The Douglass Century

Christ, Carol T., Perrone, Fernanda, Hawkesworth, Mary, Denda, Kayo

Published by Rutgers University Press

Christ, Carol T., et al.
The Douglass Century: Transformation of the Women’s College at Rutgers University.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/63181.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/63181

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2249691
One hundred years ago, fifty-four women students stepped into the halls of the New Jersey College for Women (NJC). They were seeking something uncommon in that day—but something long overdue—the opportunity for public higher education. They were pioneers, and their legacy is a long and unbroken line of women leaders. Since that day, Douglass has given us one hundred years of excellence, one hundred years of opportunity, and one hundred years of access. The founders of NJC, the members of the New Jersey State Federation of Women’s Clubs, were committed to creating a great public institution of learning for women. And thanks to countless faculty, staff, alumnae, donors, students, and administrators over the years, that’s exactly what they achieved.

The Douglass Century takes us through an uncommon journey. Douglass has undergone many changes in its long history, some driven internally and others externally. Ours is a history of opportunities and challenges and, most of all, adaptation, resilience, and innovation. All through its history, Douglass has provided education that fits with its originating mission—to create the best education for women in the nation.

The New Jersey State Federation of Women’s Clubs saw a clear need for public education and broader access in New Jersey, revealing a vision well ahead of its time. Yet even at NJC, exclusions occurred, as Jewish and Catholic women were tracked for religion and African Americans by racial status, leading to exclusions from admittance and marginalization at NJC itself.

The landscape of higher education has changed dramatically over the course of the past one hundred years, creating new challenges and opportunities to advance women’s education both at Rutgers and nationwide. Since the middle of the twentieth century, higher education has come to be understood as a lever for equal opportunity across a broad spectrum of the population. The past sixty years alone have seen the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, Title IX, Black Lives Matter, and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), all resulting in new access to higher education. The coeducation system exploded in the late 1960s and
AFTERWORD

early 1970s, admitting women to the most elite institutions in the country and later to virtually all colleges and universities. The numbers of students enrolling in post-secondary education has grown from four million in 1960 to more than eighteen million in 2012. Nearly 80 percent of all high school graduates will enter college, although far fewer will graduate.

The system of universal education and the coeducational movement have affected the status of women’s colleges and women’s education. Today, women constitute the majority of students on campuses across the county, both in undergraduate and in some graduate and professional schools. Over the past one hundred years, the nation’s undergraduate population has become more diverse in gender, age, faith, race/ethnicity, geographic and economic background, and ability. In the future, we expect that people of color will become the majority of students in our higher education system. Douglass now is among the most diverse entities at Rutgers, which is one of the most diverse universities in the country.

Given the value—if not the full achievement—of universal education and the radical increase in the numbers of women attending institutions of higher education, do we still need women’s colleges? “Is it time,” as Agnes Scott College president Elizabeth Kiss asked in 2015, “for us to declare victory in the fight for women’s equal educational opportunity and let women’s colleges go the way of buggies and white gloves?”

Kiss responds, as I do, with a resounding no. Women’s colleges, born in the nineteenth century, have seen a decline—from 260 in 1960 to fewer than 40 today. The coeducation movement has opened up opportunities to women that were unheard of when NJC opened. Yet women’s colleges continue to have a central place in the higher education landscape.

Women’s colleges today lead four-year institutions in the percentage gain of African American, first-generation, and lower-income students and boast higher graduation rates for women of color. In comparison with coeducational institutions, women’s colleges provide students with greater opportunities for participation in leadership, build higher self-esteem in their students, and provide better preparation for women’s first jobs. Graduates of women’s colleges display more confidence and leadership skills, higher levels of social and historical awareness, and a greater tendency to engage in nonprofit work and are twice as likely to earn a graduate degree compared with graduates of flagship public universities. Women’s colleges today represent less than 1 percent of all women undergraduates, but our graduates are highly represented in the leadership ranks across the country.

Yet questions remain: Can we bring this advantage into coeducational institutions in which 99 percent of women receive their education? Can we foster the
exceptional outcomes of women’s colleges in institutions that have a broader reach and mission? From social psychologist Virginia Valian’s groundbreaking work on unconscious bias, which documented the unintentional if powerful persistence of gender schemas in evaluations of women, to the thorough social science research of today, we have learned that women, particularly women of color, do not have equal access to educational opportunity in coeducational colleges and universities. In these environments, women remain underrepresented in the leadership of student clubs and governments. Women are less likely than men to major in the physical and math sciences and engineering. And women are more likely to have lower confidence in their academic abilities than are men.

University “access programs” across the country and at Rutgers itself are sterling examples that can address the individual needs of first-generation and low-income students to help them succeed in college. Yet in most institutions, the distinct needs of women students, the impact of the intersections of gender with race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexuality on women’s opportunities, are not identified as central to the diversity mission. If our diversity programs do not identify women as a category, where can we develop the supports and programs that are essential to women’s success?

At Rutgers, Douglass serves that purpose, providing an education for women that is unique in the nation and, I would argue, possible at other coeducational institutions. Douglass has institutional status as the organization at Rutgers that is devoted exclusively to undergraduate women’s advancement and success within the context of its larger coeducational setting. Douglass brings together a comprehensive, four-year curricular and co-curricular education; career and leadership development; science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education; and equity programs. While partnering with the excellent access programs and the academic departments and schools at Rutgers, Douglass stands as the site that forges excellence in women’s education.

Much of our success is rooted in the institutional status of the college itself. The institutional position as a distinct but central part of the undergraduate program at Rutgers serves as a focus point for university partners that are also committed to women’s education and success. Douglass’s position as a fixed and permanent organization allows for resource mobilization both within and outside the university. Douglass’s separate governance and resource structure offer our students the organizational experiences to create new understandings of efficacy, confidence, and innovation.

Has Douglass led to change in the wider university? Douglass Residential College today enrolls twenty-five hundred women, or 15 percent of all women
undergraduates at the New Brunswick campus. The dramatic increase in our enrollment since our students have been able to co-enroll at Rutgers and at Douglass signals that young women today—in this age of coeducation—understand the distinct appeal of single-gender institutions. Our students are perhaps the best evidence of what women’s education can accomplish; Rutgers’s faculty see firsthand the confidence and ambition of Douglass students, opening the faculty up to new ideas about what women’s education can achieve.

Women’s education challenges many of the taken-for-granted assumptions that govern the university gestalt nationwide: assumptions about women’s equal inclusion and opportunity. A separate institution for women’s education in a coeducational setting signals and addresses the distinct needs of women in higher education. In an era when questions about women’s education appear to be answered simply through a look at the demographics, Douglass’s impact reminds us that women’s education remains an unfinished revolution. Douglass itself keeps women’s education on the radar—and I believe this has changed Rutgers, just as Douglass has been changed by Rutgers.

Through its wide array of academic opportunities, Rutgers University is perhaps one of the best places to spearhead this new model for higher education—a world-class research university that includes an institution focused entirely on the success and advancement of undergraduate women. Yet Rutgers is not the only place in which this model of women’s education can develop. Indeed, the structure of Douglass Residential College may well be the prototype for women’s education in the century to come, bringing students the best of both worlds: an education devoted to their success within a college or university with a broad array of academic options and the resources to support them.

Women in the twenty-first century are poised to have unprecedented influence on the course of world affairs. Their education is essential to securing a future of peace, prosperity, and well-being. The unique combination of a mission-focused women’s education within our system of higher education institutions can set the stage for women’s contributions to this future.

JACQUELYN LITT
Dean, Douglass Residential College and Douglass Campus
Professor of Sociology and Women’s and Gender Studies