize competitive learning models; yet there is a growing body of developmental theory — found in such works as *In a Different Voice*⁹ and *Women's Ways of Knowing*¹⁰ — which indicates that nontraditional students, particularly women and adults, learn better through collaborative learning strategies. This information underscores the need for colleges and universities to find ways to empower women's learning rather than challenging their will to learn. To enable women to gain access to the channels of power, educational institutions must find ways to make women students' learning experiences resonate with their lives — both as to present situation and future goals.

Requirements for Empowerment

Few institutions have made any structural or cultural accommodations to respond to the needs of their clientele. Take, for example, the response of higher education to increasing adult enrollments. As the data above reveals, the majority of these students are women returning to the campus to complete their undergraduate education. For the most part this category of student has been accommodated through continuing education programs that are little more than a nighttime repeat of the established daytime curriculum. Because evening continuing education is seen as little more than an income base, institutions have made few changes in the attitudes, culture, or structure of their programs to serve the needs of adult students. As a result many campuses are not welcoming places for nontra-

ditional-age students, most of whom are full-time workers who need their degrees in order to advance their careers. Another significant cohort are women who have been at home raising families and involved in their communities. Many have not been in a work or educational setting for decades.

Colleges and universities have to understand and take advantage of the experience and wisdom our adult students bring us. We must be particularly careful not to underestimate the learning of the woman who has been "at home" for many years. The philosophy that must drive a responsive curriculum is to recognize where someone is and what she needs to reach her academic goals. That requires different approaches and does not support a lock-step sequencing of courses or, in all cases, a fifteen-week semester.

To help students meet their educational goals, to empower them with knowledge, colleges and universities must offer courses in time periods and instructional formats that allow them to juggle family or work responsibilities with academic demands. Recognizing that adults have more responsibilities than the usual college-age student, institutions must be committed to providing quality programs to individuals traditionally underserved by higher education, either because they are geographically isolated or because they cannot commute to a campus. The academic needs of these adults are dictated as much by professional demands as by personal interests. It is a question of accessibility. Programs need to be designed to be easily accessible to students in terms of location, delivery, and content. To that end, instruction in the student's chosen field of study has to be offered at the workplace, in the evening or on weekends, and in intensive forms so that students need attend only one or two days per week instead of five.

A number of colleges and universities are utilizing alternative methods of course sequencing and instruction, such as intensive weekend formats and independent/individualized study options. These intensive modes of study give a student as much exposure to materials and faculty as traditional classroom schedules, but in a format that does not require the sacrifice of either family or education. Another response is to provide adequate day care for women students with children. The outstanding example of such an institutional response is the twenty-four-hour day-care program at Stanford University, which is available to all students, faculty, and staff.

We will not realize empowerment in educating women students until we provide the resources that allow them to make fair and fundamental choices about their lives. Even when women score higher academically than men, they are more likely to lose self-confidence and feel unsatisfied because of the manner in which work situations are currently structured.¹¹ Because the "salad days" of their careers coincide with their childbearing years, women are all too often forced to choose between career and children. We need to develop resources that allow a woman to combine the two in a way that is fair to both her family and her learning.

Creating a Culture

I offer my own institution, Lesley College, as a case study to show that an institution can create a culture to meet the needs of its students while maintaining its traditional commitments. In the last thirty years Lesley, a four-year undergraduate women's college, has seen the addition of a graduate school and a school of Programs in Management for Business and Industry (PMBI), both of which offer graduate and undergraduate degrees. The expansion of our programs from a small teacher education school to a diverse graduate

and undergraduate institution has been accomplished within the framework of two important goals.

First, the college is committed to enhancing the reputation and role of “traditional female occupations” like teaching with leadership training and a sensitive feminist environment. A “feminist environment” is one which focuses on the needs of all students but has a special focus on the support and encouragement of women. Second, as our coeducational graduate school has grown from hundreds to thousands of students, we have been vigilant about maintaining our historical commitment to women and providing a truly coequal education through curriculum, faculty and staff hiring, student services, and a humane environment for all members of the community.

The undergraduate school at Lesley prepares women for the “helping professions” — education, human services, and the human resources side of management. These low-paying and low-prestige fields have historically been occupied mostly by women. Educating women in a manner that responds to their needs — empowers them and causes them to discover and create opportunities for growth — is the core of the challenge we face in making our institutions responsive to students’ needs. It also provides our students with the firm knowledge base necessary to gain access to the channels of power in their chosen professions. A significant piece of this challenge is to design a curriculum that educates the new teacher or the new human service worker to the realities of working in these fields and develops the confidence and experience they need to be leaders in changing the nature of their professions.

Through their field placements and pre-service workshops, students have an opportunity to experience and discuss their future workplace with practitioners and professionals who have made a difference. For example, classroom teachers are a primary resource to student teachers in learning the ropes and the regular demands of the profession. In the culture of Lesley College, practitioners in the field are respected and valued teachers. We place our students in some form of field experience from the first semester they spend with us. We have traded the traditional notions of the free-standing academy for a vision of a college immersed in the practice of the professions for which it prepares its graduates. We have developed our own definition of what constitutes an expert faculty member, a definition that relies more on the needs of students and the profession than on the tradition of an academic hierarchy.

Women’s colleges have always had a special role in educating women students, having sought ways to address many of their particular needs. The fundamental nature of the campus environment of women’s colleges is to create a climate that supports the needs, characteristics, educational aspirations, and career goals of women. At a women’s college students live, work, play, and study in an environment that constantly, both consciously and unconsciously, supports their essential characteristics of being female. The structure, pedagogy, and student services are designed to meet their needs. While there is still much progress to be made in correcting the gender balance of the curriculum taught (for example, integrating the work of women scholars into courses and ensuring the elimination of gender bias), a female student in a women’s college is more likely to be willing to confront an issue in a classroom environment that supports and encourages her.

This same approach must be extended to all students. We need a holistic philosophy that acknowledges the need to take into account the different developmental tasks and life stages of our student population when we are developing our programs, be they academic or extracurricular.

The Call for Change

Creating cultures that respond to students' needs and aspirations, especially those of women, cannot be simply delegated to single-sex colleges or institutions whose curriculum prepares students for the historically defined "female" jobs in our society. To the extent that they are student-oriented, all colleges and universities must respond to the challenge to create environments that offer each student what she needs to succeed on her own terms. We need to make our campuses more humane, more collaborative, and more welcoming to students of diverse ages, races, and gender.

Such calls for change are opportunities for institutions of higher education. Working to face these realities and meet the challenges provides the chance to initiate important changes in curriculum and instruction delivery and develop new forms of support services that truly meet the needs and interests of students, enabling them to complete their degree programs in a timely fashion and assume a productive and worthwhile role in society.

In addition to greater sensitivity and knowledge about the learning styles of women students, colleges and universities need to develop a combination of pedagogical innovation, greater flexibility in scheduling and delivery of instruction, and deeper commitment to the needs of working adults and students from outside the cultural mainstream. Life programs and systems that support the needs of all students — from teenage undergraduates to working adult learners — must also be developed and implemented.

College: The First Channel to Power

Colleges and universities must be the first places to open the channels to power. Institutions of higher education are also places where students, as a principal constituency of the institution, should have access to power in decision making on the campus. By introducing them to the nature and uses of power as members of committees, advisory groups, and task forces, colleges and universities provide important opportunities for society's future decision makers and power brokers to participate in the governing process in a way that has a direct impact on their lives and how they view their responsibility to their peers and their institutions.

Students should be appointed to work on those issues and policies which are fundamentally important to the institution and its mission to educate — search committees for faculty and senior administrative appointments, planning and resource development, budget priority discussions, and decision-making entities such as the college council in which faculty, staff, and administrators consider ongoing and future projects. Indeed, many schools can proudly point to student names on committee rosters.

We must be careful, however, not to make the frequent mistake of ignoring the presence of students in these various forums, discounting their ideas, or even, more basically, scheduling meetings that conflict with their classroom schedules because they are "only" students and temporary citizens of the school community. We know that colleges and universities have the chance to show the world that they believe in the quality of the educational experience they offer their students as well as demonstrating that the students have the ability to make sound judgments and important contributions in the arenas of power. We must be mindful that we are models for our own students on the issues of power and access to it. Our own dealings between different constituencies — faculty, staff, and students — should be examples of openness, access to power, and the wise and humane use of power.

Models, Not Mirrors

Institutions of higher education must be models for, not mirrors of, society. It is the most important role such institutions can have. Colleges and universities have to be places where people of color, people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic groups, and those from diverse cultures and creeds are seen as assets to enrich our lives and our society, not as problems with which we must deal. Colleges must be places where the only intolerance permitted is an intolerance of ignorance; where feminism flourishes and people are seen as human beings first and then as male or female; where people can speak in a different voice and be heard; where we encourage people to find their own lifestyle and their own confidence in learning, in expressions of learning, and in defining and fulfilling their professional aspirations. Moreover, colleges and universities have to be places that respect their students for who they are and what they bring to the learning community and treat them accordingly.

Higher education is a road to power for women. We need to ensure that it reinforces a woman's strengths, self-esteem, and skills. Society needs all of our human potential. Women are a major asset, and for all reasons, economic and moral, we need to ensure that we encourage potential and not create barriers to success. Higher education's role is critical in empowering women with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to contribute and make a difference. ♀♂

Notes

1. John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition: A History of American Colleges and Universities, 1636–1976*, 3d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 64–69.
2. *Ibid.*, 64–65.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Curtis O. Baker, ed., *The Condition of Education — 1989*, vol. 2, "Postsecondary Education" (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1989), 44.
5. Charles J. Anderson, Deborah J. Carter, Andrew G. Malizio, and Boichi San, *1989–90 Fact Book on Higher Education* (New York: American Council on Education and Macmillan, 1989), 72–74.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Thomas D. Snyder, ed., *Digest of Education Statistics — 1988* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1988), 167.
8. Brubacher and Rudy, *Higher Education*, 64–69.
9. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
10. Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).
11. See Jane Adams, *Women On Top: Success Patterns and Personal Growth* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1979).