

Better Dead Than Coed?

Telling the Story of Coeducation at Goucher College

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HIS 400: Senior Thesis

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27 April 2010

Introduction: Locating Goucher's Story

Walking into Heubeck Hall from Van Meter Highway, visitors to Goucher will inevitably step over the College seal, inscribed on the second floor of the building. The Goucher seal, which was designed in 1910 by President Eugene Noble, Janet Goucher Miller, and Dean Van Meter, presents a perfect introduction to the College's founding mission and identity. Three white Della Robbia lilies, which represent womanly grace, stand against a blue background beside the Maryland state flag. Above them stands an open bible on a golden background turned to *Thessalonians*, chapter five, verse 21 and below them are written the Latin words, "Gratia et Veritas," meaning grace and truth. Taken together, these symbols imply that Goucher College was chartered in the state of Maryland on a religious foundation, seeking to cultivate womanly grace, as represented by the lilies and blue background, and elevation of the mind, as represented by the color gold. Perhaps most important though is the biblical verse cited at the top of the seal. This specific verse of *Thessalonians* reads, "Test all things. Hold fast to that which is good."

Throughout the College's 125 year history, Goucher has lived by this motto and introduced many substantial changes to its mission and identity while holding on to key elements deemed most good. Goucher has grown from a small, Christian women's seminary in Baltimore City, which graduated just five students in 1892 to a secular, liberal arts college of nearly 1400 students in suburban Towson. Despite these changes, Goucher has retained its mission of offering a hands-on, transformative liberal arts education to quirky and independent minded individuals. Of Goucher's many changes though, the College's decision to admit men in 1986 has been possibly the most significant and the least examined. This paper will explore the causes and context of coeducation at Goucher and outline the major academic and social changes which coeducation has brought about at the College. The decision to admit men, which was

implemented at Goucher in the fall of 1987, has been a mixed blessing for the school.

Coeducation has succeeded in creating the livelier classroom and social environment which Goucher lacked as a women's college in the 1970s and 1980s, but it has also introduced an unequal gender dynamic between men and women and distanced Goucher from its history and traditions as a women's college. Today, Goucher is a dynamic and trendsetting institution but it has retained little connection to its past and continues to struggle with forming a concrete mission and identity today.

The heart of the content for this paper comes from oral history interviews conducted with various community members, including current and former students, professors, coaches, admissions staff and one former president, who lived with and through Goucher's transition to coeducation. While every interview touches on the subject's experience of coeducation at Goucher, a range of other topics are also covered, including prior educational background, career goals and aspirations, and most defining memories of Goucher. Taken together, these interviews constitute an educational portrait of each subject and can be used in a wide variety of educational or historical research projects. Audio recordings of these eleven interviews can be found in the Goucher College Archives. In addition to these original interviews, the primary source documents in the Coeducation section of Goucher's Archives, specifically the meeting minutes and reports from the Trustee Task Force, survey results from Alumnae and Student polls on coeducation, and popular press articles on the effects of coeducation were enormously helpful in writing this paper. I am also indebted to the works of Anna Heubeck Knipp and Thaddeus P. Thomas, and Frederic O. Musser who wrote the first two official volumes of Goucher College's

history from 1885 to 1985.¹ My hope is that this paper might serve as a starting point from which the third volume of Goucher's history might be written.

This paper includes five chapters. The first two chapters provide the background and context for understanding the critical issues involved in Goucher's transition to coeducation. Chapter One explains the history of women's colleges transitioning to coeducation and provides a review of literature of the major sociological and educational research conducted between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s on the debate between single versus mixed-sex coeducation at the college level. Chapter Two begins by describing Goucher's early mission and identity, starting with its incorporation as the Women's College of Baltimore City in 1885 and continues on through the 1960s when enrollment at women's colleges across the country began to decline. In Chapter Three, Goucher's own decision to begin admitting men is discussed at length. This chapter outlines both the 1973 and the 1986 votes on coeducation, other measures which Goucher considered to boost enrollment including a possible merger with Johns Hopkins University, evidence on the declining enrollment and popularity of women's colleges, and the feedback of faculty members, students and alumnae on the possibility of coeducation. Chapters Four and Five, which are based primarily on testimony from oral history interviews and popular press articles, outline the immediate effects which coeducation has had on Goucher's academic and social environment.

This paper constitutes the most comprehensive research to date on the history of coeducation at Goucher and its immediate effects on the social and academic life of the College, yet it is not intended to be the definitive, objective analysis on the subject.² Such a study, which

¹ Anna Heubeck Knipp and Thaddeus P. Thomas. *The History of Goucher College* (Baltimore, 1938).
Musser, Frederick O. *The History of Goucher College, 1930-1985* (Baltimore, 1990).

² See Julie Roy Jeffrey, "Afterword: The Transition to Coeducation," in Musser's volume for a published account of Goucher's decision to admit men.

would be incredibly useful to Goucher as it plans for its future, would require years of extensive, interdisciplinary research conducted by scores of individuals. Rather, this paper is meant to serve as an introduction to that larger study. It both tells the story of coeducation at Goucher while revealing the immediate effects that admitting men has had on the College's academic and social environment. Above all, this study is intended to spark debate, dialogue and further inquiries into this momentous but often over-looked event in Goucher's history. Only by examining and discussing coeducation in a public discourse which involves all community members will men and women achieve equality within and outside the classrooms of Goucher College.

This paper relies heavily on testimony provided in oral history interviews, a genre of evidence which is sometimes criticized by more traditional historians for being overly impressionistic and subjective. I chose to incorporate evidence from oral histories simply because there are few other published sources on the topic of coeducation at Goucher. Goucher professors of Psychology, Richard Pringle and Katherine Canada, published two articles on the effects of coeducation on classroom behavior and the 1992 Ms. Goucher pageant.³ Apart from these articles, historians must turn to the documents in the College Archives, which are an excellent source for dates, official reports and statistics. To understand the actual experience of coeducation, however, the day to day obstacles and triumphs of Goucher's community members, we must ask them to describe it in their own words. It is true that oral history deals heavily in individuals' subjective and sometimes flawed recollections and impressions. The terrain of memory can be a tangled thicket. Yet when waded through carefully and checked for facts and inaccuracies, individual memories can yield dazzling insights into past events which the historian

³ Katherine Canada and Richard Pringle. "Interpreting Cross-Dressing on a College Campus: A Social Context Approach," *Annals of Scholarship* 11, no. 4 (1997): 337-357. Canada, Katherine and Richard Pringle. "The Role of Gender in College Classroom Interactions," *Sociology of Education* 68, no.3 (1995): 161-186. *American Sociological Association*, JSTOR (18 Oct. 2009).

can gain from no other source. By virtue of being present at Goucher when it began admitting men, the community members interviewed for this paper represent the world's leading experts on coeducation at the College. Nobody knows the story better than they do.

To those individuals who believe that oral history constitutes nothing more than the anecdotal stories of unqualified individuals, I would counter that history itself is a form of storytelling, albeit one grounded in the careful analysis of evidence by the historian. True, the evidence obtained from oral histories is often subjective and anecdotal, but as Donald A. Ritchie states in his guide, *Doing Oral History*, “Anecdotal is not synonymous with *apocryphal*, meaning spurious or unverifiable information.”⁴ The anecdotes and assertions made by individuals in these interviews were not only cross checked with the testimony of other individuals but also with documents from the Goucher College Archives. The history of coeducation at Goucher would be very dull indeed if it were written merely as a collection of dates from Board decisions, statistics from alumnae surveys, and names of administrators and researchers, all of which are easily obtained from primary source documents. It is the stories, memories, and opinions of individual community members, subjective though they may be, that give life and meaning to the story of coeducation at Goucher. As historians, we must let go of the notion that all evidence must be objective for it to be valid. Historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto, citing the seminal work of Edward Carr in *What Is History?*, asserts that while there is an objective truth about the past, we as historians are not capable of knowing it. Rather than striving for an unobtainable truth, historians must accept the fact that “objectivity, which we are committed to seeking, but which we can never attain, lies at the sum total of all possible

⁴ Donald A. Ritchie *Doing Oral History* (Oxford, 2003), 121.

subjectivities.”⁵ This paper, which combines the testimony of many individuals who have lived with and through the transition to coeducation, represents the sum total of many possible subjectivities about Goucher’s history. As a student currently enrolled at Goucher, I will never be a completely objective researcher of the institution’s policies and history. I chose to attend Goucher over a more highly ranked women’s college and, throughout the research process, was forced to confront my own opinions and biases about single-sex education. It is because of these experiences though, not in spite of them, that I felt drawn to the story of coeducation and compelled to research its effects on the social and academic life of Goucher. Coeducation is part of my story as a student at Goucher, and it is the story of every individual interviewed for this project.

⁵ Felipe Fernández-Armesto, “Epilogue: What is History Now?” in Cannadine, David, ed. *What is History Now?* (New York, 2002), 155.