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**The Seven Sister Colleges vs the term Women**

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A woman is an “adult female human being”, according to the Oxford Languages. From what I have learned in my gender and society class at St. Lawrence University, was that the term “women” is used to help identify a person's gender and correct pronouns. A woman is not defined by her genitals. Someone's birth sex does not define their gender.

The Seven Sisters Colleges typically are under scrutiny due to what they represent as well as what a women's college stands for. What are the Seven Sister colleges, and what do they represent? What is a women's college? These are important questions that came to my mind when I first heard of the Seven Sister colleges. A simple answer to what are the Seven Sister colleges is that “the Seven Sisters were created in order to serve mostly white, upper-class women who had been barred from attending other universities. But as coeducation came into favor towards the end of the 19th century, the need for women's colleges became less pressing.”(Thomason, 2018). The Seven Sisters Colleges have been serving the public since 1915. These highly selective colleges include Mount Holyoke, Vassar, Smith, Wellesley, Bryn Mawr, Barnard, and Radcliffe College. The purpose of these colleges was to provide young women with an education that was equal to an Ivy League degree, something that was only for men at the time. Since the doors first opened at these colleges, things have changed within the college but also within our society. Radcliffe College joined forces with its brother college Harvard in 1999 and Vassar declined its brother's college, Yale, offered to join forces in 1967. In 1969 Vassar became co-ed, “Vassar had seldom suffered financially or experienced any problems concerning the qualifications of its applicants. By the late 1950s, however, the college's single-sex environment became increasingly unattractive to active and socially conscious young

women” (A History of Coeducation, 2005). What does that mean for the other five colleges, are they currently women-only colleges? The answer is yes, and they don’t plan on becoming co-ed any time soon. In this paper, I will look into the admissions process at these seven highly selective liberal arts colleges, and look closely at how they identify what is a woman.

In 2013, Calliope Wong was applying to colleges just like any other senior during the time. Wong applied to Smith College, one of the Seven Sister colleges, and was denied due to the fact she was a transgender woman. The application to Smith College was returned to Wong without an official review from the admissions team. Vice President, Laurie Fenlason of Strategic Initiatives at Smith College stated that “someone whose paperwork consistently reflects female identity will be considered for admission,” (James, S. D., 2013). Smith College was afraid that if they accepted Wong, it would have an effect on their Title IX funding as a women's college. Now with a better understanding of gender roles and a change in admission policies, Smith states that transgender students are more than welcomed to apply and that “students are here to engage with each other socially and academically in respectful ways, and our community values the range of identities that the student body represents.”, and that they

encourage those who identify as trans, nonbinary<sup>1</sup> and gender nonconforming<sup>2</sup> to apply (Offices - Diversity - Gender Identity & Expression).

Many transgender students wish to apply to these highly selective liberal arts colleges for the opportunities that will come from the degree, but also they “believe them to be ‘both psychologically and physically safer than other colleges.’”(Heise, E. A.) This belief is supported by statistics indicating that a significant portion of violence against transgender people is perpetrated by men. Women’s colleges have the reputation of being ‘liberal, seemingly open-minded space[s]’ with a ‘focus on social justice activism,’ and are thus appealing to students who are beginning to question their gender identity.” (Heise, E. A.) Calliope Wong, the student who was denied by Smith because of her birth sex, stated something similar about why she wanted to attend Smith College, “from the beginning, I was attracted to Smith as a college for ‘iron women,’ women who had the willpower and knowledge to effect real change in society”,(Wong, 2012) Wong said in an email. "As a third-wave feminist, I definitely saw Smith as a place for the empowerment of visionary, vocal and practical women who worked to close the gap between ideal and reality.” (James, S. D., 2013). People who identified as transgender, where officially recongized by the government in the 1980s. This being said, it took the Seven Sisters 34 years to change their

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<sup>1</sup> Nonbinary- a person who identifies with a gender outside of the ‘male-female gender binary’. (Kelly, 2020)

<sup>2</sup> Gender Nonconforming- a person who deos not behave or appear to conform to societies expectations. (Oxford Languages)

policies, something that should have been changed way before. If it wasn't for Wong, who knows when these colleges would have updated their policies about who can apply.

Another reason for transgender, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming students liking these all-women colleges is that “women’s colleges like Smith have not only drawn students with a desire to lead, but also those with same-sex romantic inclinations. What started as a common practice of “crushes” and “romantic friendships” later developed into an increased acceptance for lesbian and bisexual women (Faderman 2012, 18).” (Drew, 2018). All women colleges give students the chance to express themselves, not only in the classroom but throughout the campus. Some women see these campuses as a “safe” zone because of the clear visibility of women in nontraditional roles all throughout campus. “By the second half of the twentieth-century women’s colleges became places of activism and self-expression” (Kraschel 2012). These campuses were quickly changing, maybe too fast for society to keep up. Although the school's policies did not line up with what students were attracted to it, the schools had to act factually since straight females were attracted to the idea of an all-women's college because of the lack of men.

With changes in society and an increase in individuals becoming more comfortable coming out as transgender, colleges have adjusted their admissions process by creating a welcoming environment for all. “In recent years, students and LGBTQ communities outside of colleges have called on the schools to admit transgender students. While for several years the schools have admitted students who were assigned female at birth and transitioned to male

during their college years, others transitioning from male to female were not allowed.”(Williams, 2015). These colleges, in recent years, welcome anyone who currently identifies as female to apply. Bryn Mawr states in their policy, that recognizes the changes in our world and the evolution of identifying with a gender, “all individuals who have identified and continue to identify as women (including cisgender and trans women), intersex individuals who do not identify as male, individuals assigned female at birth who have not taken medical or legal steps to identify as male”(Transgender Applicants) are welcomed to apply while “Wellesley will consider for admission any applicant who lives as a woman and consistently identifies as a woman; therefore, candidates assigned male at birth who identify as women are eligible to apply for admission. Those assigned female at birth who identify as men are not eligible for consideration for admission.” (FAQ). The difference between these two statements is that Bryn Mawr will not take a student who is undergoing medical or legal steps to identify as male, while Wellesley does not state that in their policy. Wellesley states in their frequently asked questions post, that they “accept applications from those who were assigned female at birth and who feel they belong in our community of women.” This means if you were born with a penis at birth, yet do not identify with either gender, your application will not be accepted, yet if you were born with a vagina, but still do not identify with either gender, your application will be accepted. This means the Sister Colleges identify a woman as someone who was born with a vagina at birth or a student who is in the process of transitioning to become a woman through hormones.

All girl colleges discourage students who do not fall under the ‘male-female gender binary’ category to apply and are unsure if they fall under an “accepting” category to these all-women colleges. Some students feel that when applying to all-women colleges, it is

challenging for them to identify with just one gender. The common application, a non-profit organization that allows students to apply for college, gives students the opportunity to “within the profile section, in addition to the sex question, there is an optional free response text field that gives applicants a place to further describe their gender identity. They can use the open response field or the "additional information" prompt within the writing section to share any information they wish for colleges to know.”(Common Application, How can we help?). Although this is great that the Common Application allows students to do this, most schools look at birth sex. Callio Wong stated that when applying to Smith college she felt discouraged because “to be legally recognized as “female” on [her] birth certificate according to BOTH Massachusetts and Connecticut law, [she] has to undergo vaginoplasty (feminizing genital surgery). From what [she] understand, Smith College will only evaluate [her] as a “real” girl if [she] get sex reassignment surgery.” (Wong, 2012). This is an issue that not only did Wong experience but many others who were in her shoes at a point in life.

Another concern for transgender and non-binary young adults is the mental health issues when making the transition from high school to college. “Without trans-inclusive healthcare coverage, some students may choose to put off or not to attend college. And for trans and non-binary students that do attend college, they are at an increased risk of experiencing school-related mental health issues that can be further exacerbated by inadequate or non-existent gender-affirming healthcare”. According to the American Psychological Association, “Anxiety is the top presenting concern among college students (41.6 percent), followed by depression (36.4 percent) and relationship problems (35.8 percent)” (Lin, 2012). Transgender college students are fur times more likely to experience these issues. (H., K., & Ana. 2019)

After researching these Seven Sister colleges and what they stand for, I learned that these colleges were created to give women an equal college degree to men during the 1900s. These colleges did not change their policies as the time when on and society changed its views on gender. I would say that these “all women colleges” were seen more as “all-female colleges” since their policies only welcomed those who were born female at birth to apply until 2014. Although that is still a requirement for nonbinary applicants, the Seven Sister colleges now welcome those who also identify themselves as women when submitting their application and support women who decided to transition after getting into one of the Seven Sisters.

I believe that the Seven Sister schools have the right to remain all-women colleges, but they should be looser on the term “women” and maybe use the term “womxn”. This term is used to be more inclusive of trans and nonbinary women to help avoid sexism. The term also helps bring attention to the discrimination and institutional barriers women have faced in the past, something that is very important to the Seven Sister colleges. I think all women colleges should be constantly changing their policies to make sure all who currently identify can apply and possibly be a part of these wonderful campuses. The Seven Sisters are currently making the process, much needed, to allow their colleges to be welcoming to all those who identify as a woman, and should continue to give support to those transitioning to help ease the process and offer them mental health resources.



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