On Campus

Beyond Alma Pater?

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Columbia has served as a — sometimes reluctant — academic home to remarkable women for over a century. In *Changing the Subject: How the Women of Columbia Shaped the Way We Think About Sex and Politics* historian Rosalind Rosenberg tells of the many Columbia women (and a few Columbia men) who broke new ground while overturning the givens of the male academy in its local variant – from admissions and hiring policies to theories of gender. What makes this book much more than institutional history is the importance of the women Rosenberg profiles in shaping their fields and influencing culture and politics, both through the power of their ideas and the heightened media exposure that New York provides. Rosenberg's other works include *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism and Divided Lives: American Women in the Twentieth Century*. Here, talking with Columbia, she reflects on some topics raised by her latest.

Columbia's Influential Women

The "we" in the subtitle refers to all of us. A century ago, Columbia sociologist Elsie Clews Parsons advanced the then-startling claim that "sex" is a system of arbitrary classifications by which society limits individual freedom. Three generations later, Columbia law professor Ruth Bader Ginsburg em-ployed this idea to show the Supreme Court how to extend the reach of the 14th Amendment to advance claims of sex equality in our society. Today, even conservative men accept the idea that a person's sex should not prevent her from holding an important governmental office.

Everyone has been shaped by work done at this university over the past century, from young women, many unaware of how profoundly their thinking has been affected, to aging men, even those who have never performed a domestic service. The women of Columbia cast a wide net.

Unintended Consequences

Columbia's history provides an interesting example of that old adage, "Be careful what you hope for." The refusal of Columbia faculty and trustees to admit women in the 1880s led to the creation of Barnard and Teachers College. In turn the refusal of graduate dean John W. Burgess to permit his faculty to teach in those separate schools led Barnard and Teachers College to secure the right to hire their own faculty. These two semiautonomous institutions, which then gave birth to a third, what we now know as General Studies, provided the sites at which innovative thinking about gender first emerged at the University.

Columbia's highly decentralized structure created enclaves of dissident thinking, and from these a campaign developed to open the graduate faculties and professional schools to women. By the 1930s, Columbia had become both the central site of research on gender and the largest producer of female doctorates in the country. If Burgess had accepted the admission of women to Col-umbia College, or if, having inspired the creation of Barnard and Teachers Colleges, he had encouraged his faculty to teach there (as President Eliot of Harvard encouraged his faculty to teach at Radcliffe), he would not have lived to see Columbia become the foremost training ground of female academics in the country.

To Merge or Not to Merge?

There were important factors that militated against the merger of Barnard and Columbia College in the 1960s and '70s. Barnard was the only affiliated women's college with its own faculty (one with a long history of independent-mindedness at that); the Columbia College faculty, for its part, was dubious about whether the Barnard faculty was equipped to assume teaching responsibilities in the Core. And many on both faculties worried about the danger, in those fiscally strapped times, of being swallowed into the graduate faculties and losing their ability to make undergraduate education their primary mission. There was the possibility that the idea of merger extended to the merging of all the University's faculties into one.

Theirs and Hers

Columbia began admitting women in the mid-1980s. At first, the impact on Barnard was disastrous: upward of 90 percent of women accepted to both schools went to Columbia. Over the next decade, however, Barnard stabilized and then began to flourish. It benefited from strong leadership, an improving economy in New York, and a series of studies showing that young women did particularly well in all-female environments. Today, Barnard is stronger than ever.

And Barnard and Columbia are actually much closer today than in any point in the 30 years I've been here. There's much greater effort made by departments to work together: for faculty to serve on each other's search committees, to plan curricula — certainly the history department, which obviously I know best, is much more closely integrated than ever.

In Defense of Enclaves

When I was young I saw the way to progress in areas of race or gender in ignoring differences and giving everyone equal rights. But now — and I'm sure my career at Barnard has influenced these views — I see the importance of enclaves in providing groups still experiencing disadvantage the freedom to think of new ways to advance their own interests. We're still in a society, and even a university, where most powerful positions are still held by men and we certainly live in a society where men are less likely to take responsibility for domestic life than are women. As long as gender equity remains only a goal, despite a great deal of progress, separate enclaves will add valuable possibilities. And in general, I'm more impressed than I used to be with fiefdoms because I think small organizations tend to be more creative than really big ones.

My Columbia

Columbia's impact on me began long before I arrived here. When I was a teenager attending public school in Arizona, the intellectual who most influenced my thinking was Ruth Benedict. The professors who first inspired me to study women's history as a graduate student at Stanford a decade later were two Columbia-trained historians

— Linda Kerber and Carl Degler.

My direct experience at Columbia started in 1974 with a term appointment in the Columbia history department, largely made possible by pressure from Columbia's female graduate students to hire more women. I was able to stay because of the efforts of faculty members to secure the right of young parents to work half time. With the exception of two years spent teaching at Wesleyan, I have spent the past 30 years on Morningside Heights, partly at Columbia, partly at Barnard. I like to think that having worked both sides of the street has helped me understand the perspective of each and to tell a more balanced story than might have otherwise been the case, especially on a subject on which feelings run so high.

Favorite Figure

Out of many I would pick sociologist Mirra Komarovsky — an immigrant girl who fought her way into Barnard in the early 1920s, at a time when anti-Semitism was particularly marked. She drew strength from the college to pursue graduate study at Columbia in sociology when it was still rare for a woman to succeed in academe, and who raised basic questions about the core assumptions of her discipline — especially as they related to the study of women — in the McCarthy era, when intellectual challenges were especially difficult to make. She is for me the quintessential Columbia woman: brainy, unorthodox, fearless.



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >