Centennial: November 8, 2019

“We Are Dartmouth”: Women’s Presence and the Transformation of Dartmouth College

It is appropriate that I begin with a tribute to the faculty, the students, the administrators, and the staff who constitute the Women of Dartmouth. It was and is your presence that has transformed an institution that until 1972 had been all male for more than two centuries. In claiming Dartmouth College for yourselves, in joining with the men of Dartmouth, you have left an invaluable legacy.

The process of coeducation, a process that has combined tradition and innovation, began formally on November 21, 1971. That Sunday at 6:30 in the evening, President John Kemeny announced on WDCR that the Board of Trustees had voted to admit women and also to begin year-round operation. The faculty had already voted overwhelmingly to recommend that the Board vote for the matriculation of women. It was no coincidence that the decisions about coeducation and year­ round operation were made together. Indeed, at least as far as the Trustees were concerned, one made the other possible. The change in the calendar meant that women could matriculate - without significantly decreasing the number of men at the school. Dartmouth College would still have its 3,000 men. Now 350 women would join them. Almost immediately, the skewed ratio was challenged by students and faculty. The long and difficult struggle for equal access and parity had begun. Finally, twenty-three years later that struggle was won. When the Class of 1999 matriculated at the College twenty years ago, they numbered 1,045 - 525 of them women, 520 of them men.

What did the College look like that Sunday in November of 1971? What was the tone, the texture of the place, at that moment when John Kemeny announced the Trustees' decisions? Here I am reminded of the title of a study of the Mississippi Delta from the Civil War to the present. Looking at the deeply ingrained traditions of a racially segregated South before those traditions collided with the 1960s Civil Rights Revolution, James Cobb decided to title his book: *The Most Southern Place on Earth*. On the day that John Kemeny made his announcement about coeducation, Dartmouth College might have been called at least *As Male As Any Place On Earth*.

And yet and in actuality the College had not been entirely male. In 1968, women from Colby Sawyer, Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Wellesley arrived in Hanover to participate in "Coed Week," the "girls," as the College’s newspaper, *The Dartmouth* always referred to them, attended classes with the "students," again as *The Dartmouth* referred to the College’s men. These distinctions between "girls" and "students" collapsed the next year with the Twelve College Exchange Program which brought 68 women to Hanover. Here at the College as regular students, these women discovered what made Dartmouth College distinctive - and not necessarily appealing. Perhaps most notably, there was the classroom with skewed ratio and those professors who addressed the classes as "Gentlemen - and a Lady." The Exchange continued to bring increasing numbers of women to Dartmouth in the three years before the inauguration of coeducation. That evening in 1971 when Kemeny made the announcement, there were one hundred and fifty women on campus. “Early Daughters of Dartmouth: Blazing the Trail to Coeducation 1969-1972” has brought these women to the fore. The film, which was produced by Kathy Duff Rines who participated in the Exchange in 1970-1971, premiered at Homecoming this year before a packed audience in Filene Auditorium. Directed by filmmaker Bill Aydelott, also a graduate of Dartmouth, the film reclaims these women and captures both the pride they felt in taking their place beside the men of Dartmouth and the hostility they experienced from some of those men.

In addition to the exchange students, there were the women who held positions throughout the College. There was Lucretia Martin who had been appointed Special Assistant to the President when John Kemeny took office, Marilyn Austin Baldwin, who had been named Assistant Provost, then the highest ranking woman administrator, and Ruth Adams who had come from Wellesley to serve as Vice President of the College. Elizabeth Hapgood whom we are honoring today was the College’s first woman on the faculty. An instructor in Russian in 1918 and 1919, she founded the Department during that year. The biologist Hannah Croasdale began teaching here in the early years. Elizabeth Lyding Will, taught Classics in 1953 through 1954. Her daughter Barbara Will, a member of the English Department, is currently serving as the Associate Dean for the Humanities. There were faculty members like Colette Gaudin, later the first woman appointed chair of a department; Blanche Gelfant, later the first woman elected to the Committee Advisory to the President; and Marysa Navarro, later the first woman appointed Associate Dean. In a poll of faculty and administrators, taken in May of 1970, 91 percent of faculty and 62 percent of administrators responding favored coeducation. Five months earlier in December of 1970, students answered a questionnaire in similar fashion. Eighty-eight per cent responded affirmatively to the possibility of coeducation.

The undergraduate women who would transform possibility into reality began to arrive in the Fall of 1972. There were 177 women who matriculated as first year students. They were joined by 74 transfer students and 100 exchange students. The ratio was 9 to 1, men to women. There was resistance as well. “Lest the old traditions fail" was the rallying cry for those who looked askance at the innovations that would transform Dartmouth College into a coeducational institution. One alumnus was adamant: “For God’s sake, for Dartmouth’s sake, and for everyone’s sake, keep the damned women out.” Nancy Weiss Malkiel, who took that declaration as the title for her study of the struggle for coeducation in the Ivy League, has noted that Dartmouth, compared with other institutions “took longer and followed a more tortuous path to conclusion about the right steps to take with respect to the education of women.” Without question, some " traditions" did take a while to "fail." There was the alma mater itself. Nothing could have symbolized the past more than "Men of Dartmouth." In a poll taken in the fall of 1972, female students were asked if the song, like the school, should become coeducational. Of the 350 women asked, 256 did not respond. Sixty-nine percent of the ones who did said they preferred the alma mater the way it was. One of these students may have spoken for many: "if men want to sing about rocks in their heads, it's fine with me." Eight years later in 1980, one woman responded more negatively. Initially, she had been excited about participating in this tradition, but, as she recalled, “It didn’t take long, though, before the words stopped making me laugh and started to rankle. ‘Whose school is this?’ I began to wonder. After a while I refused to stand up and sing during the song.” It took longer, it took more students who were joined by women faculty, to institute a change in the lyrics. “Men of Dartmouth” became “Dear Old Dartmouth” in 1988.

In the decades since women were admitted to Dartmouth College, life in this community has been transformed, in and out of the classroom. You will know that a faculty member is speaking to you when I begin with the classroom. The same ratio of 9 to 1 prevailed in the ranks of the faculty in the early years of coeducation. In the fall of 1972, 92 percent of the College 's faculty was male. Of the 315 members of the faculty, only 26 were women. Almost certainly, the relative absence of women contributed to the response some of us experienced here in the early years. The idea that a woman might be a professor had not occurred to some of Dartmouth's men. Shortly after I arrived at the College, I had an experience of misidentification coupled with condescension. Walking into a class in American intellectual history at the beginning of the spring term in 1978, I was asked by a male student "Are you the prof?" "It looks that way," I responded. "It doesn't to me - you' re a woman," he declared as he bolted for the door.

Year by year the number of these misidentifications declined as more women entered the ranks of the faculty. In 1982, ten years after the College had begun to admit women, there were 73 women and 240 men on a faculty of 311. In 1992, the number of women had increased to 93 on a faculty that now numbered 333. By 1997, women constituted 32 percent of Dartmouth's Arts and Sciences faculty and 27 per cent of its tenured faculty, the highest percentage in the Ivy League. Three of those faculty members were alumnae - Susan Ackerman, Class of 1980, then and now a member of the Religion Department; Judi Byfield, also the Class of 1980, then a member of the History Department; and Ursula Gibson, Class of 1976, then a member of the Thayer School of Engineering. Today, in the Arts and Sciences slightly more than a third tenured and tenure track faculty are women. The percentage, then, has not increased in the last twenty years. In 1979, the Board began to invite women who had graduated from the College to join them as Trustees. Four decades later, only twenty-five women have served on the Board. Today, however ,Laurel Richie ’81, one of those women, chairs the Board.

Students and faculty, women and men, have transformed the classroom in these last decades. Nowhere has this transformation been more apparent than in the founding of the Women's Studies Program. Five years after the College had begun to admit women students and to recruit women faculty, eight of us teaching here drafted a proposal for a Women's Studies Program. Formally adopted by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences in the spring of 1978 by a vote of 138 to 3, Dartmouth now had the first Women's Studies Program in the previously all-male Ivy League. The Program opened with an introductory course, which Lynn Higgins, Elizabeth Baer, and I taught the first time the course was offered, and the Steering Committee started offering other courses. The Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department, as it is now titled, has developed a major and course offerings that extend across the curriculum.

The community that is Dartmouth goes well beyond the formally constituted classrooms to the athletic playing fields, to the Hop, to the Tucker Foundation, to the Outing Club. Here in what has been called the CoCurriculum, transformation was an imperative if the College was to become coeducational. To say only that there were "challenges," that there were "adjustments" to be made, would be euphemisms. In the early years, there were individuals in fraternities who were determined that the College would remain at least As Male As Any Place on Earth. Fortunately for all of us, Dartmouth’s women were more determined. They stood firm in claiming their place at the College. In the face of unspeakable behavior, they demonstrated a courage that remains inspiring.

Let me cite two examples, both of which suggest why the faculty in the late 1970s voted overwhelmingly in favor of abolishing fraternities. In the spring of 1973 in the context of fraternity initiations, a letter was slipped under the door of every resident of the all-female Woodward Hall. Obscene and vicious in its language, those who wrote the letter labeled Woodward residents the "enemy," and demanded that “the upper part of your body must remain naked before our eyes when you eat in Thayer,” adding that “your services must be available at all times.” Not least, they threatened all Dartmouth women should they refuse to become the sexual property of Dartmouth men. In responding to those who had also broken the windows on the first floor of their dormitory, the women of Woodward Hall laced their return letter to the harassers with defiance as well as humor: Dartmouth women were not to be intimidated by a bunch of goons.

But that did not end such behavior. Two years later, in the spring of 1975, there was the song that the members of Theta Delta entered in "Hums," the annual competition held on Green Key Weekend, which was that year judged by Dean of the College Carroll Brewster. "Our Cohogs," as the song was titled, proclaimed that Dartmouth women were "all here to spoil our fun." That was only the beginning of the epithets, however. Dean Brewster awarded first prize to "Our Cohogs" and joined the members of the fraternity in a public rendition of the song. The records of the evening do not note whether the brothers of Theta Delt sang the loudest on the line "knick, knack, paddy whack send the bitches home," or provided harmony on "our cohogs they play four they are all a bunch of whores." Class of 1978 Hillary Smith, who was sitting in the audience, recalled "I heard the song and I thought, 'they've got to be kidding.' . . . I walked away. Apparently, a lot of other women did too."

We don’t know how many women walked away that evening, but we do know that Dartmouth women initiated another tradition four years later. The Woodward letter and the "Cohogs" song, as well as the despicable behavior of certain fraternities surely contributed to “Take Back the Night,” the march that in 1979 signified Dartmouth women's resistance to harassment. It was no coincidence that the women (and I might add, the men) marched down fraternity row's Webster Avenue, which was seen by the organizers as "a danger zone in need of being reclaimed by the women (and again I might add the men) of this community.”

"Take Back The Night" signaled a need for change if Dartmouth College were to meet its commitment to an open and diverse CoCurriculum that extended beyond its classrooms. In 1980, the year after the march, the Committee on the Quality of Student Life submitted its report to the Trustees. Emphasizing that Dartmouth was a residential college because "it believes that significant parts of a truly liberal education take place outside of the classroom," the members of the committee, seven of whom were students, recommended that the residential system be reorganized - some dormitory clusters should be created and wherever necessary, dormitory facilities should be renovated to support residential life programming. In the next years, the Office of Residential Life was established, all of the dormitories became coeducational, and the plans were developed for the expansion of Collis from 11,000 to 48,000 square feet. In addition, a Woman’s Support Task Force chaired by Marianne Hirsch, then a professor in French and Comparative Literature, recommended the establishment of a Women’s Resource Center, which provided support for women and served as well as a place where women and men gathered for conversation on gender-related issues.

In these years, the idea for the East Wheelock Cluster also began to take shape. The East Wheelock Cluster has been designed as an environment in which "social life" and "intellectual life" are integrated. A 235-bed residence directly across the street from Leede Arena, it includes a private residence for faculty associates, a large commons for student cultural, educational, and social programs, and a budget to support bringing visitors to the Cluster. Faculty who have served as Associates have included Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, Cleopatra Mathis and William Phillips, Ivy Schweitzer and Tom Luxon, and Susan Brison and Tom Trezise. Today the East Wheelock Cluster stands as an embodiment of a community in which members can converse, share ideas across disciplinary boundaries, and explore common interests in an informal residential setting.

In more recent years, there have been other initiatives. Let me cite two of the most notable. Begun in 2018 and based at Rauner Library’s Special Collections, the Historical Accountability Student Research Fellowship, which provides four term-long student fellowships, is designed to engage students in archival research that brings to the fore principles of inclusion and diversity at the College. Last year, Caroline Cook focused on the career of Hannah Croasdale, who became Dartmouth’s first tenured female professor. Cook has also organized the exhibit for this Centennial. Grace Hanselman devoted this summer to research on the critical role played by women such as Marysa Navarro who mentored other women on the faculty during the early years of coeducation. Founded in 2014 and led by inaugural Director Annabel Martín, the Gender Research Institute at Dartmouth has been dedicated to facilitating gender-related reaching research, teaching, and social engagement. Under Martín’s leadership, Dartmouth faculty associated with the Institute have authored a special issue of *Humanities*, a scholarly journal that publishes articles across the disciplines in the Humanities. The subjects of their essays range from higher education to welfare activists, from gender violence to new models of citizenship.

In addition to these initiatives, there are other markers of achievements and remaining challenges in the last decade. As Susan Ackerman has observed, “There are more women in the faculty, more women in the administration, more African American women in the ranks of faculty and administrators.” Yet, employing a familiar observation, she noted, “Women still have to work twice as hard to be considered half as good as men.” Ackerman has done exactly that. She chaired Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies from 2002 through 2004, she chaired Religion from 2004 through 2012, and she returned to chair Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies from 2015 to 2019, all the while continuing a robust program of scholarly publishing. Susan Ackerman pointed as well to an absence that affects all women, whether faculty, students, administrators, or staff. “Women cannot see themselves physically imprinted on the campus,” she reminded me. We have buildings named for men, we have buildings dedicated to families, which presumably includes women. We have no building named exclusively for a woman.

Let me conclude as I began, with you, with the women of Dartmouth. In reading these last weeks about Dartmouth past and present, I have often thought that the women of Dartmouth must be descendants of Susan B. Anthony. The nineteenth century’s America's most prominent organizer for women's rights, Anthony was once asked about the prospects for female suffrage. What if women failed to get the vote, she was asked? She looked the questioner directly in the eye and declared: "failure" she said "is impossible." In all the challenges you have faced, in all the successes you have achieved, you have embodied Susan B. Anthony's declaration. With your example before us as we move forward, we will be able to act as you have, and to say as Anthony did, "failure is impossible."