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Mingling Promiscuously: A History of Women and Men at Harvard

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Mingling Promiscuously

A History of Women and Men at Harvard

Drew Gilpin Faust

I am Drew Faust, dean of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study and professor of history in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.¹ I am here because in October 1999 Radcliffe College merged with Harvard University. Radcliffe, which was founded in the late nineteenth century to give women access to a Harvard education, has now evolved into an Institute for Advanced Study, and Harvard College has fully integrated women and men within its undergraduate body. Unlike women students accepted before 1999, none of you was admitted to “Harvard-Radcliffe”; unlike women who graduated before 1999, none of you will have the signature of a Radcliffe president on your diplomas. You all, women and men alike, will receive the same piece of paper when you graduate on June 9, 2005.

You are enacting a new twenty-first-century chapter in the long and complicated history of women and men at Harvard University. But you are also the heirs of a past that has profoundly shaped this university and that will, inevitably, have an influence on your experience here. I am by training and temperament a historian, so I tend always to see the past as prologue. I arrived here only last January after 25 years of teaching at the University of Pennsylvania to become the first dean of the newly reconfigured Radcliffe--no longer an independent college but now one of Harvard’s ten schools. In the months

since, I have been repeatedly struck by the relevance of Radcliffe and Harvard's past to where we find ourselves today. I want to share a little of that past with you--so you see not just the Harvard of 2001 as you wander its paths and corridors and sit in its classrooms. I hope that history will bring another dimension to your understanding of your environment, a dimension that will enable you not only to appreciate the lives of those who preceded you, but more fully to understand your own role as pioneers of a new order, of a new set of relationships between women and men at Harvard.

Harvard College's evolution into the coeducational undergraduate institution it is today is unique; it has followed a path unlike that of any other college or university in the United States. When it opened in 1636, it was, of course, designed exclusively for the education of men. But that did not mean that the Harvard community did not from the outset include women: women who swept the halls, cleaned the rooms, even women who offered the College support through donations and legacies. Harvard has never been a womanless place--though for too long, as Laurel Ulrich of the History Department has noted, it has had a womanless history.

By the nineteenth century, women's rights and women's access to higher education had become significant social questions, and females began actively to seek admission as Harvard students. A woman applied to the Medical School in 1847. The dean assured Harvard's governing body, the Corporation, that she was old and unattractive enough not to disrupt the male students' concentration, but she was still denied a place. Just two years later, Sarah Pellet sought admission to the College.

President Jared Sparks replied to her directly: “I should doubt,” he wrote, “whether a solitary female, mingling as she must do promiscuously with so large a number of the other sex, would find her situation either agreeable or advantageous.”

In the decades that followed Sarah Pellet’s disappointment, the expansion of higher education for women in the United States was dramatic. Oberlin had been path-breaking in admitting women in 1837; Mount Holyoke Seminary was founded the same year; Vassar opened in 1865 as a college exclusively for women; Cornell accepted an endowment for a college for women in 1872; Smith and Wellesley opened for women students in 1875. These developments did not go unnoticed in Cambridge, where a group of women--wives, daughters, and sisters of its highly educated elite--became increasingly vocal about their desire to partake of Harvard’s intellectual riches.

Harvard spoke and would continue to speak out firmly against coeducation. Charles W. Eliot, who became the university’s president in 1869 and remained in office for 40 years, established his position in his inaugural address, declaring that the policing of hundreds of young men and women of marriageable age would be impossible. He had doubts, moreover, about what he called the “natural mental capacities” of the female sex. Harvard would not follow the coeducational example of Oberlin. But neither would the Cambridge supporters of women’s education model their efforts on Wellesley or Smith. Their hopes for eventual integration with Harvard led them to invent a different structure.

Since early in the nineteenth century, individual women had, under a variety of informal arrangements, gained entrance to some lectures at Harvard College, and this may have fueled an appetite for greater access. In 1872 a group of Cambridge and Boston

ladies formed the Woman's Education Association and invited President Eliot to a meeting to consider women's admission to Harvard.

Eliot's opposition to coeducation was unyielding, and he cited reasons that ranged from the already overcrowded state of the College to the violation of moral and religious tenets. The discussion about coeducation at Harvard during these years extended well beyond the president, as students and faculty articulated the principles of manliness that they regarded as the essence of the College's identity. Barrett Wendell, professor of English, proclaimed that there must be no deviation from the tenet that had ruled since the founding of the College in 1636: "that the influences amid which education should be obtained here must remain purely virile." Even more than an "institution of learning," Harvard was, he affirmed, "a traditional school of manly character." The *Crimson* described coeducation as "a dangerous tendency in American society," best left to the likes of Oberlin, Cornell, and Boston University and resisted by elite schools like Yale and Harvard. The *Harvard Graduates Magazine* was gratified that the university was not being "incautious" by precipitously embracing women's education. It noted with approval that Harvard was in fact "behind most of the great colleges in the world" on the question, for "so much had been accomplished for women's education almost everywhere else." This tone of seeming wistfulness belied the pride in Harvard's judicious conservatism that infused the essay.

Under the leadership of Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, widow of the distinguished Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz, the women proposed a compromise, officially titled "Private Collegiate Instruction for Women" but popularly known as "the Annex." Women

students would be taught by Harvard professors in classes and lectures given in addition to their regular obligations to the College. Opening in 1879, the Annex came to offer 20 or 30 courses a year, less than a quarter of the number at Harvard, to a population of young women drawn overwhelmingly from the local area. Elizabeth Agassiz regarded the arrangements as a temporary measure and continued to work for the full admission of women to Harvard, even raising funds to present as an endowment to cover costs associated with the adoption of coeducation. But Harvard remained resistant.

By 1890 the Annex had grown to more than 200 students, had acquired Fay House, the building in which my office is located, and required a more regularized structure. In 1893 the Annex offered Harvard its real estate and \$150,000 as a lure to merge, but as a Harvard faculty member later wrote, this had small influence. The Annex, he explained, “had nothing to offer Harvard but girls, whom Harvard did not want.”

Thus, in 1894, Radcliffe College was born--as a compromise between what women wanted and what Harvard would give them, as an alternative to the two prevailing models of coeducation and separate women’s institutions. Radcliffe College would educate women by contracting with individual Harvard faculty to provide instruction, would offer its own diplomas, to be countersigned by Harvard’s president, and would be subjected in academic matters to the supervision of “visitors” from Harvard. Elizabeth Agassiz was pleased with this outcome and became Radcliffe’s first president, firmly believing that the College over which she presided was a temporary expedient and that women would soon be admitted as full students to Harvard. She would have more than a century to wait.

One of the peculiar results of the arrangements agreed upon in 1894 to establish Radcliffe was that the new college would never have a faculty. Radcliffe was structured as an administrative rather than an academic unit. This also meant that its students were not exposed to female instructors, for the Harvard faculty had no women at all before the arrival of Helen Maud Cam in 1948. By 1919, 100 percent of Barnard's faculty were women; 55 percent of Bryn Mawr's, 80 percent of Vassar's, 82 percent of Wellesley's, 30 percent at coed Swarthmore, and 29 percent at Oberlin. But all of the 185 Harvard instructors who offered courses at Radcliffe that year were male and crossed Garden Street to deliver their lectures in Radcliffe classrooms filled exclusively with women. Ruth Hubbard, an accomplished scientist who graduated from Radcliffe in 1944, remarked on the implications of this dependence upon Harvard faculty for instruction. "From the beginning," she mused, "Radcliffe apparently failed to recognize that, by proudly offering its students the privilege to sit at the feet of Harvard's Great Men, it failed to awaken in us the expectation that we might someday be Great Women."

In fact, Ruth Hubbard did become a "Great Woman" and did witness at the end of her undergraduate life the beginnings of a revolution. The outbreak of World War II depleted the numbers of both Harvard students and faculty. To offer separate instruction for women and men seemed wasteful under such circumstances, and so in 1943 Harvard and Radcliffe signed an agreement that brought males and females together in all but a few freshman classes. Radcliffe also ceased making individual arrangements with dozens of Harvard professors, each paid individually for his time teaching women. Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences undertook to supervise course offerings and assign

instructors in exchange for approximately four-fifths of Radcliffe's tuition revenue. Originally cast as a war emergency measure, this arrangement was ratified as permanent in 1947. But Harvard was careful not to call this new departure coeducation. It was instead "Joint Instruction." One Harvard official celebrated this distinction in a 1949 interview, noting that the continuation of Harvard's and Radcliffe's separate extracurricular activities, separate living arrangements, and separate administrative structures meant that men and women would be spared, as he put it, "each other's oppressive continuous presence."

Nevertheless, the changes in the place of women during the war years at Harvard were profound, reflecting in part women's altered role in American society during a time of mass mobilization and world upheaval. But popular wisdom at Harvard offered a different explanation. In 1949, just a year after his graduation from the College, Anthony Lewis, whom you know as one of *The New York Times*' most distinguished columnists, wrote a piece about women at Harvard. Change, he explained, had been aided by a transformation in the girls themselves. Before the war, he noted, one frequently heard the saying, "Is she a Radcliffe girl, or did a horse step on her face?" By the late 1940s, he observed, "everyone agrees that Radcliffe girls are prettier than they used to be. This has an effect on Harvard's attitude." Such perceptions were both widely shared and long-lived. In 1962, a Harvard faculty member remarked in similar terms upon the improvement at Radcliffe. "When I first came to Cambridge [as an undergraduate]," he remembered, "there were four certifiably good looking girls at Radcliffe. By the time I had graduated from College there were nine. By the time I had finished graduate

school there were seventeen and the number had started to increase geometrically.”

But Harvard remained averse to coeducation, even as more and more of student life became merged in the postwar years. While this opened many new opportunities for Radcliffe students, it also undermined many independent women’s activities. As women joined the *Crimson* and the Harvard yearbook staff, Radcliffe’s publications weakened or disappeared. And many central aspects of Harvard undergraduate life still remained closed to women. Radcliffe students were not part of the Harvard house system. They lived in dorms, without common rooms, without resident tutors, without faculty regularly present at meals. Unlike Harvard students, they were required to wait tables in the dining halls; they were governed by dress codes that mandated skirts for most of daily life. They were not permitted in morning chapel in Memorial Church; they could not study at [the undergraduate library] Lamont--because, the head librarian explained, echoing Charles W. Eliot’s worries of the late nineteenth century, there were too many dark corridors and alcoves to police. Women would not be permitted in Lamont permanently until 1967.

A member of the Class of 1952 reflected on these postwar days at the time of her thirty-fifth reunion. “I am increasingly aware now of what we as women were deprived of then--of what we couldn’t join or do or go to. We were intelligent, amusing, decorative second-class citizens, educated for lives as wives, teachers, and secretaries, but rarely for careers of our own choice. It is astonishing how accepting we were.” It was much as Virginia Woolf had described the Oxbridge of a generation earlier: “Partridge for the men; prunes and custard for the women.”

But the acceptance and complacency of the 1950s would prove short-lived. In 1960 a new president came to Radcliffe, the first woman president of the postwar era, Mary Bunting, a scientist and a former dean of Douglass College at Rutgers University. Bunting was filled with plans and energy, decrying in her first meeting with the Radcliffe board of trustees the waste of educated women in a society that did not honor and make use of their accomplishments. Bunting identified a “climate of unexpectation” for women that led her to found the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study for postgraduate women--the real forerunner of the Institute that exists today. Throughout her tenure, she struggled as well for greater opportunities for women in undergraduate life. Bunting endeavored to establish a Radcliffe counterpart of the house system, though architectural realities and limited funds inhibited its emergence. Nevertheless, Currier House, the first structure erected specifically as a Radcliffe house, opened in 1970 as one outcome of her efforts.

Bunting’s desire to ensure that Radcliffe’s women had an educational experience equal to that of Harvard’s men contributed to a number of significant changes during her term. Emerging consciousness about women’s issues nationwide and growing pressure for coeducation at schools--like Yale and Princeton--that Harvard did regard as its peers contributed to the power of demands for change. In 1963 women students for the first time received Harvard diplomas, and by 1970 Harvard and Radcliffe had joined their commencement ceremonies. The same year saw an experiment in coresidence with an exchange between the river houses and the Quad; by 1972, living became completely integrated as women moved into the freshman dorms in the Yard. A Harvard alumnus of

the class of 1933 greeted this innovation with the declaration that Harvard had torn “down the scheme set up by the civilized to govern the relations between the sexes. . . . Civilization is dead.”

Despite vocal opposition from many Radcliffe as well as Harvard alums, by the late 1960s Bunting had come to feel that the merger of the two institutions should and could be accomplished. Bunting and Harvard president Nathan Pusey optimistically undertook a series of discussions, but she would not realize her goal. Radcliffe’s trustees insisted upon a slowing of the movement toward consolidation of the two institutions, and Radcliffe’s alumnae voiced their concern that an irrevocable merger might leave Radcliffe without the flexibility to respond to rapidly changing notions about the place of women in higher education. Was the sweeping national movement toward coeducation perhaps just a passing trend? In 1971 these reservations yielded the curious set of arrangements that came to be known as the “nonmerger merger,” an agreement between Harvard and Radcliffe that placed women’s residential life under Harvard’s direction, Radcliffe’s employees subject to Harvard’s personnel administration, and most of Radcliffe’s income under Harvard’s control.

Significantly, the task force President Pusey had appointed to advise him about the merger also submitted recommendations that extended beyond the question of Radcliffe to address the larger place of women in the university. The report called for the “full and equal participation in the intellectual and social life of the University by women in roles other than as students--as faculty members, as alumnae, and as members of the Governing Boards.” In 1970, there were no tenured women in the Faculty of Arts and

Sciences; by 1975, there were nine. In 1971 FAS created a committee to report on the status of women. The woman question at Harvard was becoming more than just about Radcliffe. Faculty hiring lay entirely outside Radcliffe's purview, as did curricular questions, which attracted increasing attention as other colleges and universities began to offer courses in women's studies. A 1974 survey of the Harvard course catalogue revealed that only four courses in more than 650 pages of course offerings were described as relating to women. A 1975 poll of chairs of 14 departments about the possibility of including women's studies in their offerings prompted one faculty member to respond that his department did not offer any relevant courses--but also had no classes dedicated to the study of "cannibals, children, or veterans of foreign wars." Eleven years later, the faculty would at last establish the Committee on Degrees in Women's Studies, permitting students to select women's studies as a field of concentration.

Growing sentiment in favor of the equality of women had a direct impact on Harvard and Radcliffe throughout the 1970s. Some of these effects occurred in response to national imperatives such as the passage of Title IX and the consequent revolution in women's sports everywhere. For Radcliffe students, Title IX meant an almost complete transformation of athletic opportunities, including access to Harvard gyms and playing fields, professional coaching, and a far more competitive atmosphere for varsity sports. Equality had other implications as well. Radcliffe's size had been limited by an agreement between the two institutions, so that the ratio of undergraduates at the beginning of the 1970s was approximately four men for every women student. This meant that it was in fact much more difficult to get into Radcliffe than into Harvard. In

the late 1950s, Harvard was accepting more than 40 percent of its applicants, while Radcliffe took only 18 percent. The deans' lists reflected this differential, with the proportion of Radcliffe students qualifying in the early years of the 1960s nearly half again as large as the proportion of Harvard undergraduates. President Derek Bok, who replaced Nathan Pusey, and President Matina Horner, who succeeded Mary Bunting in the early 1970s, recognized that these quotas for women represented a form of discrimination and contributed to a student environment in which men predominated by sheer force of numbers. In 1972 Bok determined that the ratio should be changed to 2.5 men to each woman, and in 1975 Harvard and Radcliffe admissions merged and adopted an equal access policy for all applicants regardless of gender.

By the end of the 1970s, Radcliffe had ceded to Harvard every formal responsibility for undergraduate life. The Radcliffe name was still on the letter of admission for women students, and the president of Radcliffe countersigned women's diplomas. But most women undergraduates proudly described themselves as Harvard students--embracing the identity that Elizabeth Agassiz, Mary Bunting, and many others had so long struggled to make possible.

Radcliffe College began to redirect its efforts toward postgraduate and research endeavors dealing with questions related to women. The Schlesinger Library, established in 1943, found new prominence as the growing field of women's history made its extraordinary manuscript and book collections a treasured resource. The Murray Research Center, an archive of longitudinal social science studies, was founded in 1976 and has also become a highly valued collection for students and scholars. The fellowship

program Mary Bunting established in 1960 to fight the climate of “unexpectedness” for women has produced an extraordinary array of scholars and artists--including Adrienne Rich and Anne Sexton, dramatist Anna Deavere Smith, novelist Alice Walker and historians Linda Gordon and Caroline Bynum. But Radcliffe still called itself a college, and its administrators, trustees, and alumnae worried that, without Radcliffe’s oversight and support, women students would not be adequately cared for at Harvard. Radcliffe thus continued to offer an array of services and programs for undergraduates. Students who gathered in Radcliffe’s Lyman Common Room or who received summer traveling fellowships or joined together in the Science Alliance or drew strength from the Mentor Program or became advocates for women through involvement with the Radcliffe Union of Students developed deep loyalties to Radcliffe College. But many women undergraduates of the 1980s and early 1990s had no connection with Radcliffe at all, and even feared that such an identity would somehow brand them as second-class citizens.

By the late 1990s, however, the anomaly of a college that bore almost no responsibility for the day-to-day operations of undergraduate life led to another consideration of merger. This time, nearly 30 years after the “nonmerger merger,” Harvard and Radcliffe would finally join, in many ways ratifying the *fait accompli* of integration of men and women in the student body and the emerging emphasis at Radcliffe on postdoctoral research. The merger agreement of 1999 ended Radcliffe’s existence as a separate, independent corporation and established it as one of ten Harvard schools, led by a dean who participates fully with deans of the other faculties in the governance of the university. Radcliffe is now fully inside Harvard’s gates. The merger

agreement also specified that all responsibility for the lives of women undergraduates would now rest with Harvard College. Neil Rudenstine, the Harvard president who negotiated the merger with the Radcliffe board of trustees, proclaimed Harvard's "full commitment to women" and its dedication to "making sure undergraduate education is excellent both for women and men." Radcliffe, in turn, would become an Institute for Advanced Study, a place where individuals pursue learning at its outermost limits, creating new knowledge in every field from poetry to string physics. And the Institute, in recognition of Radcliffe's past, would maintain a special commitment to the study of women, gender, and society.

What does all this history that I have recounted mean for you as you set forth on your Harvard career? Why do I think it matters that you know about Radcliffe's past and about the history of women at Harvard? I want you to think of yourselves as pioneers, adventurers at the beginning of a time of transformation, members of just the second class in which women and men received the same letter of admission. You enter an institution that has made a commitment to the equality of all members of the community, regardless of gender; this is a university that has articulated its dedication to the success of every student, male or female. But I invoke the past today to remind you that such commitments are not deeply rooted in Harvard's history, that they require a transformation rather than an extension of tradition, and that such transformation requires work and attentiveness. An institution that less than a century ago defined itself as an incubator for virility is still working out how fully to incorporate women.

Linda Greenhouse, class of 1968, now *The New York Times*' Supreme Court reporter, commented on women's experience at Harvard when she was a student here more than three decades ago. "The basic fact of our existence within the Harvard community was that we were not the norm. We were the deviation from the norm." In her day, with the 4:1 male to female ratio, that was literally as well as figuratively true. But I would suggest to you that Harvard is still in transition to a state in which men are not the norm, a norm that has been defined in no small part by the weight of Harvard tradition and expectation and culture as well as by the realities of Harvard life today. I am the only woman among Harvard's ten deans. That certainly makes me some kind of deviation from the norm. Undergraduate women's numbers are at last almost equal to those of the men--women comprise 48 percent of this year's entering class. But the faculty that will teach you still has only 17 percent women among its tenured ranks. All of this is happily changing: 46 percent of new tenured appointments to the faculty in Arts and Sciences this year are women. And remember that as recently as 1970 women comprised zero percent of the tenured faculty. Both history and present-day reality define Harvard as a work in progress on the gender question.

This means we have extraordinary opportunities and responsibilities. As dean of Radcliffe, I can see myriad ways in which the Institute can make a difference for women and thus for all of us at Harvard. We can help increase the numbers of women faculty, the quality of their experience, the excellence and importance of gender studies at the university, and the richness of undergraduate intellectual life as well.

But you too must take advantage of this extraordinary moment at Harvard--must as both women and men affirm your equal right to be the norm, to define Harvard as being a woman's as much as a man's space. To do that, I believe you must understand not only the Harvard world you see most immediately before you but also the history that has produced it. When you hear--in this most wonderfully tradition-bound institution--that something is because it has always been that way, take a moment to ask which of the past's assumptions are embedded in that particular tradition. If men and women are to be truly equal at Harvard, not all traditions can be viewed as equal.

Women and men have both been at this university from the time it was founded. As women and men together at last in a truly coeducational institution, you all reap the benefits of the strivings of those--from Sarah Pellet to Elizabeth Agassiz to Mary Bunting to Neil Rudenstine--who worked to make a Harvard education fully available to both sexes. Celebrate what they accomplished and fulfill their aspirations by claiming Harvard as at last truly the property of men and women alike.

This essay derives from a lecture delivered in Fall 2001 to the Harvard Class of 2005 at the invitation of the Ann Radcliffe Trust, Harvard College, printed in the *Radcliffe Quarterly* (Winter 2002).

Editor's note: Things sometimes change rapidly. Ellen Condliffe Lagemann became dean of the School of Education in 2002 and Elena Kagan became dean of the Harvard Law School in July 2003.

