

Unfinished Revolution: Why Women's Education Still Matters

*Remarks to the McLean Branch of the AAUW
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*President Patricia McGuire
Trinity Washington University*

Many thanks to the McLean AAUW for inviting me to speak this evening, and even more, profound thanks for supporting Trinity students with your generous scholarship for 20 years. You have helped to make the dream of a college degree come true for working women whose educational achievements improve the economic security of their children and families. Trinity thrives today for women of all ages thanks to the kind of support that you have made possible for our adult students.

Just this morning, I was at the American Council on Education, where I serve on the board, and after the board meeting we had a special roundtable on the topic of developing a more robust pipeline for women to enter university presidencies. Women are 23% of college and university presidents today, one of the highest percentages of women leaders among all major industries. But women are 57% of our students; the leadership lag becomes a great challenge when we consider that with the retirement of baby boomers looming, as many as 1,000 academic presidencies will come open by the year 2015. ACE aims to have a large group of female candidates ready and willing to take those jobs.

Among the women at the roundtable today, we were pleased to have Marie Wilson, president of The White House Project on women's leadership (<http://benchmarks.thewhitehouseproject.org/>). We discussed the WHP landmark report *Benchmarking Women's Leadership* <http://thewhitehouseproject.org/documents/Report.pdf> that includes significant data and a call to action to advance women's leadership across a range of major industries. We talked about the mixed signals that young women are getting about leadership, from the strong public role models of women's leadership like Hillary Clinton and Nancy Pelosi to the demonization they suffer and the harshly public glare focused on Elena Kagan, and, earlier, Sonia Sotomayor. We want to encourage young women to aspire to the Supreme Court or elected office as well as corporate leadership, but too often today, the pathway seems treacherous and, hence, a turn-off for the rising generation.

So, with that as a preface, let me turn to the "unfinished revolution" and the importance of a continuing focus on women's education.

On this very day 20 years ago, the Trustees of Mills College rescinded their decision to admit men to that historic women's college after two weeks of powerful protests by students, faculty and staff. At that time in 1990, like many women's colleges, Mills was struggling with enrollment and feared for its future. The trustees' original decision to "go coed" was a conventional choice for a women's college with enough resources to invest in changing programs and facilities to accommodate men. But the trustees underestimated the powerful forces of tradition and feminist imperatives that eventually led the board to reaffirm the women's

college. Today, Mills is a vibrant institution that has figured out how to remain faithful to its historic mission to women while growing and changing in many innovative ways.

What we might ask on this auspicious anniversary, however, is why such an institution is still necessary. Women have been the majority of students in higher education for three decades. Women now earn more degrees at each level than men, including doctorates. Women can now work on submarines, win the Oscar for Best Director, sail alone around the world, wield the gavel as Speaker of the House.

Doesn't this mean that the revolution is truly over? Why does any college or university continue to emphasize women's education in this day and age?

Simply put, the revolution is far from over. And women's colleges remain the stewards of the unfinished revolution in women's education and advancement, not only for this nation but for women throughout our global village.

"Enlightened sexism," a phrase coined by writer Susan Douglas, describes the phenomenon of pointing to notable female success stories as reason to declare the women's movement over. In a March 2010 essay in NEWSWEEK <http://bit.ly/94ZUcj>, three young women writers ([Jessica Bennett](#), [Jesse Ellison](#) and [Sarah Ball](#)) of that distinguished magazine reflected on the story of the 46 women of NEWSWEEK who, 40 years ago, sued the magazine for gender discrimination because women were not allowed to be writers or in any important editorial positions. Bennett, Ellison and Ball, products of post-Title IX educational opportunity, wrote about their astonishment upon first learning of the struggle of their elder sisters' at NEWSWEEK, and then their growing sense of recognition and sisterhood with that struggle as they realized that, even today, they were coping with many of the same forms of discrimination, albeit more subtle, as those women of the 1960's movement generation. They write,

"Somewhere along the road to equality, young women like us lost their voices. So when we marched into the workforce and the fog of subtle gender discrimination, it was baffling and alien. Without a movement behind us, we had neither the language to describe it nor the confidence to call it what it was."

They go on to describe some of the symptoms of the "enlightened sexism" they perceive all around them:

"...just as the first black president hasn't wiped out racism, a female at the top of a company doesn't eradicate sexism. In fact, those contradictory signs of progress—high-profile successes that mask persistent inequality—are precisely the problem. ... the idea that because of all the gains women have made, biases that once would have been deemed sexist now get brushed off. Young women, consequently, are left in a bind: they worry they'll never be taken as seriously as the guys, yet when they're given the opportunity to run the show, they balk. A recent Girl Scouts study revealed that young women avoid leadership roles for fear they'll be labeled "bossy"; another survey found they are four times less likely than men to [negotiate a first salary](#). As it turns out, that's for good reason: a Harvard study found that women who demand higher starting salaries are perceived as "less nice," and thus [less likely to be hired](#)."

I'll come back to this problem later, but let me establish a few data points to illuminate the corners of this discussion.

First, the good news: women really have made a great deal of progress in educational attainment in the United States: (Data cited below from the 2009 Digest of Education Statistics <http://bit.ly/a0vRi6> of the U.S. Department of Education)

- In 1900, women accounted for 36% of college enrollments on a total volume of 237,000 total students in higher education;
- By 1920, women's participation rose to 47% of a half million students;
- However, with the G.I. Bill in 1944 to encourage soldiers returning from WWII to go to college, enrollment shot up to 2.5 million with the percentage of women falling to 30% in 1950 as significantly more men --- soldiers coming back from the war --- entered college;
- Enrollment continued to grow in the 1950's and 1960's; women were 36% of 3.6 million students in 1960; showing the effects of the baby boom, from 1960 to 1970, enrollment skyrocketed from 3.6 million to 8 million in just one decade, and proportion of women grew to 41%;
- By 1980, with 11.5 million students in higher education, women claimed the majority share at 51%; coming 8 years after the passage of Title IX in 1972, we can surely attribute some of the growth in female enrollments to the impact of Title IX on women's opportunities;
- By 2008, with 18.2 million students enrolled, 10.4 million were female, accounting for 57% of all enrollments.

By 2008, women also claimed the majority of all degrees earned at each level:

- 62% of associate degrees went to women in 2008;
- 57% of bachelor's degrees;
- 61% of master's degrees;
- 50% of first professional degrees;
- 51% of doctoral degrees, the first time that women were a majority of doctorates.

By contrast, women were only 30% of doctorates in 1980; women were just 10% of fewer than 10,000 doctorates awarded in 1960.

The relatively small percentage of women earning doctorates up until a few years ago probably accounts for a different set of statistics we see when we consider the male/female balance in faculty statistics:

- 46% of all faculty today are female, compared to 57% of all students;

- When women became the majority of students in 1980, only 29% of the faculty were female;
- In 1950, when women were the smallest percentage of students in the 20th Century at just 30% of all students, female faculty were just 25% of all faculty.

So, we see that while women's total enrollment has increased dramatically since 1950, from 30% to 57%, or from 723,000 women students to 10,400,000 students, women professors have increased at a lesser rate from 25% to 46%, or from 60,500 professors in 1950 to 627,000 female professors in 1980.

Because of the dramatic progress in women's achievement of doctoral degrees in the last decade, we might anticipate women becoming a majority of all faculty in the next decade.

Census data also shows that women aged 25-29 now comprise 58% of all adults in that age group who hold advanced degrees. In fact, in the overall 25-29 age group, 35% of all women have bachelor's degrees compared to 27% of men. We'll come back to some warning bells that some sociologists are ringing about that imbalance in a minute.

All of that data seems to support a view that women have "arrived" in higher education. Some might say that we can declare success in the women's revolution, fold our tents and go home.

Wait! The revolution is far from over. While opportunities for women in higher education appear expansive today, compared to decades ago, we must understand that such opportunities are not available to all women even today. Millions of women in the United States remain on the margins of educational opportunities by virtue of their economic conditions, social class, racial or ethnic prejudices, family responsibilities or other circumstances.

Moreover, beyond participation in education, women continue to lag in other indicia of social equality, including pay equity and participation in power positions. Additionally, globally, women's educational opportunities and leadership advancement remain limited.

In the United States, the participation of Black women in higher education certainly is one of the remarkable features of the increasing share of women in college. Black women are making particularly notable strides: 47% of African American women who enroll in college complete their degrees, compared to 36% of African American men. 70% of the master's degrees awarded to African Americans go to women. (See Courtland Milloy, "Teaching by example: African American Women head back to school," The Washington Post, Wednesday, May 12, 2010 at <http://bit.ly/b87but>)

Hispanic students, both male and female, show critical lags in all indicators. Census data shows that only 64% of Hispanic females, and 61% of males, complete high school. Only 14% of Hispanic women, 13% of Hispanic men, enroll in college. As this nation struggles with issues around immigration status, this stunning educational gap for Hispanic students is one of our nation's most significant social justice and economic issues for the next several decades.

A majority of Black women enrolled in undergraduate programs are over the age of 25. This statistic also illustrates the fact that the enrollment of all women over the age of 25 is a large factor driving the proportionate increase in women's total enrollment. Students over the age of 25 are 38% of all students in college today. And women over the age of 25 account for 23% of that population. The rise of women's enrollment in higher education also drove the rise in non-traditional student enrollment --- students over age 25, or self-supporting younger students, or younger students with children of their own, students who work --- a population that the U.S. Department of Education estimates at about 72% of all undergraduates today.

Women's educational attainment is good news for the economic security of families. Census data repeatedly supports the fact that the attainment of college degrees significantly boosts earning power. 2009 Census data shows that average earnings for a high school diploma are \$31,000 compared to \$58,000 for a bachelor's degree and \$83,000 for an advanced degree.

However, women still do not participate equally in the economic outcomes of educational attainment. Pay discrimination, along with circumstances that keep women out of the workforce or relegated to lesser paying jobs, results in a large pay equity gap at every educational level.

With regard to pay equity, 2007 Census data shows that, despite the advance of women into the majority in educational attainment, women's earnings continue to lag their male counterparts at every educational level:

Women's average earnings compared to men at these educational levels:

- 66%: *high school diploma*
- 71%: *associate degree*
- 61%: *baccalaureate degree*
- 63%: *master's degree*
- 58%: *professional degree*
- 64%: *doctoral degree*

While women in this nation are making great strides educationally, our progress into positions of real power in corporations and governments remains slow. Consider¹:

- 17% of law firm partners are women
- 20% of physician medical directors are women
- 23% of college and university presidents are women
- 13.5% Fortune 500 executive officer positions are women
- 15.2% Fortune 500 board positions are women
- 12% of top 50 newspaper editors are women
- 17% of the U.S. Senate are women

¹ These data points are available in many public sources. The author gleaned these through individual searches on each type of position. Similar data appears in the White House Project's benchmarking report cited earlier.

- 17% of the members of the U.S. House of Representatives are women

Women's relatively low levels of participation at the highest levels of business and politics is not just an American problem. Writing in the International Herald Tribune <http://nyti.ms/d3P3sV> last week, Christine Lagarde, France's minister for the economy, industry and employment said:

"The list of women who hold positions of responsibility is growing daily, and a woman in a position of power is no longer the exception that proves the rule. I know, however, that nothing can ever be taken for granted, that the situation remains tenuous, and that constant efforts are required to turn "women's power" into a shared reality.... Through the weight of tradition, too many cultures and many governments even now keep women in a subordinate role. ...the business community is still struggling to give us top positions: the sharing of responsibilities, pay equality, and the balance between professional and personal life are not always experienced in the same way on both sides of the glass ceiling."

But France ranks 18th while the United States ranks 31st on the 2009 Global Gender Gap Index <http://bit.ly/U9UOh> produced by the World Economic Forum. That's right. We rank behind Cuba, Mongolia, Lesotho, Mozambique and many other nations. While we're tied for position #1 with 25 other nations on women's educational attainment, we are 17th in Economic Opportunities and Participation for women, 40th on the Health and Survival index, and a stunning 61st on Political Empowerment.

Baby, we surely have a long way to go!

The Global Gender Gap Index frames the challenge succinctly:

"Over the last year, the world has seen the biggest recession in almost a century. It is clear that recovery will require, among other things, the best of talent, ideas and innovation. It is therefore more important now than ever before for countries and companies to pay heed to one of the fundamental cornerstones of economic growth available to them—the skills and talent of their female human resource pool. As consumers, voters, employees and employers, women will be integral to global economic recovery. ... Girls and women make up one half of the world's population—without their engagement, empowerment and contribution, we cannot hope to effectively meet these challenges nor achieve rapid economic recovery."

Among all of the areas where women's achievement still lags badly, women remain remarkably absent from leadership in science, technology² and related fields.

² Another recent NYT article <http://nyti.ms/awoFmg> about the dearth of women in Silicon Valley discussed the obvious:

"...research indicates that gender exerts a powerful influence on where the money goes in Silicon Valley. Venture capital firms with senior female investors are more likely to attract and close deals with women-led start-ups, [concluded a](#) Kauffman Foundation report.

"That may be because data show that people are more trusting and comfortable working with people of their own sex, says [Toby Stuart, a Harvard Business School professor](#) who studies the topic.

In “Risk and Opportunity for Women in 21st Century,” New York Times, March 5, 2010 <http://nyti.ms/bGc0Va>, the writer Katrin Bennhold observes:

“The number of women who are full science professors at elite universities in the United States has been stuck at 10 percent for the past half century. ...The tug-of-war between encouraging numbers and depressing details is in many ways the story of the advancement of women overall. Women get more degrees and score higher grades than men in industrialized countries. But they are still paid less and are more likely to work part time. ...And the big money in science these days is in computers and engineering — the two fields with the fewest women. ...In the 21st century, perhaps more than ever before, there will be a premium on scientific and technological knowledge. Science, in effect, will be the last frontier for the women’s movement. With humanity poised to tackle pressing challenges — from climate change to complex illness to the fallout from the digital revolution — shortages of people with the right skill sets loom in many countries. ...Therein lie both opportunity and risk for women: In the years to come, the people who master the sciences will change the world — and most likely command the big paychecks.”

Women’s colleges have proven to be among the most successful institutions for educating women who persist in the sciences, technology and engineering. Our challenge, of course, is the fact that few investors see women’s colleges as places to devote the large sums of money necessary for ongoing infrastructure improvement, building new laboratories or establishing faculty chairs. We excel in teaching, not basic research. So, the gap between the excellence in our outcomes for women versus our ability to generate the capital necessary to sustain that excellence is a large risk for us.

Nevertheless, most of us in the Women’s College Coalition understand that our role today is not simply the task of continuing to find ways to excel in developing strong women intellectuals and leaders at the undergraduate level. We also see our role as being a voice and conscience for the ongoing imperatives of women’s education in the rest of the nation and around the world.

Now, we certainly know that there are critics who have become significantly louder in asserting that all of the emphasis on promoting women’s educational opportunities for the last half century has resulted in the diminishment of men’s educational advancement. They look at those statistics I cited earlier about the female majority in college and exclaim that we must forget about women and re-emphasize men.

Some critics have gone so far as to say that an imbalance in male-female educational attainment will be a disaster for traditional families and marriage structures, leading to economic and social calamities, and, quite possibly, plagues of locusts and frogs.

“He says that some men are reluctant to invest in women’s start-ups because “there are enough things that can go wrong with a high-risk, early-stage venture that if you’re worried about any interpersonal dynamic issues, why not do a deal that takes that out of the equation?”

“Networks are crucial for fund-raising, because most investors don’t look at pitches that come over the transom. Since an overwhelming majority of venture capitalists are men and have gotten to the firms via start-ups or business schools — both places where women are underrepresented — women have a harder time gaining access to the Valley’s boys club, analysts say.

“Women tend to network with women, and men tend to network with men,” says Sharon Vosmek, C.E.O. of Astia. “It plays out on the golf course, in the boardroom and it’s certainly playing out in high-growth entrepreneurship.”

Some universities have gone so far as to attempt to create “affirmative action for men” in their admissions programs.

Efforts to address the so-called “boy problem” should not in any way diminish the hard-won progress for women in education. The problem is not a consequence of favoring one gender over the other, but rather, of other social and educational conditions that have made academic attainment uninteresting to some young men. We have largely forgotten the fact that young men enrolled in college in droves in the 1960’s and 1970’s to get draft deferments. With the end of the draft, the incentive to spend four years or more in college diminished for many young men. During the boom years, technology jobs, in particular, were male-dominated and many did not require college degrees --- Bill Gates being a famous college dropout. Among Black and Hispanic males, high school completion rates are low, compounding the challenges of collegiate enrollment.

President Obama has set a huge national target to have the majority of this nation’s adults engaged with collegiate education by 2020. Figuring out how to get more men of all ages into some postsecondary education is an important goal, but it should not come at the expense of women’s continuing educational advancement. In fact, as more women earn more degrees, we may well see improvements in men’s educational participation since all studies show that an educated mother has a great impact on the academic achievements of her children.

We’ve surely come a long way, ladies, but we have even farther to go. As the leader of one of the nation’s proud women’s colleges, I can assure you that the revolution is alive and well, ever-expanding our horizons to understand that our advocacy for women’s advancement is truly leadership for our society as a whole. Until such time as we can say with certainty that every citizen of this earth has the education she or he needs to live a fulfilled and productive life, the revolution will be unfinished, and so our work goes on in the cause of educational justice.

2009 Digest of Education Statistics <http://bit.ly/a0vRi6> of the U.S. Department of Education

- In 1900, women accounted for 36% of college enrollments on a total volume of 237,000 students;
- By 1920, women's participation rose to 47% of a half million students;
- Women fell to 30% of enrollment in 1950 when total enrollment rose to 2.5 million students after WWII
- Women were 36% of 3.6 million students in 1960;
- Baby Boom: by 1970 enrollment skyrocketed from 3.6 million to 8 million, 41% female;
- By 1980, with 11.5 million students in higher education, women claimed the majority share at 51%;
- By 2008, with 18.2 million students enrolled, 10.4 million were female, accounting for 57% of all.

By 2008, women also claimed the majority of all degrees earned at each level:

- 62% of associate degrees went to women in 2008;
- 57% of bachelor's degrees;
- 61% of master's degrees;
- 50% of first professional degrees;
- 51% of doctoral degrees, the first time that women were a majority of doctorates.
- women were only 30% of doctorates in 1980;
- women were just 10% of fewer than 10,000 doctorates awarded in 1960.

Faculty Data

- 46% of all faculty today are female, compared to 57% of all students;
- In 1980, only 29% of the faculty were female compared to 51% of all students;
- In 1950, women were 30% of all students, female faculty were just 25% of all faculty.

Census Data: 25-29 U.S. population age group:

- 35% of women hold advanced degrees;
- 27% of men hold advanced degrees;
- Of the total pool of women and men who hold advanced degrees in the 25-29 age group, 58% are women

Journal of Blacks in Higher Education

- 47% of African American women who enroll in college complete their degrees, men just 36%
- 70% of the master's degrees awarded to African Americans go to women.
- A majority of Black women enrolled in undergraduate programs are over the age of 25.

Census Data: Hispanic Education Levels

- 64% of Hispanic females, and 61% of males, complete high school.
- 14% of Hispanic women, 13% of Hispanic men, enroll in college.

Digest of Education Statistics: Age of College Population

- Students over the age of 25 are 38% of all students in college today. Women = 23% of that population.
- "Non-traditional" students = 72% of all college students today

Census Data: Earnings by Educational Level

- average earnings for a high school diploma are \$31,000
- average earnings for a bachelor's degree are \$58,000
- average earnings for an advanced degree are \$83,000

Census Data: Pay Equity: Women's pay as a percentage of men's pay at each educational level:

- 66%: *high school diploma*
- 71%: *associate degree*
- 61%: *baccalaureate degree*
- 63%: *master's degree*
- 58%: *professional degree*
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Various Sources: Women in Power Positions

- 17% of law firm partners are women
- 20% of physician medical directors are women
- 23% of college and university presidents are women
- 13.5% Fortune 500 executive officer positions are women
- 15.2% Fortune 500 board positions are women
- 12% of top 50 newspaper editors are women
- 17% of the U.S. Senate are women
- 17% of the members of the U.S. House of Representatives are women

Global Gender Gap Index

Table 3a: The Global Gender Gap Index 2009 rankings: Comparisons with 2008, 2007 and 2006

Country	2009 rank	2009 score	2009 rank among 2008 countries	2008 rank	2008 score	2007 rank	2007 score	2006 rank	2006 score
Iceland	1	0.8276	1	4	0.7999	4	0.7836	4	0.7813
Finland	2	0.8252	2	2	0.8195	3	0.8044	3	0.7958
Norway	3	0.8227	3	1	0.8239	2	0.8059	2	0.7994
Sweden	4	0.8139	4	3	0.8139	1	0.8146	1	0.8133
New Zealand	5	0.7880	5	5	0.7859	5	0.7649	7	0.7509
South Africa	6	0.7709	6	22	0.7232	20	0.7194	18	0.7125
Denmark	7	0.7628	7	7	0.7538	8	0.7519	8	0.7462
Ireland	8	0.7597	8	8	0.7518	9	0.7457	10	0.7335
Philippines	9	0.7579	9	6	0.7568	6	0.7629	6	0.7516
Lesotho	10	0.7495	10	16	0.7320	26	0.7078	43	0.6807
Netherlands	11	0.7490	11	9	0.7399	12	0.7383	12	0.7250
Germany	12	0.7449	12	11	0.7394	7	0.7618	5	0.7524
Switzerland	13	0.7426	13	14	0.7360	40	0.6924	26	0.6997
Latvia	14	0.7416	14	10	0.7397	13	0.7333	19	0.7091
United Kingdom	15	0.7402	15	13	0.7366	11	0.7441	9	0.7365
Sri Lanka	16	0.7402	16	12	0.7371	15	0.7230	13	0.7199
Spain	17	0.7345	17	17	0.7281	10	0.7444	11	0.7319
France	18	0.7331	18	15	0.7341	51	0.6824	70	0.6520
Trinidad and Tobago	19	0.7298	19	19	0.7245	46	0.6859	45	0.6797
Australia	20	0.7282	20	21	0.7241	17	0.7204	15	0.7163
Barbados	21	0.7236	21	26	0.7188	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Mongolia	22	0.7221	22	40	0.7049	62	0.6731	42	0.6821
Ecuador	23	0.7220	23	35	0.7091	44	0.6881	82	0.6433
Argentina	24	0.7211	24	24	0.7209	33	0.6982	41	0.6829
Canada	25	0.7196	25	31	0.7136	18	0.7198	14	0.7165
Mozambique	26	0.7195	26	18	0.7266	43	0.6883	n/a	n/a
Costa Rica	27	0.7180	27	32	0.7111	28	0.7014	30	0.6936
Bahamas*	28	0.7179	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Cuba	29	0.7176	28	25	0.7195	22	0.7169	n/a	n/a
Lithuania	30	0.7175	29	23	0.7222	14	0.7234	21	0.7077
United States	31	0.7173	30	27	0.7179	31	0.7002	23	0.7042
Namibia	32	0.7167	31	30	0.7141	29	0.7012	38	0.6864
Belgium	33	0.7165	32	28	0.7163	19	0.7198	20	0.7078
Belarus	34	0.7141	33	33	0.7099	23	0.7113	n/a	n/a
Guyana*	35	0.7108	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a