

COLLEGE WOMEN IN THE 1930s:
THE POSSIBILITIES AND THE REALITIES

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In 1920 college was viewed as a stepping-stone for both men and women — a place to prepare for a lifetime career.¹ Women especially looked forward to this time in their lives. Great strides had been made in women's rights since the turn of the century, most particularly the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment (giving women the right to vote), and young women eagerly explored the career opportunities that greeted them upon graduation.²

Yet 1920 marked the end of an era in the struggle for women's rights. As historian William H. Chafe has noted, the unified front of the women's movement disintegrated after suffrage was won.³ The women who had struggled for the right to vote were a generation older than those women entering college in 1920, and the suffragists expressed dismay at the behavior of their younger counterparts. The senior group believed that the young women were not doing their share in advancing the cause, in part because they saw college women taking their education for granted and not looking upon it as a rare opportunity on which to capitalize. Women who had graduated from college before 1920 noted that, since the younger generation was not the first to go to college, it could not understand the pressure the pioneers had to withstand to succeed so that other women could follow. Moreover, suffrage veterans thought that the vote had lulled young women into

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1 Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930's* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 56.

2 "Youth in College," *Fortune*, June 1936 p.156.

3 William H. Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 112.

a false sense of equality when actually the fight for equal rights had just begun.⁴

Their fears proved well grounded. Because of postwar reaction to further social change in the 1920s, young women often committed themselves to individualism rather than reform. With loose morals and devil-may-care attitude, the flapper (portrayed in the movies as a woman who could easily lure a rich bachelor to the altar with her charms) became the role model for young women as traditional sex roles encroached upon the gains made earlier in the century. As the decade wore on, college women increasingly professed a willingness to forgo a career for marriage.⁵

The pressures of socialization, coupled with the onset of the Great Depression, accelerated the subtle movement "to get the little woman back in the house where she belonged."⁶ In fact, many women were dissuaded from attending college because society led them to believe that in pursuing careers they would be taking jobs from men who needed to support families. If they went to college only to enrich their minds, society made them feel as if they were squandering precious money. Money, like jobs, was a scarce commodity during the depression, and many parents could not afford to send their daughters to school. While the percentage of women between eighteen and twenty-one in college increased from 10.5 percent in 1930 to 12.2 percent in 1940, their proportion of total enrollment dropped from 43.7 percent to 40.2 percent over the same period.⁷ Caroline Bird noticed that the depression was creating a new "lost generation" when she remarked, "Almost everyone knew someone who couldn't go to college because of the Depression."⁸

4 See Chafe, *The American Woman*, 92-93; and Nancy Woloch, *Women and The American Experience* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 356-57.

5 Chafe, *The American Woman*, 102.

6 *Ibid.*, 107.

7 Ware, 57-58.

8 Caroline Bird, *The Invisible Scar* (New York: David McKay, 1966), 295.

For the women who did manage to go to college in the 1930s, the atmosphere on campus was sobering. Discouraged from pursuing courses outside the liberal arts, denied leadership positions on campus, and pressured into marriage, women found many career paths closed to them. They could not build on the many achievements that had been made in the early 1900s because the social pressures of the 1920s and the economic instability of the 1930s had created an environment hostile to their advancement. Those women who pursued higher education during the depression suffered a restriction of the educational and career opportunities available to them.

In 1837 when Oberlin became the first male college to open its doors to women, few other male institutions followed suit. As a result, women's colleges came into being; among them were the Seven Sisters, the female version of the Ivy League — Vassar (1861), Wellesley (1870), Smith (1871), Radcliffe (1879), Bryn Mawr (1885), Mount Holyoke (1888), and Barnard (1889).⁹ While the goals and curriculums of women's and coeducational institutions differed by 1930, both types of schools tended to limit the education of college women.

The goals of women's colleges in 1930 were often quite different from their original statements of purpose and tended to diminish the emphasis on preparation for a career. For example, Rutgers's Female College, which opened in 1867, emphasized the importance of education in expanding career opportunities for women. Smith, Bryn Mawr, and Mount Holyoke initially offered women an education equal to that of the men's preprofessional colleges.¹⁰

It is important to emphasize, nevertheless, that the types of careers women received training for in college often varied from

⁹ Lois W. Banner, *Women in Modern America: A Brief History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 3,32. See also Wainwright Evans and Joseph K. Folsom, "If Your Daughter Goes to College," *Better Homes and Gardens* 18 (May 1940): 21.

¹⁰ Mabel Newcomer, *A Century of Higher Education for American Women* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 53-56.

those vocations generally thought of as "men's" professions at the time. Before 1920, for instance, women were considered acceptable in the field of medicine since it maintained only a mediocre status as a career. As the century wore on and the medical profession became more respected, medical schools instituted a five percent quota for women applicants.¹¹ So women, even before 1900, began developing "women's" professions. These were careers which demanded college degrees and which were considered by society as respectable jobs for women, including social and library work, teaching, and nursing.¹²

However, by 1900 eighty percent of colleges and universities were coeducational.¹³ Consequently, women's colleges had to search for new reasons for existence besides their original goal of offering an equal education while simultaneously developing programs of interest to women. Most of them adopted a liberal arts curriculum; some, particularly southern colleges, placed increasing emphasis on their elaborate home economics programs.¹⁴ In fact, the president of Union College in New York remarked, "One of the chief ends of a college for women is to fit them to become makers of homes."¹⁵

By the 1920s, even the Seven Sisters were submitting to society's belief that women should be homemakers. Vassar, for example, began its School of Euthenics in 1925, offering such mind-broadening courses as "Husband and Wife," "Motherhood," and "The Family as an Economic Unit."¹⁶ Antioch also opened a family studies unit during this period.¹⁷ The young woman attending college in the 1920s thus received a number of frustrating and conflicting messages: "Be an individual but get

11 See Banner, 156; and Woloch, 392.

12 Woloch, 182.

13 Banner, 6.

14 Newcomer, 58, 60.

15 William H. Chafe, *Women and Equality: Changing Patterns in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 33.

16 Woloch, 405.

17 Newcomer, 101.

married as quickly as possible after school" and "Train for a career, but remember the easy, comfortable life of a housewife."¹⁸

In the 1930s, college as a training ground for the art of housewifery became more pronounced as society viewed women who worked as usurpers of the jobs of men who had families to support.¹⁹ To drum up admissions, women's schools often lowered their academic standards. Bennington, the only women's college opened in the 1930s, hoped to attract students by not setting specific entrance requirements; administrators required evidence of outstanding work in only one field.²⁰ By lowering general standards for admission, Bennington opened its doors to unqualified students and also cast doubt on the quality of education it was able to provide. In short, women's colleges moved away from their goals of equal education and career preparation.

Women's colleges in the 1930s claimed that their curriculums would nurture the development of a woman's independence and individuality and provide social contacts as well.²¹ Despite this claim, coeducational institutions accused them of promoting two things: an unrealistic atmosphere void of competition with men which would disappear when their graduates left college and advantageous friendships in an era when many established families had lost their wealth.²²

Although the ostensible purpose of establishing coeducational colleges was to promote an equality of education between the sexes, this was far from the case in the 1930s. Competition was keen in every area, and the brighter girls often lacked a social life; this was the price for challenging men in the classroom.²³

18 Woloch, 409.

19 Chafe, *The American Woman*, 107

20 "The Bennington Project," *New York Times*, 9 February 1930, sec. 3, p. 4.

21 Evans and Folsom, 81-82.

22 *Ibid.*, 87. See also Eunice Fuller Barnard, "Our Colleges for Women: Co-Ed or Not?", *New York Times*, 26 March 1933, pp. 4-5.

23 W. Beran Wolfe, "Why Educate Women?", *Forum* 81 (March 1929): 166.

Still, there were times and areas in which they did not have to compete with the men; often they were advised to adopt the more "feminine" majors, such as English, while the men dominated the fields of mathematics and science.²⁴ In fact, Dr. Jacqueline Bull (B.S., University of Kentucky, 1934) noted that advisers "signed you up for what they thought you should have."²⁵

There were many women in the liberal arts fields in both types of schools largely because the depression reinforced their social role as steadfast supporters of men. Ironically, men believed that women, as the childbearers, should study social subjects that would ready them for their primary role in life as mother and homemaker.²⁶ Consequently, they should take courses in the biological sciences, child psychology, education, and social work. In addition, women were expected to be knowledgeable in the fine arts, the humanities, and the social sciences, so as to be able to converse with their husbands' friends.²⁷ A study conducted by Stephens College found that women's functions required more in the way of social graces than thinking ability; it therefore suggested that women take courses in "physical health; mental health; communication; esthetic appreciation; social, economic and political situations, morals and religion; and efficient consumption."²⁸ It was often suggested that women felt more confident in majoring in what they wanted to at women's colleges; yet from 1931 to 1934 at Vassar, only twenty-seven out of 252 women graduated with a mathematics, chemistry, or physics degree.²⁹

24 Barnard, "Our Colleges," 4-5. See also Newcomer, 91.

25 Taped interview with Dr. Jacqueline Bull, Lexington, Kentucky, 6 October 1977. Alumni/Faculty Oral History Project, University of Kentucky, Lexington.

26 Clarence C. Little, "Women and Higher Education," *Scribner's Magazine* 86 (August 1929): 149.

27 *Ibid.*, 150. See also Paul Swain Havens, "Higher Education for Women Stresses Role of Conserver," *New York Times*, 17 December 1939, sec. 2, p. 5.

28 James M. Wood, "Curriculum Built to Student Needs," *New York Times*, 20 July 1930, sec. 3, p. 7.

29 Newcomer, 93.

Nevertheless, women persisted in pursuing a college education, even when they were steered away from the "men's" subjects. Ellen Baxter (B.S., University of Kentucky, 1940), whose original aim was to be an engineer, found to her amazement that she was the only girl in an algebra class of thirty-five. After a semester of engineering courses, she decided this field was not for her. Instead, she chose library science as her major. When asked by a professor why she had chosen that field, she replied, "Is there anything else for a woman to do?"³⁰ Similarly, Dr. Jacqueline Bull admitted that library science was a respectable alternative open to women who did not want to teach.³¹ The views of both Baxter and Bull reflected the general trends in education at the time. The University of Kentucky graduated over 3,500 men from the college of engineering between 1930 and 1940; it gave diplomas to only thirty women during that time.³² While the University of Kentucky did award Virginia McClure a doctorate in American history in 1934, the first ever given to a woman by the institution, the number of women receiving doctorates nationally declined by five percent over the decade, from eighteen percent of the total in 1930 to thirteen percent in 1940.³³

Thus women's educational opportunities in the 1930s were limited partly because of a trend, beginning in the 1920s, to think of college for women as either preparation for homemaking or as training for a career that would last only until a woman married. Consequently, women were increasingly pushed into either liberal arts curriculums (i.e., programs that would teach

30 Interview with Ellen P. Baxter, 605 Galaxie Road, Lexington, Kentucky, 19 October 1987.

31 Interview with Dr. Jacqueline Bull.

32 *The University of Kentucky — Its History and Development: A Series of Charts Depicting the More Important Data — 1862-1955* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1956).

33 See "Miss Virginia McClure to Receive First Ph.D. Degree Ever Bestowed on Woman by U of K This Friday," *Lexington Herald*, 27 May 1934, sec. 2, p. 9; and Patricia Albjerg Graham, "Expansion and Exclusion: A History of Women in Higher Education," *Signs* 3 (Summer 1978): 766.

women how to think but would not necessarily prove marketable when searching for a job) or into the "women's" professions.³⁴

The 1930s accelerated the trend that had begun in the 1920s. Because of the depression, women were socialized to believe it was their duty to marry rather than to use their college degrees to pursue their personal career ambitions. If a woman could afford to go to college, she was guided toward a degree with limited marketability.

Although women found their curriculum choices to be somewhat limited during the 1930s, this did not prevent them from wanting to obtain a college education. Nevertheless, with the number of unemployed reaching between twelve and fifteen million people in 1933, the number of families who could afford to send their daughters to college was severely curtailed not only because of the financial strain but also because sons were educated first.³⁵ Consequently, funding a college education in the 1930s became one of the biggest obstacles to women seeking a degree.

Part of the problem in raising the money to attend college was the fact that many women could not convince their families they truly needed to go. College was perceived as the basis for a career; however, as mentioned above, many colleges and universities encouraged women to take liberal arts courses to prepare themselves for homemaking. When these college graduates searched for a job, they lacked the specific skills that made them desirable in the tight job market characteristic of the depression.³⁶ Thus it was far less of a financial strain on their families to enroll them in a vocational course for a few months. People generally thought higher education was less important for a woman than a man; after all, most women married, and it was the man of the household who supported

34 Esther Eberstadt Brooke, "September Girls," *Good Housekeeping* 97 (September 1933): 45, 192.

35 Ware, xiii.

36 Brooke, 45.

the family.³⁷ If a woman could argue her way past the above-mentioned hurdles, it benefited her considerably to be intelligent. Schools in the 1930s could not afford to help the consistent but not outstanding student; as a result, she either did not enter at all or she was forced to drop out because of expenses.³⁸ All of these reasons figured into the decline of women's percentage of total enrollment.

Obviously the cost of higher education in the 1930s contributed to the newfound seriousness of college women. Administrative officials and faculty were quick to notice the changed demeanor of the undergraduate. Dean Gildersleeve at Barnard noted that the women were much more conservative than the "roaring twenties" group, while Alzada Comstock, an economics professor at Mount Holyoke, stated that women were quite serious about their studies.³⁹ Not surprisingly, the women who attended college during this time rarely failed to mention this apparently shared trait. Pearl Anderson (B.A., Transylvania College, Lexington, 1930) remarked, "Students then really appreciated the opportunity to get an education. It was a matter of grave importance."⁴⁰ Both Baxter and Bull mentioned the significance of a degree in obtaining a job; Baxter characterized it as "an insurance policy."⁴¹

From 1929 to 1935 several ways of funding an education were available to women. One already mentioned was the support of the family. While this was not always forthcoming, it made a significant difference in some cases. In Baxter's case, for example, her brother (a civil engineer) supplemented her

37 Newcomer, 152. As we will see later, married women found it nearly impossible to obtain jobs with or without a degree. See Banner, 186.

38 Alzada Comstock, "The College Girl: 1933 Model," *Current History* 39 (November 1933): 183.

39 See "Girls at College No Longer Blase," *New York Times*, 14 February 1933, p. 13; and Comstock, 182.

40 Interview with Pearl Anderson, 1880B Dalton Court, Lexington, Kentucky, 20 November 1987.

41 See Interview with Ellen Baxter; and interview with Dr. Jacqueline Bull.

income.⁴² In addition, many college students lived at home to reduce expenses, including not only Baxter, but also Ann Ford (B.S., University of Kentucky, 1939), Anderson, and Bull.⁴³

A second method of paying for college was through scholarships and grants. While these were available in the 1930s, the women's colleges could not compete with the coeducational or men's colleges in this area. Before the depression hit, men's colleges were receiving nine times more money than women's colleges; in 1932 they averaged thirty times more money for their endowments than did the women's institutions.⁴⁴ Such a differential reflected the value placed on women's education. Although the women's colleges tried some innovations (e.g. Mount Holyoke's community college for twenty-five girls in Hartford who could not afford its exorbitant rates), their lack of funding combined with their high tuition forced many women to look elsewhere.⁴⁵

A third means of paying for a college education was simply to work. In addition to her grant from Transylvania, Anderson wove for her grandmother, who lived in Berea.⁴⁶ Bull was a library assistant at the University of Kentucky.⁴⁷ Thus, many women who wanted to go to college worked either to pay their own way or to supplement their family's contribution.

The fall of 1933 witnessed efforts by the government to aid youth in funding their education. Concerned with a drop in enrollment, administrators turned to Washington for help.⁴⁸

42 Interview with Ellen Baxter.

43 See taped interview with Ann Ford, 5286 South Perry Street, Littleton, Colorado, 12 June 1979. Alumni/Faculty Oral History Project, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Ky.; Interview with Pearl Anderson; Interview with Ellen Baxter; and Interview with Dr. Jacqueline Bull.

44 "Holds We Neglect Women's Colleges," *New York Times*, 3 November 1933, p. 16.

45 "Hail Experiment at Mount Holyoke," *New York Times*, 29 September 1935, sec. 2, p. 7.

46 Interview with Pearl Anderson.

47 Interview with Dr. Jacqueline Bull.

48 The University of Kentucky and Transylvania College, however, never deviated by more than one hundred students. See "UK Registration In-

Most of the assistance came from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) which devised a student aid program based on payment for jobs performed for the school and community. Initially, the plan was tried at the University of Minnesota; the average pay for 1,000 students engaged in the program was \$15.00 per month.⁴⁹ By February 1934 the plan was such a success that it was expanded to cover the nation and began payments to 75,000 students.⁵⁰

Witnessing the success of this project and realizing the importance of boosting the morale of the nation's three million unemployed youth ages sixteen to twenty-five, Eleanor Roosevelt pressed the president to devote a New Deal organization especially to the needs of youth. Mrs. Roosevelt was concerned that young people of both sexes would reject the ideals of the nation and become disillusioned with the free enterprise system.⁵¹ Acceding to her persuasiveness, Roosevelt created the National Youth Administration (NYA) on 26 June 1935 by executive order and allocated \$50 million for relief purposes for the fiscal year.⁵²

The NYA began with several goals in mind, including: 1) finding jobs for youth; 2) providing vocational training for them; 3) furnishing work-study programs to supplement the money of students in secondary and higher education, and 4) creating work relief projects for unemployed youth.⁵³ In pursuing these objectives, the NYA took over the FERA's task of

creased to 3,168," *Lexington Herald*, 19 September 1936, p. 5; and *Transylvania College Bulletin: The Catalogue* (Lexington, Ky.), 1930-40, vols. 3-12.

49 See Betty Lindley and Ernest K. Lindley, *A New Deal for Youth: The Story of the National Youth Administration* (New York: Viking Press, 1938), 11; and Dorothy G. Johnson and Malcolm M. Willey, "Backgrounds of College NYA Students," *School and Society* 50 (19 August 1939): 253.

50 Lindley and Lindley, 11.

51 See Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1971), 536; and George T. Blakey, *Hard Times and the New Deal in Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 102.

52 Lindley and Lindley, 3.

53 "50,000,000 Youth Project is Established by the President," *New York Times*, 27 June 1935, p. 1.

furnishing student aid and funding camps for destitute women.⁵⁴ While the NYA supervised a variety of projects, it completed the monumental task of starting work-study projects at over 1,500 colleges and universities while avoiding the accusation of creating a centralized youth movement.⁵⁵

Roosevelt chose Aubrey Williams, the deputy director of the Works Progress Administration, to head the NYA with Richard Brown as his deputy director. He also appointed Josephine Roche, assistant secretary of the treasury, as head of the executive committee and Charles Taussig as head of the National Advisory Committee, a group made up of thirty-five leaders from the business, education, agriculture, and religious communities.⁵⁶ The only unfortunate appointment in this arrangement was Williams who, preoccupied with his WPA and FERA duties, almost completely neglected the NYA in its first six months of operation.⁵⁷ Mrs. Roosevelt, dismayed at the lack of progress of the organization she worked so hard to bring into being, began to apply pressure to Williams to achieve tangible results. She demanded monthly reports from him.⁵⁸ Her involvement caused the president to call the NYA "the missus' organization."⁵⁹ Although Williams was forced to step up his involvement with the agency, he did not make it his main concern until overwork and stress compelled deputy director Brown to give up his position in 1938.⁶⁰

Despite Williams's lack of involvement, the NYA proved itself a helpful relief program, due in large part to its excellent organization. At the top, of course, was the national headquarters in Washington, D.C. State NYA youth directors reported to the

54 Lindley and Lindley, 14.

55 Ibid., 160.

56 Ibid., 14.

57 John Salmond, *A Southern Rebel: The Life and Times of Aubrey Willis Williams* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 124.

58 See *ibid.*, 125, 138; and Lash, 540-41.

59 Salmond, 138.

60 Ibid., 139.

national office; they in turn received information from district and county supervisors. Below them were the project supervisors, and on the bottom rung of the ladder were the advisory committees at the colleges themselves.⁶¹ This lowly position in the hierarchy did not, however, reflect the authority of the advisory committees. In fact, the NYA's administrative power was quite decentralized. The Roosevelts encouraged this arrangement, fearing that the government would be accused of promoting curriculums beneficial to its aims in the schools.⁶²

The NYA did set some guidelines for the implementation of the student aid program within the schools. Like the FERA program, the NYA paid an average of fifteen dollars per month for thirty-five to forty hours of work. To begin with, the quota for each school was twelve percent of its total enrollment as of 15 October 1934.⁶³ Students also had to meet certain requirements to be eligible for the program:

- 1) to show need
- 2) to be between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five
- 3) to have a good academic standing and a good character
- 4) to demonstrate they wanted to work
- 5) to be able to work
- 6) to carry at least three-quarters of a full academic load
- 7) to be a United States citizen
- 8) to take an oath of allegiance to the program
- 9) to refuse to participate in programs which sought to overthrow the government.⁶⁴

Of the \$50 million given to the NYA for the 1934-35 school year,

61 Lindley and Lindley, 15.

62 Ibid., 14. Fear that the government would install socialist programs ran rampant in the depression. In fact, concern was expressed at the NYA's inception that it would adopt a policy of aid to students in exchange for a government-dictated curriculum; see, for example, "The National Youth Administration," *School and Society* 42 (13 July 1935): 68-69.

63 "Broad Objectives of New Youth Relief Plan of President Roosevelt," *New York Times*, 27 June 1935, p. 4.

64 U.S., Federal Security Agency, *Final Report of the National Youth Administration: Fiscal Years 1936-43* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1944), 52-53.

\$14,512,500 was allotted for college work programs. The NYA instructed its state youth directors to redistribute jobs to other institutions if a school failed to meet its quota of jobs, thereby spreading the available funds to as many students as possible.⁶⁵ Jobs were to be beneficial either to the school or its community; they normally included clerical, secretarial, laboratory, and library positions on campus, and health and welfare projects in the community.⁶⁶ Beyond these regulations, school administrators were free to implement the programs as they saw fit.

In Kentucky, Frank Peterson was the state youth director and Robert K. Salyers was his deputy from 1935 to 1938 when, upon Peterson's resignation, Salyers assumed the position of state director.⁶⁷ Peterson attended a two-day conference of state directors held in Washington in August 1935, and he heard Mrs. Roosevelt's rousing speeches dealing with the need to encourage young people to reach their potential.⁶⁸ Enthused, Peterson returned home and was able to get thirty-three colleges and universities involved, including the University of Kentucky.⁶⁹

At the University of Kentucky, an advisory committee was quickly formed which included T. T. Jones, dean of men, and Sarah B. Holmes, assistant dean of women, who were responsible for picking the men and the women recipients. Both officials were promptly inundated with letters requesting information; for a quota of 339 undergraduate positions, over 1,000 applications were made.⁷⁰ To be as fair as possible, Jones and Holmes tried to make the selections representative of the

65 "President Allots Local Work Funds," *New York Times*, 18 August 1935, p. 27.

66 "Student Aid Under the National Youth Administration," *School and Society* 42 (2 November 1935): 597.

67 Blakey, 91-92.

68 "President Spurs Youth Relief Work," *New York Times*, 21 August 1935, p. 15.

69 Lindley and Lindley, 274.

70 T.T. Jones and Sarah B. Holmes, "Administration of Student Aid Under the NYA at the University of Kentucky," Lexington, Ky., 8 June 1936 (Typewritten), 1-2.

state as a whole. They also managed to place extras in jobs when the assigned students could not work, bringing the total to 527.⁷¹ Still, 2.76 men to one woman received NYA aid at the university (the population ratio at the university was two men to one woman); again, the view that it was more important for a man to get an education reduced the women's chances to receive aid and, thus, attend college.⁷² Ellen Baxter was one woman who did receive NYA aid; she worked in the library every weekday for twenty-five cents per hour. This aid, combined with her brother's generous gift, allowed her to attend the university.⁷³

Nationally in 1935-1936, over 100,000 college students benefited from the NYA program. As a result, its funding for 1936-37 was increased, with a larger portion of college aid going to the regions affected by the dust bowl.⁷⁴ College administrators, realizing that the government did not plan to nationalize their schools, applauded the success of the organization, and eighty-four more institutions that year joined the NYA list.⁷⁵ However, in 1937-1938, the number of students receiving aid declined thirty-nine percent due to the troubled economy.⁷⁶ In fact, only \$10,236,726 of the NYA budget of \$75 million was devoted to college financial aid.⁷⁷ A small improvement occurred in 1938-1939, as the quota of those receiving aid went from 8.0 percent to 9.3 percent of the enrollment of participating institutions.⁷⁸ The government

71 *Ibid.*, 2,4.

72 *Ibid.*, 2.

73 Interview with Ellen Baxter.

74 See "Student Aid," 597; and "NYA Enters Its Second Year," *New York Times*, 26 July 1935, sec. 10, p. 4.

75 "124,818 Students Now Get Aid," *New York Times*, 31 January 1937, p. 9.

76 "95,025 in Colleges through NYA Fund," *New York Times*, 28 March 1938, p. 18. In Kentucky that year, 1,156 students participated in the program at a cost of \$155,655. Their average pay was \$10.64 per month. See Lindley and Lindley, 274.

77 "College Students Aided by National Youth Administration, 1937-38," *Monthly Labor Review* 46 (May 1938): 1175.

78 "University and Transy Share in Federal Aid for Students," *Lexing-*

realized the program was valuable; in 1939, it was the only program not to receive a funding cut by Congress. Instead, its allocation was increased to \$100 million.⁷⁹ As a result, the college aid program was allocated \$14 million — its original allotment.⁸⁰ With the threat of war growing, however, the NYA became more devoted to defense efforts through its out-of-school work relief programs and was soon classified as a defense agency. This change came about through the efforts of Williams, who wanted to make his agency a permanent fixture of the government. But because the NYA was duplicating the functions of other agencies and its financial help was no longer needed at the college level since the schools had developed work-study programs of their own, it was eliminated in 1943.⁸¹

Several pieces of information indicate the NYA worked well. For example, the aid did not go to those who did not need it; eighty-five percent of the recipient's families had less than a \$2,000 income per year.⁸² Further, the NYA program was credited with increasing the enrollment at one third of the institutions that participated.⁸³ Administrators were so happy with the program that seventy-four percent of them voted for its continuation in 1937, even though they realized they would receive less money the next year because of the economic setbacks.⁸⁴ In addition, it was discovered that NYA work did not have an adverse effect on grades. In fact, since academic excellence was one of the criteria for selection, NYA students

ton Leader, 30 January 1939, p. 10. Transylvania received aid for forty-nine students that year (\$6,615), while the University of Kentucky was able to supplement the income of 314 students (\$42,390).

79 Henry N. Dorris, "Relief Curbs Stay," *New York Times*, 1 July 1939, p. 1.

80 "NYA College and Graduate-Work Program, 1939-40," *Monthly Labor Review* 50 (April 1940): 859.

81 Salmond, 143, 155, 159.

82 Johnson and Willey, 254.

83 "University Lists Up Again Sharply," *New York Times*, 21 December 1936, p. 25.

84 "Sees Positive Value in NYA Student Aid," *New York Times*, 25 July 1937, p. 4.

performed better in the classroom than did their peers.⁸⁵ For all the above reasons, the NYA college work-aid program was one of the most successful New Deal projects.

Despite the excellent track record of the NYA, however, women received only 225,000 jobs out of the 620,000 given from 1935 to 1943.⁸⁶ In most schools, as at the University of Kentucky, men received nearly three jobs to every one given to women. Nationally, however, there were only 1.4 men to every woman in college during the 1930s.⁸⁷ Women in the depression probably needed financial aid just as much as, or more than, the men did because many families could not or would not help them through school. Thus, discrimination in the area of NYA jobs was a further example of how women received less than their fair share of educational assistance in the 1930s.

While students were necessarily concerned about the depression and their studies, some time was available to devote to student activities. Many of the organizations that existed at the coeducational schools, however, reinforced the gulf between the sexes. Further, the social life and the mores at both types of institutions tended to guide women towards marriage, even more so than had been the case in the 1920s.

At the women's colleges, activities became quite popular because few had the money to spend on off-campus diversions.⁸⁸ In general, it can be said that women who attended women's schools had a much higher level of participation in activities than did women at coeducational institutions, for the simple reason that they were not competing against men for positions.

While not as many activities existed then as do today, there was a wide variety from which to choose at women's colleges. One organization prevalent on every campus was student

85 Omar C. Held, "Does NYA Work Affect the Academic Record of College Students?", *School and Society* 50 (5 August 1939): 192.

86 See Ware, 57; and U.S., Federal Security Agency, 54.

87 Ware, 57-58.

88 Virginia C. Gildersleeve, "A Dean's Portrait of the College Girl," *New York Times*, 4 February 1934, sec. 6, p. 7.

government. Since this organization was responsible for making the rules for the dormitories, a position in it was desirable and powerful.⁸⁹ Another organization at many women's colleges was the radical club. While it is true that radical groups existed and flourished at these schools, they involved less than five percent of the student body.⁹⁰ In addition, groups like Vassar's "Daisy Chain Radicals" were not as concerned with new economic systems as they were with defeating restrictions on institutions receiving financial aid from the state and aiding poverty-stricken regions of the United States during their summer vacations.⁹¹ Choir, literary clubs, and art clubs thrived during the depression as many women took fine and liberal arts courses.⁹² Publications also commanded the attention of a large number of women. One of the most interesting projects undertaken in this area was *The Student Internationalist* which combined the efforts of girls from five of the Seven Sisters, besides those from Sarah Lawrence and Connecticut College. It was concerned with events in Europe and reflected the students' desire to keep up with current events.⁹³

At the women's colleges, not much emphasis was placed on team sports; individual sports such as golf, swimming, riding, and tennis prevailed.⁹⁴ Part of the reason for the lack of interest in team sports must certainly have been that college administrators did not encourage competitiveness among women. Rather than having intercollegiate track and swimming competitions at a single site, each athlete would race either the clock or her teammates at her own school. The best times in the various contests were then telegraphed to a central location

89 Mabel Barbee Lee, "Censoring the Conduct of College Women," *Atlantic Monthly* 145 (April 1930): 445.

90 Gildersleeve, 7.

91 "Youth in College," 158.

92 Eunice Fuller Barnard, "The New Freedom of the College Girl," *New York Times*, 19 March 1933, sec. 6, p. 5.

93 Barnard, "A New American College Girl Emerges," *New York Times*, 12 March 1933, sec. 6, p. 5.

94 Barnard, "The New Freedom," p. 9.

which compiled the results and announced the winners.⁹⁵ In the same vein, some colleges conducted "play days," in which girls from different schools were grouped together on teams to de-emphasize school rivalries while others held "sports days," in which players did represent their colleges but were not told the final outcome of the various competitions until days or weeks later.⁹⁶

Women's colleges often lacked sororities completely, primarily because of inadequate housing but also because the college, particularly if it was one of the Seven Sisters, had its own prestige to offer the girls.⁹⁷ The colleges also wanted to breed some degree of independence in their charges; as a result, such social clubs were discouraged by the administration. Nevertheless, some of those attending women's colleges in the 1930s obviously succeeded in obtaining leadership positions on campus. Not surprisingly, then, women in these colleges participated in much the same activities their predecessors had in the 1920s.

At coeducational schools, on the other hand, women had difficulty gaining leadership in any activity in which the men dominated. At the University of Kentucky, for example, the Women's Self-Government Association (made up of the presidents of the residence halls) existed until 1939, when it merged with the men's group; by doing so the women lost many leadership positions.⁹⁸ The language clubs and honoraries were open to women as was the women's glee club, the Young Women's Christian Association, and the campus newspaper, the *Kernel*, but most of the chief positions went to men as they did on other campuses.⁹⁹

Women's sports at the coeducational level, while more team-oriented than women's college athletics, suffered from

⁹⁵ Barnard, "A New American," p. 4.

⁹⁶ Ware, 61.

⁹⁷ Newcomer, 124.

⁹⁸ Interview with Ann Ford.

⁹⁹ See Frances Jewell McVey Papers, Box 16, file 118, University of Kentucky, Lexington, and interview with Dr. Jacqueline Bull.

administrative influence in the 1930s. Sarah B. Holmes, the assistant dean of women at the University of Kentucky, remembered that Sarah Blanding, the dean of women, wanted to withdraw the women from interschool competition and place more emphasis on intramurals because they would be more "ladylike," even though she herself had been a varsity player while in college.¹⁰⁰ Ellen Baxter not only participated in the Women's Athletic Association (intramurals), but she also lettered in varsity field hockey.¹⁰¹ She was an exception, however, as most women seemed content to cheer on the male football and basketball teams. The admiration shown for the assertive women in the 1920s was gone, replaced by the ladylike deportment of women spectators. Indeed, as Mabel Newcomer noted, leadership by women was decreasing significantly.¹⁰²

Sororities, unlike women's sports on coeducational campuses, flourished during the depression, although they had gained some popularity in the 1920s. Sororities took the place of women's community service clubs of the early 1900s; they also were a mark of social status.¹⁰³ Pauline Kael, who attended Berkeley, remembered the power both the fraternities and sororities held; they helped to stamp out radical organizations on campus.¹⁰⁴ Bull, a Zeta Tau Alpha at the University of Kentucky, echoed Kael's reference to the power of the fraternities and sororities, noting that even though the members were a minority on campus, they held most of the offices. However, she withdrew from her sorority after spending a year out of school, mentioning racial and religious biases as the reason for her decision.¹⁰⁵ Ann Ford was a Tri Delta, but she was not

100 Taped interview with Sarah B. Holmes, 508 East Main Street, Lexington, Kentucky, 28 February 1978. Alumni/Faculty Oral History Project, University of Kentucky, Lexington.

101 Interview with Ellen Baxter.

102 Newcomer, 63.

103 Woloch, 405.

104 Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pocket Books, 1978), 398-99.

105 Interview with Dr. Jacqueline Bull.

involved with the sorority as much since she lived at home.¹⁰⁶ Still, the ability to get in the right sorority became especially important in the 1930s because sororities emphasized being "the girl who is popular with the men."¹⁰⁷

The emphasis on being popular was not lost on girls at either type of institution. As mentioned above, the hard realities of the depression fostered the need for a sense of emotional security found in the nuclear family, and as a result women in college often felt the pressure from parents and peers to get married.¹⁰⁸

From the turn of the century to the 1920s, women had seen college as preparation for a rewarding career. During that time, many women chose to stay single and devote themselves to their occupations, a practice condoned by society.¹⁰⁹ The 1920s and its sexual revolution changed this perception. Automobiles became trysting places for many young Americans. During the decade, spinsters began to be ridiculed as sexually frustrated women who channeled their energies into their careers. People did not shrink from labeling these women as lesbians.¹¹⁰ Consequently, young women eagerly jumped at the chance of learning the feminine graces and contemplated marriage soon after college to avoid the social stigma of being an old maid. Thus it was that *Fortune* reported in 1936, "Fifteen years ago, when college girls sat up to the late hours of the night, they talked about careers and living their own lives. . . . Today, the prospect of marriage and children is popular again."¹¹¹

Although one would think that the women attending women's schools would have some reluctance to put their education and career aside for marriage and motherhood, such was not the case. In fact, the women at these institutions were perhaps

106 Interview with Ann Ford.

107 Barnard, "Our Colleges," 5.

108 Banner, 192-94.

109 Ware, 64.

110 See *ibid.*, 65-66; and Frank Stricker, "Cookbooks and Law Books: The Hidden History of Career Women in Twentieth Century America," *Journal of Social History* 10 (Fall 1976): 1-19.

111 "Youth in College," 156.

under more pressure than girls attending coeducational colleges. Eighty-three percent of Bryn Mawr students in 1932 ranked marriage above careers.¹¹² The independence these schools tried to nurture within the girls was ground down by society's view of women graduates who did not marry. Men labeled them, for example, as either neurotics or insatiable man-chasers.¹¹³ Graduates of the institutions themselves complained that their college years made them "frigid."¹¹⁴ They also noted that the environment increased homosexual tendencies among some of their number.¹¹⁵ One man went so far as to call these women "pseudo-males," just waiting for a chance to assert their feminist sentiments.¹¹⁶ Not wanting to undergo such ridicule, most of these women did not hesitate to forego a career for matrimony.

Women at coeducational colleges were not much better off. Indeed, many wound up in these institutions not only to receive an education but also to learn to relegate themselves to the second-class status their parents were sure they would face in the real world. Liberal arts curriculums were therefore encouraged, since they would prepare the woman for her domestic role.¹¹⁷ The results of such socialization were evident when a woman attending Oberlin admitted, "I hope my job will be so engrossing . . . that it will be a hard pull to leave it for marriage."¹¹⁸ How sad women such as her considered marriage a mandatory sentence and thought that independence could only last a few years before being traded in for a wedding gown and submission to a husband's will. Studies were even done showing that college women had fewer children than those who did not attend college, a conclusion which subtly attempted

112 Eunice Fuller Barnard, "The College Girl Puts Marriage First," *New York Times*, 2 April 1933, sec. 6, p. 8.

113 Wolfe, 167.

114 Evans and Folsom, 86.

115 Ibid.

116 Little, 146.

117 May F. McElravy, "Your Daughter Against a Man's World," *Better Homes and Gardens* 18 (June 1940): 70-71.

118 Barnard, "The College Girl," 9.

to prove that women college graduates were not carrying their share of the burden of replenishing the population.¹¹⁹ As Ellen Baxter put it, "Girls were supposed to get married and have babies."¹²⁰ Thus, a great deal of pressure was put on women at both types of colleges to get married rather than pursue careers.

Since a large number of women graduates chose marriage, fewer of them were competing for careers during the depression. Even so, single women graduates found it difficult to break into almost any career in the 1930s. For married and older women, the job market was even bleaker.

A woman's main problem in the job market during the 1930s was the attitude of employers that men, as the providers for most families, should be hired rather than women. Although this stance hurt single women's chances at obtaining employment, it all but obliterated the married woman's chances. Many employers fired all female married employees.¹²¹ In a study of women's employment during the depression, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) found that twenty-one percent of 8,796 women attending college from 1925 to 1935 had been unemployed at least once during the depression. In addition, twenty-five percent of married women were unemployed in 1935.¹²²

Yet eighty percent of the women who wanted jobs found them during the 1930s. This was because women were willing to take salary cuts and work in fields other than those they had majored in during college. Employers would naturally hire cheaper labor.¹²³ Thus, salary reductions for women ran from forty to sixty percent.¹²⁴ The federal government aggravated this situation. Fully twenty-five percent of the National Recovery

119 Willystine Goodsell, "The Size of Families of College and Non-College Women," *American Journal of Sociology* 41 (March 1936): 589.

120 Interview with Ellen Baxter.

121 Banner, 186.

122 See "Economic Status of University Women," *Monthly Labor Review* 50 (February 1940): 345-46.

123 Banner, 187.

124 See "Economic Status," 348; and Ware, 71.

Administration's codes allowed employers to discriminate against women by paying them lower salaries than men.¹²⁵ In 1930, the average salary of a female college graduate in a city with a population of 250,000 was \$2,631; by 1932, that figure had dropped to \$1,635.¹²⁶ Women were also paid less than men for equal work.¹²⁷ Some women were forced to take jobs outside of their majors, such as Pearl Anderson who, although she had a degree in teaching mathematics and chemistry, taught secretarial courses and became assistant registrar at Transylvania University.¹²⁸

During the 1930s, women did manage to make headway in three areas: medicine, law, and journalism. Despite such requirements as mandatory medical internships (to which access was restricted for women), women's numbers increased in this field. In 1930, they comprised 4.0 percent of those in medicine; by 1940, they made up 4.6 percent of those in the profession.¹²⁹ In the field of law, they made a smaller gain, increasing from 2.1 percent to 2.4 percent of the total. Women were usually relegated to settling divorce cases and drawing up wills, rarely finding their way into criminal or corporate firms.¹³⁰ The one profession in which they were allowed to excel was that of journalism. Eleanor Roosevelt broke open the field by holding press conferences for women only. Some women went on to executive journalism positions. For instance, Anne O'Hare McCormick was appointed to the *New York Times* editorial board in 1936 and won the Pulitzer prize in 1937, while Freda Kirchwey became the managing editor and publisher of the *Nation* in 1937.¹³¹

125 Banner, 185.

126 See Francis Cummings, "Earnings of College Women," *New York Times*, 15 November 1930, p. 16; and "Women Earn More If College Graduates," *New York Times*, 25 November 1932, p. 17.

127 Ware, 71.

128 Interview with Pearl Anderson.

129 Ware, 70, 73-74. For many informative tables on careers, see Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, *A Woman's Place: Options and Limits in Professional Careers* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971).

130 Ibid., 70, 73.

131 Ibid., 77-78.

For women in other fields, the situation was not nearly so promising. In 1931, Dean Mullins of Barnard requested that year's graduates to stay off the job market and go to graduate school so as not to compete with those already out of work.¹³² Such requests, combined with pressures to marry and salary cuts, caused the percentage of women in many occupations to level off or decline slightly.

In three professions, the percentage of women workers stayed the same or declined by a few points: nursing, social work, and library science. While women composed ninety-eight percent of the work force in nursing from 1930 to 1940, the number of student nurses employed by hospitals skyrocketed from 4,000 to 28,000, primarily because these institutions could not afford to pay regular salaries.¹³³ The number of women social workers declined from sixty-eight percent of the total in 1930 to sixty-seven percent in 1940. Although this decline was small, it can be attributed to three factors. First, social workers were resented during the depression as many families accepted relief for the first time in memory.¹³⁴ Second, because much of the work became administrative rather than casework, the profession received a large influx of men.¹³⁵ Third, a degree was now required to be a social worker.¹³⁶ Women in library science saw their participation in the field shrink from ninety-one percent of the profession in 1930 to eighty-nine percent in 1940.¹³⁷ Again, the requirement by most employers of a degree accounts for some of the loss, as does the demand for job experience.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, Baxter noted that there was a shortage of

132 "Asks Barnard Girls Not to Hunt for Jobs," *New York Times*, 3 January 1931, p. 18.

133 Ware, 70, 73.

134 *Ibid.*, 70, 74.

135 Jesse Shirley Bernard, *Academic Women* (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1964), 248.

136 Anne Peterson, "Girl Graduates Are Heartened by Outlook," *New York Times*, 14 May 1939, sec. 2, p. 4.

137 Ware, 70.

138 Eunice Fuller Barnard, "In the Classroom and on the Campus," *New York Times*, 14 February 1938, sec. 2, p. 7.

librarians in Kentucky. Consequently, she did not have to apply for her first job but was approached by the principal of Athens School. There, she not only supervised the library but taught physical education, mathematics, and French.¹³⁹ Similarly, Ann Ford was hired by the University of Kentucky's King Library and worked there for three years until her marriage.¹⁴⁰ It should be pointed out, however, that these women graduated in 1940 and 1939 when the pressure to get married immediately upon graduation had lessened somewhat.¹⁴¹

The fields in which women suffered their biggest setbacks during the depression were in teaching both at the public school and collegiate levels. As mentioned above, women were awarded eighteen percent of the doctorates conferred in 1930; by 1940 that figure had dropped thirteen percent. As the number of women Ph.D.'s fell, so did their chances in the job market. Women made up seventy-two percent of the faculty at women's colleges in 1940, largely because that was the only place they could teach. But even this field was being encroached upon as unemployed male professors found jobs at these colleges, which hired them to enhance institutional prestige.¹⁴² In addition, the "publish or perish" doctrine came into vogue, and women who prided themselves on their teaching abilities alone were at a disadvantage.¹⁴³ At the University of Kentucky, wives of professors could not teach; in fact, the school would not hire married women as professors.¹⁴⁴

Elementary and secondary school teachers were perhaps the hardest hit in the depression. From 1920 to 1940 the proportion of women teachers declined from eighty-five percent to seventy-eight percent. Many school districts not only required

139 Interview with Ellen Baxter.

140 Interview with Ann Ford.

141 Peterson, 4.

142 See Graham, 766; and Ware, 80-81. See also Bernard, 37.

143 Graham, 772.

144 Interview with Sarah B. Holmes.

higher degrees but also refused to hire married women.¹⁴⁵ Large disparities also occurred here; whereas men in 1939 earned an average salary of \$1,953, women earned only \$1,394. Furthermore, many school districts ran out of money, and teachers had to choose between working without pay or neglecting the education of children.¹⁴⁶

In brief, women pursuing a career in the 1930s met with frustration as men were hired before them whether they were more qualified or not. Furthermore, married women, regardless of their level of education, were the subject of much discrimination and often could not find jobs.

From the preceding discussion, it is obvious that college women lost ground in the 1930s. College administrators denigrated their ability to succeed in careers other than homemaking, and the curriculums, while reflecting a broadening social consciousness, often did not offer women career skills. Women were discouraged from going to college by parents who thought it was a waste of time and money if their daughters were just going to marry anyway. Federal funding for college students favored men by a ratio of 2.76 to one, although the population ratio was only 1.4 men to every woman nationwide. If a woman did manage to leap the financial hurdle, she found she could rarely obtain campus leadership positions unless she went to a women's college. Furthermore, she experienced a great deal of pressure to marry, a course of growing popularity in the 1920s which had become even more imperative with the onset of the depression and the ensuing need for financial and emotional security. Those who did pursue careers (with the exception of doctors, lawyers, and journalists) were rewarded with the prospects of fewer jobs and salary cuts. Consequently, women in the 1930s with the dream of getting a solid education

145 See Ware, 71; and Stricker, 10.

146 Chafe, *The American Woman*, 61. I have neglected to mention office work, in which twenty-five percent of the women employed found jobs, because there is a dearth of material on the subject. But see Ware, 67, 74.

and realizing their potential in a vocation were usually frustrated. How sad that many brilliant minds, oppressed by the sex discrimination that flourished during the Great Depression, were not given the chance to develop. How terrible to have the capacity to do something one enjoys and to be denied the opportunity. This was the tragic reality for college women in the 1930s.