From Same-Sex to Coed: Trinity Female Students’ Perceptions of Their Transition to College

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Research Question

How do females of same-sex high schools navigate the transition to coeducational environments both academically and socially?
Past Research

- “...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).

- “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 (Swain & Harvey, 2002).

- “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” (Lee & Marks, 1990).

- “...The increasing presence of male students was associated with an overall decrease in professor-initiated interactions, student-initiated interactions, and female student-initiated follow-up interactions” (Canada & Pringle, 1995).
Case for Significance

- Help parents decipher whether or not single-sex ed. would be beneficial for their daughter

- Social aspect beneficial to psychologists studying gender-biased interactions
  - Increase in awareness and consciousness

- Should school administrators establish frameworks for implementation of curricula fostering same ideals?

- Looks at negative aspects to provide reasoning for modification or moving away from single-sex ed.
Research Context

► Trinity College’s campus, Hartford, Connecticut

► An independent, nondenominational, liberal arts college

► 2,188 undergraduate students

► 50/50 male to female ratio

► Observations conducted in small seminar classes

► Interviews were conducted in private room of the library
Methods

☐ Randomly selected 5 students from each class
☐ Interviewed each of these students 2 times.
☐ Conducted a total of 20 interviews.
Methods Breakdown

- **Academic:**
  - Selected two students from each class
  - Small discussion-based seminars
  - Observed 2 times each
  - Post-observation and pre-observation interviews
  - In total conducted 12 interviews
    (1 preliminary/pre-observation and 2 post-observation interviews).
Methods Breakdown

- Social

- Sample questions:
  - Did females from single-sex schools feel less prepared socially for a coeducational environment?
  - Did they experience anxiety or shyness when in a social setting that is predominantly males?

- Interviewed students’ roommates, mentors, and T.A.’s
  - provided me with an understanding of how they perceive the females interact with males outside of the classroom.
Thesis Statement

- Previous educational experience had a significant impact on their transition to a coeducational environment.

- Hyper-awareness of gender-biased stereotypes $\rightarrow$ heightened class confidence and participation for first year students.

- Transition to senior year $\rightarrow$ less concerned with proving equal intelligence levels.

- Classroom confidence remained constant.

- Class participation dwindled by senior year.

- Dissipation of feeling compelled to react against gender-biased stereotype.

- No significant social anxiety or lack of confidence.
Hyper-awareness of gender-biased stereotypes → heightened class confidence and participation for first year students

- Need to be head strong, opinionated, comfortable w/ intelligence

“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.”

---Vivian, First-Year
Engrained with the notion of breaking down gender-biased stereotypes

“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.”

---Katie, Senior
Transition to senior year → less concerned with proving equal intelligence levels

Classroom confidence 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, Senior
Class participation dwindled by senior year

Dissipation of feeling compelled to react against gender-biased stereotypes

“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 am 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, Senior
No significant social anxiety or lack of confidence

“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.”

---Michelle, First-Year

“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. 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.”

---Katie, Senior
Conclusions

- Is a single-sex education beneficial to the females of our society?
- Should coeducational schools implement these same ideals?
- Future research on females carrying these ideals into graduate school and their professional lives