Pursuing Truth

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Introduction
Women’s Education and the College of Notre Dame of Maryland

Boundaries ought to be crossed. National boundaries, of course; but first of all boundaries of the imagination and sensibility, which wall us in when we think we are so free.

—Marie-Alain Couturier, OP, Sacred Art

The status and role of women are incontestably among the most crucial issues facing society today. Yet historians have given little attention to the efforts of women in the nation’s largest religious denomination, Roman Catholicism, to take their place as the equals of men over the past century. In seeking that story, the commitment of the Catholic Church to the mission of higher education is of fundamental importance. Women’s education inarguably played a critical role in the history of American Catholicism and of American women and their families during the twentieth century. This book views that history through the lens of the College of Notre Dame of Maryland—since 2011, Notre Dame of Maryland University. The college’s 1895 founding in Baltimore opened a new chapter in higher education when it became the first Catholic college in the United States to award the four-year baccalaureate degree to women.¹ This book explores women’s struggle for equal access to Catholic higher education during the twentieth century and analyzes their responses to challenges from the Catholic Church, higher educational associations, students, established Protestant churches, and secular society.

The “Seven Sisters”—Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley—have traditionally received more attention in the scholarly literature on higher education than other institutions that admitted women, and historians of Catholic higher education in the United
States have tended to focus heavily on colleges established by and for men. Significant scholarship on Catholic women’s colleges has developed very slowly, and otherwise exhaustive articles on women’s education insufficiently acknowledge their very existence. In this context, Catholic Women’s Colleges (2002), edited by Tracy Schier and Cynthia Russett, remains the most valuable addition to a sparse literature. This book therefore intends to add a significant corrective to the literature on women’s higher education, even as

Figure 1. Student at the Annex Cornerstone, showing “Notre Dame A.D. 1895.” Photo by Margaret Steinhagen, NDMA.
it demonstrates that Catholic women’s colleges modeled themselves simultaneously on and against the elite secular and Protestant women’s colleges.

The College of Notre Dame of Maryland and other Catholic women’s colleges rejected traditional views of women’s subordinate place in public and private life and offered their graduates new opportunities to participate as equals in every sector of US society. Moreover, by contesting women’s narrow professional and social horizons from within a church that had few public forums where women could be heard, they influenced millions, not simply their own students. And despite ongoing religious tensions between Protestant and Catholic Americans, over time Catholic women’s colleges helped create a more tolerant and democratic nation by affording new educational opportunities to women of every faith, social class, and race.

Catholic women’s colleges are of particular interest to the history of higher education because, to a far greater extent than their Protestant and secular counterparts, they were founded, governed, staffed, and financed primarily by women. This was not entirely a result of Catholic men’s indifference to the cause of women’s education. For centuries, women’s religious orders had been the only viable agencies through which female members of a patriarchal church could undertake projects of such scope. The talents and voluntary lifetime commitments of their members were major assets of these tightly organized and enduring female orders. During the nineteenth century many women’s religious orders began to become highly specialized in professional work, especially in the fields of education and medicine, and to offer Catholic women unique opportunities to unite as influential actors in church and society. Despite the restrictions of cloister and custom, the orders expanded steadily in number and membership from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1960s. For thousands of young women, the benefits of convent life more than compensated for the loss of those offered by the most common alternative life path, marriage and family.

Because of their dedication, slim personal expenses, and experience with collective projects, women’s orders were able to overcome one of the chief constraints facing early founders of female colleges: how to fund their work. Wealthy lay patrons were few, bishops and clergy typically offered only verbal support at best, and ordinary parishioners, overwhelmingly working- and lower-middle-class, did not give high priority to church-supported colleges for women. For much of their histories, Catholic women’s colleges received their most significant financial support from their founding sisterhoods. A Catholic women’s college was a community-wide project. All members of the order, whatever their employment, shared in the sacrifices required for its development. The funds to establish a college and educate sisters for its
faculty typically came from an order’s collective savings, from borrowing against convent property and tuition-paying schools it owned, and from the small stipends received by sisters staffing parish schools. As a result of this common endeavor, the collective presence of sister-faculty and administrators was always notable. A large convent, with its attached chapel, typically distinguished the campus of nearly every Catholic women’s college.

By 1910 there were 14 Catholic women’s colleges, and by 1967 they numbered 120.6 While Catholic women’s colleges varied in geographic location, social class of students, and curricular focus, in essential areas they had much in common. All were Roman Catholic in affiliation; religious orders of women had established and supported most of them; and they maintained important collaborative and competitive connections. All were quite small at their foundation, and many remained so. And although a deeply religious spirit marked these institutions, they were founded to advance the cause of higher education for women in general, and they welcomed students of all faiths. The history of the College of Notre Dame of Maryland provides an excellent opening through which to explore the foremost issues faced by these institutions in the twentieth-century United States.7

Notre Dame of Maryland’s story reveals how major religious, social, and economic forces affected American Catholic women during the twentieth century—and how these women, in turn, affected the course of history. It sheds light on their initiatives and strategies, successes, and failures as they confronted secular and ecclesiastical challenges to developing Catholic higher education for their sex. It also reveals women’s intellectual growth and emancipation from male control, from social mores favoring the home, and from limited professional opportunities. The college’s development provides new perspectives on how higher education and religion widened the intellectual horizons, professional influence, and social power of American women. Contrary to a conventional wisdom that sees the decades before the Second Vatican Council as a time of harmonious cooperation among Catholics, the College of Notre Dame was a center of political and religious controversy from its inception. Its archives reveal a complex story of boundary crossings, the interaction of multiple cultures, and female enterprise and power, showing how placement and displacement within changing social, political, and ecclesial contexts enlarged the map of educational opportunity for women in the United States.

The question of whether higher education was desirable for women was still a topic of debate among late-nineteenth-century Catholics. Opponents argued that the college experience might encourage middle-class women to seek professional careers, elect to remain single, or, should they marry,
have few or no children. Should such choices become popular, they would pose serious threats to the social fabric of church and home. Yet as long as Catholic colleges remained male preserves, episcopal pronouncements that women were compromising their religious faith by attending secular institutions rang hollow. It was this state of affairs that the Congregation of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSNDs) determined to address when, in 1895, they established the College of Notre Dame of Maryland in Baltimore.

The SSNDs had been founded in Bavaria, Germany, in 1833 “for the education of female youth,” and opened their first school in North America in Baltimore in 1847, after which they soon established a female preparatory boarding school. In 1873, they opened a collegiate institute on a spacious campus in Govanstown, Baltimore County, about two miles from the city center. The College of Notre Dame of Maryland opened on the same property in 1895. In its early years, administrators and faculties of established Catholic men’s colleges, with a few exceptions, paid little attention to the women’s college. This initial aloofness left the founding sisters free to experiment, and they seized the opportunity. Rejecting prevailing clerical ideas that women’s college curriculum ought to prepare them for their future domestic responsibilities, the sisters aimed to integrate the pedagogical ideas of leading mainstream women educators with their own distinctive principles of female education. Theirs would be a liberal arts college offering women the same intellectual and professional opportunities available to their male peers. Despite myriad changes and challenges over the last 125 years, this vision continues to imbue the university today.

Sources, Terminology, and Organization

The major primary sources for the history of the College of Notre Dame of Maryland are located in the archives of Notre Dame of Maryland University, a depository rich and comprehensive in topical and chronological coverage. The archives, currently held at Loyola Notre Dame Library, hold the official records of the college and its precursor, the Collegiate Institute, as well as correspondence and papers of trustees, administrators, and faculty, a significant collection of oral histories and diaries, and records of student clubs and publications. These resources shed light on a complex academic and social world. They reveal how the college met significant public challenges from church officials, mainstream educators, and public critics over the course of the twentieth century.

Any history focused on Catholic women religious faces a number of vocabulary problems. Following common usage, I employ the terms “nun”.
and “sister” interchangeably, although their definitions differ in canon law. (Officially, sisters take simple vows and belong to religious communities dedicated to public service in the wider society, while nuns, who take solemn vows, lead lives of prayer in strictly cloistered orders.) Similarly, I use the terms “congregation,” “order,” “community,” and “sisterhood” synonymously. As for named individuals, until the 1960s most congregations bestowed religious names on members; thereafter they were free to use their legal names. For accuracy and consistency, I identify individual sisters by surnames (when known) and professional titles, and employ religious titles, such as “Sister” or “Mother,” when appropriate.

To enable comparison of Catholic and secular approaches to women’s higher education in the context of cultural, social, political, and religious changes in twentieth-century America, the book follows a chronological framework. I address several major themes: interactions with mainstream America; how organization enabled female power; gender dialectics in a patriarchal church; and the questions of race and class in a “democratic” women’s college.

Chapter 1 analyzes prevailing church attitudes toward women’s higher education and mainstream attitudes toward the Catholic Church in late-nineteenth-century America. It surveys the development in Baltimore of the Collegiate Institute for Young Ladies by the School Sisters of Notre Dame from 1873 to 1895, including the acquisition of property and buildings by the order, the educational philosophy of the school’s administrators and faculty, and the academic and extracurricular experiences of its students. A commitment to gender equity as well as religious conviction persuaded the SSNDs to found a college for women in 1895. Catholic colleges at this time admitted only men, and Catholic women were attending public and private colleges and universities in growing numbers. This development, as well as political expediency, prompted the dean of the US hierarchy, James Cardinal Gibbons, to approve the sisters’ proposal to establish a women’s college.

The burden of financing and staffing the new college rested with the religious order. Gibbons, the archbishop of Baltimore under whose direct supervision the college existed, allowed it to open but offered no tangible support, and there were few lay patrons. Chapter 2, therefore, investigates the governance, financing, and staffing of the new college. Members of the first governing board, administrators, and most full-time faculty were sisters, a female and religious dominance that was to influence the college’s development in important ways. Until a sufficient number of sisters held advanced degrees, the college’s founder and first dean, Sister Meletia Foley, relied on faculty from local universities, especially Johns Hopkins and the University
of Maryland, to supplement, as part-time professors, her small full-time faculty. The diverse teaching styles and scholarly attributes of the early faculty, full- and part-time, lay and religious, are explored in this chapter.

Economic and political forces in this period deeply influenced the culture of the college and triggered significant changes in student demographics and campus life. Chapter 3 explores the opening of the College of Notre Dame to class and racial diversity. It analyzes several critical challenges, including tensions related to class differences among white students in the 1920s and 1930s, and a protracted controversy in the 1940s over whether the college should admit African American applicants. Although problems related to increasing class diversity within the student body gradually resolved, the college’s prized “community spirit” remained conspicuously deficient in the matter of race until the 1950s. Poverty programs and church mission work absorbed generous students in the 1930s and 1940s, but there was little campus interest in the cause of racial equality until well into the civil rights era. Finally, the chapter considers another “diversity” issue on campus—the divide between lay and religious faculty and staff.

Chapter 4 examines the benefits and costs of the college’s commitment to offering a strictly liberal arts course of study. It considers the college curriculum and academic traditions, both of which reflected the crucial influence of elite eastern women’s colleges. Economic distress in the 1930s prompted many Catholic women’s colleges to add professionally oriented curricula. However, beyond introducing a social work major in the 1930s and expanding its science curriculum in the 1940s to prepare students to benefit from new opportunities for women in industry and technology, the College of Notre Dame did not follow this trend. In the 1970s, however, the College of Notre Dame became the nation’s second college to develop a Weekend College, now a familiar component of US higher educational institutions. The Weekend College offered employed women and men of average means the opportunity to earn a bachelor’s degree from a private liberal arts college. While this radical undertaking met with a vigorous response and attracted a large enrollment, it also brought new challenges. Because employed adults sought professional fields of study, the college for the first time significantly diverged from a strictly liberal arts curriculum. This chapter considers the effects of this decision to extend the scope of the college’s intellectual and social mission.

As a result of its adherence to the liberal arts, the college’s enrollment and endowment lagged behind those of rival Catholic women’s colleges that accommodated growing demand for vocationally oriented curricula. This impeded its efforts to meet the standards for recognition by the Association
of American Universities. With a small alumnae association and few major lay donors, the college continued to rely heavily on the founding religious order. But the sisterhood alone could not provide an endowment that would enable the expansion needed to benefit from the opportunities of the booming postwar era. The local archbishop’s refusal in 1945 to permit the college to undertake a public fundraising drive set the stage for a pivotal decision to look beyond the Catholic community, to state governments and the federal government, for financial support. Seeking governmental support, the college, for the first time, had to demonstrate to the wider American society that its Catholic identity and values did not conflict with its secular mission. Chapter 5 analyzes the impact of two major legal controversies in the 1960s and 1970s that importantly influenced the college’s curriculum, faculty, and student experience. In 1963, the College of Notre Dame was one of several Maryland church-related colleges to receive state educational grants. The Horace Mann League, joined by several other citizen groups, brought suit against the state and the colleges on constitutional grounds, claiming that the institutions were “pervasively sectarian.” The College of Notre Dame, a defendant in this lawsuit and in Roemer v. Board of Public Works of Maryland, a 1970s case on eligibility for Maryland state funding ultimately decided by the US Supreme Court, learned that mainstream perceptions of its religious identity were of central importance, and indeed were vital to its autonomy and success as an institution of higher education.

From its inception in 1895, Notre Dame had modeled its curriculum, academic standards, and collegiate traditions on those of the leading eastern women’s colleges. It did not, however, follow them so readily when they gradually relaxed many institutional rules governing student dress, behavior, and campus social life. Casual observers have attributed the recalcitrance of Catholic women’s colleges to their control by religious orders. Chapter 6 contends that, contrary to popular belief, the “convent model” was not the major explanation for the slow withdrawal from student oversight. Throughout much of the twentieth century, behavioral regulations at the College of Notre Dame and similar institutions came under the intense and enduring scrutiny of local bishops and clergy. Catholic teachings on sexual morality were more closely linked to female than male public and private behavior, a gender difference that constrained the liberalization of social rules in women’s colleges. But as American social mores became more liberal in the 1960s, students rebelled. The civil rights and feminist movements and the reforms in church life introduced by the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) engendered dissent among American Catholics on issues of sexual morality. At the College of Notre Dame, student requests for extended male visitation hours
in their residence hall rooms in the early 1970s provoked an explosive battle over the church’s moral teachings and students’ rights as modern women. This chapter considers how the women’s college resolved a major conflict between prevailing social mores and religious values. It asks why nuns, more than lay trustees, administrators, and faculty, became the target of both liberals and conservatives in the controversy, and assesses the order’s changing status on the campus.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many Catholic women’s colleges merged with local Catholic men’s institutions or moved to coeducational status. The College of Notre Dame did neither. Despite intense pressure from hierarchy, clergy, and laymen, its trustees refused to consider persistent overtures to merge with Loyola, a Jesuit men’s college on a neighboring campus. This proved to be the most difficult gender battle in the college’s long history. The conclusion to the book investigates the college’s response to challenges to its autonomy as a women’s institution, particularly after Loyola College became coeducational in 1971. Notre Dame’s decision to remain an independent women’s college demanded extensive changes in curriculum, student body, and organizational structure. Membership in the School Sisters of Notre Dame began to decline seriously in the 1970s, as with most other American sisterhoods. The conclusion reflects on the effects of this important development in the shape of women’s higher education under Catholic auspices in the twenty-first century. The order’s ability to provide funds and contribute the services of sisters to the college waned, and the large campus presence of sisters, who since 1895 had served as public witnesses to the college’s Catholic character, rapidly diminished. Lay administrators and faculty grew in number, and students and faculty became more diverse in class and race as well as religious background. Trustees, administrators, faculty, and leaders of the founding order, like their twentieth-century predecessors, continue to face critical challenges in advancing Catholic higher education for women in the United States.