

# Between Tradition and New Expectation: “Gender Diversity” and Trans-inclusive Admissions Policies in Contemporary U.S. Women’s Colleges

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## Introduction

On March 10, 2013, a high school senior named Calliope Wong posted what she called “the last update letter” titled “Thank you” on her Tumblr blog (“Trans Women @ Smith”) where she had shared her journey of applying to Smith College, one of the most prestigious women’s colleges in the United States.<sup>1</sup> In the letter, Wong grieved that Smith returned her application twice because she identified herself as a trans woman (male to female) and her Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) listed her as “male.” Attaching a photo of Smith’s rejection letter, Wong lamented, “There was never any fair shot for me.” This, however, did not turn out to be her “last” letter shared on Tumblr. Ten days later, Wong posted a new letter titled “Not Done Yet,” in which she shared her discovery that the sex marker reported in FAFSA does not force a single-sex institution to give up its status.<sup>2</sup> She thus contended that though Smith was able to “[make] an admission decision for [her] based on [her] credentials,” they instead “chose” to reject her based on her biological sex.<sup>3</sup>

The story she shared on her Tumblr blog quickly spread nationwide on various media, which later had a great impact on changing admissions policies in many women’s colleges across the country. *HuffPost*, *USA TODAY*, and *abcNEWS* took up Wong’s story of being rejected by Smith right after she posted her “Not Done Yet” letter.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, referring to Wong’s story, *The New*

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1 Calliope Wong, “Thank you,” *Trans Women @ Smith* (blog), March 10, 2013, <https://calliowong.tumblr.com/post/45074030481/thank-you>.

2 Calliope Wong, “Not Done Yet,” *Trans Women @ Smith* (blog), March 20, 2013, <https://calliowong.tumblr.com/post/45877663408/not-done-yet>.

3 Wong, “Not Done Yet.”

*York Times* and *TIME* both published opinion articles, urging women's colleges to take the initiatives in challenging gender norms and making their admissions policies more trans friendly.<sup>5</sup> In 2014, a few months after these articles were published, and nearly two years after Wong started her blog entries, Mills College became the very first women's college to officially announce its trans-inclusive admissions policies. Recognizing the evolving understanding of gender, a number of women's colleges have followed suit, revisiting the meanings of "women" and including a wider range of gender diversity in their admissions policies by being trans-inclusive. Today, as of this writing (2021), twenty-two women's colleges have announced trans-inclusive admissions policies.<sup>6</sup>

This has led to a heated debate about the definition of "women" and renewed attention to the mission of women's colleges. As their policies have shown, all these colleges acknowledge that their institution needs to serve not just "women" defined by biological sex but other oppressed gender groups. And yet, their disagreement falls apart when determining who qualifies as a woman and which specific gender group(s) they should serve.

This issue of how to determine "who is a woman" has arisen in women's colleges precisely because it echoes a broad range of debates within feminism and among much broader cultural contests over gendering social space. While traditional definitions assumed that biology determined gender, the rise of second wave feminism in the 1960s, and particularly the pioneering work of

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4 Meredith Bennet-Smith, "Smith College Rejects Female Transgender Student Calliope Wong: Applicant Ruled 'Male' By Admissions," *HuffPost*, Published March 21, 2013; Last modified February 2, 2016, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/smith-college-transgender-calliope-wong\\_n\\_2920845](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/smith-college-transgender-calliope-wong_n_2920845); Natalie DiBlasio, "Smith College rejects transgender applicant," *USA TODAY*, March 22, 2013, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/03/22/smith-college-transgender-rejected/2009047/>; Susan Donaldson James, "All-Female Smith College Returns Transgender Woman's Admissions Application," *abcNEWS*, March 25, 2013, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/female-smith-college-returns-transgender-womans-admissions-application/story?id=18805681>.

5 Kiera Feldman, "Who Are Women's Colleges For?" *The New York Times*, May 24, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/25/opinion/sunday/who-are-womens-colleges-for.html>; Avi Cummings and Dean Spade, "Women's Colleges Are on the Wrong Side of History on Transgender Women," *TIME*, June 9, 2014, <https://time.com/2848822/womens-colleges-transgender-women/>.

6 As of August 2021, there are thirty-four remaining women's colleges in the U.S. To find out the existing women's colleges in the U.S., I checked the resources provided by Women's College Coalition (<https://www.womenscolleges.org/colleges>) and information provided by the website of each college.

Judith Butler, led to increased acceptance of gender as socially constructed and self-identified.<sup>7</sup> The subsequent emergence of "intersectionality" in the 1980s further contributed to diversifying definitions of women that explored the meaning of gender as created at a nexus of social contact points, including race, class, and sexuality.<sup>8</sup> These insights led to a revolution in understanding gender as a socially constructed and maintained identity, which has recently engaged women's colleges in re-thinking how to address their core values and mission. The implications for these insights have spread widely across the U.S. cultural landscape in conflicts over transgender women in women-only social spaces, such as women's restrooms and women's sports,<sup>9</sup> as well as conflicts within the feminist movement about the inclusion of transgender women in the broader categorization of women's identity. Women's colleges are therefore hardly alone in confronting a large range of complicated questions surrounding redefining the concept of gender.

Women's colleges are therefore part of a larger shifting landscape of gender politics in the U.S., and are at the forefront of contemporary battles over defining gender, women, and the use and necessity of spaces specifically designed to cater to women. This means that they must confront critical questions raised by the conceptual embrace of multiple forms of "womanhood," which challenge them at numerous points, from admissions policies to campus facilities to counseling services. Embracing diversity puts them in the midst of a

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7 The literature is broad on deep, but for some fundamental works arguing the social constructionist view, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith Lorber, "Night to His Day: The Social Construction of Gender," in *Feminist Frontiers*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Laurel Richardson, Verta A. Taylor, and Nancy Whittier (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004), 33-50; Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *Gender & Society* 1, no.2 (1987): 125-51.

8 "Intersectionality" is a concept introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. It considers multiple factors such as race and gender in understanding how one is socially subordinated. She contends that intersecting of these factors needs to be taken into consideration as they are related to the structures of oppression. See Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139-67.

9 Laurel Westbrook and Kristen Schilt argue that gender-segregated social spaces are likely to cause "gender panics" and make people determine gender biologically. For more, see Laurel Westbrook and Kristen Schilt, "Doing Gender, Determining Gender: Transgender People, Gender Panics, and the Maintenance of the Sex/Gender/Sexuality System," *Gender & Society* 28, no.1 (2014): 32-57.

range of complex issues and policies that are fundamentally challenging them to confront just how diverse and inclusive they should be as a single-sex institution for “women.”

This paper examines this issue in depth by focusing on women’s college admissions. While colleges accepting a broad range of students must address their needs on campus, an even more fundamental question is the admissions policies, which decide which students may or may not enroll. This paper, therefore, argues that admissions is a critical moment when a college must confront directly its own sense of mission, and define most precisely who it intends to serve. As a result, this paper uses the larger debate over gender identity as the backdrop and explores how women’s colleges use admissions policies to interpret their institutional missions. In particular, it examines how women’s colleges attempt to embrace the changing definitions of gender identity while also upholding their historical commitment to empowering women. By investigating the transgender admissions policies of the twenty-two women’s colleges in light of their mission statements, this paper concludes that there exist four main approaches that women’s colleges use to fulfill these two seemingly contradictory purposes: maintaining their identity as a women’s college and welcoming gender diversity to their institutions. These four approaches reveal the continued challenges for justifying the existence of single-sex education in an era when diverse gender identities are recognized and highly embraced. This paper therefore contributes both to expanding our understanding of the issues women’s colleges face today, as well as the broader landscape of U.S. gender politics.

Scholars have only recently taken up this issue on women’s colleges’ mission and trans-inclusive admissions policies. Some earlier studies explored how trans-inclusive admissions policies determine womanhood and how they relate to the identity of women’s colleges. For instance, in their 2017 study of the nine women’s colleges, Megan Nanney and David L. Brunnsma point out that these colleges determine their applicants using varying combinations between three main criteria (i.e., biology-based, identity-based, and legal-based criteria), in which fourteen different combinations of sex, gender, and legal criteria exist.<sup>10</sup>

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10 Megan Nanney and David L. Brunnsma, “Moving Beyond Cis-terhood: Determining Gender through Transgender Admittance Policies at U.S. Women’s Colleges,” *Gender & Society* 31, no.2 (2017): 158-60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243217690100>.

Creating such complex policies for determining "women," these colleges, they argue, both keep their tradition and face new challenge of embracing diversity.<sup>11</sup> Another group of researchers have taken a different approach, focusing more on some specific admission requirements and their impacts on students' higher education experience. For instance, Elizabeth R. Boskey and Oren Ganor examine how the requirement of surgical transition affects transgender youth's access to and graduation from women's colleges.<sup>12</sup> In addition, in studying twenty women's colleges, Megan Nanney claims that women's colleges' trans-inclusive admissions policies have not been always inclusive and welcoming to all trans people.<sup>13</sup> Nanney thus urges higher education practitioners and policy makers to explore trans inclusion not just through sex and gender but through such features as race and class. Meanwhile, other group of researchers have focused on discussing the needs to propose new admissions policies and make an institutional change to women's colleges. In *Beyond Trans: Does Gender Matter?*, Heath Fogg Davis proposes adding more useful sex-related questions in application forms, claiming that sex-classification questions often fail to consider transgender or gender-nonconforming applicants during the application process.<sup>14</sup> Davis further suggests that women's colleges be renamed as "historically women's colleges," following a similar path to "historically black colleges and universities."<sup>15</sup> Davis makes such suggestion because addressing sexism in colleges does not necessarily require excluding men from admission.<sup>16</sup>

These studies have been extremely important in advancing our understanding of this complex issue regarding the mission and role of women's colleges in the contemporary U.S. However, there are not many studies which have explored

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11 Nanney and Brunsma, 161.

12 Elizabeth R. Boskey and Oren Ganor, "Women's College Admissions and Retention Policies Pertaining to Transgender Students: A Comprehensive Analysis," *Journal of LGBT Youth* 17, no. 4 (2020): 453-71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2019.1685424>.

13 Megan Nanney, "Making Room for Gendered Possibilities: Using Intersectionality to Discover Transnormative Inequalities in the Women's College Admissions Process," in *Intersectionality and Higher Education: Identity and Inequality on College Campuses*, ed. W Carson Byrd, Rachelle J. Brunn-Bevel, and Sarah M. Ovink (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 227-41.

14 Heath Fogg Davis, "Checking a Sex Box to Get into College: Single-Sex Admissions," in *Beyond Trans: Does Gender Matter?* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 105-108.

15 Davis, "Checking a Sex Box," 87.

16 Davis, "Checking a Sex Box," 87.

the strategies women's colleges use to uphold their traditions of empowering women and, at the same time, to articulate their institutional role to meet the new needs of other gender groups. This paper aims to investigate this issue by examining the twenty-two women's colleges that, as of 2021, have announced transgender admissions policies. And it argues that by utilizing four main approaches that incorporate the ideas of "diversity," "human rights," "self-exploration," and "sisterhood and/or a singular focus on women," women's colleges attempt to both value their tradition and embrace the new challenge. As a result, this paper helps illuminate broader question of the institutional roles of women's colleges in today's complex, rapidly changing world.

## Approaches to Uphold Tradition and Embrace Change

In an era when gender identity is considered a fluid concept, many have questioned the existence of women's colleges. Some urge women's colleges to go coed and accept men as well. Others claim that the time may have come for women's colleges to follow a similar path as "historically black colleges and universities" and to be renamed as "historically women's colleges."<sup>17</sup> The idea suggests that it would allow these colleges to not only reduce the problems caused by gendered admissions but also to maintain their historical feminist educational focus. However, while recognizing the need to serve not just biologically-defined "women," none of the twenty-two women's colleges have chosen either path. They have instead chosen to remain a "women's college," continuing to reflect a gender binary as the basis of their institution. And within this specific institutional framework have they all attempted to continue upholding their historical commitment to empowering women, while also expanding their roles to serve other gender minorities.

This has led to the question of "how" they have attempted to fulfill such seemingly contradictory purposes. Examining their varied trans-inclusive admissions policies, I found four main approaches, three of which focus more on the rationale for accepting new gender groups (1, 2, 3) and the fourth that focuses instead on the rationale for maintaining their identity as women's colleges (4). Twenty-two colleges use one, or two, or three of these approaches in

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<sup>17</sup> Davis, "Checking a Sex Box," 87.

explaining their reasons for determining whom they should serve. By understanding these complex and sometimes contradictory responses, we can see the continued challenges that women's colleges face for articulating their institutional roles and justifying their existence in today's changing world where gender diversity is embraced.

### 1. Creating a "Diverse" and "Inclusive" Community

First, a number of women's colleges highlight their institutional commitment to creating a "diverse" and "inclusive" community in achieving both purposes. To redress past discrimination against historically underrepresented minorities as well as to create a democratic citizenry, many colleges since the 1970s have emphasized the importance of a diverse student body.<sup>18</sup> Just as with other coeducational institutions, many women's colleges today also emphasize the importance of fostering campus diversity. In their college websites, twenty out of twenty-two colleges refer to "diversity," "inclusion," "a diverse student body," or "diverse perspectives," which they consider essential to creating a rich learning community. For instance, Mills College believes in "the power of diversity to enrich [their] learning and [their] lives"<sup>19</sup> and considers diversity as a necessary component of learning: "Critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, creativity, and collaboration are all enhanced when a diverse faculty and student body interact and learn from one another."<sup>20</sup> Holding similar views, some note that by learning within a diverse community, "all graduates are prepared to thrive in a complex world"<sup>21</sup> (Wesleyan College) and students are educated "to transform the world"<sup>22</sup> (Mount Mary University). Others also demonstrate that "respect of differences among people is a prerequisite to achieving institutional

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18 As for redressing past discrimination, affirmative action practices fostered by President Lyndon B. Johnson played an important role. See Lyndon B. Johnson, "Howard University Commencement Address." As for creating democratic citizenry, see Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 28-30. Regarding how diversity became a critical part of college education, see *Regents of University of California v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978)

19 Mills College, "What We Stand For," accessed February 22, 2021, <https://www.mills.edu/uniquely-mills/what-we-stand-for/index.php>.

20 Mills College, "Equity, Inclusion & Social Justice," accessed February 22, 2021, <https://inside.mills.edu/about-mills/equity-inclusion-social-justice/index.php>.

21 Wesleyan College, "Wesleyan College Mission Statement and History," accessed February 24, 2021, [https://www.wesleyancollege.edu/registrar/catalog/mission\\_history.cfm](https://www.wesleyancollege.edu/registrar/catalog/mission_history.cfm).

excellence”<sup>23</sup> (Scripps College) and that they are committed to being “a just and inclusive community that . . . promotes respectful dialogue across differences”<sup>24</sup> (Agnes Scott College). Across these women’s colleges, interaction and dialogue within a diverse, inclusive community are considered critical for enhancing students’ learning, preparing them to succeed in a larger society and fostering respect towards others.

It is this idea about diversity and inclusion that many of these colleges refer to when explaining their decisions to accept transgender students. They claim that their new transgender admissions policies “align with” or further “advance” their missions. Being “an institution that values inclusion,”<sup>25</sup> Simmons University, one of the earliest institutions to admit transgender students, acknowledges that gender notions are evolving and claims that their new admissions policy “is aligned with [their] values.”<sup>26</sup> As one of the latest colleges to have revised its admissions policy, Moore College of Art, “the first and only historically visual arts college for women” in Philadelphia, also articulates that their “founding principles of inclusivity and opportunity are evident in [their] policy to admit nonbinary and trans students.”<sup>27</sup> And they also further claim that “[d]iversity can only be a strength.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Bryn Mawr College, which also embraces diversity “as essential to its excellence,”<sup>29</sup> believes that gender complexity provides “an opportunity for learning”<sup>30</sup> and allows the school to ask “how to be the best women’s college possible.”<sup>31</sup> By forming a diverse community through trans inclusion, they intend to revisit and reaffirm their institutional identity and mission as a women’s college.

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22 Mount Mary University, “Mission, Vision and Values,” accessed February 22, 2021, <https://mtmary.edu/about/mission.html>.

23 Scripps College, “Principles of Diversity” in “About Scripps College,” accessed February 22, 2021, <http://catalog.scrippscollege.edu/content.php?catoid=18&navoid=1955#mission>.

24 Agnes Scott College, “Mission & Values,” accessed February 22, 2021, <https://www.agnesscott.edu/about/mission-values.html>.

25 Simmons University, “Admission Policies,” accessed March 8, 2021, <https://www.simmons.edu/undergraduate/admission-and-financial-aid/how-apply/admission-policies>.

26 Simmons University, “Admission Policies.”

27 Moore Art of College, “Mission & Values,” adopted September 22, 2020, <https://moore.edu/about/>.

28 Moore Art of College, “Mission & Values.”

29 Bryn Mawr College, “Transgender Applicants,” accessed February 19, 2021, <https://www.brynmawr.edu/admissions/transgender-applicants>.

30 Bryn Mawr College, “Transgender Applicants.”

31 Bryn Mawr College, “Transgender Applicants.”

In short, highlighting the idea of college as a place where people from diverse backgrounds interact with and inspire one another, these colleges embrace their decisions to accept transgender students. As Alverno College (one of such colleges to place emphasis on inclusion) supports transgender students as "integral members of [their] diverse campus community,"<sup>32</sup> women's colleges incorporating this approach regard welcoming transgender students as one of their new institutional responsibilities that reaffirms and advances their goal to create a more diverse campus community.

## 2. Respecting Human Rights

Some of the colleges adopting Approach 1 (Creating a "diverse" and "inclusive" community), including several denominational institutions, also assert human rights as a rationale for accepting gender diversity while maintaining their identity as a women's college. The College of Saint Benedict, Alverno College, and Agnes Scott College all refer to "human" or "all persons" in their admissions policies in which they assert their commitment to "respecting the dignity of all persons"<sup>33</sup> (the College of Saint Benedict), to creating a community where "the rights and human dignity of every other member"<sup>34</sup> are recognized and respected (Alverno), and to enabling all persons to be "recognized as citizens and [to] feel safe leading authentic lives"<sup>35</sup> (Agnes Scott). Given that transgender people are likely to encounter harassment and discrimination in higher education institutions, colleges and universities in general have been facing critical challenges concerning transgender's campus lives and have been called for prompt action to create a safe learning environment.<sup>36</sup> In addition, these colleges stress the idea that every individual has the right to learn in a place where they wish, though transgender students hoping to enter a women's college were only recently considered for admissions. Genny Beemyn, the director of the UMass Amherst Stonewall Center, called women's colleges forming new admissions policies "a step forward, one that's long overdue" and

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32 Alverno College, "NONDISCRIMINATION," accessed February 19, 2021, <https://www.alverno.edu/Civility-Nondiscrimination>.

33 The College of Saint Benedict, "Transgender Students" in "Policies, Violations and Forms," accessed February 23, 2021, <https://www.csbsju.edu/human-rights/policies-violations-forms/transgender-students>.

34 Alverno College, "NONDISCRIMINATION."

35 Agnes Scott College, "Agnes Scott College Statement on Gender Expression and Gender Identity," last revised November 2014, <https://agnesscott.omeka.net/items/show/94>.

claimed, “If they say they’re women, then saying that they can’t attend is denying their identities and marginalising them.”<sup>37</sup> As Beemyn points out, women’s colleges, among other higher education institutions, were long expected to engage in discussions surrounding transgender rights and make some policy changes around their admissions. In making their policies trans-inclusive, therefore, it seems that the women’s colleges adopting this approach aimed to address this unjust treatment experienced by transgender students in higher education. By highlighting their institutional responsibility to provide a safe learning environment for all, including transgender students, they give reasons for embracing gender diversity through trans inclusion.

Meanwhile, a few other colleges, including St. Catherine University and Mount Holyoke College, show respect for human dignity by more specifically referring to the rights of gender minorities in their new policies. In light of their Catholic Social Teaching, St. Catherine embraces its “rich and vibrant history of educating people of all marginalized genders” and affirms their commitment to “respecting the dignity of each person, standing in solidarity with the poor and marginalized, and working toward community and justice.”<sup>38</sup> As for Mount Holyoke, when announcing the trans-inclusive admissions policy at the 2014 convocation,<sup>39</sup> President Lynn Pasquerella stated, “Human rights begin at home.” And then, referring to the works of early feminists, she emphasized the need for their college to recognize the evolving understanding of gender identity and

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36 For transgender students’ campus lives, see more in Susan Rankin et al., *2010 State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People* (Charlotte, NC: Campus Pride, 2010); John Dugan, Michelle Kusel, and Dawn Simounet, “Transgender College Students: An Exploratory Study of Perceptions, Engagement, and Educational Outcomes,” *Journal of College Student Development* 53, no. 5 (2012): 719-36; Brent Bilodeau, *Genderism: Transgender Students, Binary Systems, and Higher Education* (Saarbrücken, Germany: Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009).

37 This statement is found in Collin Binkley’s article. See Collin Binkley, “Elite US Women’s Colleges Accepting Transgender Students for First Time,” *Independent*, September 5, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/transgender-students-womens-colleges-accepted-wellesley-ninotska-love-lgbt-rights-bryn-mawr-barnard-a7930096.html>.

38 St. Catherine University, “TRANSGENDER AND NON-BINARY STUDENTS” in “2021-2022 Academic Catalogs and University Policies,” December 1, 2018, <https://catalog.stkate.edu/policies/stu-non-acad/transgender-non-binary/>.

39 Lynn Pasquerella, “Mount Holyoke College’s Official Policy on Transgender Students,” Margo Burns, September 2, 2014, video, 3:38, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0sdw9nblKo>.

respect the learning opportunities for every individual who aspires to thrive in their community:

[W]hat it means to be a woman is not static. Just as early feminists argued that reducing women to their biological functions was a foundation of women's oppressions, we acknowledge that gender identity is not reducible to the body. . . . I am proud that Mount Holyoke College chooses to lead with our policy on trans women — a policy that reinforces our commitment to access, diversity, and the dignity of every woman's life.<sup>40</sup>

Mount Holyoke framed the shift in their admissions policies as a matter of human rights. Acknowledging that the historical oppressions of women were based on their biological sex as female, the college implemented the most inclusive admissions policy (i.e., accept all genders except cisgender men) so that they could further fulfill their role to contribute to those who are socially oppressed on the basis of gender.

Similar to Approach 1, the colleges adopting this approach assert one of the institutional responsibilities commonly considered crucial for college education: to respect the rights and dignity of every member of campus community. Regardless of age, race, religion, or gender identity, every individual is entitled to learn fully in an environment where they wish and feel safe and supported. By acknowledging this core responsibility of college education, many women's colleges adopting this approach embrace their decisions to redefine who they should serve and to expand their institutional roles to support transgender and/or non-binary students. In fact, these women's colleges not only formally admit transgender students but also provide additional campus resources for students and instructors to address transgender and non-binary students' needs, including resources for housing, preferred name and chosen pronoun.<sup>41</sup>

### 3. Providing Support for Self-Exploration

Another approach women's colleges use is linked to the idea that college is a

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40 Pasquerella. "Mount Holyoke College's Official Policy."

41 Alverno College. "NONDISCRIMINATION"; Mount Holyoke College, "Supporting Trans and Non-Binary Students," accessed February 20, 2021, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/teachinglearninginitiatives/supporting-trans-and-non-binary-students>.

place where students explore themselves. As studies on college education show, college is considered as more than a place for pursuing academic excellence; it is also a place where students seek for who they are, including their interests and their identity. As Andrew Delbanco states in his book *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, a college should be “a place where young people find help for navigating the territory between adolescence and adulthood”<sup>42</sup> and should also try to be “an aid to reflection, a place and process whereby young people take stock of their talents and passions and begin to sort out their lives in a way that is true to themselves and responsible to others.”<sup>43</sup> Providing students with space and support for exploring themselves before they go into adulthood, therefore, is considered as one of the critical roles that colleges are expected to serve.

Five out of twenty-two women’s colleges, all of which also use Approach 1, demonstrate this role. All of these five colleges also allow matriculation of those who transition to male after admissions. For instance, Alverno College provides support for “students on their journey of self-discovery,” highlighting their recognition of how “gender identity may change over time.”<sup>44</sup> Alverno thus encourages transitioned students to “persist through graduation, experiencing the personal and academic support each student deserves from an Alverno education.”<sup>45</sup> In announcing their trans-inclusive admissions policy at the 2014 convocation, Mount Holyoke College President Pasquerella showed similar views by claiming, “I think it’s important to remember that your college years are time of reflection. And one of the homeworks for the great liberal arts education is time to think about your place in the world and the place in the world of others.”<sup>46</sup> Aligned with this statement, Mount Holyoke provides learning opportunities for all genders except cisgender men and allows transitioned students to continue to pursue degree at their institution. In addition, Smith College shows support for students’ self-exploration in its “Gender Identity & Expression,” which begins with a question, “Is Smith still a women’s college?” Smith answers as follows: “In its mission and legal status, Smith is a women’s college. Smith is also a place where students are able to explore who they are in

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42 Delbanco, *College*, 3.

43 Delbanco, *College*, 15-6.

44 Alverno College, “NONDISCRIMINATION.”

45 Alverno College, “NONDISCRIMINATION.”

46 Pasquerella, “Mount Holyoke College’s Official Policy.”

an open and respectful environment."<sup>47</sup> While showing its identity as a women's college, Smith simultaneously adds its clear support for students to explore themselves while enrolled.

Closely related to the former approaches, the colleges adopting this approach have also expanded their roles to serve new gender groups by reflecting on the responsibility of college education. Acknowledging that we now live in an era when gender identity is considered a fluid concept, these colleges articulate their institutional responsibility to support students' self-exploration, including gender identity, in their trans-inclusive admissions policies. By doing so, they also further reinforce the idea of college as a safe, supportive learning environment for diverse gender groups.

#### 4. Valuing Sisterhood and a Singular Focus on Women

While the three approaches surveyed thus far focus more on explaining their embrace of gender diversity, the last approach focuses more on explaining the reasons for maintaining their identity as a women's college. In several places in their trans-inclusive admissions policies, twelve colleges partly and/or largely use this approach, asserting the value of sisterhood and/or a singular focus on women.

First, all of these colleges only consider for admissions those who self-identify and live as women, just as do many other colleges adopting the former three approaches. However, most of them are different from others in that they assert this admissions policy by clearly denying admittance of those who self-identify and live as men.<sup>48</sup> Many of these colleges do so by answering "No" to the question concerning admissions of trans men in their Frequently Asked Questions (e.g., "Are trans men eligible for admission?" "No."). Hollins College also clarifies its rejection of non-binary students (e.g., "Are individuals who identify as non-binary eligible for admission?" "No."), further demonstrating its institutional identity as a women's college and its role focusing on serving "women."<sup>49</sup>

Two colleges further highlight this focus on serving women in how they

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47 Smith College, "Gender Identity & Expression," accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/equity-inclusion/gender-identity-expression>.

48 Other colleges state that they consider for admissions those who self-identify and consistently live as women, without referring to the eligibility of trans men or non-binary students.

handle those who transition to male after admissions. While other colleges allow—and some even encourage—transitioned students to remain and persist in their institutions until graduation, two colleges, Bennett and Stephens, prohibit them from continued enrollment. Bennett states that once admitted, the student needs to self-identify as a woman throughout her matriculation to be considered eligible for receiving a degree from the college.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, Stephens, which spent more than four years to formalize its trans-inclusive admissions policies, shows the same understanding. Stephens notes that their policy on transitioned students also applies to those “who identify as non-binary but who are transitioning to male,” stating that they can only stay at their institution “only to complete the current semester.”<sup>51</sup> Stephens’ reason behind this decision reflects its strong institutional commitment to supporting those who intend to continue living as a woman:

Because the College has expanded its definition of womanhood to include both sex and gender, it is logically consistent that it also acknowledges both sex and gender in its definition of manhood. As a result, the College will stop admitting and enrolling students who were born female but who now identify as men or who are transitioning from female to male. . . . The College will no longer admit or enroll students who identify as non-binary but who are transitioning to male.<sup>52</sup>

Stephens asserts the notions of sex and gender in arguing for its decision to de-enroll students who change their physical sex or self-identification from female to male. Just as many other women’s colleges, Stephens is shifting to determine their applicants based on not just their biological sex but their gender identification. They claim that the same logic should also apply to the definition of men, and therefore conclude that de-enrolling those who transition from female to male should be more logical and consistent with their “singular

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49 Hollins University, “Transgender Policy,” last modified October 30, 2019, <https://www.hollins.edu/on-campus/student-life/new-student-info/policy-on-transgender-issues/>.

50 Bennett College, “Transgender Admissions Policy,” last revised January 28, 2017. [https://www.bennett.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Transgender\\_Admissions\\_Policy.pdf](https://www.bennett.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Transgender_Admissions_Policy.pdf).

51 Stephens College, “Frequently Asked Questions: Stephens College Admissions and Enrollment Policy,” accessed February 22, 2021, [http://komus3.amazonaws.com/files/faq\\_admissions\\_policy\\_\\_\(1\).pdf](http://komus3.amazonaws.com/files/faq_admissions_policy__(1).pdf).

52 Stephens College, “Frequently Asked Questions.”

mission of educating women."<sup>53</sup> Incorporating their understanding of sex and gender in determining who to serve, Stephens prohibits "men" from enrolling and highlights its identity as a women's college.

In addition, four colleges adopting this approach place emphasis on keeping their identity as a women's college by embracing "sisterhood," a "women-centered focus," or a "singular" mission or focus on educating women. For instance, Spelman College, a historically Black college for women in Atlanta, repeatedly clarifies "the Spelman Sisterhood" in its trans-inclusive policy. Asserting that "[their] core belief in the bonds of sisterhood remain"<sup>54</sup> even after they admit transgender students, Spelman asks its prospective students to make sure they come "prepared to participate in a women's college that is academically and intellectually rigorous."<sup>55</sup> In a similar manner, Wellesley College views a "singular focus on women" as a critical part of their institution.<sup>56</sup> They thus expect to receive applications not just from those assigned female at birth but from those "who feel they belong in [Wellesley's] community of women," which was "designed specifically to prepare women to thrive in a complex world."<sup>57</sup> Bryn Mawr College, while adopting Approach 1 and 3, also regards their "women-centered focus" as "a fundamental part of [their] undergraduate mission," although it is not meant to exclude any members of their community.<sup>58</sup> In addition, Stephens, the only college which puts "singular" before "mission" in describing their updated policy, further asserts its institutional role to serve women: "Stephens College has recommitted to its singular mission of educating women."<sup>59</sup> As Stephens is also the only college that requires trans women to submit "legal documentation that they are legally women or that they are transitioning to female" when applying,<sup>60</sup> being a "woman" in legal and/or biological status is a necessary requirement for Stephens to have in order to fulfill their institutional role as a women's college.

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53 Stephens College, "Frequently Asked Questions."

54 Spelman College, "Admissions Frequently Asked Questions," accessed March 10, 2021, <https://www.spelman.edu/admissions/frequently-asked-questions#revised-policy>.

55 Spelman College, "Admissions Frequently Asked Questions."

56 Wellesley College, "FAQ" in "Mission and Gender Policy," accessed February 22, 2021, <https://www.wellesley.edu/news/gender-policy/faq>.

57 Wellesley College, "FAQ."

58 Bryn Mawr College, "Transgender Applicants."

59 Stephens College, "Frequently Asked Questions."

60 Stephens College, "Frequently Asked Questions."

Lastly, eight colleges intend to embrace their identity as a women's college through the use of gendered language. In their trans-inclusive admissions policies, these colleges state that they will continue to use "gendered language," "the language of sisterhood," and/or "female pronouns," which they consider reflect or maintain their mission and/or identity as a women's college (e.g., Barnard, the College of Saint Benedict, Hollins).<sup>61</sup> Some further note that such language would "powerfully convey important components of [their] mission and identity" (e.g., Bennett, Wellesley).<sup>62</sup> In addition, while keeping their "women's college" identity by the use of gendered language in institutional communication (e.g., ceremony), some encourage the use of inclusive languages and chosen pronouns in such places as classrooms and residence halls where students engage in interpersonal communication (e.g., Alverno, St. Catherine, Smith).<sup>63</sup> By doing so, these colleges attempt to maintain their institutional identity while addressing disparate students' needs.

Unlike the former three approaches, it is quite evident that the last approach rather places emphasis on keeping the identity of women's colleges. Although these twelve colleges shared with other colleges a willingness to accept transgender students, in their new admissions policies they also seek ways to maintain and reflect their traditions. By clearly excluding "male" identity in application and matriculation requirements as well as asserting women as their primary focus, they actively try to find the meanings of their existence as an institution historically dedicated to "women" in today's changing world.

## Conclusion

In an era when diverse gender identities are widely recognized and embraced, many have questioned the existence of women's colleges. However, as this paper has shown, the twenty-two colleges surveyed fervently remain a "women's college" while acknowledging their institution needs to not just serve

61 Barnard College, "Transgender Policy," accessed March 7, 2021, <https://barnard.edu/admissions/transgender-policy>; The College of Saint Benedict, "Transgender Students"; Hollins University, "Transgender Policy."

62 Bennett College, "Transgender Admissions Policy"; Wellesley College, "FAQ."

63 Alverno College, "NONDISCRIMINATION"; St. Catherine University, "TRANSGENDER"; Smith College, "Pronouns" in "Gender Identity & Expression," accessed February 22, 2021, <https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/equity-inclusion/gender-identity/pronouns>.

biologically-defined "women." Keeping their institutional identity as a women's college, they have all shared a willingness to revisit the meaning of "womanhood" and decided to expand their institutional roles to accept transgender students.

And yet, examining their strategies to fulfill these two seemingly contradictory purposes concerning their institutional roles (i.e., upholding traditions and embracing the new challenge of accepting diverse gender groups), we found that these women's colleges use a variety of combinations of the four main approaches, three of which focus on explaining the rationale for embracing gender diversity and the fourth instead focusing on the rationale for keeping their institutional identity as a women's college. Some, for instance, show their dedication to creating a diverse learning community through trans inclusion while also asserting the value of "women-centered" focus. In a similar way, others demonstrate their role to provide a supportive space for students to self-explore while also demonstrating their use of gendered language to value their tradition. Many of the twenty-two colleges, in short, utilize two or three of these approaches in explaining how they aim to meet their new expectations without losing their identity as a "women's" college.

These complex and sometimes contradictory responses from each women's college reveal the complexities and difficulties of articulating their institutional roles. This paper, by illustrating how women's colleges use these four approaches in determining their applicants, clarifies the continued challenges for justifying single-sex education in today's changing world where diverse gender identities are recognized and embraced. As a result, this paper helps illuminate broader question concerning the institutional missions and roles of women's colleges in the contemporary U.S.

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**Abstract**

# Between Tradition and New Expectation: “Gender Diversity” and Trans-inclusive Admissions Policies in Contemporary U.S. Women’s Colleges

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Recognizing the evolving understanding of gender, many women’s colleges in the United States since 2014 have revisited the meaning of “women” and included a wider range of gender diversity in their admissions policies by being trans-inclusive. Their degree of inclusivity, however, varies widely, which has led to a heated debate about the mission of women’s colleges. This study explores this issue in depth by examining how changing definitions of gender have caused women’s colleges to interpret their institutional missions in the contemporary U.S. In particular, it investigates how women’s colleges attempt to continue upholding their traditional missions of empowering women while also expanding their institutional roles to serve diverse gender groups.

In order to investigate this question—the strategies women’s colleges use to fulfill these two seemingly contradictory purposes, this study examines the twenty-two women’s colleges that, as of 2021, have announced trans-inclusive admissions policies. Investigating their trans-inclusive admissions policies in light of their mission statements, this study reveals four main approaches that women’s colleges use to maintain their historical commitment to serving women while embracing their new expected role to meet the needs of other gender groups. Of the four approaches, three incorporate the ideas of “diversity,” “human rights,” and “self-exploration,” all of which are closely linked to the critical responsibility of college education. By highlighting the idea of college as a safe, supportive place where people from diverse backgrounds can respect one another’s rights and explore who they are, women’s colleges using these approaches embrace their decisions to expand their institutional roles to accept transgender students. The fourth approach, on the other hand, asserts the idea

of “sisterhood” and/or “a singular focus on women,” focusing more on the rationale for keeping their identity as a women’s college. By demonstrating “women” as their primary educational focus, women’s colleges incorporating this approach seek for ways to continue upholding their traditional missions of serving “women.”

The fact that twenty-two women’s colleges use varying combinations of these four approaches in determining who to serve reveals the complexities and difficulties of articulating their institutional roles. This study, by illustrating these complex and sometimes contradictory responses, shows the continued challenges for justifying single-sex education in today’s changing world where diverse gender identities are recognized and embraced. This study, therefore, helps illuminate broader question of the institutional roles of women’s colleges in the contemporary U.S.