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Wellesley Women and Michigan Men: Women’s Entry into Higher Education, 1870-1930

By

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Abstract

In 1911, William De La Mater of Peoria, Illinois wrote to Marion Talbot, the Dean of Women at the University of Chicago, asking for the educator’s advice regarding his daughter Mabel’s future. “I ask myself this question,” De La Mater wrote. “Which is the nobler work for women, devotion thru life to a family, or to a calling that is generally poorly paid and oftentimes little appreciated?” De La Mater’s query is only one example of confusion surrounding the educational possibilities for women. The period between 1870 and 1930 is marked by a degree of anxiety among Americans faced with academic decisions. Parents, academic administrators, and students themselves sought models of female scholarship, using comparison to open up imaginable possibilities.

By looking towards other institutions, educators attempted to build educational models off of what had come before. Students compared their own colleges to those around them, creating identity for their new institutions where none had existed before. The ever-present need for comparison was fuelled by confusion and anxiety: what is the right path forward as it pertains to women’s education? Answers, it seemed to many, could be found by looking to the left, and then to the right.

In an anonymous, undated letter to Marion Talbot, the University of Chicago’s Dean of Women from 1899-1925, a fourth year student at the college who identified himself only as “a Southerner” and “an ordinary, normal man, neither better nor worse than the ordinary,” initiated his crusade against the dancing of the tango by his female classmates. Most likely written in the 1910s, when the sensuous tango had become popular in the United States, the writer made moral and medical arguments to Talbot, demanding she prohibit and eradicate the tango from Chicago’s campus. Of the young women who tango, he wrote: “I am sure no woman who has reached the age of discretion would condone the tango if she had seen it danced as it is at university functions.” The letter-writer also attempted to instill a sense of duty in the administrator: “Is it fair to the fathers and mothers who entrust their pure + innocent daughters to your care, to permit this to go on?” He informed Talbot that the tango had been prohibited at other universities and urged her to do “...as has already been done at Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa + countless other schools + clubs.”[[1]](#footnote-0) His disgust for what he saw as immodest behavior is palpable, but the undercurrent running beneath his words implies a greater frustration. For this writer, there was a difference between sons and daughters, and as such there is a difference to how each sex should be treated in an academic setting. Perhaps to this anti-tango crusader, like to many other male students at the time, to be a man at a coeducational institution is to be pulled down by the presence of young women, some of whom don’t know “why they themselves enjoy [the tango].” The writer may even have developed an inferiority complex to the prestigious single-sex eastern colleges, and the sight of “misbehaving” women along with his knowledge that such behavior was not tolerated at other universities only stood to remind him of his own status.[[2]](#footnote-1)

A need for comparison permeated educational matters at the turn of the twentieth century as students, families, and educators attempted to find models for female education. Zig-zagging across the final decades of the nineteenth century were contradictory opinions regarding the best methods for educating America’s young women. Many female students at Oberlin College, the first institution to award undergraduate degrees to women and the first coeducational college, admitted to feeling uncomfortable in their mixed-gender classes during the 1840s and 1850s. Looking back on Oberlin’s co-educational experiments at the end of the nineteenth century, some college administrators, like William Harper of the University of Chicago and James Angell of the University of Michigan, feared that women would not be comfortable speaking publicly in the company of men and hesitated when deciding what classroom structures should look like at their own colleges. For some administrators, these studies reaffirmed a need for segregated educational structures, opening discussion again as a solution for female students was sought.[[3]](#footnote-2)

Historians have written extensively regarding the opening of women’s colleges, the expansion of the student bodies of state-funded universities, and the establishment of co-educational institutions during this period, with scholars drawing out the arguments of educators as they made decisions pertaining to curriculum and enrollment. Who would be admitted? How would their education be funded? And what of the classroom structure? Those in positions of power changed their minds, sometimes more than once, in answering those questions. What has been missing from these conversations is an emphasis on the anxieties which motivated decision makers.

From the time of the early Republic until the Civil War, young women and girls were educated at female seminaries. These institutions varied in rigor and purpose: on one end of the spectrum were seminaries providing lessons which were comparable to full-fledged men’s colleges, on the opposite end were institutions which served as a place for female adolescence to be whiled away. Despite the tendency of some seminaries to refine wealthy girls, the majority sought to prepare women for teaching, providing an education that was often funded by wages earned by those same women. Seminary education was not needed to obtain a position, yet women still enrolled at great cost, dedicated to honing their skills. Many students came from relative poverty, working hard to earn money to support their own education.[[4]](#footnote-3) With time, some of these institutions adapted, identifying themselves with liberal arts colleges, thus becoming the first women’s colleges when they began to award degrees.[[5]](#footnote-4)

In the next generation there was a remarkable shift. From about 1870 and beyond, there was a boom in women’s entry into higher education. Women’s colleges like Wellesley, Smith, and Bryn Mawr opened their doors with the goal of teaching women the liberal arts to prepare them to become teachers.[[6]](#footnote-5) State-funded institutions came under pressure from tax-paying parents who insisted that their daughters have access to an affordable education close to home.[[7]](#footnote-6) Questions of how women would be integrated into previously male-only spaces arose, with some institutions setting quotas on female enrollment while others separated courses by gender. During this period the University of Chicago emerged with a plan to educate men and women equally. However, when female students began to out-perform their male classmates, university officials felt they had to reconsider the rightness of co-education. Suggestions were made to reduce the number of women in attendance and to separate classes by gender, falling into step with other co-ed universities.[[8]](#footnote-7)

Despite segregatory practices, in the early decades of the twentieth century women from multiple classes and ethnic groups gained access to higher education in unprecedented numbers. Yet the experiences of these young women, once enrolled, varied dramatically. With scholarships mainly allocated to men and inherently designed so as not to award a recipient with a “full ride,” even high-performing working and lower-middle class women were required to work to pay their tuition.[[9]](#footnote-8) For some this meant performing unskilled or semi-skilled labor during the academic year. For others it meant taking time off from their education to earn money. Costs ranged among institutions, but for all but the wealthiest families a careful consideration of costs and economic benefit was necessary when deciding whether or not a daughter should pursue higher education.

Once enrolled in college, young women gave great thought to what would come next for them. The female alumni sometimes took inspiration from their professors and administrators, deciding to pursue advanced degrees so that they, too, could work in higher education. Others found themselves in “pink-collar” professions, roles that became increasingly acceptable for women to work in for pay following the Civil War.[[10]](#footnote-9) Those from wealthy backgrounds sometimes lent their labor as volunteers filling similar positions, forgoing pay. Still others found themselves dedicating their time to home and family, either living with their parents or marrying after graduation. Generally by the 1920s college came to be seen as an intermediary period for young women.

This paper seeks to highlight the culture of comparison that existed in American higher education at the turn of the century as well as the importance of precedence as individuals and institutions sought to answer questions surrounding women’s education. From parents to administrators, the communities built around the University of Michigan, Wellesley College, Simmons College, and the University of Chicago relied on their understanding of precedence. Focusing particularly on the latter two schools, patterns of comparison emerge within these two colleges, highlighting the values which prompted academic decisions.

It is possible to understand higher education at the turn of the twentieth century by looking at lists of data; how many women were enrolled in 1894 versus how many men? What was the average annual household income for a freshman class? What percentage were students of immigrants? Which colleges implemented co-education, and in what ways? How was time in college spent? One would see that women generally gained a stronger foothold in academia as the decades progressed, that families who sent their children to college usually had some means, that young people from all backgrounds were studying at the college level, and that administrators had a variety of strategies for tackling mixed classrooms. What this data does not necessarily convey is the strong currents of doubt and anxiety that underpinned the decisions of parents, educators and students, so often unsure whether they were making the right choices surrounding education. Each of these seemingly distinct groups looked to others for answers, taking advice from neighbors and making studies of other institutions. The students understood themselves and their place as students of their particular college by making comparisons to other schools. Knowledge of what a college education could and should be only existed by looking to the left, then looking to the right.

**“I ask myself this question: which is the nobler work for women, devotion thru life to a family, or to a calling that is generally poorly paid and oftentimes little appreciated?”: College as a Family Affair**

When it came to whether or not a young woman at the turn of the twentieth century would have access to a college education, the most powerful determining force was the will of her parents. Increasingly after the Civil War, families were viewing higher education as a safeguard for their daughters. Should she not marry, or should the family’s wealth be lost, the woman would be able to apply her education and earn a living that could sustain her. Alternatively, other families had the opportunity to think seriously about educating both their sons and daughters, potential first generation college students, because the United States was growing in material wealth and the middle class was expanding with it.[[11]](#footnote-10) High school graduation rates were up, especially among girls, preparing a greater portion of the population than ever before for a university education.[[12]](#footnote-11)

Beyond ability or inability to pay tuition and fees, the decision of whether or not a daughter would go to college could come down to parents’ love and their understanding of a woman’s role. It would be difficult to condemn a mother or father who, at the turn of the twentieth century, was hesitant to enroll their daughter in college courses. Though parents at that time had examples of women who had achieved a great deal in their chosen professions, they remained few and far between. More than that, it was generally understood that even the most successful women could not remain in their careers should they decide to get married and start a family. As it would appear to parents, the choice their daughters faced was essentially that of one or the other; not both.

Correspondence between the father of a female University of Chicago student and Marion Talbot, the Dean of Women, highlight the complicated thought process that went behind familial support of higher education. In 1910, William De La Mater was a mechanic in Peoria, Illinois and the devoted father of an only child, Mabel, a hardworking first year student in the college and the first in her family to pursue a degree. She wanted to be a teacher. His first letter to Talbot was simultaneously a complaint that Mabel’s dorm room lacked proper ventilation, a request to have the issue addressed, and a sheepish plea that Talbot keep an eye on his daughter to ensure she did not work so hard as to ruin her health.

A year later, he wrote again, this time with much more introspection. He himself was not educated, he told Talbot, but he wished he was. Still, he was riddled with doubts. Should he be encouraging Mabel to pursue teaching? “I have never for one moment thought of trying to induce her to abandon the idea of becoming a teacher, which is the object she has in view,” he wrote. “But I am occasionally advised by teachers to do so.”[[13]](#footnote-12) His instinct to support his bright daughter in her pursuit of higher education is strong, but his fear for the quality of her future is a fierce opponent to his indulging nature and fueled by a lack of accessible examples of fulfilled professional women in his life. Told by members of his community that teachers worked too hard for poverty wages, Mr. De La Mater only possessed an image of female intellectual drudgery wherein well-trained women, very much like his daughter, labored for little reward. Statistics, as Barbara Sicherman points out, support the validity of De La Mater’s mental image of the college educated female teacher in a dead end job.[[14]](#footnote-13) For most women, a college degree did not allow them to compete with their male colleagues for promotion: Mabel De La Mater was statistically unlikely to become a principal or a superintendent of schools, and the version of life her father was acquainted with in their hometown aligned with this fact.

As he considered the versions of feminine life which he *was* familiar with, William De La Mater also thought of his own sisters, happy as mothers and wives. “I ask myself this question,” he wrote. “Which is the nobler work for women, devotion thru life to a family, or to a calling that is generally poorly paid and oftentimes little appreciated?”[[15]](#footnote-14) He worried Mabel would like to marry someday but that her husband would not be as well educated as she, leaving them with little in common on which to build a happy marriage. Again, the statistics supported some of Mr. De La Mater’s suspicions: female students who graduated in the 1910s were significantly more likely than those who had graduated before 1900 to someday marry.[[16]](#footnote-15)

What path would make Mabel happy? What should he encourage? De La Mater’s love for his daughter is palpable in every page of his letter. The examples of female happiness he had in his own life suggested that the more traditional path would provide a greater guarantee of happiness, but Talbot represented what Mabel *could* be if she continued her studies. The unwritten question buzzes beneath his words: “Marion Talbot, are *you* happy?” Her response did not address the personal. Happiness, she informed De La Mater, is very much possible for the educated woman -- and an educated woman does *not* need to be a teacher. She may even stand a better chance at happiness than an uneducated woman.[[17]](#footnote-16) For the De La Maters, and other middle class families like them, an example of educated female fulfilment is necessary if they are to imagine and accept a professional future for their daughter. Much like an earlier generation of girls needed Jo March from *Little Women* as a model of female creativity and authorship, Mr. De La Mater needed an image of a professionally successful and happy woman in order to imagine his daughter taking up a similar role.[[18]](#footnote-17)

De La Mater’s concerns echo earlier pushes to integrate women into public universities. State universities were made to accept women for two very compelling reasons. The first, their student bodies were largely derived from the public high schools and college preparatory academies within the university’s respective state. As girls began to graduate from high school in larger numbers than boys, state universities would have had too small a pool of applicants had they remained male-only.[[19]](#footnote-18) The second reason public colleges began to open to women was that tax paying parents began to demand college education for their daughters that would be both local and low cost.[[20]](#footnote-19) Some parents felt their daughters were entitled to state subsidized higher education under the Morrill Land Grant Act, as the terms under which it established state colleges did not specifically exclude women. Families *looked around* at other states that had opened their public universities to women; they saw how their neighbors’ sons were able to attend the University of Michigan but not *their* own daughters and came to the understanding that their girls should be able to emulate other young people who were fortunate enough to secure an education.

At the University of Michigan, the state university most often held up as a paradigm of scholarly success after its introduction of co-education, women had difficulty earning the right to study despitetheir parents’ arguments of being deserving taxpayers. Though under increasing pressure by the state legislature in the 1860s to admit women, the University of Michigan’s president and its Board of Regents continuously refused. Their arguments against the admission of women included notions that their refusal took the will of fathers and brothers into account, who were thought to fear for the modesty of their daughters and sisters should they be part of a co-educational experiment at Michigan.[[21]](#footnote-20) Such sentiments lingered for several decades, as was seen in the anonymously written letter from a self-righteous University of Chicago student at the beginning of this paper. Before the first women were allowed to enter the University of Michigan in 1870, the question was put to the young men in the student senate, and then to the student body as a whole. Care was taken to understand the mood of students while also taking into account the pressure from the general public to provide an education for Michigan’s young women. Here, again, decisions affecting the direction of women’s higher education were made only after consultation within communities, though on a much larger scale than the De La Mater family’s decision to push for the education of Mabel.

**“Our chief rule is against tears in the walls!”: Regulating Students’ Behavior in a Collegiate Echochamber**

Once the University of Chicago opened its doors in 1890, college administrators looked to the east and its well-established women’s colleges for guidance not necessarily in the structure of academic life, but in the structure of the students’ personal time on campus, fleshing out rules and guidelines for behavior that students would need to follow. In addition to creating rules, administrators were also tasked with devising dormitories which would function as oversized households, prompting young students into pre-approved, religiously moral behavior. Marion Talbot, a former Wellesley College social science professor and, beginning in 1899, the Dean of Women at the University of Chicago, was largely responsible for establishing the patterns of personal and social life for the university’s female student body. The extent of her power did not leave the male students untouched, as her various proclamations shaped the daily university schedule for decades.

From the outset, the University of Chicago was a coeducational institution at a time when single sex colleges were losing popularity. Beginning in the 1850s, public universities bowed to taxpayer pressure, opening themselves up as affordable educational options for the state’s daughters and working to integrate women into pre-existing classrooms. Unlike coeducational state schools, the University of Chicago was creating itself from scratch. It needed to define both a culture and structure for itself, rather than merely integrating more students into existing ones, with the potential to create a competitive and academically rigorous university that could join those older colleges of the first-tier.[[22]](#footnote-21)

With only a few graduated classes behind it, the University of Chicago was seeing its female students outperform their male counterparts, a scenario which the university’s first president, William Harper, neither anticipated nor welcomed.[[23]](#footnote-22) By 1901, morale among the men plummeted, pushing Harper to rethink coeducation. His proposals to separate courses by sex were met with hostility by the leading female administrators. Exemplifying the successes of single-sex colleges on the East Coast provided justification for those advocating separation.

For Talbot, educational equality between the sexes could only come from strict management of the students’ social lives. Multiple times during her thirty year tenure at the University of Chicago, Talbot investigated the habits of older colleges, seeking to understand not only how they organized themselves to meet the needs of their students, but also how they organized their students to meet the needs of the institution. During the summer of 1894 while still assistant Dean of Women at Chicago under Alice Freeman Palmer, Talbot wrote to James Monroe Taylor, president of Vassar College, asking that he send her a copy of Vassar’s rulebook. His response, jolly and unexpected, informed Talbot that Vassar did not have any formal rulebook and had not had one for many years. Taylor explained that assemblies were used to address widespread behavioral issues among students. When considering the greatest issues that Vassar’s administration faced concerning student behavior, Taylor wrote: “Our chief rule is against tears in the walls! It’s so hard to enforce it, but we inspect, -- and charge damages… Our old ‘volume’ really included very little that older girls do not know, -- and yet, someway, these things need to be said to many.”[[24]](#footnote-23) Over the course of three decades, Vassar had come to understand that formal, written rules did not direct its all-female student body as well as individual reprimands. This methodology would enforce a subconscious culture of conformity among students, who behaved as Vassar thought they should organically.

Through similar correspondence, Talbot learned that not all women’s colleges operated on the same philosophy. Wellesley College sent a copy of their own pamphlet containing the college’s rules, neatly broken into sections as they pertained to personal and educational habits. On the page titled “Regulations for all Students Connected with Wellesley College,” pupils were given instructions that pushed them towards educational conformity within the curriculum. Though still concerned with student behavior and the destruction of dorm rooms, Wellesley’s first stated rule informed the women: “Without permission from the President, students will not join or leave any department of instruction, nor attend any course except those to which they are assigned.”[[25]](#footnote-24) Turning the page, a student would find guidelines for healthy behavior which Wellesley expected her to adhere to, demanding an hour of open-air exercise from her each day.[[26]](#footnote-25) Exercise was prescribed to female college students because their institutions were still reckoning with a long held criticism of women’s higher education: that women’s health was too fragile to allow for the intense academic work involved with undergraduate study. It was understood that Wellesley’s own founder, Henry Durant, created these rules promoting physical fitness because he “...realized that the Victorian young lady, with her chignon and her Grecian bend, could not hope to make a strong student.”[[27]](#footnote-26) Inserting itself so fully into the lives of its students ensured that Wellesley developed a culture of strict conformity. However, this “butting in” was not always welcomed by students.

By involving itself so heavily in the daily lives of students, many of Wellesley’s earliest pupils wondered if they’d chosen the right college, or, worse: if they were receiving a college education at all. A member of the class of 1879, Mary Elizabeth Stilwell wrote home to her mother complaining of what she saw as unreasonable claims on her time which did not allow her adequate room for genuine study. “Wellesley is not a college,” she declares.

“I came here to take a *college course*, and not to dabble in a little of every insignificant thing that comes up. More than half my time is taken up in writing essays, practicing elocution, trotting to chapel, and *reading poetry* with the teacher of English literature, and it seems to make no difference to Miss Howard and Mr. Durant whether the Latin, Greek and Mathematics are well learned or not. The result is that I do not have time to half learn my lessons.”[[28]](#footnote-27)

Indeed, Stillwell had a point. Even on Sundays, Wellesley women’s schedules were heavily dictated, apparently leaving little room for students to catch up on their studies.[[29]](#footnote-28) As the decades progressed and the heavily involved Durant passed away, Wellesley students slowly won a freer schedule. By the time Marion Talbot was contacting eastern colleges, upperclassmen at Wellesley no longer had to endure the hours of mandatory Bible study and domestic work which Stillwell and her classmates had lamented over.[[30]](#footnote-29)

Marion Talbot also made a study of the housing situations at eastern colleges, hoping to understand the “norm” for dormitory living and bring those standards back to the University of Chicago. In Chicago’s earliest years, it lacked on-campus housing for its female students, allowing a male-centric extracurricular culture to flourish and leaving women in off-campus boarding houses, separated from many of their classmates. After travelling to the northeast to look at Smith College, Mount Holyoke College, Wellesley College, Vassar College, Radcliffe College, Swathmore College, Bryn Mawr College, Barnard College, and Teachers College, Talbot wrote a report for Chicago’s administrators. Here, she compared costs and styles of living among institutions, noting the numbers of domestic servants present in dormitories and styles of household management and governance. Talbot identified a few institutions operating under similar circumstances as Chicago:

“Although the conditions in all the institutions were interesting and profitable to study, only those at Barnard College, Teachers College and Radcliffe College are practically the same as our own. Their location in cities and their connections with men’s colleges put them in quite a different class from the women’s colleges and give them peculiar advantages and difficulties.”[[31]](#footnote-30)

The information she collected largely shaped the building of the female dormitories, which became a set of buildings lining what was known as the Women’s Quadrangle.

Once the women’s dormitories had been built, a coeducational campus culture could and must be established as well. For Talbot this meant heavily involving herself in the lives of her students, her rules for their social lives coming like Biblical proclamations throughout her three decades at the University of Chicago. In addition to her self-emanating proclamations, Marion Talbot as Dean of Women also had the final say on any activity that affected the female undergraduates. Her dual role as the Head of House at Green Hall, one of the female dormitories, helped her hear of any clandestine or ill-advised meetings that could quickly be banned before ever even being formally proposed.

Having control over the non-academic aspects of the lives of Chicago’s students was important for the university’s early administrators in ways that were similar and more complicated than their single-sex predecessors. Where Henry Durant had needed to fight against the stereotype of the weakened female scholar, controlling nearly every moment of a Wellesley girl’s life in the hopes of creating a person highly developed both mentally and physically, Marion Talbot and those progressive administrators who sided with her had to fight against their institution’s president and their colleagues, pushing for coeducation even though it had supposedly already been won. At the University of Chicago, female students needed to be at their best socially so that the rightness of their place at the college academically could not be doubted.

Though Harper won sex-segregated classes for a few short years, Talbot’s careful study of other institutions and her implementation of her data eventually led to other institutions coming to her for advice regarding how to effectively establish coeducation.[[32]](#footnote-31) In September of 1919, a representative of Newnham College at the University of Cambridge wrote to Talbot requesting information that could help answer questions Cambridge committees had regarding the integration of women into their own university, focusing particularly on the degree of separation between the sexes at Chicago.[[33]](#footnote-32) In the Newnham College letter, it's clear that Cambridge’s leaders considered coeducation viable only insofar as men and women were separated in nearly everything but the strictly academic, and *this,* they understood as Chicago’s model. Universities chased after one another, watching how the others behaved and questioning themselves, unsure if there was a better model. Newnham College reaching out to Talbot can be seen as bringing this custom full circle. Though Talbot had spent years contacting other institutions, searching for inspiration after which she could model Chicago’s fully coeducational vision, she had been beaten by those at the university who believed in a division of the sexes. The University of Chicago, then only partially coeducational, was famous within just a few decades as being a success story for coeducation. Newnham College contacted Talbot searching for a model of coeducation which Talbot did not fully support. The institutions behaved like the ouroboros, looking back at their own tail and mimicking one another to the point that an outsider might not know where one’s model for education began and the other ended.

**“O but still we love devotedly our slimy Simmons Dump!”: Finding Collegiate Identity through Comparison**

By 1900, American higher education had been reckoning with questions of how women should be included in an academic environment for several decades. Individual institutions’ willingness to integrate women varied. The well-established Ivy League universities would not accept women until the latter half of the twentieth century. At the opposite end of the spectrum were women’s colleges, which were often endowed by progressive benefactors during the late 1800s and funded by large tuition bills. The newest of these institutions in 1900 was Simmons College, located on the Fenway in Boston, Massachusetts. Founded by John Simmons, a businessman who had amassed his wealth in the burgeoning clothing industry, his will called for the establishment of a college with the goal of educating women in “medicine, music, drawing, designing, telegraphy, and other branches of art, science, and industry best calculated to enable the scholars to acquire an independent livelihood.”[[34]](#footnote-33) With this emphasis on practicality, Simmons distinguished itself from the other northeastern women’s colleges. In 1906, just seven years after the college opened its doors, students were divided among six different schools: the School of Household Economics, the Secretarial School, the Library School, the School of Science, the School of Horticulture, and the School for Social Workers. Each school exposed students to some of the fundamentals of a liberal arts education, requiring them to take courses in English, History, and French, but the bulk of the curriculum prepared students for a career.[[35]](#footnote-34)

For Simmons students enrolled in the 1910s and 1920s, an understanding of their place within the larger American educational framework was still being worked out. Its founding as a school of practicality, its campus in the Fenway-Longwood neighborhood being located on reclaimed swampland, its highly reputable neighbors across the Charles River in Cambridge, and comparisons to the better-established Seven Sisters women’s colleges were all factors in creating an early identity for Simmons College as it graduated some of its first classes. This tradition of comparison can be seen in *The Simmons Song Book*, composed of musical compositions by students and graduates and published in 1935 as they attempted to establish traditions and create a college culture for their youthful alma mater. Collegiate singing was popular across the country, but particularly at established eastern colleges. The young women at Radcliffe and Wellesley sang school songs, just as their brothers at Harvard and Yale crooned their own.[[36]](#footnote-35) Each of these colleges had songs, passed down between classes, which highlighted the quirks of life at that particular school and celebrated community. By communicating both the unique and common aspects of their education, the Simmons women created an image of a different kind of female student. A Simmons student was motivated by practical concerns and expected to have a career, but she also identified as a pupil on a college course. Her interest in song and collegiate community linked her to students of the old ilk, but her vocational studies distinguished her as something new.

In multiple pieces in *The Simmons Song Book,* the student-writers mention what they affectionately refer to as the Simmons Dump, simultaneously singing its slimy praises while comparing it to the better developed campuses of fellow women’s colleges in the state of Massachusetts. Dorothy Staples, a member of the Simmons graduating class of 1923, puts Simmons in direct comparison to the three Seven Sisters colleges located in the commonwealth in “Dump Song.” In the first verse, Staples writes: “Mount Holyoke has its campus, and Wellesley has its lake// And Smith has all the beauties that art and cash can make// But thinking of their splendors, do not let your spirits slump// For our Simmons has its famous, fetching, fascinating Dump.”[[37]](#footnote-36) The presence of a “Dump,” as the students called it, spoke to the newness of Simmons. Situated between the Back Bay and Fenway-Kenmore neighborhoods in Boston, Simmons was surrounded by reclaimed marshland. This “Dump” was a muddy quarter-mile stretch between the student housing facilities and the academic campus. A similar sentiment is expressed in a song from nearby Radcliffe College in Cambridge: “Oh Wellesley has a campus to wake the muses’ lyre// The beauties of Northampton a poet could inspire// And spring is sweet at Vassar when trees are in the bud// But I sing of Radcliffe College in the midst of Cambridge mud.”[[38]](#footnote-37) Without a beautiful campus or decades of tradition to draw on, the earliest Simmons students found joy in singing on the ubiquitous “steps” in warm weather, each successive class teaching lyrics and melodies to the next. Its urban location and the realities of being newly-opened set it apart from other schools, pushing students to build community through the inside joke that was Simmons’ lackluster grounds. Its identity was partially achieved through comparison to other women’s colleges and the establishment of a community centered around a teasing embrace of the less-than-pleasant aspects of a particular school.

As the school grew and adapted, students were able to reflect on the history of the college. In 1905, six years after it opened, Simmons built its first dormitory. With the opening on South Hall, Simmons partially shed its reputation as a “commuter school,” open only to local girls.[[39]](#footnote-38) In “Simmons Was a Baby Once,” Marian Bathgate from the class of 1917 writes: “But a ghost of a dormitory lurked in her mind-- It’s there and it won’t go away… Look beyond to a future day// There’s a ghost of a chance that will get those dorms// In some dear golden day.”[[40]](#footnote-39) Bathgate’s reflections on the college’s lack of communal housing was in line with other college students’ priorities during this period. The presence of student housing was highly valued.[[41]](#footnote-40) When Simmons *did* open up a dormitory, students built community around a shared routine. Similar to early Wellesley students’ reliance on shared schedules to create a sense of community, Simmons students emphasize the non-academic aspects of campus life in their songs. In the anonymously penned “Up in the Morning,” the students sing of their daily schedule, from the early morning wake up call to afternoon classes and an evening socializing; the day finishes with a call of “lights out” at ten.[[42]](#footnote-41) Communal meals also feature in the song book. In “Nothin’ But a Muffin,” the students express dismay over their limited breakfast options.[[43]](#footnote-42) By building dormitories and dining halls, Simmons created new ways for students to identify as a unit while also pushing the college closer in amenities to the other women’s colleges that its students could not help but make comparisons to.

“Answer to the Muffin Song (Sung by the Seniors)” speaks to female students’ expectations for their futures. “Juniors, shut your eyes now and try to visualize,” the second verse begins. “A weary Simmons Senior coming home from work at five// To a dining room that’s red, eating hash (poor girl, ‘most dead!)// She’d revive if she could see a muffin.”[[44]](#footnote-43) Here, it’s clear that the expectation is that the majority of seniors will soon be joining the workforce. Potentially they anticipate continuing to live communally as they begin their careers, evidenced by their inability to choose for themselves what they’ll be eating for their meals. “When Classes Are All Over” makes it clear that students expect that their heavily predictable, scheduled college days are preferable to potential unpredictably in the workplace, which may call on them to work during hours they are accustomed to relaxing. Reflecting on how “Dr. Eldridge” told them to “shoo” if they did their coursework past four in the afternoon, the Simmons secretarial students hoped, but did not expect, that their future employers would be so generous.[[45]](#footnote-44) The seniors already regret having to leave the freedom and joy of their college days behind them.

For Simmons students in the 1910s and 1920s and their families, college had become an accepted step in American adolescence for both sons and daughters. Marian Bathgate opens “The Old Oaken Bucket” by saying: “The days of my childhood are now behind me/ In college at Simmons a student am I.”[[46]](#footnote-45) Entry into college marked the end of girlhood and the beginning of an intermediary period, cushioning young women before entering the job market. The decision to allow a daughter this intermediary period was made by the family at large. In “Our College,” the Sophomore Song Committee writes: “We wished to go to college// Pa said he’d pay the dues.” Using the pronoun “we” implies that this situation was prominent among students. By the time this song was written (sometime in the 1920s, as the composer, Barbara Senior, was from the class of 1926), the two components seemingly needed to obtain a college education were a student’s desire to attend and a parent’s ability and willingness to pay the tuition and fees. From there, as the song goes on to convey, it becomes a matter of choosing *which* college to attend.

Multiple songs proactively addressed doubts as to Simmons College’s academic repute, their lyrics speaking to the college’s pragmatism in its educational choices. The class of 1921 penned a song called “One Thinks,” adapted from a song called “Harvard Student,” highlighting both the vocational training offered to Simmons students and the excellent academic options available at the college.[[47]](#footnote-46) The students took pride in the mission of their unique school. “If you’d be a debutante, then go to Vassar,” Hazel Randall from the class of 1923 writes in “Simmons Summons Us All,” named as the Prize Song of the year. “Go to Bryn Mawr if you’d be a P.H.D.// But if you want vocation’l art// Come to Simmons at the start// Simmons summons to practicality.”[[48]](#footnote-47) Students experienced a mix of traditionally academic subjects and vocational training. A third year student in the School of Secretarial Studies took History and German, studied the History of Art and Commercial Law, while also learning typography and shorthand.[[49]](#footnote-48) The students writing these songs found a place for their school within the world of women’s colleges and were able to articulate a reason it should exist. Where Marion Talbot’s vision for the women at the University of Chicago was rooted in a desire to create academic equality between the sexes, with women not relegated to gendered courses and departments, Simmons College embraced the reality of female work. Simmons offered its students intellectual fulfillment when it taught them the sciences and humanities, but it also prepared them for the post-college world, educating them so that they would be able to succeed in roles commonly available to women. By comparing Simmons to other schools, Simmons students were able to see the gap that previously existed in women’s education and built up Simmons identity as the school that would fill that practical gap.

Though the musically inclined students who composed these songs were happy to attend college, and to attend Simmons in particular, in some compositions they dare to voice frustrations over the expectations, both academic and social, that are placed onto them. In other songs, the students waste no time in telling the listener of all the fun they have outside of their studies, but in “Waiting for the Marks to Come Out,” nervousness surrounding academic performance comes to the forefront. “When at last the Judgement Day arrives// You slowly climb the stairs// Your knees vacillate// Your heart palpitates// Then you step up to the Registrar,” writes Esther Keliher from the class of 1919.[[50]](#footnote-49) This joking hyperbole masks a deeper anxiety that was common among students during the early twentieth century. As a 1910 female Cornell graduate put it: “If we mentioned study it was only to be funny about it… to assert that we hadn’t cracked a book this term. All this was not hypocrisy; it was urbanity… Living in layers of alternate seriousness and noisy surfaces is one of the delights of college.... The light-hearted intervals fool the outsiders.”[[51]](#footnote-50) The necessity a student in the 1910s had for good grades did not differ so much from that of a modern student: a fair number relied on partial academic scholarships to fund their educations, with families or income earned from their own part time jobs making up the rest of the tuition. Very few students were granted full scholarships.[[52]](#footnote-51) Regardless of their family’s income level, a certain degree of status seems to have been accorded to college women. Gendered expectations for ladylike manners were a burden for some students. In “Down the Fenway to Brookine,” the writer looks enviously unto swans who are allowed to move wildly about the neighborhood, acknowledging that she as a student was forbidden from behaving similarly. “We must all put on our bonnets// And most patiently resign// To appear as perfect ladies// Down the Fenway to Brookline… Where they think us so refined// And extol the Simmons’ banner// As a model for Brookline.”[[53]](#footnote-52) The short walk from Simmons’ campus to the suburb of Brookline seems to take the students through a different world, where they can look on at undeveloped parkland and wish for a space to be carefree in the way that Wellesley and Mount Holyoke students are able to do on their private, enclosed campuses. Unlike their counterparts at other schools, Simmons’ urban location forces its students to continue a gendered performance as they seek out leisure. There is prestige in being a student, but also a duty to represent their college well as they voyage into town with few respites from the work of being a young lady who is also a student.

Information about the women’s relations with their male counterparts is also cloaked in jokes. Multiple times, the songwriters kid about their difficulty finding dates to prom. In “A Man!!” “As I Was Walking,” and “Senior Prom Song,” young women write about their nonexistent standards when it comes to finding a man to escort them to the Simmons prom, while older students give advice to the younger women on how to get a man, *any* man to agree to be their date in “Juniors, Give Attention” and “Serenade Song.” The lyrics speak of girls equally willing to take a poor man to prom as they would be a Harvard man, should only he be willing to come. In none is there ever a reference to what would happen to them socially if they should fail, nor do the women speak of any affection or love lost between them and the potential suitor. The young men are simply a ticket to entry, and are perhaps a bit objectified. For example, “Senior Prom Song” relates a conversation between Simmons students, with one telling the other: “‘My dear, I’ll ask my aunt// Whose brother has a friend// Who knows a nice young Cornell youth// She’d be quite glad to lend.’”[[54]](#footnote-53) Here again the students are building tradition around female friendship and emphasizing the homosocial importance of collegiate traditions, just as earlier women’s college students did.

During the 1910s and 1920s, Simmons College was a new institution with students who were on guard to protect their alma mater against unprovoked attacks as to its academic rigor or general desirability. No, the college did not have dormitories or an impressive campus like the other, older northeastern women’s colleges, but it did have a beloved Dump. Lacking the common elements that contributed to a positive college culture at the time, Simmons students looked towards creating traditions that could be built up and repeated year after year as a means of forming an identity for their college and understanding where their school fit into the larger scheme of American higher education. Together, the women used songwriting as a means of building community, culminating in 1935 in *The Simmons Song Book.* The students’ appreciation of the founding mission of their school presents itself in several compositions, showing their listeners the reasons why they chose Simmons and why their college is needed as an option for female students. Again and again, the writers use humor to relate their frustrations with their education, building community by lamenting with fellow students similarly affected. For these women, college was a joyful intermediary period between the confines of childhood and the work of adult life. The expectation displayed in these songs is that the majority of students would go on to work. Their relationships with young men were framed by their social duties to one another and a desire to participate in the traditions of junior and senior prom. Through songwriting, the students contributed to the formation of a particular identity for Simmons, using comparison, proactive defense to potential criticisms, and humor as they crafted songs to be sung by successive classes of Simmons students, ones who may not know that there had ever been a Dump.

Higher education between 1870-1930 was a time of significant change to the previous American college structure. Before the Civil War, a university degree was available mainly to the sons of wealthy families, their daughters sometimes attending institutions that resembled finishing schools and did not award certificates or degrees. Young women from humbler backgrounds sometimes put themselves through formal teacher training, often paying their own tuition, educating themselves to a degree that was not strictly required in their line of work. In the years after the war, with an expanding economy at play and many new institutions opening their doors, higher education became feasible for more young Americans than ever before. Among those most significantly affected were the nation’s women, to whom many of the new institutions catered as women-only, degree-awarding colleges. Women also gained admission to what had previously been male-only spaces. Public universities bent to the pressure of parents who sought affordable local education for their daughters. Still other new universities opened with the intention of educating both men and women.

Bringing women into the fold represented an enormous departure from American educational tradition, and families, educators, and the students themselves thought a great deal about how women should be integrated into colleges. For parents, it was not always clear whether their support of a daughter’s educational aspirations truly did the girl a kindness. An individual family, especially one without a history of educated women, could struggle to imagine what their daughter’s life might be like should she graduate with a degree in hand. It’s no coincidence that as time went on and more professional women gained prominence within communities that still more women entered universities. Families like the De La Maters in 1910s Illinois were limited in their capacity to simply imagine a future for educated women, and so relied on the advice of neighbors, friends, and educated acquaintances to gain an understanding of what the world was becoming. Similarly, those families who wished for their daughter to be allowed to attend state universities were prodded into their position by observations of changes in the educational landscape: if the daughters of Iowa’s middle class were able to attend the local public university, why shouldn’t the daughters of Michigan attend theirs, just as Michigan’s sons did? This put more and more women into college classrooms at the turn of the twentieth century.

For educators, making the right calls regarding women’s education felt crucial to the success of their institutions, leading many to make studies of other colleges in hopes of making informed decisions. Marion Talbot was Dean of Women at the University of Chicago from the 1890s to the 1920s. Talbot was tasked with creating social guidelines for students and a plan for women’s housing, leading her to look at eastern colleges’ dormitory systems and to contact administrators at other universities so as to better understand current norms and best practices when it came to limiting student behavior. In the same memo to her colleagues in which she explains she had examined eastern colleges in order to gain an understanding of their models for female education, Talbot laments that she was unable to acquire similar information from Simmons. “It was a matter of regret that the plans for Simmons College were not further advanced as the college will undoubtedly have problems similar to our own to solve,” Talbot wrote.[[55]](#footnote-54) As new educational modes were being introduced, educators were anxious to make their colleges a success. For them, it was necessary to check that their plans lined up with what other administrators were doing. Had she written to Simmons later, Talbot would have received a student handbook written by the students themselves.[[56]](#footnote-55) She would have found commonalities with educators dedicated to preparing their female students for work, but equally resolved to educate them for gendered careers that were more easily attainable for women than those Talbot hoped for her female pupils.

Students themselves understood that a new collegiate culture was emerging. Those at new institutions took it upon themselves to develop a distinct identity for their institution, using comparison to other better established colleges to partially achieve their goal. During the 1910s and 1920s, the women at Simmons College used music to build community with their classmates and to locate themselves within the wider college structure. Some of their songs poked fun at their lackluster campus, comparing it to the beautiful parks other women’s colleges enjoyed. Other songs defended their juvenile college, insisting that it prepared its students for practical purposes, giving the institution an articulated reason for being in a newly crowded college market. Self-identity for Simmons students was obtained by looking at the young women at places like Wellesley and Smith and finding what they had in common and what they did not.

Without a curiosity to know what was happening with other people at other colleges, families, educators, and students may not have been able to navigate the changing dynamics in higher education. They needed examples of what women scholars could be to envision their daughters in that role. They needed the anger they felt when they saw that other people’s children had access to education when their children did not in order to push universities to open their doors to their daughters. Administrators needed the advice of older colleges in order to know if they were making the right choices for their students. And the young women themselves needed a knowledge of college cultures that had come before them in order to develop one of their own. Being able to look around them and then pick and choose what future, system, or culture to adopt helped to build the American higher education system as it existed at the turn of the last century.

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