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From Same-Sex to Co-ed: Trinity female students' perceptions of their transition to college

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In March of 2004, the United States Department of Education began to discuss the enforcement of the anti-discrimination law, Title IX. This policy allows school districts to establish more single-sex classes and schools in their community. Stricter enforcement of Title IX, would allow school officials the opportunity to create a class, grade level, or entire school designed for either males or females. There are in fact, classes in Connecticut public schools that are offered to a single gender, for example in Manchester High School, an all girls technology class can be taken. "Teachers and guidance counselors in the Hartford programs say that boys and girls who learn without the distraction of the other gender score higher on standardized tests, behave better in class and take more risks in asking or answering questions" (Frahm & Gottlieb, 2004). However, there are critics who believe that "...while many girls report increased confidence and improved attitudes about math and science, they do not show a measurable improvement in academic skill" (Dornin, 1998). I have taken these studies and findings further by researching how graduates of single-sex high schools fare in coeducational college environments. I focused specifically on how female graduates of single-sex schools navigate the transition to coeducational environments both academically and socially.

Based on my extensive research of Trinity's female graduates of single-sex schools, their previous educational experience significantly impacted their academic transition to a coeducational environment. Graduates of single-sex schools are engrained with the notion of needing to prove your intelligence and academic ability to the opposite sex. This hyper-awareness of gender-biased stereotypes led to heightened class confidence and participation for first year students. However, as the females transitioned to their senior year, the females were less concerned with proving to males that they are of equal intelligence levels. Classroom confidence remained constant, while class participation dwindled. This drop in participation was caused by feeling less compelled to react against gender-biased stereotype. Disproving the common idea that graduates of single-sex schools experience social inhibitions when in coeducational environments, the females of my study transitioned with no significant social anxiety or lack of confidence.

In 1992 the American Association of University Women (AAUW) Educational Foundation published a report entitled *How Schools Shortchange Girls*. This report provided "...overwhelming evidence that girls were often ignored in the classroom and neglected in the curriculum. This report brought gender equity to the forefront of educational reform" (AAUW, 1998, p.1). Herbert W. Marsh (1989), the University of Sydney, conducted a study looking at whether or not attending single-sex and coeducational high schools effects a student's achievement, attitudes, behaviors and sex differences. He found that "students from single-sex schools generally had higher educational aspirations...had better social self-concepts, had lower sex stereotypes, and spent more time on homework" (p.80). There has been a multitude of past research that examines the effects single-sex education has on the student's classroom behavior and

confidence levels. Sandra Swain and Douglas Harvey (2002) found that “girls exhibited an eagerness to participate in discussions and a willingness to ask for help in front of other girls. Girls repeatedly asked the teacher questions and used the answers as opportunities for group learning (p.17). Valerie Lee and Helen Marks (1990) argue that “the single-sex educational experience, especially during the formative adolescent period, appears to enable young women to overcome certain social-psychological barriers to their academic and professional advancement” (p.381). I took these studies further by researching how effects of a single-sex education are carried over into college environments.

My findings could be helpful in the world of educational studies, because it would aid parents in deciphering whether or not single-sex education would be beneficial to their daughters’ education in the long-run. Also, the social aspect of my research would be useful to psychologists studying gender-biased interactions. If the females from single-sex high schools are less likely to be academically inhibited while in a male dominated environment, then this would give evidence that single-sex education helps to reduce the effects gender-biased stereotypes has on academic performance. Teachers and other school faculty could attempt to implement curricula in coeducational environments that foster these same ideals of breaking down the stereotypes and helping females to feel confident to speak up in a male dominated situation. Females that feel confident in the classrooms and have positive self-concepts would then be able to carry these traits into the social arena of their lives. And conversely my research looks at a few of the negative factors associated with single-sex education. People in the world of education might use this data to provide reasoning for moving away from single-sex educational options or

could establish an understanding of how to modify their current practices. My research has useful findings for the educational arena and will shed light on a much debated topic.

My study mainly involved qualitative research. I spoke to Professor Sarah Wert, who teaches Psychology 101 and Applied Social Psychology. She gave me permission to pass out a voluntary survey in both her courses, asking for females that went to single-sex high schools to volunteer to be a part of my study. The first year students in my research are going to receive credit for participating in my study. Once I had a list of females who went to single-sex high schools, then I randomly selected 5 students from each class to participate in my study. I interviewed each of these students 2 times. Therefore, I conducted a total of 20 interviews. Based on class scheduling and agreement to participate, I selected two students from each class that I would observe in a classroom setting. It was a challenge to gain permission and schedule times to do the observations, however, I was able to collect rich data from the observations I completed.

I used small seminar classes as my observation environments. I observed one Trinity first year in her seminar and another first year in a small discussion-based class. Also, I have observed two Trinity seniors in their advanced senior course that has a discussion-based format. I have observed these 4 students 2 times each. I have conducted both pre-observation and post-observation interviews to see how the participants perceived their classroom behavior each time I observed them. In total I conducted 12 interviews with these four students (1 preliminary/pre-observation and 2 post-observation interviews). Therefore I was able to ask follow-up questions based on what I observed in the classroom, and gain an understanding of the student's feelings about their participation and confidence levels in the classroom. Observing seminars

instead of lecture formatted classes was useful to my research because class discussion was more frequent than say in a psychology 101 classes where the class size could be over 100 students. I chose to observe both seniors and first years because I wanted to see if as college continues, do the females feel as though they lose their confidence and competitive character or do they continue to perceive themselves as active class participants? My system of field notes was a journal of my classroom observations, and also, due to the fact that I am a quick note taker I recorded my interviews in this same journal.

As for the social aspect of my study, I observed and interviewed female students outside of the classroom. A question that I focused on was did females from single-sex schools feel less prepared socially for a coeducational environment? I asked them if they experienced anxiety or shyness when in a social setting that is predominantly males. Also, I interviewed a few of the students' roommates to provide me with an understanding of how they perceive the females interact with males outside of the classroom.

My research was conducted on Trinity College's campus, in Hartford, Connecticut. Trinity is an independent, nondenominational, liberal arts college. There are 2,188 undergraduate students with a male to female ratio of 50/50. All observations were conducted in small seminar classes. All interviews were conducted in a private room of the library.

...From Prozac to sushi

Graduates of single-sex schools are engrained with the notion of needing to prove your intelligence and academic ability to the opposite sex. This hyper-awareness of gender-biased stereotypes led to heightened class confidence and participation for first year students. I found that all of the students I interviewed perceived themselves as having high classroom confidence. This class confidence is linked to graduates of single-sex schools feeling compelled to battle gender-biased stereotypes that their high school teachers and administrators had warned them about. The females I interviewed all discussed how they were engrained with the notion of being head strong, opinionated and comfortable with their intelligence. Nora, a first year at Trinity is from the DC area. She attended a single-sex school from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Nora discussed with me how "...every teacher was constantly sending the message of women can do everything. We were surrounded by strong female figures, with a female principal, teachers, and headmistress." Nora's heightened class confidence can be attributed to her single-sex education, where having an opinion and expressing your intelligence was both embraced and highly encouraged. I observed Nora in her first-year seminar for two different class periods. Professor Jackson asked the class about their thoughts on whether or not mood elevating drugs should be so readily available in our society. Specifically, "should people be happy all of the time?" A debate ensued, with each student calling out their thoughts on this issue. The boys in the class were frequently cutting off the other students in order to voice their opinions. Nora would wait for the teacher to call on her. Nora agreed with the majority of the class, that mood elevators such as Prozac should be available for people that are depressed and mentally disturbed. However, Nora became very defensive when a boy commented on people abusing the use of anti-depressants. He

blurted out that “being depressed is just another excuse for people that cannot deal with their lives; they should just go see a shrink or something.” Nora quickly responded by pointing out this boy’s ignorance on mental disorders. He attempted to retort, but Nora continued to explain how there are situations where people are clinically depressed and due in fact have a chemical imbalance. This scenario displays how she held to her opinions and did not allow the male to dominate the conversation. Nora is an opinionated person that is not going to let a boy keep her from conveying her thoughts to the class. She was constantly instructed to be aware of gender-biased stereotypes, such as men are better debaters and that the opposite sex will challenge your intellectual capabilities. Nora’s hyper-awareness of these stereotypes fueled her efforts to speak her mind during this class session. The debate lasted for twenty minutes, and then the professor announced that “...another important issue must be addressed.” The class needed to decide what kind of food they wanted for their end of the semester party. During my post-observational interview with Nora I asked her how she perceived her classroom confidence was during this debate. Nora responded as follows,

I could not believe the comment that boy made about mentally ill people. He is always shouting out in class. I think he likes the sound of his own voice. I felt very strongly about this topic and wanted to tell that ignorant jerk that he was wrong. I just wish the professor would have let us discuss the issue for longer. But instead we had to discuss what food to get for a party. What a great debate, from Prozac to sushi.

Nora was not only frustrated about the comment her male classmate made, but she also would have liked the professor to allow more time for the debate. Nora expressed to me how in high school the teachers welcomed heated debates where students were able to voice their opinions freely and openly. For this reason, Nora pointed out that she did not

hold back when the boy's comment went against her beliefs. Observing Nora in the classroom setting, displayed her heightened confidence and participation as a result of the ideals instilled in her during high school.

I don't need a maid to do my dirty work

Vivian is another first year that I interviewed and observed in a classroom setting. We discussed her exposure to specific social cues at her high school, located right outside of Hartford. Vivian explained to me how the teachers would include in lesson plans some type of message that involved women needing to stand up for their beliefs and ideas.

If I have something to say and it goes against what a boy is saying I am still going to stick to my opinions. My teachers provided me with an environment that made me feel comfortable with expressing my opinions, even if they were not in line with what others thought. I definitely think that this has carried with me to college, and I have no problem being known as the opinionated bitch in my classes.

I have observed Vivian a total of three times in her sociology class. There was one situation where the class was discussing whether or not to have a maid do your housework. I observed how most of the class was in favor of paying a person to clean their house. However, Vivian argued against having another person do her "dirty work." One male became somewhat confrontational when he responded to Vivian's comments. Vivian did not back down and kept her strong opinion. She turned right around in her seat and addressed the male student's comment in a very firm and confident manner. Two

days later, I interviewed Vivian about her class participation in the “maid debate.” “I’m going to stick with my beliefs and no guy is going to make me keep my mouth shut.” The scenario involving Vivian and the maid discussion further displays how females from single-sex high schools are taught to be aware of gender-biased stereotypes. They feel compelled to fight these stereotypes upon their arrival to a coeducational school, leading to heightened class confidence and participation. Vivian is proving to her male peers that the gender-biased stereotypes in our society should be challenged. Vivian explained to me that her high school teachers were adamant about teaching them not to be afraid of proving they are of equal intelligence level. “I am ready to go up against any boy. I know that I have something to offer, you won’t see me sitting in a corner not saying anything.” Vivian is displaying how she has heightened class confidence directly connected to being told for four years that she must be head strong and comfortable with her intellectual capabilities.

By my senior year, I was sick of it all

Seniors conveyed to me this same feeling of being engrained with the notion of breaking down gender-biased stereotypes. Katie, a senior who went to a single-sex school for thirteen years, was not as positive about being bombarded with women empowerment messages.

I’m not really for women’s rights. It was all so engrained in everything we did that now I just don’t care. I appreciate birth control and I’m Pro Choice but I’m not a raging feminist. Every week we had women speakers that were alums of our school, coming in and saying how successful they were because they didn’t let men hold them down and get in the way of what they wanted. They told us to be strong females and to breakthrough any gender-

based obstacles. Everywhere I turned there were bulletin boards reminding us to be strong, opinionated, and proud of our intelligence. By my senior year I was sick of it all.

Katie, felt that these messages of being confident and proving yourself in front of males was essentially overkill. This data poses the question of how can school administrators establish a balance between drilling social messages and allowing the students to decipher their own ways of establishing an active role in society. Nora and Vivian found their hyper-awareness of gender-biased stereotypes to be helpful when they transitioned to a coeducational environment. However, Katie felt that her single-sex high school focused too much on preparing females to prove themselves to the opposite sex. I asked Katie why she has these feelings about her school's emphasis on promoting women's intelligence.

Now that I have been in college for four years, I can form my own opinions on how a woman should act in a male-dominated society. I know that my teachers meant well and there assemblies and speakers definitely prepared me for college, but now I do not feel that I need to fight these stereotypes. College is about getting an education. College should not be a battle of the sexes.

Katie's comments convey the idea that with time these single-sex graduates move away from feeling compelled to react against gender-biased stereotypes. Their four year college career allows them to form their own opinions on how to act in a coeducational environment. The teachers and administrators provided them with a framework of defense mechanisms against gender-biased stereotypes; women need to be headstrong, comfortable with their intelligence, and opinionated. However, the seniors I interviewed all discussed how this hyper-awareness of stereotypes has dissipated as they have learned to interact in a coeducational setting without feeling their gender roles are threatened.

I'm over the whole man-hater mentality...

Paige is another senior that shared the same opinions on being overwhelmingly engrained with the notion of breaking down gender-biased stereotypes. In our interviews Paige discussed that her transition to senior year has definitely affected her classroom behavior. Paige noted that she is less concerned with proving that she is of equal intelligence level of any male. "When I got to Trinity I was gun ho about showing guys that I could keep up with them in the classroom. Now, I don't feel like I need to prove anything to them." Paige is expressing how there is a huge difference between her class participation during her first year and senior year. "I was constantly raising my hand, when I was a freshman, especially during my ethics course. I had been told by my high school teachers that right from the beginning of school, I needed to be confident about expressing my opinions." Although, class participation dwindled for the seniors I interviewed, they all were adamant about the fact that classroom confidence had remained constant.

I am totally comfortable with my intelligence level. I don't feel like I have to prove myself anymore by constantly raising my hand and speaking up in class. This doesn't mean I'm not as confident, it just means that I'm over the whole man-hater mentality that my school shoved in my face. Let them answer all the questions, they are usually wrong anyways!

Paige's classroom confidence has remained the same but she is no longer actively fighting the gender-biased stereotypes that had been so engrained in her during high school. The transition to senior year played a role in these females formulating their own views on how to be active participants in their coeducational community. They no longer

entirely rely on the women empowerment messages from high school, to navigate college both socially and academically.

It's not a competition anymore

Kiley, a senior at Trinity, discussed this same notion of feeling less compelled to react against gender-biased stereotypes. She acknowledged that her class participation has dwindled compared to her heightened levels of participation during her first year.

I don't think I'm less inclined to talk in class because I feel nervous or insecure— but I feel guys have a tendency to overtake a classroom— talk much more. I don't need to prove to them that I'm just as smart. It's not a loss of confidence, it's just that I'm not as focused on showing the boys that I can win a debate or have more intelligent things to say. It's not a competition anymore.

Kiley is reiterating that her dwindling levels of class participation are not due to feeling less confident. But instead there has been a significant dissipation of feeling compelled to fight gender-biased stereotypes. I was given the opportunity to observe Kiley in a classroom setting. I noted that Kiley was not as actively participating as the first years I had observed. She did not contribute to the discussion, until the professor actually called on her to give her thoughts about the African slave trade. In a post-observation interview, I asked Kiley her perceptions on her participation in class that day. Kiley responded with, “if you want the truth, I wasn't prepared for the class. I hadn't done the readings, and had no clue what to say when the teacher called on me.” Kiley's answer to my question does bring up the point that a condition of class participation could involve how prepared for the class the student feels. In this case, Kiley did not feel as if she had a relevant contribution to make to the class, due to the fact that she had not

looked over the material the night before. However, as the interview continued, I asked Kiley what it was like to be in a history class when the majority of the students are male. Also, I mentioned that there is a stereotype involving men being better at history than females. Kiley explained to me that four years ago

...I would have been raising my hand like crazy, to voice my thoughts on the slave trade and whatever other topics in class. But as a senior, I'm not going to say something in class just to look like I am participating. I don't feel like I need to prove to these professors and guys that I'm just as good at history as they are. I am comfortable with what I know and what I don't know.

Kiley believes that her class participation dwindling is actually a sign of her breaking away from the hyper-awareness of gender-biased stereotypes. She is more concerned with doing well in the class, than proving to her peers that she is of equal intelligence level. This new focus on not feeling compelled to react against gender-biased stereotypes is a direct result of spending four years in a coeducational environment away from a single-sex school that engrains in you the ideals of "women empowerment".

I was used to having guys around

Disproving the common idea that graduates of single-sex schools experience social inhibitions when in coeducational environments, the females of my study transitioned with no significant social anxiety or lack of confidence. However, there were specific conditions that contributed to not experiencing these social inhibitions. Level of contact and exposure to males during their high school careers, played a major role in this smooth transition to the social world of college. Many of the girls I interviewed had male siblings, which they believed helped them become more

comfortable interacting with males in social settings. Kiley explained to me that “If I didn’t have brothers than I definitely think I would have been more timid and shy around boys in college.” Michelle, a first year, is the youngest of five with three older brothers. “My brothers always had friends over, and I constantly had to defend my opinions in a house of boys. I think that this exposure to males helped me when I got to college, because I was used to having guys around.” Another factor that seemed to play a role in the girls feeling comfortable in their new coeducational environments was having boys on the same campus or even having certain coeducational courses. Nora described how “...being on the same campus with my brother school, helped me to not feel isolated. We went to their games and the school planned all sorts of activities with the boys, such as dances, community service, and coeducational Cathedral events.” These Cathedral events involved having speakers come and address the student body about worldly issues. Kiley felt that having boys in a few of her senior year classes, “...made a big difference.” “Once I had that first class with guys I noticed how the dynamic of class quickly changed. The teacher encouraged all of us to speak up about personal issues such as sex and drugs.” Katie also believed that her exposure to boys helped with her transition to a coeducational environment.

I definitely don’t feel socially awkward in front of boys. Even when I was a freshman, I felt fine. We had socials from, 4-7 on Fridays in the seventh and eighth grade. Also, we had Barkley’s which was ballroom dancing class. It was like a manners class where you had to wear party dresses and white gloves. This was where we met the boys and found out who was cool and who wasn’t. My group of guy friends came from these socials, and when we started driving we would go to their games.

These females perceived themselves as not having any significant social anxiety as a result of transitioning to a coeducational environment. Their single-sex education did not

completely isolate them from males. The females were exposed to males in different contexts throughout their high school career which allowed for a relatively smooth transition to a coeducational environment.

Everyday I find myself feeling more comfortable...

Time played an important role in these female's transition to a coeducational environment. Many of the first years noted that the little social anxiety they felt had in fact dissipated with time. Nora explained that "...everyday I find myself feeling more comfortable with the boys I live with." I interviewed Nora's roommate and she also felt that Nora has become less socially inhibited with the boys in their dorm. She noted how Nora is more likely to strike up a conversation with a male hall-mate than she was two months ago. Kerri a senior at Trinity went to a single-sex high school for two years. She believes that with time, she became even more comfortable in Trinity's coeducational environment. "As a woman in this world you need to assert your power as an opinionative person. But I believe this comes with age and not just being told how to act." These females needed the time to adapt to new surroundings where males would all of a sudden be a part of their educational environment. Each female I interviewed agreed that going to a coeducational school took some getting used to. Paige explained that "...of course I'm going to be a little nervous around guys when I first get to college, but who isn't nervous when they start going to a new school and have a bazillion people to meet in a few days." Being anxious and nervous when arriving to college, was attributed to being in a new environment and not just because they went to single-sex schools. Nora told me that she "...was more nervous about meeting her roommate and making

close girl friends than going to school with boys for the first time.” The females in my study did not attribute their college jitters to being from a single-sex school. They perceived their social transition as easy, with no abnormal levels of anxiety.

I loved going to an all girls’ school

My research uncovered that Trinity’s graduates of single-sex schools were significantly impacted academically by their previous educational experiences. The females involved in my study were engrained with a hyper-awareness of gender-biased stereotypes that in turn led to heightened class participation and confidence during their first year at Trinity. This class participation dissipated as the females transitioned to their senior year due to feeling less compelled to prove their intelligence to the opposite sex. The females of my study transitioned with no significant social anxiety or lack of confidence. These findings suggest that a single-sex education is beneficial to females of our society. However, some of these females reported feeling overwhelmed when they were engrained with the notions of the need to be a strong willed woman that is comfortable with her intelligence. Therefore, there must be a happy medium when teaching young females to be opinionated and confident. Single-sex schools need to allow their students to form their own ideas of how to be a contributing citizen of society, other than by bombarding them with defense mechanisms against gender-biased stereotypes.

This research provides evidence that coeducational schools could work to implement programs that emphasized students being proud of their intelligence, and comfortable with expressing their opinions. However, both males and females should be

exposed to these types of programs. For example, having speakers of both sexes come to assemblies and discuss their professions would aid students in seeing the importance of working hard. The females in this study said that they were surrounded by female role models engraining in them the message of women empowerment. Coeducational schools could focus on providing all students with positive role models that promoted academic achievement for future success.

Future studies could compare private single-sex and private coeducational graduates' transition to college. This comparative study would provide evidence if the academic and social behaviors of the females were due to their single-sex education, or if the same ideals they were taught, are also present in coeducational private schools' curricula. Also, future research could study whether or not females from single-sex schools carry these ideals into graduate school and their professional lives. Single-sex education is a regularly debated topic. Further research would definitely be beneficial to investigate the effects of this type of learning environment on today's youth.

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