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# Why Women's Colleges?: Reassessing the Benefits of Single-Sex Higher Education for Women

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# Why Women's Colleges?

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## Reassessing the Benefits of Single-Sex Higher Education for Women

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Prerequisite for Honors in Sociology

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## Abstract

In the United States today, young women have access to virtually all of the country's best colleges and universities. However, research suggests that single-sex education may still be beneficial to women in ways that co-education is not. Women's colleges encourage students to pursue non-traditional career paths, offer more female role models and mentoring opportunities, provide more leadership experiences on campus, and cultivate generally supportive campus environments in which students develop social and academic self-confidence. In this study, I examine the experiences of female students at two women's colleges and two co-educational colleges and find that women's college students differ from their peers as prospective students in that they are more likely to be seeking academically challenging environments. After arriving on campus, they are more likely to report positive social experiences and interactions with diversity during their first year, though this difference is eliminated in subsequent years. They are also more likely to hold leadership positions and somewhat more likely to switch to and persist in STEM fields. I suggest that women's colleges still offer real benefits to their students, and that co-educational colleges should look to them as effective models of how to support both male and female students on their campuses.

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## Introduction

Historically, women's colleges in the United States have served the purpose of providing access to higher education for women who were prohibited from enrolling in most of the nation's most prestigious universities. Since the 1970s, however, virtually all institutions have opened their doors to women, forcing those women's colleges that continue to stay true to their original missions to justify their existence in the face of increasing educational opportunity for women. Smith College, one of the original "Seven Sisters" schools, is one such institution, today enrolling around 2,500 undergraduates. In a sub-section of its website entitled "Why is Smith a Women's College?" the college boasts that over the years it has "only become more convinced that, for many women, a women's college is the *best* option." The rationalization that follows echoes many of the arguments made in favor of women's colleges in the sociological literature, beginning with a seminal series of studies by Mt. Holyoke alumna M. Elizabeth Tidball in the 1970s that demonstrated that graduates of women's colleges have tended to be more successful than women who graduated from co-educational colleges. Smith's website also emphasizes, however, more recent work that focuses on the undergraduate experience and how specific institutional factors affect student outcomes (Smith et al. 1995; Langdon 2001; Kinzie et al. 2007).

The website states that at Smith, "women are the focus of *all* the attention and *all* of the opportunities." This argument, which is one that was first articulated by Tidball, states that women's colleges eliminate the need for women to compete with their male peers for faculty time and educational as well as extracurricular opportunities on campus. Next Smith states that at the college, "faculty and alumnae offer outstanding role models." Tidball and others have argued that women's colleges provide women with stronger role models because they typically have

more female faculty and administrators who can serve as mentors and role models to female students. In addition, the page states that “at Smith, all of the leaders are women,” an argument that again emphasizes the advantage of the women’s college environment in providing opportunities for women; with no male peers to compete with, women hold all of the leadership positions on campus, which provides them with valuable experience to apply to their future careers and post-graduate lives. The website also echoes the second component of Tidball’s classic argument that women’s colleges encourage women to enter non-traditional careers by widening their opportunities and encouraging them to pursue their interests, regardless of gendered expectations, stating that, “[a]t Smith, there are no stereotypes about what women should do, but there are unlimited expectations about what women can do. Smith is a great training ground for careers that might still be considered non-traditional for women. At Smith, any career choice is an appropriate one.” The idea that women’s colleges provide women with a unique, empowering environment in which to explore their passions is one that is echoed throughout the literature on women’s education (Tidball et al. 1999; Miller-Bernal 2000).

Other women’s colleges espouse similar sentiments in their promotional materials. On a web page entitled “Only Wellesley,” Wellesley College, another of the Seven Sisters, touts its alumnae network, global community, exceptional faculty, and curriculum, but emphasizes especially a notion of sisterhood. At Wellesley:

[Sisterhood is] partly about the revelation that all the most courageous, most provocative, most accomplished people on campus are women. It’s partly about the simple, lifelong joy of being friends with those women. It’s mostly about 2,300 smart, singular women feeling the power of being 2,300 smart, singular women together, with the world before them.

At schools like Smith and Wellesley, two of the oldest and most well-known women's colleges in the country, the justification for continuing to enroll exclusively women may not actually be an essential one. Institutional prestige alone, along with generous endowments and the support of strong alumna networks, would probably allow these institutions to continue to stay true to their founding missions. However, I believe that the rationalizations described above are important in large part because they are passed on to students on a daily basis by administrations and faculty members. Beyond role models, leadership opportunities, and access to non-traditional career paths, what makes graduates of women's colleges exceptionally successful might be the experience of being part of a community in which women are expected and encouraged to excel.

The aim of my thesis, first and foremost, is to address the question of whether or not women's colleges are still relevant in the United States today, given the wide range of educational opportunities available to women in the twenty-first century. Taking into account a substantial body of research which has, again and again, shown the potential benefits of single-sex education for female students (Smith et al. 1995; Miller-Bernal 2000; Langdon 2001; Kinzie et al. 2007), I ask whether there are specific institutional factors inherent to women's colleges which are beneficial to women in particular. Drawing from previous studies, my research focuses on three major areas, which constitute my empirical chapters. First, I address several important questions related to college choice: What kind of student attends a women's college? What motivates students to continue to choose single-sex education over co-educational environments? Or is what I call the "women's college question" not necessarily a deciding factor when prospective students make decisions about college? Second, I address how characteristics of the environment in which students live and study during their four years of college affect students on a personal and academic level. Whereas no previous studies on women's colleges have looked in

depth at student social experiences in college, this is an area in which women's colleges are perhaps the most different from otherwise similar co-educational colleges, and an important factor that prospective students consider when choosing their college. Finally, I consider student outcomes by examining how students choose their majors and career paths, specifically how or whether this differs between women's colleges and co-ed colleges.

I do not believe that the women's college experience is fundamentally different from that at comparable co-educational colleges. Through my analysis of in-depth qualitative interviews with students at two women's colleges and two co-educational colleges, however, I have found that subtle differences in the ways that women's colleges are run, how students interact with each other, and how students are treated by faculty and administrators, can make a difference for female students. It is these differences, as well as similarities, that I have tried to illuminate in the following chapters. To some extent, these are factors that administrators have the capacity to change, and studies such as this one have the potential to inform educators on how to more effectively provide a positive learning environment for all of their students, women as well as men. My research supports much of what has been written about the benefits of women's colleges in the past. Students choose the two women's colleges because they perceive these to be quality institutions where they will have the ability to challenge themselves academically and push themselves to grow on a personal level. They are attracted by these institutions' glowing reputations, and are comforted by the knowledge that they will, upon graduation, be supported by large, successful alumnae networks. Echoing again Smith College's website, they enter with the knowledge that at a women's college, "the 'old boys' network' becomes an 'ageless women's network.'" Students leave with these expectations, for the most part, fulfilled. Perhaps, if co-educational colleges could adapt some of what makes women's colleges such great places

for personal development, both men and women at these institutions would benefit. I will return to this question in my concluding chapter.

My thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter One reviews past research on women's colleges and discusses the benefits associated with attending a single-sex institution. Chapter Two outlines my methodology and discusses the sample. Chapter Three, the first empirical chapter, begins by considering whether or not a different type of student attends a women's college as opposed to a co-educational college. In this chapter, I also work toward understanding how students view the campus cultures at their respective colleges, and how they themselves are incorporated into this culture. Chapter Four considers social and non-academic life on campus, beginning with initial impressions of social life on campus and considering students' perceptions of social life during their sophomore and senior years. This chapter also looks at how students perceive diversity on their campuses, along with how their understandings of diversity have developed over the course of four years. It concludes by considering student engagement in leadership positions on campus, which previous research indicates may be more prevalent at women's colleges (Whitt 1994). Finally, Chapter Five examines major choice, focusing on whether or not women's colleges are better at supporting women in non-traditional, particularly STEM (science, math, engineering, and technology), fields. This final empirical chapter also addresses the role of mentors and role models. Chapter Six consists of a discussion and conclusion.

## Chapter One: Review of the Literature

The first women's colleges in the United States were founded in the early 1800s with the intention of providing young women with access to higher education at a time when most institutions were exclusively male (Harwarth et al. 1997). These early institutions varied greatly in size and scope. Some, such as Wells Seminary in New York and Mt. Holyoke Seminary in Massachusetts (today Wells College and Mt. Holyoke College), educated primarily women from wealthy New England families and offered a curriculum that was, at the time, equivalent to a combination of high school and college coursework. In its early days, Wells had a preparatory department which catered to students who were not academically prepared for college-level coursework. This program remained in place even after the seminary officially became a "college" in its second year of operation. By comparison, schools like Vassar, Wellesley, and Smith had more rigorous curriculums and higher admissions standards for their students even in their earliest days. These colleges enjoyed a more prestigious reputation from the beginning, and were among the twenty-four institutions whose alumnae were eventually invited to join the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, an organization founded in 1881 dedicated to encouraging young women to attend college and expanding opportunities for women graduates (Miller-Bernal 2000). Other early women's colleges such as Bennett College and Spelman College, both of which remain in operation today, were founded with the specific purpose of serving black women. Still more were Catholic institutions, and served the additional purpose of educating nuns (Harwarth et al. 1997).

Though the first women's colleges differed to some extent in their founding missions and the types of female students they served, they shared the common struggle of being among the

first to advocate for educating women in a time when many still doubted their intellectual capacities (Miller-Bernal 2000). As Emily Langdon argues, however, the difficulty of their beginnings, in some cases closely associated with women's suffrage and the abolition movement, "merely adds to the rich tradition that makes women's colleges distinctive and cultivates such allegiance among alumnae" (2001: 7). The legacy of women's colleges in the United States is long and rich, marked from the beginning by overcoming adversity. While their basic rationale for much of their history was providing access to higher education for young women, they have also always been unique environments in which women are given the opportunity to learn and grow. From their earliest days, they have cultivated this environment through what M. Elizabeth Tidball and her co-authors have identified as six critical factors: creating a total collegiate environment for women comparable to male colleges; giving women the opportunity to study in all fields, including those that have traditionally been male-dominated; providing female role models; encouraging networking; creating a places for the development of friendships among women; and encouraging the generosity of women on behalf of others (Tidball et al. 1999).

Despite the demonstrated success of the women's college model, however, feminists in the early to mid-nineteenth century, including Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, saw women's colleges as a temporary solution for educational inequality (Miller-Bernal 2000). Though some private colleges, most notably Oberlin College, founded in 1833, and many of the public land-grant institutions in the West and Midwest were founded as co-educational institutions, the majority of elite private colleges, including the Ivy League universities Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Columbia, and Brown,<sup>1</sup> along with smaller elite colleges such as Amherst and Williams College did not become co-educational until the late 1960s and early

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<sup>1</sup> Notable long-time co-educational exceptions among the Ivy League schools are Cornell University and the University of Pennsylvania, which began admitting women in 1870 and 1876, respectively.

1970s. However, even at those schools that became co-educational early on, such as Middlebury College, women often experienced unwelcoming environments in which they were not fully accepted by their male peers (Miller-Bernal 2000). The move to co-education for many private colleges in the late 1960s was brought on in large part by financial need. For many previously all-male institutions such as Princeton University, the focus was on how allowing women to enroll might offset annual expenses by increasing enrollment, not on the “intellectual, philosophical, or social responsibilities or concerns arising from [the] decision to admit – and presumably to educate – women” (Tidball et al. 1999: 14). Regardless of the reasons, however, almost all of the remaining single-sex male institutions in the United States had transitioned to co-education by the early 1970s.

The advent of near-universal access to higher education for female students posed a serious challenge to women’s colleges, which suffered significant declines in enrollments during this time as female students increasingly chose to attend the formerly all-male institutions now open to them. Whereas 233 women’s colleges were in operation in 1960, only 116 survived into the 1980s, and the numbers continue to decline today. Those that survived the crisis of the 60s and 70s had one of two options: they could either follow the trend of co-education and begin admitting male students, or reaffirm their missions and contributions to higher education in a way that emphasized *equity* in rather than *access* to higher education for young women (Langdon 2001: 10). Of the original “Seven Sisters” Colleges, Vassar chose to become co-educational and Radcliffe merged with neighboring Harvard University, while Smith, Wellesley, Mt. Holyoke, Bryn Mawr, and Barnard remained single-sex throughout the period of transition and until the present day. This later group participated in a re-imagining of the women’s college mission, carried out by college leaders at gatherings such as the 1969 Cedar Crest Conference and

supported by the emergence of the Women's College Coalition in 1972 (Tidball et al. 1999). What resulted was a rationale that emphasized the continuing benefits of single-sex education for women, one that parallels a growing body of research beginning in the 1970s that has been committed to demonstrating, and at times questioning, the short and long-term benefits of single-sex higher education for young women. I turn now to a review of the literature in this field.

## LITERATURE REVIEW: WOMEN'S COLLEGES IN THE UNITED STATES

The literature on women's colleges has focused primarily on two areas. The first body of research, which dates back to the 1970s, has assessed the post-graduate outcomes of women's college alumnae; as I will discuss, much of this research has demonstrated, not without contention, that women's college graduates are more likely to be successful in their fields and more likely to attain advanced degrees. The second and more recent group of studies has focused on students' college experiences, especially factors such as student satisfaction in college, academic and extracurricular engagement, and intellectual and personal development. This second body of research has addressed the mechanisms by which female students may attain benefits which later have the potential to translate into higher rates of success in their careers, including faculty mentorship, access to role models, leadership opportunities, and support in non-traditional majors and career paths. In the sections that follow, I outline the most important findings in each of these sub-fields.

*Student Outcomes: “Baccalaureate Origins” Studies*

One of the most prominent voices advocating for the advantages of women’s college in a world that had embraced co-education was the physiologist M. Elizabeth Tidball, who graduated from Mt. Holyoke College in 1951. In 1973, she published the first of an extensive series of studies advocating for the advantages women’s education. Throughout her research, Tidball has used the so-called “baccalaureate origins” approach, looking at the percentages of women appearing on lists such as “Who’s Who of American Women” (WWAW) who graduated from women’s colleges as opposed to co-educational institutions. She also looked at percentages of medical school entrants and doctorate students who completed their undergraduate work at women’s colleges. Through a series of studies assessing the baccalaureate origins of doctorate students in general (Tidball & Kistiakowsky 1976), baccalaureate origins of entrants into medical schools (Tidball 1985), and baccalaureate origins of natural science doctorates (Tidball 1986), she concluded that women’s college graduates were about twice as likely as their peers who graduated from co-educational colleges to attain high levels of success in their fields. In particular, she emphasized that women’s colleges were more likely than co-educational institutions to produce women who went on to enter non-traditional, male-dominated fields. Her primary explanation for the higher achievement of women’s college graduates was that women’s colleges provided students with a larger number of female mentors and role models, due to the higher number of female faculty, administrators, and peers at these colleges. In addition, she emphasized the importance of an environment in which women were “seriously involved in a variety of academic pursuits” (Tidball & Kistiakowsky 1976: 652). However, because her methodology only allowed her to see post-graduate outcomes, she was not able to address in

much depth the mechanisms by which women's college alumnae become disproportionately successful in comparison to their peers.

Numerous other researchers have responded to Tidball's original set of studies by re-creating her research with updated or slightly different data sets, or creating similar studies which also relied on national publications such as WWAW. Many of these studies have reproduced her results, though in some cases to a lesser degree. One such study replicated Tidball's findings, again using WWAW, but focusing on editions that represented women who graduated primarily between 1940 and 1979, as opposed to Tidball's sample, which represented women who had graduated between 1910 and 1940. The intention was to update Tidball's original data and assess how the changes women's colleges underwent in the 60s and 70s affected their graduates. The authors found that among those who graduated from 1940 to 1949, women's college graduates were about 1.4 times more likely to appear on the WWAW list; graduates between 1950 and 1969 were 1.25 times more likely. However, the differences between women's college and co-educational college graduates became less significant in the later two decades studied. In the 1960s in particular, the numbers were approximately equal. The 1970s showed a re-emergence of the trend, though the difference was not as statistically significant as in earlier decades (Rice & Hemmings 1988).

Other researchers have provided a strong criticism of Tidball's work, arguing that confounding factors such as the prestige of the Seven Sisters colleges may affect the characteristics of the students who attend, and therefore their success rates later in life. Oates and Williamson (1978) also replicated Tidball's work, using data from *Who's Who in America* (WWA) rather than the WWAW list, and found that a large number of the successful women's college alumnae in their sample graduated from the highly selective Seven Sisters colleges. They

suggested that this may be because the students who attend these colleges have historically been upper-middle class individuals who would be likely to succeed regardless of which institution they attend. In response, Tidball (1980) reproduced her own study, arguing that the WWA list produced different results due to the smaller number of women represented in the data. In this follow-up study, she found that, even when accounting for the Seven Sisters colleges, women's colleges still produced twice as many "achievers" as their co-educational counterparts.

The question of entering student characteristics, however, remains an important one: students may enter college with different characteristics that are not necessarily correlated with institutional selectivity. They may be more ambitious, more academically focused, or more concerned with institutional prestige, all of which has the potential to affect post-graduate outcomes (Rice & Hemmings 1988: 550). More recent "baccalaureate origins" studies have attempted to control for individual student characteristics such as socioeconomic background and entering attitudes. Stoecker and Pascarella (1991), for example, used a longitudinal study rather than a list such as WWAW and controlled for individual characteristics, including pre-college aspirations and student background characteristics such as socioeconomic status, secondary school accomplishments, and academic achievement. The authors found that attending a women's college did not have significant effects on students' post-college educational, occupational, and economic attainments. However, the authors suggest that women's colleges may still be beneficial to students in that they "socialize women in ways that enhance self-confidence, drive for success, and prominence within occupational strata" (Stoecker & Pascarella 1991: 403). A similar study, which also controlled for individual student as well as college characteristics, found that women's colleges produced a significantly higher percentage of

female entrants into medical schools; however, after controlling for institutional selectivity, this difference was diminished (Crosby et al. 1994).

Other studies, however, have tended to reaffirm some of the benefits of women's colleges. Lisa Wolf-Wendel (1988) used data from *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who Among Black Americans*, and *Who's Who Among Hispanic Americans*, focusing on individuals who graduated college after 1965 and earned doctorates between 1975 and 1991. She found that for African-American and Latina women in particular, women's colleges and other institutions that have historically served minority populations, such as historically black colleges, produced more high-achieving women than other institutions. Another study, which also controlled for students' socioeconomic status and SAT scores, found that attending a women's college was positively associated with higher levels of self-esteem, self-control, marital happiness, and educational and occupational achievement (Riordan 1992). In a subsequent analysis, Riordan (1994) also found that even one year of attendance at a women's college was positively associated with achieving higher levels of post-college education; the author suggests that this is because female students at women's colleges have access to more social capital due to the removal of sexist bias on campus and in the classroom. Other studies that have focused on post-graduate outcomes have found that women's college graduates experienced less sexism and higher increases in self-confidence while in college, and more networking opportunities after graduation (Duncan et al. 2002), and that women's college graduates viewed their college environments as more positive than their co-educational counterparts (Hoffnung 2011). However, the dramatic differences between women's college and co-educational alumnae were generally not found in the more recent studies such as Hoffnung's, indicating that perhaps the concrete benefits of women's colleges

have decreased over the years in tandem with more general shifts toward gender equality in the United States.

*Continued Benefits of Women's Colleges: College Environment Research*

Despite the relatively insignificant differences between the occupational and educational outcomes of women's college and co-educational college alumnae in the present day, a series of more recent studies focusing on the specific experiences of female students at women's colleges have found that there may in fact be continued benefits to single-sex higher education when it comes to self-confidence, engagement, and personal aspirations. One such analysis found that women's college students were more likely to persist to graduation, have strong diversity orientations, care about social change, and gain leadership and academic skills (Astin 1993). Daryl Smith (1990) found that women's college students rated their colleges higher when it came to the academic program and contact with faculty and administration, and reported higher levels of development in terms of changes in values of tolerance and cultural awareness. They were also more likely to complete their degree. In a subsequent study, Smith and colleagues (1995) found that students at women's colleges were more academically engaged and more likely to believe that their colleges were concerned with civic involvement and multiculturalism. They also perceive their colleges to be more student-centered, which in turn is a positive predictor of academic engagement and extracurricular involvement. The only area in which women's college students rated their colleges less positively was social life. Similarly, Leslie Miller-Bernal (1993) found that women's college students had more female faculty mentors and were more likely to hold leadership positions.

A series of studies by Mikyong Kim supported and expanded upon many of the findings reported above. Kim and Alvarez (1995) found that women's colleges positively affected students' academic ability and job-related skills, and increased students' social self-confidence through higher rates of participation in student organizations and more leadership positions. In a subsequent study, Kim (2001) found that the women's college environment was more socially active, altruistic, community oriented, and supportive of women's studies and minority studies. In addition, women's college students developed higher diversity orientations and stronger desires to influence social conditions. She suggests that these results may explain in part why women's colleges produce a disproportionate number of female politicians and policymakers. In a third study, Kim (2002) also found that students at women's colleges were more actively involved with campus demonstrations, diversity awareness programs, and honors programs, three variables which were positively associated with intellectual development. Jillian Kinzie and her colleagues (2007) reported similar results; they found that women's college students were more engaged, reported higher levels of academic challenge, engaged in higher order thinking activities more often, and scored higher on collaborative learning and faculty-student interactions. This was true for transfer students as well as those who completed all four years at a women's college. In addition, students at women's colleges again found their colleges to be better at supporting diversity than did their peers at co-educational institutions.

Further studies have demonstrated additional benefits of single-sex higher education for female students. Solnick (1995) found that women at single-sex colleges were more likely to shift from female-dominated to neutral or male-dominated fields than women at co-educational colleges, a finding that supports Sebrecht's (1992) argument that women's colleges are better at encouraging women to enter and persist in non-traditional and male-dominated fields. Students

at women's colleges are also more likely to have higher occupational aspirations (Astin & Kent 1983). As discussed above, multiple studies have found that students at women's colleges are more likely to have opportunities in which to practice leadership skills (Whitt 1994), and be elected to student office (Astin 1993). Finally, there is some indication that the women's college environment is more accepting of non-traditional gender identities and a range of sexual orientations (Marine 2011), but very little has been written on this subject. Overall, however, research that has focused on students' experiences at women's colleges has found that there are consistent benefits to attending a women's college, the most significant of which are higher levels of academic engagement, increases in social and academic self-confidence, leadership skills, and higher diversity orientations. In the next section, I discuss the potential mechanisms by which these benefits may accrue.

#### *Mechanisms: Why Do Women's College Students Experience Benefits?*

Research has shown that, on both the secondary and college level, co-education is in fact better for male students, while single-sex education has advantages for females (Miller-Bernal 2000). This may be because the absence of men in the classroom and on campus allows women to fill roles and take positions that have traditionally been occupied by men. For example, Canada and Pringle (1995) found that there were fewer student-professor interactions in co-educational as opposed to single-sex classrooms, and Hall and Sandler (1982) argued that women experience a "chilly climate" in the classroom, in which they receive less attention and encouragement from professors in comparison to male students. Another mechanism that may be at work in co-educational settings is stereotype threat, in which individuals who are aware of

widely held cultural beliefs about their group experience anxiety about fulfilling these stereotypes in situations where they are activated, such as in the classroom or during test taking (Aronson & Steele 1995). In the absence of men, it is possible that women's college students feel less pressure to act a certain way, and are able to be ambitious and academically engaged without fear of judgment from male peers for acting in a non-feminine way. This is supported too by the suggestion that students at women's colleges may benefit from the absence of a "culture of romance" at their colleges (Miller-Bernal 1989); the women's college environment eliminates distractions and allows students to be more academically focused.

Another important factor affecting the positive developments of women at single-sex institutions may be the simple fact that women's colleges "take women seriously," both historically and today (Tidball et al. 1999). As I have discussed, most co-educational colleges were founded with the intention of catering to male students, and female students were often admitted as an afterthought. Women's colleges, on the other hand, were founded with the specific mission of educating women. As Tidball and her colleagues have suggested, this legacy continues to the present day in that women's colleges encourage their students to reach their full potential by engaging in academics across all disciplines, filling all of the prominent positions on campus, and developing high aspirations that are not defined by traditional gender roles. In addition, women's colleges emphasize the successes of their prominent female alumnae, who in turn serve as role models for current students. Leslie Miller-Bernal (2000) echoes such an argument, making the case that women in single-sex environments are encouraged to fill traditionally male-dominated roles, which helps them to develop attitudes and behaviors that in turn will in turn help them in their post-graduate lives.

Another aspect of the legacy of single-sex education is that women's colleges have traditionally had higher numbers of female faculty members and administrators. Today, women's colleges remain true to this model; most women's colleges employ 50 percent or more female faculty, along with higher percentages of female administrators. However, the difference between women's colleges and co-educational colleges in this regard has decreased in recent decades: many co-educational colleges now employ similar numbers of women and men, as is evidenced by the fact that Andrews and Linden, the two co-educational colleges in my sample, both employ nearly equal numbers of male and female faculty members. The "role model" theory has its origins in Tidball's research, stemming in part from the fact that Tidball herself credits much of her own success to a female mentor she had while at Mt. Holyoke. Others have supported this theory (Ehrhart & Sandler 1987). However, the question remains as to whether role models for female students must necessarily be women (Oates & Williamson 1980). Leslie Miller-Bernal (2000), for example, found that female students cited both male and female faculty and other adults as role models, and suggests that perhaps, the advantage of a women's college is not that there are simply more women to serve as role models but that female students do not have to compete with male peers for faculty mentors and advisors. Such a hypothesis is supported by a recent double-blind study in which science professors were randomly sent identical resumes with either male or female names and asked to recommend the student for mentorship or a research assistant position. Both male and female professors were more likely to choose male applicants for hire or mentorship, and recommended higher starting salaries for men, regardless of the fact that the fictitious resumes were identical (Moss-Racusin et al. 2012). Women's colleges may eliminate this unconscious bias among faculty because all potential mentees are women, meaning that women might have more opportunities for mentorship

experiences that can shape career aspirations and persistence, particularly among students in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields.

Several more straightforward explanations as to why students who attend women's colleges might be more successful later in life have also been discussed in the literature. First, as many authors have argued, women's colleges provide the simple advantage of offering students more opportunities to occupy leadership positions and other important roles on campus, which in turn gives them experience and confidence that can later help them in their careers (Astin 1993; Whitt 1994; Kim & Alvarez 1995). Other potential benefits of women's colleges include support both on campus and after graduation from large alumnae networks (Tidball et al. 1999). This can be extremely important for concrete advantages such as securing career-shaping internships while in college and gaining access to job opportunities, advice, and mentorship after graduation. Women's colleges often boast about their alumnae networks, and this aspect tends to be a draw for incoming students. Ultimately, it is likely a combination between these more direct advantages and those discussed above that makes a difference for female students at women's colleges. It is the goal of my research to address some of the mechanisms by which students may benefit from the women's college environment.

## Chapter Two: Methods

I set out to do this project with the intention of examining whether or not the women's college experience is in fact different in meaningful ways from the co-educational college experience. Rather than utilizing survey-based data like much of the previous work in this field, I wanted to look at how students themselves speak about their college experiences. Specifically, I was interested in how students made and then rationalized important decisions over the course of their four years at college, how they were affected by academics and social aspects of their institutions, and how they made sense of their own personal development during their college careers. Therefore, I wanted to use interview data, ideally from a relatively large number of students from several institutions. Although conducting my own interviews would have been ideal, it proved to be more efficient to work with data from the New England Consortium on Assessment and Student Learning (NECASL), a longitudinal interview study carried out at seven liberal arts colleges in New England with members of the class of 2010. Respondents at each college were interviewed three times during their first year and twice every subsequent year on subjects ranging from academic to residential experiences. With the exception of one college (not included in my study), where faculty members interviewed students, students were interviewed by their peers. Because of the logistical constraints of a senior thesis, utilizing these data was ultimately the best way to access a large amount of in-depth information from a significant number of students at numerous institutions. In addition, the longitudinal nature of the study allowed me to get a sense of how each individual student grew and developed over the course of her college career, something that I could not have done had I conducted my own interviews.

For the analyses that form the basis for my three main empirical chapters, I selected a subset of interviews from female students at two women's colleges, which I will call Hart College and Madison College, and two co-educational colleges, which I will call Andrews College and Linden College. I chose to limit my study to these four colleges for several reasons. I included both Madison and Hart because including two women's colleges allowed me to examine which aspects of students' experiences were specific to individual institutions and which may be shared by students at women's colleges in general. As comparison co-educational institutions, Andrews and Linden work well because they resemble Madison and Hart in important ways. First, all four institutions are located in the Northeastern part of the United States. This is significant, because, as Kim (2001) points out, regional location affects campus culture. In addition, all four institutions are liberal arts colleges, which is important because institutional type affects everything from the mission of the institution to everyday aspects of students' lives, like course selection and major choice. The four are also similar in size, with enrollments ranging from approximately 2,000 to 2,500 undergraduate students. At each college, the majority of students live on campus or in close proximity to campus in independent or college-owned housing. Of the four, only one has graduate programs, but these are separate from the undergraduate college. Students at all four institutions are taught primarily by professors and take their classes with other undergraduates. Both Madison and Hart allow students to take classes at nearby co-educational colleges.

Common criticisms of studies on women's colleges argue that institutional reputation, academic rigor, and selectivity in admissions affect student outcomes because they indicate the academic preparedness and resources of the student body (Oates & Williamson 1978). Thus, I wanted to control for institutional reputation and selectivity to the extent that I was able given

my data. Andrews is the most selective of the four colleges, with an approximately 15 percent acceptance rate in 2012, while Hart, at 50 percent, is the least selective. Madison and Linden, at around 30 percent each, fall in between. While the two women's colleges appear to be significantly less selective than the two co-educational colleges, this is in part because women's colleges typically receive fewer applications than similar co-educational institutions. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, many of the subjects in my sample considered and were accepted to two or more of the four institutions, indicating that these colleges attract and accept similar types of students. A somewhat better indication of institutional reputation and rigor is, perhaps, a national ranking such as the U.S. News National Liberal Arts College Rankings, an annual report that uses a wide variety of indicators such as freshman retention rates, faculty characteristics, entering student test scores, student graduation rates, alumni giving, and institutional financial resources to rate colleges. While this report is not without its critics, it does give a rough idea of the quality of an institution, and, more importantly, its general reputation among employers as well as prospective students, which affects students' post-graduate success and entering student characteristics, respectively. In the 2012 ranking, Andrews and Madison, and Linden and Hart, were ranked similarly high. Thus, the four institutions parallel each other in a way that controls for institutional reputation and rigor, if not completely for selectivity. It is likely that, between the four colleges, students at Andrews and Madison and Linden and Hart might experience comparable academic environments and post-graduate opportunities based on institutional reputation.

The history of each of the four colleges is also likely to impact the way that they are operated today; as Leslie Miller-Bernal (2000) documents, founding ideologies of an institution are integral to the way that colleges have historically treated their female and minority students

in particular. Historical legacies continue to impact institutions today, especially given that much of their funding comes from alumni and alumnae and affects administrative decisions and, by extension, campus environments. Madison and Hart, both founded in the late nineteenth century, were founded with the intention of providing female students with similar educations to their male counterparts at the nation's top universities. Though each of these colleges has a specific historical background, by comparing my results to the results of studies done at other women's colleges, I have to some extent been able to compare the experiences of Madison and Hart students with female students' experiences at other women's colleges. Overall, much of what I found among my women's college respondents resonates with previous research on a variety of women's colleges in the United States.

My comparative institutions, Andrews and Linden, have very different origins, both from each other and from the two women's colleges. Though both were founded in the mid to early nineteenth century, Andrews only admitted male students for much of its history, and did not begin to admit women until the 1970s. Linden College, on the other hand, has been co-educational, admitting students from of all races and religions, since its inception. Several of the students in my study discussed the historical origins of their colleges and the potential effects that these might have today. One student at Andrews noted that diversity might be impacted by the fact that the College has admitted primarily white, male students for much of its history, while a student at Linden argued that despite its inclusive founding mission, her college is not as diverse as she would like it to be. Thus, I argue that while the history and founding myths of each institution impact students in important ways, other factors that are specific to the present state of each college are significant as well.

In selecting my final subset of subjects from the NECASL data, I chose to include only female students in order to compare women's experiences at the two different types of institutions. Because previous research has shown that student experiences are often significantly impacted by race (Wolf-Wendel 1998), I chose not to control for race by eliminating non-white students, but instead balanced the sample by selecting approximately equal numbers of students from each race from each of the colleges. Students in the NECASL study were interviewed up to ten times: three times during their first year, beginning with the fall semester, continuing once each semester for the remaining three years, and finishing with a final interview one year after graduation. I have narrowed down my sample to include only students who had completed seven or more of the ten interviews, and then eliminated further students based on the availability of the specific interviews that I wished to focus on. After these exclusions, I randomly selected students to achieve an approximate balance in numbers between the colleges. In the end, my sample consists of 50 total students, 24 total from Andrews and Linden, and 26 total from Madison and Hart.

Table 2-1. Sample by Race and College.

Race	Andrews	Linden	Hart	Madison	Total
Asian	3	2	2	3	11
African-American	3	2	3	3	11
Latina	2	2	1	3	8
White	5	5	5	5	20
Total	13	11	12	14	50

My sample is not necessarily representative of all women from each of the colleges, in part because the original respondents were recruited at random, and in part because my selection of subjects was guided primarily by the availability of data. However, I think that because of the number of students and the depth of information provided by each individual, the resulting data pool has the potential to speak for a wide range of experiences at each of the colleges.

I began my data analysis by reading through each of the selected interviews, looking for relevant text and repeating ideas and trying to get a sense of each student's individual experience. Working within my theoretical framework, I looked at specific rounds of interviews and specific questions within these interviews to identify relevant text and repeating ideas. Following an initial reading, I returned to the interviews and identified repeating themes, focusing specifically on the differences between the two women's colleges and the two co-educational colleges. In writing up my conclusions, I have attempted to stay true to my original intent by letting the interviewees speak for themselves, quoting specific students and presenting the data in as clear and unfiltered a way as possible. As with any qualitative study with a limited number of respondents, the primary challenge that I faced in analyzing my data was determining which experiences and themes were significant and likely to pertain to the larger population of students at either women's or co-educational colleges. As a general rule, I included themes only if they were voiced by at least a handful of students from a given sub-set. However, the primary goal of this study was to understand the mechanisms by which students attain benefits at women's colleges. Therefore, my concern was more with the content of the interviews than with attaining concrete statistical measures.

As I discussed in my introduction, three major themes constitute my empirical chapters. Chapter Three, an assessment of selection bias and campus cultures, draws from the first round

of interviews, conducted one or two months after students entered college, and round nine, conducted during students' senior spring semester. Chapter Four focuses primarily on round one, round five, conducted in students' fourth semester, and rounds eight and nine, conducted in students' senior year, to address students' social lives, leadership experiences, and assessments of diversity on their campuses. Finally, data for Chapter Five, which focuses on student major choice and mentorship, comes from round five as well as rounds nine and ten. Table 2-2 on the following page summarizes this information.

Table 2-2. Organization of Empirical Chapters.

<i>Chapter:</i>	<i>Data:</i>
Chapter 3: Background characteristics	First year, fall semester (Round 1) Senior year, spring semester (Round 9)
Chapter 4: Social experiences	First year, fall semester (Round 1) Second year, spring semester (Round 5) Senior year, fall semester (Round 8) Senior year, spring semester (Round 9)
Chapter 5: Major choice	Second year, spring semester (Round 5) Senior year, fall semester (Round 8) Senior year, spring semester (Round 9)

My study is limited in several ways. Most importantly, as I have discussed, the colleges included in my sample have very specific characteristics, which makes it difficult to generalize results to, for example, larger public universities. In addition, I did not design the questions or carry out the interviews, and so they do not always directly address topics relevant to my research questions. However, by focusing on specific relevant questions, as well as getting an overall picture of each student's experience by reading through several interviews for each

individual, I was able to narrow down the data to fit my needs. In the end, using the NECASL study gave me access to a far greater number of subjects and a wider range of information than I would have been able to collect on my own. While my results cannot necessarily be generalized to all colleges in the United States, the study makes an important contribution in that it is qualitative and looks at the college experience in a longitudinal manner; the last comparable study, presented in the book *Separate by Degree* by Leslie Miller-Bernal (2000), was done on the class of 1988. Thus, I hope that my study will update and supplement existing work in the field by providing a different perspective and supplementing quantitative studies with a qualitative analysis.

### Chapter Three: Selection Bias and Campus Cultures

The strongest criticism of the body of research that defends women's colleges has been that many of these studies, especially the earliest ones, failed to control for incoming student characteristics. Mary J. Oates and Susan Williamson (1978) argued that without controlling for institutional characteristics such as institutional prestige and academic rigor along with individual student characteristics such as academic preparedness and socioeconomic background, we cannot truly determine whether women's colleges produce different results from their co-educational counterparts. Oates and Williamson's study suggested the possibility that the higher success rates of women's college graduates may be attributed to students' higher socioeconomic status along with the high prestige of the Seven Sisters colleges, on which much of the research about women's colleges up until that point had been done. The authors found that by eliminating the Seven Sisters from their analysis, the effect of women's colleges on alumnae achievement was effectively eliminated. Subsequent studies (Tidball 1980; Riordan 1992; Crosby et al. 1994) have argued that controlling for other factors such as institutional selectivity, size, and tuition may be even more important, because these are indicators of the *type* of student who attends a particular college and therefore impacts how "successful" these students will be after graduating. Others still (Stoecker & Pascarella 1991, Kim & Alvarez 1995) have controlled for individual student characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, high school grades, and standardized test scores, along with more intangible entering characteristics such as pre-college educational and occupational aspirations, self-confidence, and attitudes about diversity.

Though various studies have produced different results, what they all have in common is that they call into question the causal impact of college upon students. Though the institution that

one attends undoubtedly has some effect upon future educational attainment, career accomplishments, and personal aspirations, more deeply embedded pre-college characteristics may be just as significant. One of the most important of these is socioeconomic class, which is instrumental in determining whether and where a student attends college, and continues to impact individuals throughout their lifetimes through direct and indirect benefits or disadvantages such as quality of pre-college education and the possession of particular kinds of social and cultural capital. Socioeconomic status along with other factors such as parental education and occupation shapes personal aspirations and goals in much more fundamental ways than the college one attends. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, defined as a system of internalized schemes of interpretation and perception, is useful in thinking about this (Schwartz 1997). An individual's foundational childhood *habitus* shapes how he or she perceives and interacts with any given new environment. For many students, going to college represents the first major opportunity for a shift in *habitus*, but the formative experiences that they carry with them from youth shape this experience in important ways. Thus, an individual's characteristics dramatically affect the ways in which she will in turn be affected by her college experience. Any study that hopes to determine the effects of college upon individuals must account for these variables, along with institutional differences beyond gender composition that might affect individual students' outcomes.

A basic model that has been used by scholars who have studied the impact of college upon students is the "input-environment-outcome" (I-E-O) model, first developed by Alexander Astin (1977; 1993). "Input" refers to characteristics of students entering college, "environment" refers to environmental factors such as programs, faculty, peers, and educational experiences, and, finally, "outcome" refers to student characteristics upon leaving college. A somewhat more

nuanced model, which I have borrowed from Stoecker and Pascarella (1991), with slight modifications, is helpful in conceptualizing the effects of college upon students:

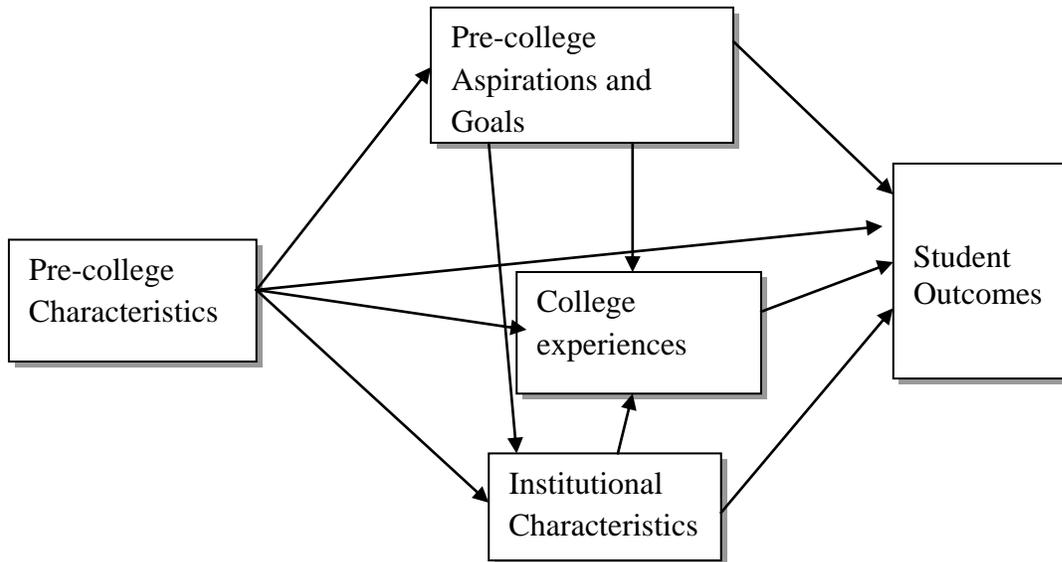


Figure 3-1: Causal model of student outcomes

As we can see, pre-college characteristics affect every other variable in the model, including college experiences and student outcomes, the two dependent variables that researchers on women's colleges have primarily focused on. Moreover, pre-college characteristics affect institutional characteristics, in that they affect students' college choice, and pre-college aspirations and goals, though these are later affected by institutional characteristics and the college environment. Institutional characteristics, in turn, affect both college experience and student outcomes. Given these considerations, it is not surprising that all of the studies that have made a point to control for either institutional or student characteristics have to some degree reduced, and in some cases eliminated entirely, the effects of women's colleges on student outcomes found in Tidball's original set of studies. However, this is not to say that women's

colleges do not necessarily have *any* effect on student experiences and outcomes. If our model is correct, then institutional characteristics, though mediated by pre-college characteristics, do have an impact on student outcomes and experiences; gender composition is simply one of these characteristics. Whether or not this particular characteristic is significant must be examined through empirical evidence. Indeed, numerous studies (Tidball 1980; Rice & Hemmings 1988; Riordan 1992; Riordan 1994; Astin 1993; Wolf-Wendel 1998; Smith et al. 1995; Miller-Bernal 2000; Kim 2001; Kim 2002) have, despite controlling for intervening variables, found that women's colleges cultivate greater social and intellectual self-confidence, diversity orientations, academic engagement, and personal aspirations in their students, among other positive outcomes.

One of the advantages of the present study is that my sample focuses specifically on four colleges that are quite similar in location, size, selectivity, and type.<sup>2</sup> This eliminates, for the most part, the problem of controlling for confounding institutional characteristics. More difficult to control, however, are individual student characteristics. Socioeconomic class and race are the most concrete of the range of incoming student characteristics that have been identified in the literature. I have been able to account for race by selecting approximately equal numbers of students who self-identify with one of four racial or ethnic categories (white, African-American, Asian, and Latina) for each of the four colleges. Socioeconomic class is slightly less clear in the sample, because the study was not designed to identify this variable. However, the student bodies at these four colleges are relatively similar in socioeconomic composition. Whereas previous research has asserted that the difference between single-sex and co-educational student outcomes could be attributed to the fact that students at women's colleges were more likely to be primarily white, upper-middle class, and Protestant, both Madison and Hart have in more recent decades

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<sup>2</sup> For a more complete explanation of the selection and characteristics of the four colleges in the sample, please see Chapter Two.

committed themselves to diversifying their student bodies. This has meant not only working to increase racial diversity and admitting more international students, but also increasing socioeconomic diversity, facilitated by need-blind or need-sensitive admissions policies and generous financial aid offers. Andrews and Linden, likewise, offer need-blind or need-sensitive admissions policies, and are committed to meeting full financial need through scholarships and loans. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that socioeconomic class in my sample is at least somewhat balanced between students for the four colleges in my sample.

Beyond basic student characteristics, however, are more elusive characteristics such as students' ambition and self-confidence. Clues about these personality traits can be gained by looking at individual student responses, in this case in the form of interviews. The goal of this chapter, therefore, is to identify differences in students' incoming attitudes, aspirations, educational goals, and self-concepts. That is, I address the question of whether women's colleges are "self-selecting," and attract a particular *type* of student who would do well in life regardless of where she attended college. To do this, I have looked carefully at the very first interview of the study, conducted within a few weeks of students' arrival on campus during the first semester of their college careers. I contend that these interviews are most representative of students' pre-college attitudes, largely unaffected by the institutional climate of their college. From these interviews, I have attempted to understand whether women who choose women's colleges differ in important ways from their counterparts who choose co-educational colleges. Are these students looking for something different out of their college experience? Do they have different ambitions and aspirations? Do they already subscribe to a particular campus culture which fosters especially driven and ambitious students? Then, in order to understand how students are socialized to their college's specific institutional culture, I focus on a question asked in the

interview conducted during students' senior year spring semester about who they see as a "typical" student at their respective colleges. This chapter, then, serves as a foundation for subsequent discussion by addressing differences among incoming first-year students and then answering the question of whether women's college students come away with different attitudes and perceptions about their colleges than their peers who attend co-educational colleges.

## COLLEGE CHOICE

The women in my sample applied and were accepted to a wide range of colleges and universities, and ultimately made their decisions based on a variety of factors ranging from financial aid to institutional reputation. Many of the students in my sample, as expected, were looking for small liberal arts colleges in the Northeast. They were interested in the flexibility of the liberal arts curriculum, emphasized the appeal of small class sizes and close professor-student relationships, and expressed a desire to become a part of a campus community. To varying degrees, students also spoke about more objective measures by which they compared potential colleges. These included acceptance rates, average SAT or ACT scores, and national rankings. However, while most of the students in my sample mentioned a multitude of factors that were important during their decision-making process, each of them ultimately prioritized certain factors over others. Within my sample, I found that there were three general types of decision-makers. The first group, who I call the "practical choosers," based their decision mostly on practical concerns, such as financial aid or simply where they were accepted and rejected. The second group based their decision primarily on institutional reputation. These students were mostly concerned with what a prestigious school could offer them in terms of academics and

resources, and the future benefits they might receive from having gone to a “good school.” The final and the most common type of decision-maker based her choice on one or more of the following: the “environment” that she experienced at the college when she visited, conversations with alums or current students, printed promotional material, and the college website. Students in this category typically sounded the most excited about their college choice, and talked about “falling in love” with their college upon visiting or hearing things about it. They were enthusiastic about attending and felt like they had found a place where they truly “fit.” Almost all of the students in my sample who reported applying to their college under early decision fell into this last category.

Table 3-1. Percent of Students Choosing College for Practical, Prestige, and General “Environment” Reasons.

	Hart and Madison ( <i>n</i> = 25)	Linden and Andrews ( <i>n</i> = 24)	Total ( <i>n</i> = 49)
Practical choosers	20%	17%	18%
Prestige choosers (Primarily Prestige)	52% (24%)	25% (8%)	39% (16%)
Environment choosers (Primarily Environment)	64% (40%)	75% (58%)	67% (49%)

*Notes:* Percentages appearing in parentheses represent those students who primarily emphasize just that reason. Column percentages add to more than 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive – students may appear in more than one choice category.

*“Practical” Choosers*

The smallest group of individuals in my sample made their decisions based on practical concerns, most commonly financial aid. For these students, such concerns trumped other more ineffable criteria like the “feeling on campus” or even institutional prestige, which many of their peers were most concerned with. As one Hart student put it: “[M]y decision was highly based on financial aid because my family is poor, we can’t afford to pay too much money for education or college or whatever, so financial aid was like the number one, and number two was whether I liked the school or not.” For many students, the luxury to choose a college based on a gut feeling was simply not a reality. Another reason that some students chose a college based on practical concerns was whether or not they were admitted to their first-choice college. Many of the students who indicated practical reasons for choosing their college also said that it was not necessarily their first choice. For these students, the decision to attend a particular college often came down to where they got in, combined with where they could afford to go.

Among my respondents, however, the number of “practical” choosers was quite low. As is represented in Table 3-1, only 17 percent of the students from Andrews and Linden, and 20 percent of the students from Madison and Hart made their decisions based either primarily or in part upon practical concerns. This is interesting, given that all four of the colleges in my sample have generous financial aid policies. The relatively lower percentage of students in my sample who indicated that financial aid was a significant factor in deciding where to attend may indicate that the students in my sample are better off than students at these four colleges in general. More likely, though, is that while financial aid may be an important concern for many students, it is not necessarily the one that was foremost on their minds while looking back on the college selection process. Importantly, as well, the percentages of practical choosers at each of the four colleges

and between the two types of colleges was fairly similar, indicating that even if the sample is skewed toward students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, this is true for the sample as a whole and should not affect my results in a significant way.

### *“Prestige” Choosers*

The second largest group of decision-makers, nine out of the total forty-nine students for whom data from the first interview were available,<sup>3</sup> made their decision based primarily on institutional reputation. Another ten students considered both environmental factors and prestige in their decision-making, for a total of eighteen students, or 39 percent overall, who considered prestige to be primarily or at least partially important in deciding upon a college (see Table 3-1). These students expressed the desire to attend a “good school,” or a school with a good reputation. This was often mentioned in conjunction with getting into graduate schools or getting a job later in life; as one Linden student put it, “I was looking at schools that would help me get into really good graduate schools.” Students indicated that they hoped to find a college that was a “good fit” for them in terms of their past accomplishments and their future goals. Thus, many students viewed the college that they chose as a status symbol that would, later in life, convey their intelligence and accomplishments to others. This attitude is captured by a student at Hart who said that:

[P]restigiousness was important because when it came down to it, I was put on honor rolls at a lot of the state colleges that I got into, and I would have gotten a lot of opportunity out of them but... it was always important to me that I went to a school with a big name. Just a school where smart people had come from, people sort of know that

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<sup>3</sup> One student from Hart did not participate in this round of interviews.

smart people come from there. It was important because I always wanted to be in, I mean I'm not at Harvard, I didn't apply to Harvard, but I wanted to go to a school that you hear the name and people have this reaction. And they're like, wow, this person must be intelligent. I always wanted that. And I always heard about if you go to a good school you get a better job and all that stuff.

This student, despite being accepted to honors programs at state universities, chose to attend Hart because she perceived Hart to be a "big name" college, which would help her later in life, in secondary as well as direct ways. Thus, despite the fact that she would not be able to continue cheerleading at Hart, something she could have pursued at the state colleges that she was accepted to, she chose to attend Hart because she wanted to be associated with the "Hart name." For her, giving up cheerleading, which had been a large part of her life in high school, was worth being able to attend a better college. Similarly, another Hart student said that her father pushed her to choose Hart because "[h]e knew just having the Hart College title attached to my name would get me farther than a lot of other places."

Prestige was also often a signal that the college would prove to be adequately challenging and academically stimulating. For example, one student noted that she made her decision to attend Madison "[m]ainly because of its academic reputation. It was considered [to be] a very, very strong liberal arts college for women." Other students, particularly those who reported being rejected from more "prestigious" institutions such as the Ivy League universities, echoed this sentiment. One Andrews student, whose first choice was Brown, said that after she was rejected from Brown she chose Andrews over her other second choice college, because "I felt I should come to Andrews, because I felt that it was the best for my education, whether I wanted that or not... [Although] sometimes I feel like I might have liked [the other college] more, I feel I'll get a better education here, which is why I go to this college." As was the case with this

particular student, who would have gotten in-state tuition at her second choice college, these types of decision-makers sometimes chose to attend what they perceived to be more well-known or prestigious colleges over significantly less expensive in-state colleges, or other colleges where they were given more financial aid, because they thought that the pay-offs would be greater later in life.

Women's college students, in particular, also said that they were attracted to the potential benefits of the alumnae networks that these colleges offered upon graduation. One Hart student said that when she visited, she found that many people told her that there were a lot of opportunities available to students at Hart, and that "[t]he alumnae connection was really helpful for people who graduate. So that was major." Madison students also echoed this sentiment; one student said that she started thinking about women's colleges after her tour at Madison, during which she met another prospective student whose mother had gone to Madison. "Her dad had gone to Harvard," she explained, "and he was like, I never had the alumni connections that my wife did." This statement stuck with her, long after deciding to attend Madison, as one of the things that attracted her to women's colleges in general, and Madison in particular. Here, the emphasis that women's college administrators put upon their alumnae networks both draws prospective students and is substantiated by first-hand reports and experiences.

Overall, I found that despite the fact that Madison and Hart are both statistically easier to get in to, students who ultimately chose to attend these colleges were more concerned with reputation than their peers who chose co-educational colleges. In total, only two students (8 percent) who ultimately chose to attend co-educational colleges made their decisions based

primarily on prestige.<sup>4</sup> In comparison, six of the women's college choosers (24 percent) fell into this category. An additional four students from co-educational colleges (17 percent) and five from women's colleges (20 percent) made their decisions based on a combination of prestige and environment.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, one student noted that her father supported her decision to attend Hart because "he always thought of a women's college [student as] being sort of like an upper class sort of citizen. Maybe from the west, maybe from the east, but people who come from old money who are just brought up well." While this particular student was the only woman in my sample who alluded to the fact that women's colleges might be places where more elite students who come from "old money" attend, it is interesting to note that some of institutions are embedded in an elite, upper-middle class (white, Protestant) history that continues to be somewhat influential today in shaping individuals' decisions about where to attend college.

### *"Environment" Choosers*

The third and by far the largest group of students chose their college based on the intangible "feeling" that they got from a college. These students, who I refer to as "environment" choosers, based their decisions primarily on how they felt on campus, what alums or current students said about the college, and the general first-hand impression that they got from the institution. They most often reported making their decision after visiting campus for a tour or for an overnight visit during the decision-making process, and said that they liked or felt like they fit

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, both of these students attended Andrews; no students from Linden chose to attend based solely on reputation or prestige. This may be because Andrews is a more selective institution.

<sup>5</sup> Statistically, it is more difficult for women to gain acceptance to small liberal arts colleges than it is for men because more women typically apply, and colleges try to keep their ratios as even as possible. Thus, women's colleges may offer women who cannot get in to comparable co-educational colleges a chance to attend a potentially better quality college.

in with the people that they met, thought that the campus was beautiful, or felt at home. These students, who were the most emotionally-driven choosers in my sample, were also the most likely to declare that they were already in love with their college long before they arrived on campus for orientation. One Andrews student who exemplifies this perspective described the positive impression she got from the college during her first visit:

[J]ust the campus itself, like I remember we were driving by... you see like the glass buildings and it looks so pretty and your just like, oh, I want to go here. And a big part of it was just the community feeling... everybody seemed to be really supportive of each, I keep using that word, but everyone seemed to be really supportive of each other. And when I met the people that went here that was a big thing... it seemed like it was, like these were nice people that were completely relaxed and there was no sense of like stress or competition.

This particular student, even after quite some time had passed since her first visit, remembered in detail what she noticed when she first saw the campus. During her visit, she was clearly impressed by the people that she met and felt like she would fit in with these types of students. This idea of feeling comfortable and at home on campus was one that was echoed by others as well. For instance, one student from Linden noted that, “I stayed over here and it just kind of felt right. I liked all the people. They seemed very smart and they were interested in their classes, but they weren’t kind of too intense about it and not pretentious at all. I liked that everyone was laid back, just pretty real.” A student from Hart also shared similar sentiments, saying that “[Hart] was the friendliest [college] that we came to visit. Most of the people, like everybody I talked to loved it.”

As is evident in many of the interviews in my sample, first impressions of campus and initial interactions with current students, staff, and faculty, can trump things like reputation and

other purely numerical measures of a school's "fit" or quality. The sentiment that a college simply "felt right" was one that was reiterated by many of the students in my sample, but particularly by those who chose to attend Andrews and Linden. Students repeatedly mentioned encountering friendly individuals who seemed to care about their studies but were also "laid back." One student from Andrews emphasized that she felt comfortable on her visit because "[p]eople were just really friendly... college tours and like admission stuff is always a little bit uncomfortable, because you're like, you feel like you're on display. You feel like you're not sure when people are being nice if it's ... a politeness thing or it's like a genuine thing. So it was like really great to go and have people be welcoming." At Andrews, the friendly atmosphere on campus seems to be something that the administration endorses and works to convey to prospective students. Both Andrews and Linden students in my sample repeatedly emphasized the friendliness of people they met on campus, and often based their decision upon this factor. Evidently, the work administrations are doing on these campuses to support a comfortable, friendly atmosphere is for the most part successful, particularly in attracting prospective students.

Though some Madison and Hart students also spoke about feeling comfortable on campus, fewer mentioned friendliness as being the factor that won them over. It was more common for these students to report interacting with alumnae who convinced them to apply and meeting intelligent, interesting women on campus. This view is exemplified by a Madison student who said that the "brilliant" alumnae she had met were the "tipping point" in her decision to attend:

[T]he woman I worked with this past summer, I'd known her for a while and that was definitely influential in why I went to Madison... She's done a lot of very kind of high-powered research in this small field in marine science. She got this genius award which you can't apply for it, you're given it. Also, another woman I know, [name], also is very

high in her field. Different field slightly. It's environmental engineering. And they're very intelligent women to talk to. Easy. They treat you as an equal. They're not afraid of anything. They know who they are and what they want.

It is also noteworthy that this student's grandmother attended Madison, something that also likely contributed to her decision to attend. Admissions offices at women's colleges often emphasize the successes of their alumnae, a feature that several of the women in my sample seem to have picked up on. For example, one Madison student, who had been deciding between Madison and another college, mentioned that she had heard of Madison in part because of the prominence of successful alumnae. However, as the above quote demonstrates, the impression that women's college graduates are successful, accomplished women who have been successful in their fields is one that is substantiated by first-hand experience for some prospective students.

A few students who chose to attend Madison and Hart also noted that they were especially impressed by the women that they met on campus. A Madison student said that she was won over during her overnight visit, during which she thought that all of the students she met were "amazing":

[Madison students] were able to speak without being shy about it...they would just come up to you, be like, hey, how are you? My name is so and so... And just when they were sharing their experiences about coming to Madison and their life before Madison and their accomplishments so far. And their classes they're taking and with how much fervor they would talk about their professors and their class and their classmates. I was like, well this is pretty amazing.

Beyond being attracted to a college because of statistics or promotional material, this student found that the women she met on campus were accomplished and passionate about what they were doing. When looking for a college, most of the students in my sample implied that they

were looking for a place that would help them to grow and develop in the presence of like-minded peers. As one student put it, “[Madison students] seemed like the type of people that I wanted to be around. And I felt like I had a lot in common with them, just that they’re more motivated and ambitious and that would be a good place to learn and really improve and grow over four years.”

The sentiment of looking for like-minded people was echoed by the co-educational college choosers as well. For example, one Andrews student said that “I really felt that [at Andrews]... people work hard and they respect one another and there’s really not that feeling of competitiveness. Which I really liked...I really just like saw myself here and that’s the main thing, why I chose it.” When choosing a college, students envisioned not only where they would be spending the next four years, but also who they would become during that time. Current students and alumnae that they met helped to shape their ideas about who that person might be, and who she would be surrounded by. Thus, many students, especially “environmental” choosers, focused on finding a college where they would find people who had similar goals, aspirations, and attitudes. However, it seems that women’s college choosers and co-educational college “environmental” choosers were looking for different types of peers when they made their decisions. Whereas co-educational college choosers, embodied by the Andrews student quoted above, were attracted to an environment that fostered “laid-back,” friendly, yet academically serious students, women’s college students more often talked about successful, driven alumnae and students who influenced their choice.

Overall, then, I found that there were some important differences between women’s college and co-educational college choosers. Women’s college students were more likely to be driven by prestige, whereas co-educational college students were more likely to be attracted by

the general atmosphere on campus. This perspective is exemplified by one Linden student, who said that in her decision making process “the feeling on campus really... was more important to me, and my happiness at a college was more important than the prestigiousness or the program that I was interested in.” Moreover, while over half (52 percent) of women’s college choosers considered environment to be their primary or secondary consideration, they were much more likely to emphasize that they were impressed by the intelligence and success of current students and alumnae of their colleges. Co-educational choosers, on the other hand, were more likely to emphasize feeling comfortable on campus.

### *Why Women’s Colleges?*

A final consideration when discussing college choice in this sample is why in particular students chose to attend or not attend a women’s college. Significantly, none of students in my sample said that they chose their college *specifically* or primarily because it was a women’s college. Rather, they were attracted by other factors, and considered the “women’s college question” to be secondary. Others saw it as something that, rather than being a positive aspect, was something that at first discouraged them from applying or wanting to attend. This was reflected, too, by several of my Andrews and Linden respondents who considered women’s colleges, often including Madison and Hart. For example, one Andrews student who considered going to Madison said that she liked the lacrosse coach there and seriously considered attending, but ultimately decided she didn’t like the single-sex environment. “[I]n the end I was like I can’t do this all girls thing... it wasn’t [a] comfortable feeling for me on the campus.” This feeling that an all-women’s environment would be uncomfortable, too far outside of the ordinary, or socially

detrimental was one that was echoed by several other students who decided not to attend Madison, Hart, or other women's colleges.

Those who ultimately did decide to attend Madison or Hart had varying feelings about the single-sex aspect of the two colleges. For some, it was neither a draw nor a deterrent. Rather, they were interested in other characteristics of the college. One Madison student, for example, put it this way:

I wasn't necessarily concerned about whether it was co-ed or if it was, well, all female. I didn't really care that much. I was looking for a school that I guess had a lot of spirit... [I was] interested in being around people that were genuinely interested in learning. They didn't just come to college because they needed to get... a college degree and then go off and get a job and go and work and make money. I wanted people [who] were interested in learning, [who] wanted to have intellectual conversations.

Whether or not she was more likely to find, at a women's college, the kind of intellectually curious student who was interested in going to college for the sake of learning, this particular student did not base her decision on the gender composition of a college. Rather, she found that she liked the people and the environment at Madison, which just happened to be a women's college. Other students seemed even less concerned with the women's college aspect. A Hart student said that while she was slightly hesitant at first, ultimately "I figured why not, it's not like we're isolated." Another respondent from Madison said that though she applied to both Hart and Madison, the fact that they were women's colleges did not factor heavily into her decision. "[T]he fact that these schools are all women's didn't really bother me that much. Like it wasn't that big of a factor. It was just different, but it didn't bother me that much." As is apparent in several other students' responses to questions about whether they were particularly interested in women's colleges, this aspect, while unique, didn't necessarily "bother" them.

For some students, however, the women's college aspect was at first a deterrent. It is interesting to note that some of my respondents, while perhaps not personally concerned about attending a single-sex institution, were worried about what others might think of them if they did so. One Hart student said that her friends gave her a hard time: "... all my friends were like, oh my gosh, you're going to become a lesbian, and really cracking jokes about the fact that I was going to an all women's college." The stigma that women's colleges are places where women become lesbians is something that others were concerned with as well. More often, however, students were worried that if they chose a women's college, they might be missing out on some of the aspects of college that they were looking forward to. One Hart student said that she was, initially, concerned about both classroom and social experiences:

[O]ne of the things I think that held me back in immediately wanting to apply to Hart was that it was an all women's college and I had wanted, just in the classroom, just to have the experience, the male and female perspectives... that was one of the things I was wondering about socially, is just having an all women's campus. But ultimately, I mean it really, I've been here now and I really don't think about it at all.

As is apparent in the quote, she has, in retrospect, come to terms with the women's college aspect and says that she does not notice it as much as she anticipated that she might. Most students who chose women's colleges ultimately concurred with one Madison student's assertion that she would be able to "deal with the all girls school thing," even if they were not necessarily excited about it.

Whether or not they experienced some amount of hesitation in attending a women's college initially, however, many students ultimately framed this as a positive aspect. Many of the students who expressed these views repeated ideas found in the literature about women's colleges providing an environment in which young women are free to take on any role that they

wish, without the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. For example, one Hart student said that while she hadn't really considered women's colleges at first, she thought about it more and decided that it might be a more positive environment for her. As she put it, she thought that a women's college would be better:

Just because of the not having men to pressure you or show off... [Y]ou can do whatever you want because [Hart promotes] women doing anything they want to... Guys always think that they're smarter and then you kind of, you don't express your opinions as much around them because they shoot them down because they know more than you do... People [at Hart] are more likely to listen to you because everybody here is more open minded I guess.

This kind of sentiment, though not ubiquitous throughout the first-round interviews, indicates that students are, to some extent, aware of the potential benefits that exist at women's colleges. This particular student looked forward to finding herself in an environment in which she would feel free to express herself without judgment, and without being overshadowed by more vocal males who she characterizes as embodying an attitude of superiority; they "think they're smarter than you." This point was also alluded to by a Madison student who said that she didn't want to go to a "masculine school," and that she thought that women "do a lot better when there [aren't] any males around." Whether or not these students were aware of the literature about women's colleges, they subscribed to the idea that a single-sex environment might be more positive for women.

A few students framed their preference for a single-sex environment in terms of social life and campus culture. For example, one Madison student said she thought that "it would be really comforting to know that it was an all-girl's school and that I would have no distractions here. I would have to go find my distractions, which is harder." This, she notes, was something

that helped to win her parents over as well. Another Madison student said that she was looking for a place where she could focus on academics. “I was looking for a place where I knew I was going to get a great education, because I always thought, if I was going to go away to college, I want to dedicate my time to a place where I can be really well educated... And I didn’t want to party, party, party.” Similarly, a Hart student said that she was looking for a “calm” environment without a heavy drinking culture. She thought that Hart had a “strong support system for girls” and that “if you’re not feeling well they’ll actually care. Men will just be like, oh, okay, you don’t feel well, well we’ll see you later. A girl might sit by your side and watch television or a movie with you.” Given that the literature about women’s colleges indicates that female students at women’s colleges find their institutions to be more supportive of students than those at co-educational colleges (Miller-Bernal 1993; Smith et al. 1995), this last comment is especially interesting. All three of the students quoted above were looking for a supportive and academically-oriented environment where they would not be pressured into particular kinds of socializing, and even before arriving on campus, they thought that they might find this specifically at a women’s college.

Finally, one Madison student stated more explicitly that she thought that attending a women’s college would help her to succeed in a non-traditional career field, something that the literature has emphasized as a benefit of women’s colleges. As she put it, “I think [in] politics there are still more men than women and so in order for me to go out into this big scary world, it is better to find my voice first, to find who I am.” She believed that Madison would help her to achieve this goal. This perspective exemplifies what women’s colleges hope to accomplish. This student, who thought that Madison would help her to “develop as a woman and not just as a student,” was looking for a place where she could come into her own and become empowered to

go out into the world and challenge traditional gender roles. She is, however, somewhat of an exception in my sample. While some women's college choosers saw the women's college aspect as a positive thing for various reasons, most saw it either as just another characteristic of the college, or even as a potential deterrent. Thus, I found that most women who arrive at women's college campuses are not necessarily more likely to explicitly seek out an environment that supports women in ways that co-educational colleges do not. If they encounter this type of environment, and if women leave convinced that single-sex education was beneficial to them, then it is likely because of the institutional characteristics of their colleges and their experiences, not because of entering attitudes or expectations.

#### THE "TYPICAL STUDENT": CAMPUS CULTURES PRODUCED AND REPRODUCED

Based upon my analysis of college choice among the students in my sample, I found that many, particularly the "environment" choosers, based their decisions on their impressions of campus culture. Prestige and practical choosers, on the other hand, were more interested in aspects of the college which are not as directly a part of the culture, such as outsider perspectives and financial aid. To what extent, then, do students become indoctrinated in the campus culture, and how do their perceptions of their college change over the course of four years? To address this question, I looked at the final round of interviews conducted during the spring semester of students' senior year, focusing on two questions, one that asked students to define a "typical" student at their respective colleges, and a follow-up question that then asked students whether they felt that they themselves fit this stereotype. Interestingly, the majority of the students at each college shared similar ideas about who a typical student was, and while no one wholeheartedly

agreed that she fit that stereotype, most said that they shared some characteristics with the typical Linden, Andrews, Madison, or Hart student. This indicates, first, that specific campus cultures exist at each of these colleges, and that students also come to see themselves as fitting into this culture in particular ways. Moreover, those who do not see themselves as “fitting” tend to feel out of place on campus. This is exemplified by one Andrews student’s reflection during her senior year:

I think that most people who don’t immediately love Andrews feel [out of place]. And it’s sort of weird, because I obviously don’t want to make people feel uncomfortable... with the fact that I, frankly, hated it here my first year and wanted to transfer. I started to like it more, but I’ve always been ambivalent about it. And it wasn’t until this year that I really actually felt like... I am glad I am graduating from Andrews. And this is the first year I’ve ever said that.

As evidenced here, not fitting in to a particular environment is an alienating experience. Whereas this student felt that her peers loved the college and therefore fit in to the dominant campus culture, she herself never felt strongly about Andrews. She also says that she did not want to make other people feel “uncomfortable” by voicing her opinions about the college, and indicates that this too was an alienating experience. Liking the college more and ultimately deciding that she is glad that she is graduating from Andrews seems to have served to mitigate some of these feelings of alienation; she said that she now felt less out of place than she did her first year.

Thus, it seems that campus cultures are important in shaping student behaviors and expectations for themselves, but also serve to exclude those who do not “fit in” or subscribe to the dominant culture on campus. This culture differed at the four colleges. At Andrews, the “typical” student was described by many as someone who is active and involved on campus,

serious about academics, athletic, ambitious, well-rounded, and either preppy or outdoorsy. One respondent described the typical Andrews student in this way:

It's somebody who's active, definitely, in all aspects. So, they play sports, they're involved in a club, they are a leader, or they have been a leader at some point, doing something, they've been part of a team at some point, they're active in their community, whether it's volunteering or mentoring or whatever it is. They're not just sitters and people who just hang around. They're definitely not lazy. I think they work hard, definitely play hard. But I think there's a nice balance between working and then being able to have fun.

Many of the Andrews students in my sample characterized the typical student at their college in a similar way, adding that he or she is likely well-rounded and friendly. As one student put it, "I just picture this person kind of around campus with friends or be bopping around on a bike or something. Knows professors, knows one or two professors. Is into their major." Another student said that she thought of Andrews students as people who were "really, really driven in high school, and probably like everyone was captain, editor, like head of something or other." The image of a hard-working individual who is involved in the campus community and passionate about what she does is one that resonated with many of the Andrews students in my sample.

Others characterized the typical Andrews student in a slightly less positive way. For example, one student said that she saw the typical student as someone who "probably went to prep school somewhere. Probably privileged. And probably is either studying econ or gov[ernment]." The sentiment that Andrews students tended to be "preppy," from New England, and privileged, was one that was shared by several others as well. Another Latina student said that she saw the typical student as "white" and "upper middle class, or upper class." She noted that this student was insulated by her privilege; "I can see them as very limited in their

perspective of life. Very sheltered from certain realities and hardships.” However, this particular opinion was not shared by most of the students in the sample. Rather, the “typical Andrews student” was most often characterized as someone who is passionate, active, and, as the first student quoted above put it, knows how to “work hard... play hard.” Most students in the sample said that they themselves fit, to some extent, the image of a typical Andrews student. Moreover, they felt that others shared these characteristics as well; the typical Andrews student is not a “mythical” person but rather someone that exists and develops through her experiences in college.

The Linden students in my sample characterized the typical student at their college primarily as someone who is friendly, politically or socially active, laid back, approachable, and “open.” One student captured many of the aspects of the typical Linden student that her peers also identified:

I think a Linden student in general is someone who is friendly and who is accepting of others and is excited about learning about others... I think [Linden students] are very open to new and different things, and obviously academics are a very important thing to most [Linden students]. And, I don't know, I think as a whole, [Linden students] want to go out into the world and, I don't know, do good.

This student paints her peers as open, welcoming, involved, academically engaged and caring people who are interested in the world around them. Most students agreed with aspects of this statement, adding that they saw the typical Linden student as “pretty liberal but pretty aware of their place politically and socially as an activist and sort of a participant in our country and in the world... Linden kids are really creative.” Interestingly, while most of my respondents said that Linden students care about academics, this was not the primary identifier of a typical student. Rather, a majority of my respondents mentioned that Linden students are socially and politically

active, caring, and interested in learning from others, not necessarily in a classroom setting. For example, one student said that “I think Linden students are often described as people who care about things, be it social justice or the environment.”

Another aspect of the Linden community that many of my respondents emphasized was that Linden students are supportive of one another, both on and off campus. One student, for example, said that “I think a [Linden student] will really go out on another limb for another [Linden student], and that’s great. I mean just like socially, we all get along so well.” Another student explained that while she was in Washington D.C. over the summer, and met several Linden alumni:

I mean I love Linden and I think that, you know, when I was off campus in the spring in D.C., it was amazing running into Linden people, like at a bar or something, and then you’re buying each other drinks and you’re talking all night and you like have this great connection. And I mean Linden is part of my identity in that way.

Not only does she emphasize the connection that she felt with other Linden students, even those who she got to know while off campus, she says that Linden is a part of her *identity*, and this is what allows her to empathize with other Linden students in all spheres of her life. This experience of being a part of a community which then figures centrally into one’s identity and fosters connections with peers is one that was mentioned by several other students from all four colleges, but was emphasized more among the Linden students in my sample. It is also a testament to the power of a campus community to shape an individual over the course of her four years at college, and serves as a contrast to the Andrews student quoted above who felt out of place because she did not feel strongly about her college.

Overall, Linden students are seen by their peers as interesting, dedicated individuals who “care about things.” As one student put it, “As a community, I just think we are a bunch of nice kids, nice weird kids, you know, I don’t think there is anyone normal at Linden, I really like that about it. Everyone you meet has something very interesting going on that you might not ever, you would never expect, which is nice.” Ultimately, most of the students in my sample said that they identified with the typical Linden student, at least to some extent. She, like the typical Andrews student, is not a mythical conception but rather a conglomeration of the characteristics of a wide range of individuals on campus, who share a general mindset of friendliness and openness. As the quote above demonstrates, what Linden students believe they have in common with each other is being engaged in something that they are interested in, and, above all, being a part of the community. A notable exception is one student who explained that she is not a “typical Linden student” because:

Oh, [Linden students are] very proud to be [at Linden] and love Linden. I’m not saying I don’t love Linden, it’s been a hard year. But I do think of Linden as an amazing place and I took so much from it. I am not, I think my time at Linden has come and I’m just kind of waiting now. So in that aspect I’m not a, I’m not a true [Linden student]. And that actually is something I had some problems with coming back and transitioning with my friends. So in that sense, no, I’m not.

It seems, then, that another criterion for fitting the mold of a typical Linden student is loving the college, much in the same way that the typical Andrews student loves Andrews.

Many of the Hart students in my sample were hesitant at first to describe the typical student at their college. Those who did eventually answer the question, however, responded that the typical Hart student is someone who is ambitious, academically oriented, critical, creative,

and likely an intellectual; one student captured the typical Hart student in a few words: “Heady, nery, intellectually exciting.” As another student put it:

[Hart students] are, even if they’re not outspoken, like physically, in their mind there’s a lot of things going. And like they’re obviously ambitious people and interesting people and beautiful in their own ways and whatever. So yeah, that is like typically [Hart student]. I do agree that Hart does somehow manage to get like a bunch of really cool people like as a part of the incoming classes and I don’t know how they do it, but everyone I feel like has something to offer even if what they’re offering is crap. But usually within their four years they grow, you know, and I feel like this community fosters that growth.

This statement is particularly interesting because it highlights that, first of all, the individuals who come to Hart are already interesting and talented in their own ways; everyone has “something to offer.” However, this student also emphasizes that it is the environment at Hart that ultimately shapes these individuals and helps them to grow to their full potential. The idea that Hart students are inherently talented people was echoed by several others as well; for example, one student said that “I think of someone who can either be very, very sure of themselves and know exactly what they want and they’re open to other things, or someone who is not so sure of herself yet is so incredibly talented that those talents come through in ways you wouldn’t necessarily expect.” This student highlights the fact that the typical Hart student is someone who is intelligent and has something to offer, even if she herself is not necessarily confident in her attributes.

Hart students were also portrayed as being very academically oriented; one student noted that her peers are “always stressed out, they’re always thinking about what they have to do for whichever class and when they’re going to do it. For the majority of Hart students anyways, the

social parts come way after the academic parts.” However, Hart students are perceived as being critical as well as intelligent and academic; as another student put it:

I think most people value education here in some way or another, or at least they learn that they should value, I don't know, I mean I guess in general I think Hart students challenge what they've been taught over the years. I don't know if that's general of all colleges or not but I think that's definitely true here, that people are open to change and they learn that changing is okay, that learning new things or fighting the system is, you know, acceptable.

This quote is particularly interesting because this student sees Hart as a place that encourages students to ask questions and challenge the status quo in a somewhat subversive manner. Hart students are not only intelligent but also independent thinkers who are looking to shape the world in particular ways. Another student echoed this sentiment, saying that Hart fosters critical thinking skills and develops confidence in its students. This is something that she believes she shares with her classmates: “I don't really quite accept what is going on just for face value, I'm going to think about it. And I think that's key in being a [Hart student].”

The typical Madison student, similar to the typical Hart student, was portrayed as someone who is very academically focused; as one student described it, she puts her “academic work... [a]bove all else. In addition, respondents said that the stereotypical Madison student is someone who is involved, passionate, ambitious, overachieving, confident, and probably wears pearls. One student described her in this way:

Well she takes four classes - unless she's like a junior then she might be taking five because she's crazy that year. She's in like three or four clubs. Really active in all of those things. Has probably one, maybe two jobs. And is doing a 350 [independent research] or has done a 350 or will be doing a 350 in the near future. She's got some amazing internship lined up for the summer. She didn't go abroad. She stayed here and

did - you know five classes. And she averages maybe seven hours of sleep a night if she's lucky. Is opinionated. Gets stressed but kind of ... thrives on stress in some ways.

This picture of an overly involved, highly ambitious, academically driven, and hard working individual was echoed by many of the Madison students in my sample.

Even where their definitions differed, most students said that the typical Madison student is ambitious and passionate above all else. As one student put it:

Something at everyone's core is there is some kind of ambition. Because I just feel like why would you come to Madison knowing that it's a really tough school and that it's an all women's college if you didn't care about academics. There's just no way I think. And that's why people are so stressed out because... they came here wanting to excel and [they were] that type of person in high school.

Interestingly, this student invokes the fact that Madison is a women's college to explain the underlying ambition of its students. This kind of sentiment reinforces the idea that, as a women's college, Madison is a place where students are highly focused on their academics, without the distraction of a social life that involves men. This student emphasized that, as a result, "every Madison student probably has something academic that she's passionate about... And I don't know if that's true everywhere that you came out of college with one academic passion. One area that you're really interested in." The idea that Madison students all have a passion which motivates them was shared by several others; another student noted that a typical Madison student "is a person who just likes what they're doing, you know? They're passionate about what they're learning even though they complain about it a lot."

In contrast to the other colleges, many Madison students emphasized that they felt pressured to live up to the image of the typical student; the exaggerated stereotype of a typical

Madison student, as opposed to the other typified college students, is to some extent an unattainable persona. One student explained: “there’s definitely a lot of pressure here to do everything all at the same time. Like join twelve thousand clubs and be the president of half of them. And take eight classes basically and not sleep.” Some students framed this pressure in a more positive light, saying that it has pushed them to become the best version of themselves. For example, one student explained:

I think by the time you get out of here you’re very sure in yourself and confident. And I think Madison creates women who are very good thinkers. It can be a hard environment... Every single person I’ve known at Madison... myself included [have had] times where they think that they don’t belong here. That they’re not smart enough. That they are a failure. That they are just not good enough. And everyone goes through that. Majorly... It’s actually sad. And I think unfortunately our community does kind of foster that. But on the other hand by the time you get to be a senior that really does taper off and they realize wait I can do this. Look at what I’ve done. But ... [y]ou know depending on who you are it can be a major depression period and stuff... This inadequacy a lot of people feel.

This student paints a picture of an environment in which students believe that others around them are excelling, but feel inadequate in comparison. However, she also believes, looking back, that this experience causes individuals to push themselves and realize their full potential. This sentiment was echoed by several other Madison students. Another student said that the experience of going to a “difficult school” caused her to bond with her peers in a unique way. “I feel like we understand each other,” she explained, “I feel like [the experience] makes you stronger as a person. It makes you realize how many options that are out there and how high you can go. And even if you don’t reach those levels or if you don’t go that high, you can still be happy living in a cardboard box with all that knowledge that you now have from Madison.”

Ultimately, many students also identified in part with the stereotypical Madison student. As one student put it, “I think one thing we all share in common is like an intense, insane, crazy drive to do about ten million things. [The typical student] is an exaggerated stereotype. But take it down a couple notches and it’s not so exaggerated nor is it a stereotype I think.” Another student emphasized that, in the end, “of course I see some parts of me in her or else I wouldn’t have come to Madison or enjoyed it... I think the really ambitious part is great. Because when you have a bunch of girls like that [it] really pushes you to do things you never thought you were capable of.” For this particular student, being around like-minded, ambitious, and driven peers pushed her to succeed herself, and she frames this as a positive result of a somewhat stressful environment. As another student put it, Madison is “[v]ery challenging academically,” but that it “does a great job of preparing you to be competitive outside of Madison. Whether it’s in the workplace or in another academic setting.” This student draws a line between the Madison environment and future success in a quite explicit manner.

Finally, Madison students emphasized that despite the somewhat competitive environment on campus, in the end Madison students, similarly to Linden students, are there for one another. One student noted that Madison students “may squabble among each other. We do it a lot. But we will stick together. And I think that’s the big thing.” Another student added that much of the supportiveness of the community comes from the fact that everyone is successful in her own way:

We support one another in the sense that we place a lot of value on the Madison name and we can be extremely helpful. It’s a place of a lot of intellect. You don’t always feel it but there’s actually a lot of sisterhood here. Sometimes you see the opposite, but... that’s only once in a while. And I think the Madison community has a lot of potential... If every person here really had the chance to do what she wanted to do, like [2,000] women doing

exactly what they're completely passionate about... we could create so much change because people could form partnerships with each other.

This student believes that the strength of the Madison community lies in the combined power of each individual's passion, and that this combination of talent and dedication is also a source of solidarity and sisterhood among herself and her peers. In the end, most Madison students seemed to have a complex relationship with the typical Madison student character; they tended to see themselves as not wholly fitting this stereotype, but simultaneously thought that they embodied some elements of her, which in turn pushes them to be successful in their own lives.

A common theme among respondents from all four of these colleges, then, is that individuals are aware of a somewhat mythical "typical student" who embodies the campus culture at their college. They, in turn, come to internalize this stereotype and, ultimately, emulate it themselves in some respects. Through this process, campus culture is internalized, mythologized, and reproduced in particular ways at each institution. As is apparent in the experiences of the "environment" as well as prestige choosers, prospective students are attracted to particular cultures. This serves as a self-selective mechanism through which each college attracts, to some extent, like-minded individuals who are then indoctrinated into the dominant campus culture. Those who do not comply, like the Andrews student quoted at the beginning of this section, feel left out. Another Andrews student captured this process in the following quote:

You know, I think that Andrews attracts a certain type of person... I guess the sense of closeness and friendliness and warmth of the people on this campus. It appeals to that type of person to come here to begin with. But I think that Andrews also allows a certain type of person to develop over time. And I think, like I said before, the rigor of this school, the constant amount of things that are always going on and sort of just everything that is this school, I think is the essential part, like the actual center of what brings people

together, and I guess what makes them who they are. So I would say that in one way Andrews is something that, you know, the typical Andrews student - Andrews appeals to them. But I think how they are is something that develops while being here, definitely.

The typical student on each campus, then, is created once students arrive on campus, but to some extent, each college is likely also “self-selecting” of a particular type of individual. It is important to note that admissions committees also play a crucial role in selecting certain students who are likely to fit into the dominant culture of each campus.

A final point of comparison that is relevant here is between the two co-educational and the two women’s colleges in my sample. Interestingly, Hart and Madison students as a whole emphasized that the typical student at their college is an especially intelligent and ambitious person. This fits well with incoming students’ impressions that Madison and Hart are places that produce strong, self-assured women, and that the two colleges are particularly prestigious and academically focused. It appears that most students are not disappointed in this respect, and ultimately come to see themselves as embodying this persona to some extent. Thus, while students may enter college with expectations about the environment, they also become indoctrinated into the campus culture in a way that causes them to see themselves as ambitious, driven, intelligent women who ultimately fit the stereotype of the typical student at their college in some way or another. It seems that this is one mechanism by which women’s college students may gain in academic and social self-confidence over the course of their four years in college; their college environments encourage them to see themselves as strong women with the potential to be successful later in life.

In this chapter, I began by analyzing first-year interviews to address the question of whether or not women's college students are different upon arriving at college, and whether they use different criteria with which to choose a college. I found that, in general, women's college students were in fact different in that they were looking for more prestigious and academically oriented environments. In contrast to their peers who chose co-educational colleges, they did not tend to make their decisions based on how they felt on campus or on the friendly people that they met when they visited. Rather, they were more likely to be attracted by successful alumnae and the "motivated and ambitious" students that they met on campus. Some of them also emphasized that they were looking for an environment that would allow them to focus on academics without the distractions of men on campus. In general co-educational college choosers fell more often into the "environment" choosers category; they were looking for a college with like-minded peers where they thought that they would feel comfortable and be able to learn and grow.

By the time that students were seniors, most of them had developed more nuanced ideas about what it meant to be a student at their particular college. This suggests that campus cultures are internalized, mythologized, and reproduced by current students, administrators, and faculty, and in turn communicated to incoming students, who make their decisions based on their perceptions of the college. Once they arrive, they are indoctrinated into this culture and thereby participate in reproducing it. Based on my analysis of the senior year question about who the typical student at each college was, I find that the campus cultures at both Hart and Madison share some particular characteristics which potentially contribute to the positive development of female students in these environments. Students at women's colleges were more likely to emphasize that the "typical student" at her college is an ambitious, intellectual, and talented individual who knows what she wants and how to get it. The fact that most of the students in my

sample also said that they identified in some part with this student suggests that through their college experience, they come to embody some of these characteristics and in turn come to see themselves as ambitious and talented women. Identifying as a typical Hart or Madison student may indeed contribute to these graduates' positive self-images. Thus, I found that not only were the women's college students in my sample somewhat different in their attitudes and ambitions to begin with, their experiences in college also reinforced and shaped these characteristics in a way that led them to see themselves as embodying the characteristics of a driven, intelligent, and successful woman.

## Chapter Four: Social Experiences

Despite the existence of a fairly large body of research about women's colleges, relatively little attention has been paid to student experiences with social life at these institutions. Researchers have found, however, that despite other benefits, women's college students report lower levels of satisfaction with their social lives than their peers at co-educational colleges (Smith 1990; Smith et al. 1995; Hoffnung 2011). Social life can be an important factor in students' decisions about where to go to college; a significant number of students in my sample expressed some hesitation in choosing a women's college because of concerns about the potential for rewarding social experiences (see Chapter Three). As previous research indicates, these concerns are, to some extent, legitimate. However, as Smith et al. (1995) suggest, other positive factors such as perceptions that the college cares about students may ultimately mitigate dissatisfaction with social life. Research indicates that women's colleges provide more opportunities for important leadership experiences in college, particularly through participation in on-campus organizations (Whitt 1994), both because there are more positions open to women and, perhaps, because students are more involved in general. Studies have also found that students perceive women's colleges to care more about student learning, civic involvement, multicultural goals, and diversity (Astin 1993; Smith et al. 1995; Kinzie et al. 2007). In addition, research suggests that women's college students are more engaged in academics and extracurricular activities, develop higher self-reported social and intellectual self-confidence, and higher diversity orientations (Smith et al. 1995; Kim & Alvarez 1995; Kim 2001; Kim 2002).

My goal in this chapter is to address student perceptions of these three key non-academic areas on campus: social life, leadership experiences, and diversity. To address the question of

social life, I have looked again at first-semester interviews to gauge initial impressions and experiences. I then turn to second-year spring and senior-year fall interviews for developing impressions of campus life at the four colleges. To assess the prevalence of leadership experiences, I have looked at both the sophomore and senior year interviews. Finally, I have compared first-year and senior-year impressions of diversity to assess how well students believe that their administrations deal with these issues on campus, looking particularly at how these perceptions change over the course of four years.

Table 4-1. Organization Chapter Four.

<i>Subsection:</i>	<i>Data:</i>
Impressions of Social Life	First year, fall semester (Round 1) Sophomore year, spring semester (Round 5) Senior year, fall semester (Round 8)
Perceptions of Diversity	First year, fall semester (R1) Senior year, fall semester (Round 8)
Leadership	Second year, spring semester (Round 5) Senior year, fall semester (Round 8)

## SOCIAL LIFE AT WOMEN'S AND CO-ED COLLEGES

### *First Year Perspectives: Dominant Forms of Socialization*

For the majority of the students in my sample, the most challenging aspect of their first few weeks on campus was adjusting to a new social environment. This included, for most, the experience of living away from home for the first time, the challenge of forming new friendships in an unfamiliar place, dealing with decisions about drugs and alcohol, and learning to be independent all while balancing new academic experiences and extracurricular activities. The transition to college provided many of my respondents with the opportunity to develop a sense of

independence; as one Andrews student explained, becoming independent and figuring out the small things like how to do her laundry and balancing academics with her sleeping schedule was “challenging but at the same time... really rewarding.” Comments about adjusting to daily life on campus were common among respondents from all four colleges, and ultimately, most of the students who reported having a hard time at first said that they had found ways to begin to feel comfortable on campus. Overall, only two or three students from each college reported being dissatisfied with the social life at her college during the first interview; this was fairly evenly spread across all four colleges.<sup>6</sup> However, the ways in which students talked about their social lives, and the criteria which they set for a positive as opposed to negative experience, differed in revealing ways between the women’s colleges and co-educational colleges. Whereas Andrews and Linden students tended to frame their discussions of social life in terms of drinking, “partying,” and their choices about whether or not to engage in these types of activities, Madison and Hart students were more likely to talk about meeting friends in their residence halls, classes, and through extracurricular activities with whom they could spend time doing non-alcohol related activities on or off campus.

This difference was the most striking among those who reported being dissatisfied with their social lives. While some of the women’s college respondents complained about a lack of excitement on their campuses, almost all of the Andrews and Linden students who reported being dissatisfied with social life instead criticized the heavy drinking cultures that they had encountered on their respective campuses. As one Andrews student explained, “I have been to parties [at Andrews], but those are not parties... I mean, people are just getting drunk. That’s not

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that because I only included students with seven or more completed interviews in my sample, my results do not represent students who for whatever reason decided to transfer or leave college after their first semester or first year.

a party. I mean, it's all about having fun socializing with people. Dance or whatever. If people get drunk and lose their consciousness, there is no socializing." This particular student, who said that the drinking culture that she found at Andrews differed starkly from what she was used to at home, said that she wished that there would be more acknowledgement of different people's "backgrounds" and more access to social events that did not revolve around heavy drinking.

Other students shared this perspective; for example, one Linden student noted:

I've attended a couple of what they call parties here, but it's very different from what I would call parties back home, I guess... everyone, here I feel that, especially the freshmen, they're trying to be perceived as cool so they feel they have to drink a lot and act like so drunk. I have nothing against like drinking or anything. I think that's fine, but I think when you take it to a level where you're doing it to just try to be cool and seem older, it's not cool.

Similarly to this Linden student, most of those who voiced complaints about binge drinking on campus stated that they were not opposed to drinking in general. Rather, they were concerned about and opposed to the specific kind of binge drinking that they observed their peers engaging in. One of the Andrews students in my sample, who grew up in Mexico, emphasized that the drinking culture she had encountered at Andrews and in the United States in general differed from what she experienced at home. "[We] drink in Mexico from a really early age, but we handle it differently. Here it's just drink to get drunk," she noted.

Interestingly, the majority of the individuals in my sample who expressed concern or dissatisfaction with binge drinking and on-campus parties were either non-white or had spent time in different cultures, both in the United States and abroad. For example, the first student quoted above is an African-American student from Atlanta. Her perspective was shared by several other minority students at both Andrews and Linden, who reported having experienced

different cultures growing up and were reluctant to conform to the type of “party” culture that existed at their respective colleges. One African-American Linden student, who described herself as a “loner type” and said that she was having a somewhat difficult time making friends in the first few weeks, said that she found herself in a residence hall where “most people are heavy partiers, there’s a lot of alcohol, people throwing up and doing crazy things.” While she, too, said that she was not necessarily opposed to drinking, she explained that she was feeling frustrated with those around her who used drinking as an excuse to behave inappropriately. She described a particular incident with a roommate: “My roommate urinated in my closet from being inebriated, and it makes me so upset that this happened... that particular person is the one who has the loudest mouth when I have to get up early in the morning... I’m just like frustrated, I don’t know, just frustrated.” This feeling of frustration with peers’ behavior was echoed by several other students at both Andrews and Linden.

While most of the students did not necessarily discuss social life in terms of their own personal backgrounds, it is interesting to note that six out of eight minority students at Andrews and two out of six minority students at Linden expressed some degree of concern with drinking culture at their respective colleges. However, others expressed concern or dissatisfaction as well, particularly those with diverse perspectives, such as the student from Mexico quoted above. A white Linden student who spent time in Europe in high school, too, noted that:

I am not one of those people who gets really drunk. I’ll hang out and drink but I know my limits. That is one thing I learned from [living in Europe] like your first couple times at a pub you get wasted and the next morning you feel like shit, so you learn pretty fast, and a couple of my freshman friends are experiencing that right now. Hopefully they will get through it and then we can all just have a good time with no trash bins involved.

This particular student expressed her criticism in optimistic terms, hoping that her peers would “get through” this phase and learn to control their behavior. Her perspective was shared by others who hoped that the social situation might change later on, and in the meantime found other means to socialize and make friends. One Andrews student who chose to live in “chem-free”<sup>7</sup> housing said that she appreciates the drug-free environment in her residence hall because, “the friendships on our floor are really strong because we don’t drink heavily in our rooms and so we really have like a family going on. We are always in each other’s rooms and hanging out without being drunk. So, I’m glad I have that kind of friendship on campus.” Others, too, expressed choosing to opt out of partying and drinking, and said that they instead spent time talking or watching movies with friends.

A substantial number of Andrews and Linden students also reported participating in drinking and parties. One Andrews student said that she enjoyed going to parties with friends on weekends: “[My friends and I] normally hang out with each other on the weekends, partying a little bit... [we] kind of party hop mostly, kind of be like, oh, there’s a party in like [another residence hall], we’ll go over there and find it. That sort of thing.” Another Andrews student said that while she went to parties, what she enjoyed more was spending time with friends in the residence halls before going out. “It’s like our pre-gaming [drinking together before going out] is... more the highlight of the evening than the actual social house party. Like the social house parties just seem kind of foolish so far. They’re kind of big. I like small dorm room parties.” This student said that she was not really “crazy about” Andrews yet, but that she was trying to make it work. As is evidenced by her quote, she had given the culture a chance and was attempting to

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<sup>7</sup> “Chem-free” housing options exist at both Andrews and Linden. Students who live in chem-free housing are meant to refrain from returning to the residence halls under the influence of drugs or alcohol and are prohibited from having these substances in their rooms.

adjust, but was not necessarily excited about participating in the primary mode of socializing on campus. Even those who reported being happy with social life occasionally noted that the quality of interactions at parties was not quite the same as that of those that happened in other spaces. One Andrews student noted that the friendships she formed in her residence hall were more meaningful than others made during drinking events:

[Y]ou meet people when you go out, when you might not be one hundred percent there. So I've met [my good friends] when I've been a hundred percent here...you meet some people some nights that might be drunk or might be some influence of something and they might not remember your name, might not remember exactly where they met you or something... you want to have friends when you're sober not just friends when you're, you know. I've made [my good friends] when I've been sober and they've been sober and then you go out together. So you always look out for one another and things like that.

Ultimately, while some critiqued drinking culture, and others participated in it, most students reported making friendships through residence halls, classes, activities, and pre-orientation trips. However, almost all of the Linden and Andrews students mentioned the ubiquitous nature of on-campus parties and drinking, whether in negative or positive terms, and whether or not they personally partook in it.

Among the women's college students in my sample, the emphasis when it came to social life was more on making friends and finding people to spend time with. Interestingly, fewer women's college students (12 percent as opposed to 21 percent) reported being dissatisfied with their social experiences in the first interview. Though the difference is not necessarily significant, these numbers are interesting because they contradict, to some extent, the literature about women's colleges which indicates that women's college students are in fact less satisfied with their social lives in comparison to their peers at co-educational institutions (Smith et al.

1995). This discrepancy may lie in how “satisfaction” is defined by students and measured by researchers. While Smith and her colleagues’ study asked students to rate their social life in a survey, students in the NECASL study were not directly asked to rate their social experiences on a fixed scale. Rather, I coded social experiences by looking at questions about friendship formation and general happiness on campus, which includes residential life, experiences in extracurricular organizations, and feeling comfortable on campus. Using this broader definition of satisfaction with social life, it was clear in the interviews that most of the women’s college students felt satisfied with their initial experiences on campus and, importantly, did not express the same sorts of concerns about drinking culture or pressures to engage in particular kinds of socialization.

The small number of women’s college students who reported being dissatisfied with their social lives in the first interview tended to report having a hard time making friends, or being unhappy with the single-sex environment specifically. One Hart student, for example, said that “adjusting to the all girls” was difficult at first. “I have three little sisters and then my mom and it was just my dad, but that still didn’t prepare me for when I came,” she explained, noting as well that there was a lot more “homosexuality and bisexuality” on campus than she expected. She also said that at Hart, she found that there was “not much of a social life,” and had considered transferring to a co-educational college during the first few weeks, although she had heard that many people felt similarly during their first year and eventually came to like the college. Her comment about the unexpected amount of “homosexuality and bisexuality” on campus is also interesting because it reflects some of the concerns voiced by women’s college students about the stigmas surrounding homosexuality that they perceived to be associated with single-sex institutions (see Chapter Three). For some students, it seems, the ubiquitous nature of gay culture

on campus was somewhat uncomfortable and unfamiliar at first, though they tended to frame these remarks in an objective manner. For example, one Hart student, who said that her friends teased her about becoming a lesbian before she came, noted that:

I [was] sort of surprised, when I first found out who was gay and who wasn't in my residence hall. It happened to be a lot more people weren't straight than there were straight people. So I was sort of surprised that so many people have sort of already determined their sexuality. It didn't make me nervous or anything, because you don't come to a college like Hart without being open to people who like the similar sex [sic]. But it was just surprising to me. I wasn't expecting it. Because when I had come to visit most people looked straight, but I guess it sort of hides itself.

These types of comments, interestingly, were more common at Hart, and suggest that the cultures at Madison and Hart may be slightly different when it comes to acceptance or visibility of LGBTQ individuals. As I will discuss later in the chapter, however, for many individuals the relative openness to different viewpoints and sexual orientations at both colleges was a welcome change, and one that attracted them to these institutions in the first place.

Other complaints about women's colleges were more directly connected to the lack of men on campus. One Madison student, for example, said that: "The all-girls atmosphere is kind of freaking me out sometimes. Because [of] the whole Madison goggles thing. Whenever you see a boy, you like look twice." However, she found that the atmosphere was "surprisingly laid back," and appreciated that there was no pressure to dress or act a certain way while on campus. Another student who went to a single-sex high school shared similar sentiments, explaining that "Hart has no men, and that really bothers me sometimes. I thought it wouldn't be that bad coming from an all-girls school, six years, you know, I can do this. No men, I can do that, no sweat. Sometimes I just get really depressed because there's no men around." Both of these

students, to some extent, felt that the lack of men on campus affected their social life at college, but ultimately this was not a reason to be dissatisfied with their experience overall. The Hart student quoted above said that she already had a good friend who felt like a sister, and that the community in her residence hall felt like a “family.” In addition, she said that she went off campus to parties at surrounding colleges.

A more fundamental concern among Madison and Hart students was the lack of opportunity to form meaningful friendships with male peers. As one Madison student put it, “I’m finding it difficult to make male friends, and that’s something I miss a lot. Because I find [if] you go to [another college] on the weekends... you’re not going to find someone you can build a long lasting friendship with. You’re going to find frat boys or whatever, and that’s really hard for me.” This student felt that she was not really able to form friendships with men by going to parties at other colleges because the environment did not allow for it, and she found that this was something that she missed from home. Similarly, a few students noted that they missed the “male perspective” on campus; as one Hart student explained, “... sometimes it’s hard to just be around girls all the time because guys have a different sense of humor that you get used to when you’re around them, and then when you’re not around it for a long time it’s kind of difficult.” However, she found that ultimately it was nice at times not to have men on campus because “there are no guys in your classes that are kind of like showing off I guess, or like picking on you or anything like that because you’re a girl... [I]t’s not a bad thing overall.” Most students, in fact, said that they enjoyed being able to separate academic and residential experiences from their social interactions with men, and were able to meet males off campus through friends. One Madison student explained:

[Before I came to Madison] I was like, I'm [not] going to see a guy for a year, maybe summer if I'm lucky. But now, like I met a guy from Boston. And he was like, you should come over one of these days and hang out with us. So a couple girls and [I] went over there one time and we just hang out with a bunch of guys there. And we became friends already, so it kind of works out. Plus, I like that they're not here distracting me the whole time. I like separating that.

This sort of experience was fairly common among both Madison and Hart students, who reported making an effort to form friendships off campus either at social events such as fraternity parties or through social networks that they or their friends brought to college. Many, such as the student quoted above who said that she expected to see men only in the summer if she was "lucky," were pleasantly surprised at their ability to meet men and have a rewarding social life at college.

Thus, while there was some dissatisfaction with the single-sex environments at Madison and Hart, many students were in fact able to form meaningful relationships with men off campus that did not necessarily revolve around frat parties and, for the most part, students found that they did not mind the lack of males in their residence halls or classes. As one Madison student pointed out, she felt that the women's college environment in fact fostered closer relationships between the women on campus: "Definitely, as the summer progressed, I started getting more nervous about the all-girl thing, [but] as it turns out... actually I am closer to friends than I would be in a co-ed school." Ultimately, most students at the two women's colleges, similarly to those at Andrews and Linden, reported making friends in their residence halls, through extracurricular activities such as varsity and club sports, and in classes. Madison and Hart students in particular reported forming positive friendships with their peers and experiencing a sense of community on campus, and emphasized that they enjoyed being able to choose when to engage in drinking and partying, and when to spend time participating in other social activities with friends on or off

campus. Most notably, none of the women's college students in my sample complained about binge drinking happening on campus, and far fewer spoke about alcohol consumption or drug use, either in reference to themselves or others. To some extent, this may be an effect of selection bias; perhaps women's college students were not looking for this type of environment in the first place. However, it is also likely an effect of the overall campus cultures at these two colleges, which both seem to encourage alternative forms of socialization rather than partying and drinking.

### *Evolving Social Lives: Sophomore and Senior Perspectives*

By the time that students reached their sophomore years, most of them reported being in large part satisfied with their college environments. Importantly, the criticisms about heavy drinking were no longer prevalent, indicating that perhaps those students who were initially uncomfortable with these types of social interactions had been able to find other social outlets on campus. Reactions from the two co-educational schools were somewhat mixed; students in general sounded somewhat less enthusiastic about their colleges and at times noted that their campuses felt slightly small or like a "bubble," but most of them continued to reiterate that they liked their colleges and had grown to appreciate things like courses, professors, and opportunities on campus. Women's college students, similarly, reported being happy with their colleges in their sophomore year. Notably, Hart students were the most likely to report being satisfied with their experience at this point in their college career. However, comments about the sacrifice involved with going to a women's college came up at this point in students' college careers as well; as one Madison student put it:

Sometimes I think of it as a sacrifice that I'm making by being here. Because you know the social life is not as great as it is in other schools. And I see that Madison has really fostered my learning experience here. So I really, really, appreciate that. And I definitely don't regret my coming here at all. I think I've changed in that I've broadened my interests and I've met a lot of people with similar and different interests as well. And I've had a lot of conversations about topics that I never really thought about before. So in that sense that's how I've changed... I've been focusing a lot on my academics.

These types of comments, while more prevalent at Madison than at Hart, were common among all of my women's college respondents, indicating that students came to see their social experiences as being negatively impacted in some ways by the women's college environment. In addition, students no longer emphasized that they enjoyed having a separation between their social and academic lives, which is perhaps a reflection of burn-out with academic work.

In their senior years, many of the students in my sample spoke about being sad to leave their campuses, grateful for what they had gained while in college, and often ready to leave as well. Among my respondents from Andrews and Linden, in particular, a common sentiment was again that their colleges felt small and disconnected from the "real world;" this was especially true for those students who came back from being abroad during their junior years. One Linden student explained that what she missed most after coming back from abroad was "[j]ust being able to not feel so isolated and trapped. You really forget how far away you are from life here, and I think I forgot the Linden bubble." However, students in general said that they were still happy with their colleges, and many of them who earlier mentioned considering transferring for various reasons said that they had learned to like their colleges.

The women's college students in my sample were likewise mostly happy with their colleges, and reported positive self-gains. As one Madison student explained: "[B]eing at

Madison I've kind of come out of my shell more. I'm still kind of very quiet and reserved person. I like to observe more than I do talk. But I think that now I express more of my opinions." However, the women's college students in my sample also expressed strong critiques of what they perceived as an environment of stress on their campuses; this was much more prevalent at Madison than at Hart. One Madison student, who spoke in depth about her positive experiences going abroad, said that coming back, she was shocked to re-encounter the extremely academic and hectic environment at Madison. She explained:

[There is] this overall sentiment on campus that if you're not rushing to somewhere next, then you're not doing important things... you're not involved enough or working hard enough. And if you want to change the world, you should be working all the time to do that... Like if you look around like no one's just sitting. Everyone's just constantly running somewhere. So it's just a really weird social environment that isn't replicated that many other places... That's just not really what I want in life. So I don't know that I picked a social environment that really fit my overall like attitude in life mostly on those things. But you know the college is -. It's a great college. It's a good education and it's a beautiful place and I'm glad that I'm here. But I definitely think this is a really unhealthy place to be.

These comments were echoed by many other Madison students, who noted that their peers were competitive and "stressed out" in a way that at times made it difficult to forge and maintain positive social relationships. The sentiment that this environment was somewhat unhealthy was also shared by many students.

My respondents at Hart also, but to a lesser extent, spoke about the academically intense environment and its consequences at their college. As one student noted:

I would say that my whole last year [abroad] changed my idea of my academic experience just because I realized that if I could succeed in a foreign language that I had

only had for two years previous work with or knowledge of, then there's no reason for me not to give 150 thousand percent at Hart, when it's in English. But I mean, even if you give one hundred percent, Hart will try and kill you because the work load is ridiculous here, it's ridiculous here.

Another student noted that after coming back from abroad, she now recognized "the academic rigor that is present" at Hart. However, comments about extreme competitiveness and unhealthy social environments were absent at Hart, suggesting that this may be something that is isolated to the particular culture that exists at Madison and may not be associated with the fact that it is a women's college. However, one trend that is consistent across the two women's college is that students, in all three of the rounds of interviews, found the academics at their college to be challenging, rewarding, and engaging. Though the co-educational college students also spoke about their academics, they were more likely throughout the study to emphasize making an effort to balance academics with their social lives.

## PERCEPTIONS OF ON-CAMPUS DIVERSITY

One of the more consistent findings in the literature about women's colleges is that women's college students appear to be more likely to perceive their colleges as caring about student learning, civic involvement, and multiculturalism (Smith et al. 1995; Kinzie et al. 2007). Women's colleges also seem to place more emphasis on diversity awareness in their curriculums, including supporting women's studies and minority studies, than their co-educational counterparts (Kim 2001). Whereas previous studies have explored these questions using survey data, the NECASL data provides an interesting lens through which to address the same issues because it allows for a qualitative analysis of student responses. Throughout the study, students

were asked questions about their perceptions of diversity and the ways in which it was fostered and supported at their respective institutions. In this section, I will focus on questions asked during students' senior year fall semester about how effectively they thought that their college dealt with issues of diversity.<sup>8</sup>

An important point that emerged in the analysis of the responses to these questions is that there was often a difference between diversity that students themselves experienced and how they perceived their colleges to deal with issues involving diversity. Thus, while I found that many students seemed to have developed nuanced definitions of diversity, and many voiced strong opinions about diversity on their campuses, they often simultaneously indicated that they perceived their college's apparent commitment to diversity to be inauthentic. This discrepancy points to the idea that students develop their ideas about multiculturalism, inclusion, and exclusion in conversation with peers and perhaps faculty members, and often believe that their administrations are either somewhat disconnected from the student body or only superficially or ineffectively concerned with issues surrounding multiculturalism and diversity. The two narratives about diversity existing on college campuses – one experienced and perpetuated by the student body, and the other voiced by the administration – appear to work in a dialectic manner with one another, influencing both how students think about diversity in general and on their campuses in particular.

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<sup>8</sup> Questions asked include: 1) "In your own words, what does diversity mean?" 2) "Based on your experiences so far, what can you say about diversity at \_\_\_ College? Do you think that it is a core value at \_\_\_ College?" and 3) "Do you think that students, faculty, and administration at \_\_\_ College support and encourage diversity?"

*First-Year Impressions of Diversity*

As a point of comparison to responses during the senior year of college, I looked again at the first round of interviews conducted during students' first semester to ascertain their beliefs about diversity and their colleges' commitment to diversity. For many, particularly minority students, institutional diversity was an important factor in making a decision about where to attend college. This was also something that many individuals noticed during the first few weeks and months of the semester; these comments were typically unsolicited by the interviewer, indicating that this was an important and immediate issue for many students. In general, more students at Andrews and Linden expressed concerns about the level of diversity, particularly in relation to race, at their colleges during the first year. For example, an Asian-American student from Hawaii said that the hardest part about her transition to Linden was getting used to being in the minority:

I think the biggest shock I've ever encountered here was the racial thing. Being a majority back home, and then coming here and being minority, that was probably, it's still like one of the hardest thing I have to deal with so far. I'm not used to everyone around me being something, like being one type of race. Back home everyone was a minority or a mixed race. Like they had white American and Japanese, like I have a lot of friends who are more than one race and it, I think it's just the openness we have back home that I just really miss.

Such comments were common among African-American, Asian, and Latina students at both Linden and Andrews. For many students who grew up in ethnically diverse areas, adjusting to a predominantly white college environment was a challenge.

This lack of what students see as sufficient amounts diversity may, to some extent, be exacerbated by the fact that both Andrews and Linden are located in rural areas, whereas

Madison and Hart benefit from being closer to metropolitan areas. This was emphasized by an African-American Andrews student, who said that her home state “has a lot of diversity.” She explained, “There’s always something to do, you know. And I think [here it] is totally the opposite. It’s not diverse at all.” While rural location and surroundings are both potentially confounding factors when it comes to assessing whether women’s colleges do a better job at fostering diversity and multicultural awareness on campus, a closer look at student comments nevertheless reveals that students have picked up on what they perceive to be the institutions’ commitment, or lack thereof, to diversity. For example, the same student quoted above noted that “I’m not sure about [the Andrews administration] being diverse sometimes.” She said that when she came to an accepted student’s weekend, she noticed that Andrews “brought out” a lot of students of color, but that the student body seemed different when she arrived on campus: “It was kind of biased, because all the people who were here [that weekend] were students of color... after I came here [I realized that] this was maybe one percent of the whole class.” This student expressed some amount of resentment toward what she saw as the administration’s deliberate misrepresentation of the student body during this accepted students’ weekend. What she ultimately experienced on campus did not meet her expectations when it came to diversity.

Other students expressed similar views. One African-American Linden student noted that older students told her that they were dissatisfied with the ways in which the administration had dealt with diversity in the past few years, and invoked the college’s history to express her dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs: “I felt that because Linden was founded on such [inclusive] ideals that they would at least, if they see racism they would immediately like, you know, take care of a problem. But from my understanding, I feel that it’s not being taken care of.” Others, however, saw diversity in a more positive light. Another African-American Linden

student noted that while she had heard of issues involving racial profiling on campus and in the surrounding town in the recent past, she said that she had talked to security officers on campus and “it seemed really easy to be able to talk to somebody on security, and invite them here and there, and just kind of hear some issues we have... [I]t was very comfortable.”

A further group of students invoked broader definitions of diversity. As one Asian-American Andrews student put it, “Well, when I talk about diversity, I don’t mean multi-cultural diversity. I mean, like, types of people. Everyone here, kind of, is the same in one form or another.” She also noted that she felt that Andrews over-emphasized racial diversity, and that she felt stereotyped at times by her race despite that fact that she is adopted and so sees her own identity in a more nuanced way. However, she felt that minority students were often grouped together by the administration, and even at times roomed together. She explained:

I don’t know if that’s by coincidence... I don’t know, but it really bugged me and it bugs a lot of other people. It just seems really ... imperialistic, just like trying to accommodate minorities. I got invited to this Students of Color Dinner. Like, I thought that was ridiculous. So, I won’t go into that. Just like all that kind of stuff. Yeah, I thought that was pretty lame.

Another Andrews student echoed this frustration, saying that “it feels like they kinda like they stuck minorities together like in each room. Like my room is like all three of us are black. In the next room, all three of them are Asian.” These criticisms are important, because they reflect that students are both extremely aware of and concerned about issues of diversity on their college campuses. Minority students especially felt that what they perceived to be an inauthentic commitment to diversity served to single them out and make them feel uncomfortable.

Concern with diversity was particularly prevalent among minority students, but white students also voiced opinions about a wide array of issues pertaining to diversity. For example, one white Linden student said that she wished there were more awareness of socioeconomic diversity, noting that:

I guess it bothers me when [other students] don't understand like people who actually have to get financial aid. Because I had to have a really huge financial aid package to be able to go here. And I don't like being made to feel that I don't belong here because I didn't have the money to go here, and I guess that bothers me a little bit.

Although concern about socioeconomic diversity was not common among any of the students in my sample during the first interview, it was something that, three years later, figured into many of their definitions of what diversity means. However, from these initial interviews, it is clear that students at Linden and Andrews were already engaged in conversations about diversity, and noticed it in their everyday lives. Many, like one white student at Linden, were looking for a college with a lot of diversity; as this particular student put it: "I wanted a diverse group. And I know that Linden is notorious for working on diversity and [the town] also is, so I knew it was very up-and-coming in that way." Comments like these make it clear that students hope that their institutions will continue to work on these issues, and that they see diversity as a goal that they would like to see their colleges strive toward.

The women's college students in my sample, similarly to those in at the co-educational colleges, were concerned with diversity when making their decisions about where to attend. For example, one white Madison student said that "I wanted [a lot of diversity], because [at] my high school you didn't get much of that at all. It's basically all white students, all sort of apathetic, I guess, toward religion and toward everything else... here I've already met people from so many

different backgrounds, and just talking to them is really interesting. So I like that.” Overall, however, fewer women’s college students, particularly minority students, criticized the ways in which their colleges handled diversity. Rather, they framed their comments about experiences with diversity within the first few weeks in a more positive light. For example, one African-American Hart student noted that:

I come from a predominantly African-American, Hispanic school and I’ve never been surrounded by so many Caucasians before, and some of the things they say is just like, oh man, what? It’s just different perspectives coming from different backgrounds, different experiences. So it’s interesting. [I’m learning] a lot.

While this student’s interactions with diversity at Hart were not all necessarily positive – it seems that some of the “things [Caucasians] say” were surprising to her in a negative way – she ends the comment by saying that she is learning a lot from these experiences. In a similar vein, a Latina Madison student said that whereas her high school was primarily Hispanic, “[at Madison] it’s different, because you see everyone from everywhere running around. Like when you sit down and you hear either stories of their life or what they have to say, it’s really compelling.”

Discourses about learning from others with different perspectives were prevalent among the women’s college students, and to a lesser extent the co-educational college students as well, in my sample. As one white Hart student, who said that most of her friends from home are “white, upper middle class people,” put it, “I think that there’s a lot of different cultures that are represented here, I guess. And the people aren’t necessarily the same. Not everyone is rich or poor or anything like that... [it is] fascinating to learn where people are from, and how things are different.” Exposure to individuals who come from different backgrounds was viewed as

particularly important part of the college experience for many students. One African-American Madison student put it succinctly:

[Madison is] such a diverse place that you shouldn't come in your freshman year and leave the same way your senior year. You should have learned something, whether it is why the way people dress the way they do in different cultures, or why does she talk like that, why does she walk like that, or why doesn't she eat that. Like everyone has something to offer, so you should learn from that.

The aspect of learning from others figured centrally into this student's idea of what a successful first year at college should be; she hoped to learn and grow through interactions with her peers who are different from herself. This perspective differed slightly from some of those presented by the co-educational college students, who were often turned off by the ways in which peers as well as the administration handled matters of diversity.

Finally, several women's college students noted that the college itself did well at promoting diversity. One Madison student explained that an orientation program had a positive impact on her:

We had a talk about cultures in our dorm and I think that was one of the best things during orientation. We really got to know everyone's opinion and like got a little background history on you know, what they've done or what they've been through and what their families are like. So that was really good... It made you think about a lot of things. Because some of the questions were questions that you don't really ask or you don't really think about. It was nice hearing from international students' perspective. And even, you know, people from different parts of the country and how they think and how they act, how their families are.

Thus, students at the two women's colleges were more likely to view their colleges' commitments to diversity as being both authentic and effective during their first semesters, while

the co-educational students were less likely to react positively to experiences with diversity and the way their college handled it. To understand how these views evolved over the course of four years, I turn now to senior year perceptions of diversity.

### *Senior Year Reflections on Diversity*

Most noticeable about the senior year responses to the set of questions about diversity is that the students as a whole defined diversity in much more nuanced ways than they did during their first year. For example, far more students now included socioeconomic differences in their definitions; as one Andrews student explained, she defines diversity as “different perspectives... and with that comes like cultural backgrounds, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic, geographic... the way you grew up and the way you were raised and the way you see the world.” Others included sexual orientation in their conceptions of diversity as well. These broader definitions of diversity were stressed by many students, who emphasized that diversity is not necessarily encapsulated by race alone. As an African-American Andrews student put it:

I think people always assume that race means something is diverse, which it is, it can be. But I think it also means where you're from, where your interests are, what you do on campus, your sexuality, your views on life, what sports teams you like, if you watch teams. I just think it can mean a lot of things.

Most importantly, this comment highlights that diversity means more than just socially ascribed and achieved differences; it also encompasses differences in perspectives, personal preferences, and life outlooks. Comments like these were common among students from all four colleges, indicating that whether or not students themselves perceived their colleges to be successful at diversity, their experiences while in college informed their thoughts about this issue in important

ways. Whereas most of the comments about diversity were voiced by minority students during the first round of interviews, and pertained primarily to concerns about race and sometimes class, comments during students' senior year were more complex and demonstrated a deeper understanding of what it means to interact with a variety of individuals from different cultures and backgrounds.

A common theme among my respondents from Andrews and Linden was that diversity at their colleges had actually increased during their time there; they noted that administrators had increased their commitments to diversity over the past several years. This reflects real policy changes that were implemented at Linden and to a lesser extent Andrews during these students' tenure at the two colleges. However, as one Linden student noted, the *type* of diversity that was being encouraged tended to be racial diversity, not the other forms of diversity that students considered to be equally important. As one Linden student explained:

There has definitely been an increase in racial diversity in Linden since my freshman year. That's very, very noticeable. [But] I think it's more racial diversity. I think that's a little frustrating and it's just... a certain diversity that they're like trying to obtain, in my opinion... Like it's great that they're doing that but it's just like I hope that they can explore more like methods of diversity.

This perspective was shared by students at Andrews as well as Linden; one respondent at Andrews said that, "I think that there's been... a tremendous persistence to increase diversity on the campus. And I think that through the years, especially since my freshman year, I've seen more and more faculty, more and more students coming on campus... I think that's really wonderful." This particular student, who defined diversity as "multiple perspectives coming from multiple arrays of people," said that she was aware of the administrations' commitment to increasing diversity on campus, and appreciated this effort. However, she also noted that at times

students from similar backgrounds tended to “stick together,” which undermined diversity; she emphasized that this was a difficult pattern to break and that Andrews had a lot of work to do in order to foster a truly inclusive environment.

This sense that simply increasing racial and socioeconomic diversity on campus does not necessarily create positive interactions among members of different groups was echoed by several other students. As another Andrews student put it, she noticed that fellow students often associated primarily with others who shared similar experiences and characteristics. She said that people “keep themselves in a bubble where, it’s almost like, even though this person here, who’s different from them, is sitting right here, they don’t see it and they don’t deal with it, so they keep the same mentality that they had before.” A Linden student who shared similar sentiments noted that “everyone’s always talking about diversity and, I don’t know, I feel like people are friends with people who look like them for the most part.” However, even though they criticized peers and administrators for inauthentic or ineffective commitments to diversity, many students reported engaging in positive interactions with others who were different from themselves during their time on campus. For example, one student from Andrews who said that she grew up in town where “everyone was white, almost everyone was Christian,” noted that her views on diversity had developed while at Andrews:

[I]t’s one thing to like intellectually support diversity and another thing to actually feel comfortable in a diverse setting and Andrews has helped me feel much more comfortable interacting with people from many different backgrounds and being in a diverse place because now I’m used to it... most of my friends are international and so it’s really interesting when they get to talking about their childhoods in different countries. Like my best friend is from Tibet and he grew up in India and went to a British boarding school there and he’s a first generation college student and so he has so many interesting things to tell me.

Students reported that these types of interactions were both valuable and eye-opening, and appreciated their relationships with peers who had different perspectives and experiences to share.

Other students as well said that their views about diversity had developed in meaningful ways while at college, but demonstrated complex understandings of the relationship between the administrative actions and student experiences when it came to these issues. One white student at Linden, for example, said that she had become much more aware of class issues while at college, and found that sometimes faculty and administrators were insensitive to these types of concerns: “I can think of like a bazillion instances in classes where professors were just not even in tune with class issues whatsoever and they’re always like, oh, well, if you’re at Linden you come from a privileged background. Which is, I hate when people say that.” She found these types of remarks to be problematic, because they reflected a disconnect between professors and students on campus. She noted, however, that she felt that the college had been taking steps in the right direction when it came to increasing racial and ethnic diversity on campus, and that her social interactions had been enriched by this level of diversity:

Coming here, I would have never of thought like one of my best friends would be from like Belarus and like speaking Russian, and like one of my friends would be like from Pakistan and just like places like all over the country. And like I have friends who are African-American and friends who are Asian, you know, just like a ton, and like then I have a best friend from Maine too. So it’s just like we all come together and we’re like this little diverse family.

Similarly to the Andrews student above who found her social experiences to be the richest source of positive interactions with a diverse group of individuals, this Linden student noted that her time at college and her interactions with her friends had informed her worldviews in important

ways. Thus, this particular student exemplifies the perspective of someone who, while voicing a strong critique of college faculty and administrators' handling of diversity, demonstrates a very nuanced understanding of these issues, which she attributes in large part to her experiences on campus.

As a whole, I found that most of the students at the two co-educational colleges thought that their administrations were at least "trying" at diversity, and reported positive experiences while on campus, but noted that there was still a long way to go to make their campuses truly diverse and inclusive spaces. Thus, one student who said that while she thought that diversity was a "core value" at Andrews, she didn't think that it existed "in real terms" yet captures the general feelings about these issues on the two campuses.

Despite relatively more positive responses about diversity in the first round of interviews from women's college students, the differences between the two environments were not as clear in the final round. Notably missing from the women's college respondents were comments about how diversity had increased during their time at college, which likely reflects the real changes in policies at Andrews and Linden that were not occurring at Hart and Madison during the same time frame. Students at the two women's colleges, similarly to their co-educational peers, demonstrated complex understandings of diversity while simultaneously critiquing the ways in which their institutions handled these concerns on campus. One Asian-American Hart student put it succinctly:

I do have to give credit though to Hart for it being the most socioeconomically diverse campus, in terms of liberal arts colleges in the nation. I think it's making an effort to be more diverse ethnically, with more international students. But I think it's still a predominantly homogeneous makeup in terms of students. I think it's interesting though,

to see that despite how diverse we are, a good majority of the student body is, I guess just agrees, or adheres to the same moral or ethical concepts.

Students recognized that their colleges did fairly well at promoting and creating diversity on campus, but noted that students in general shared similar ideologies. Other students, as well, thought that diversity could be improved at their college; as one Hart student put it: “It needs some work... diversity [at Hart] seems to revolve around race and class, and there are so many other issues of diversity. There’s gender diversity, there’s age diversity, there’s ability diversity, and they all kind of get pushed to the side. It seems to be primarily about race and class here.”

Similarly to students at Linden and Andrews, many of the women’s college students stressed that while they were bothered by their administrations’ emphasis on racial and ethnic diversity to the detriment of other forms of diversity on campus, they had also experienced positive interactions with diversity that contributed to their development while in college. One Asian-American Madison student, who said that she thought that the college had a “lot of diversity” explained:

A lot of my friends are from very different [places]. So it’s really helped me to reevaluate my lifestyle. Reevaluate the way I live and also where I come from and think about you know, whether in the future I would want to continue my lifestyle or you know adopt some of their different ways and perspectives.

This perspective was shared by many others at both of the women’s colleges; as one Hart student put it, “not only are my friends diverse people, like they come from so many different places, backgrounds, but they have like diverse philosophies on life, they have diverse temperaments, different heights...” The idea that diversity also has to do with perspectives and life experiences was one that was echoed by many of the Madison and Hart students in my sample, just as it was emphasized by the co-educational college students.

It seems, then, that whereas the students at the women's colleges had more positive impressions of diversity than the co-educational college students during their first semesters, by the time that they were seniors, their experiences had caused them to become more critical. As a whole, they tended to say that their colleges made an effort, but that it was not always successful. One African-American student captured this perspective:

[Diversity is a core value at Madison], but... I think Madison needs to work on that a bit more. Because we have diverse groups on campus, but do they really interact to the extent that they could? I don't really think that they do. I think there's been some progress... Especially as a black woman and being part [an organization for black women], I do see a lot of, a lot more [of our] members involved in a variety of organizations and it's really nice to see. But I don't know if it's happening on as big of a scale as it could. And you can't really... push diversity onto people. But it would be nice to create forums where maybe that's possible. And I think the school is making progress in that.

Thus, women's college students generally thought that diversity could be improved at their colleges, but tended to agree that their administrators were at least making an effort to do so. In addition, they nevertheless reported positive interactions with a diverse group of peers, and emphasized that their campus communities were generally inclusive spaces. As one Madison student explained: "I found in my tenure I've been involved in a lot of orgs on campus and just looking into different parts of how I want to define myself. And every year I've been able to find some place that will take me... some place that I felt welcomed." Through their experiences on campus, students at Hart and Madison, like those at Andrews and Linden, appear to have developed complex understandings of what it means to embrace and successfully foster diversity. As the student quoted above demonstrates, these campus environments allow for students to explore their own positionality while developing a critical perspective on diversity.

Overall, I found that there were no significant differences in how the two groups of students in my sample perceived and experienced diversity on their campuses during their senior year. Both women's college and co-educational college students believed that their administrations were committed, at least in rhetoric, to diversity, and many students, particularly at Andrews and Linden, reported observing improvements during their time in college. One difference that did emerge between the two groups, however, is that students at the two single-sex institutions reported more support and acceptance of a range of sexual orientations as well as, to some extent, transgender students. Relatively little has been written about this particular issue at women's colleges, but, as mentioned previously, it is something that came up again and again among my respondents at Hart and Madison. At Hart in particular, students reported an environment that welcomed exploration and acceptance of a range of sexual orientations. As one Hart student explained: "I think it's definitely a big part of Hart, I think you come to Hart and you can really experiment and find out who you want to be, like your orientation, what you prefer." Other students noted that being exposed to this culture at college affected how they thought about these issues; as another Hart student put it: "I grew up in a very conservative family and I didn't even know any of those things until I came to Hart. So my first year, it was a huge shock for me. Yeah, and I was very surprised with everything, I guess. So I guess that has developed." She noted that now she was more comfortable with differences in sexual orientation, and that this had changed during her time at Hart. Still another student said that the environment caused her to discover aspects of her own sexual identity, explaining that, "I feel like if I had gone somewhere [else] I probably wouldn't have ever acknowledged any sort of bisexual side to myself... it's something that probably wouldn't have happened anywhere else I think. I'm glad that it did."

The Madison students in my sample were somewhat less clear about whether or not diversity in sexual orientation was accepted and supported at their college. One student reported a positive experience with these issues at various points in her college career:

I hadn't really thought about like gender diversity at all and self-identification. Or self-identified diversity at all before. Like [before] coming to Madison there was just basically straight and people who were a little weird... Well during [a diversity-focused orientation event], I met a lot of people who were very different from [me] and someone who was extremely religious. Somebody who was bi[sexual] and had dated men and women. Somebody who was going through a gender transition. And you know through our... willingness to be diverse, we were able to interact with each other you know as friends and accept each other for who we were.

Importantly, this student reports an evolving notion of diversity which was informed by her experiences in college and now includes "gender diversity" along with racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity. Participating in a performance-based orientation program put on by upper-class students for incoming first-year students was a particularly influential experience for this student, who reported close and positive interactions with different individuals who shared diverse perspectives with the group.

A minority of students at Madison and Hart reported somewhat less positive experiences when it came to issues involving sexual orientation. One Madison student explained, "Gender identities are not really looked at as acceptable forms of diversity [at Madison]. They're just sort of ignored. I feel. Too much." An interesting example of the complex relationship between gender identity and women's colleges is the experience of a transgender student at Hart. During

his<sup>9</sup> second-year interview, this student explained that he felt more supported and at home at Hart:

I am more comfortable being in my residence hall at Hart than I am in my own house at home, the house that I grew up in... There's also my parents' issues with my gender identity at home, and the fact they still use female pronouns, they make a point when I'm with my best friend to say girls, they won't use my new name, even when my friends are using it right in front of them.... So here is more home than home.

Nevertheless, he also said that at times, he felt out of place in the single-sex environment of the college, and had experienced some negative reactions from peers and adults on campus; he voiced these concerns during the interview conducted during his senior year fall semester:

There are a lot of transgender students on campus who feel that way because... the Hart community tends to be split on the topic of gender variant students, and so as a transgendered student walking into a class that's about women's history and to be the only male figure in that room is unsettling. But that's not to say that, how do I put this, I have to make a conscious effort to recognize when I'm in a space that is a women's space, and that's fine, I don't have a problem with that, I have to do that, it's part of my transition. But to walk into that room and feel the tension automatically rise just by being in that space is problematic.

Despite some negative experiences, though, this student reported finding the community at Hart to be generally supportive of his choices, as is evidenced by his comment that Hart feels more like home than the house he grew up in. In addition, he spoke about meeting and developing a relationship with a particularly significant professor who had become “a great friend and a great mentor.” He explained, “[H]e's really understanding of my transition, and he's a major arm for support. He's been behind me the whole way, the whole way.” Thus, it seems that, as Susan

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<sup>9</sup> I use male pronouns for this student because he indicated in both his sophomore and senior year interviews that he identifies as male.

Marine (2011) has documented, women's colleges have some work to do in both articulating their stance on transgender students and improving the ways in which these students are supported. However, they do appear to be places in which a wide range of individuals are able to find support and generally feel as though they are welcome, perhaps more so than at co-educational colleges, where gender identity and sexual orientation are not as emphasized or visible.

## LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

A final area of non-academic life on campus that has been discussed by researchers of women's colleges is extracurricular involvement and leadership development. Much of the literature on women's colleges has emphasized the finding that female students in these environments are more likely to hold leadership positions and become involved in on-campus activities (Astin 1993; Miller-Bernal 1993; Whitt 1994). Additionally, research indicates that extracurricular involvement may be especially beneficial to female students because being involved with on-campus activities increases self-esteem more for women than it does for men (Astin & Kent 1983). In order to address this question, I did a simple analysis of students' leadership activity in their sophomore and senior years. The results of this analysis are summarized in Table 4-2.

Table 4-2. Percentage of Students Reporting Leadership Experiences.

	Hart and Madison	Linden and Andrews	Total
<u>Sophomore Year</u>	( <i>n</i> = 25 )	( <i>n</i> = 23)	( <i>n</i> = 48)
Leadership	68%	57%	63%
No Leadership	32%	43%	38%
<u>Senior Year</u>	( <i>n</i> = 25 )	( <i>n</i> = 21)	( <i>n</i> = 46)
Leadership	88%	48%	68%
No Leadership	12%	52%	32%

Interestingly, my first round of analysis suggests that the two groups of students were similarly engaged with extracurricular leadership positions on campus; at 68 percent compared to 57 percent, the women's college students were only slightly more likely to hold leadership positions. However, by students' senior year, Hart and Madison students had increased their amount of leadership on campus, while Linden and Andrews students had decreased their involvement to less than 50 percent. These findings thus support previous research on the topic, but in a somewhat surprising way. However, when these findings are contextualized within the women's college environment, it is possible to hypothesize why this trend may occur.

During their sophomore year, students at all four colleges were similarly engaged and excited about their on-campus commitments; this was true for the co-educational as well as women's college students. One Linden student who was elected as the captain of her sailing

team, for example, noted “I’ve gotten really involved in the sailing team, I got elected captain... So that’s been really sweet because I just started sailing in college. So I guess I got involved in something new that I’ve ended up really liking.” By their senior years, however, many Andrews and Linden students said that they no longer had time for or interest in extracurricular activities on campus, especially after going abroad and with the added challenges of searching for jobs, applying to graduate schools, or writing senior theses. Women’s college students, in contrast, remained very active in their leadership roles on campus during their final year; in fact, the number of students holding leadership positions increased substantially in the two years between sophomore and senior year, indicating that students who were not involved during their second year became more, not less, involved later on.

Two explanations for this trend are possible. The first, which has been argued in the literature (Miller-Bernal 2000), is that women hold more leadership positions at women’s colleges because there are simply more positions available due to the lack of men. That is, all of the leadership positions on campus must be filled by women. However, the fact that students were similarly engaged during their second year indicates that perhaps the availability of leadership positions may not be the only factor at work here. Whether or not students are engaged in structured non-academic activities on campus also likely has to do with campus cultures. It is possible that at women’s colleges, being involved with activities and holding leadership positions on campus is a part of the culture and accepted by peers to an extent that it is not at co-educational colleges. This claim is supported by the comments made by Madison students quoted earlier in this chapter about how students are always “running somewhere” and involved in a multitude of activities. At Hart, leadership positions are often within residence halls, which are primarily social spaces but also provide students with leadership experiences,

suggesting that leadership and extracurricular involvement may also be integral to social life on this campus.

Whether or not campus cultures are the reason for the opposing trends between the two types of colleges in the sample, it does seem likely that women's college students are more engaged in extracurricular activities as well as academics; this may be because socialization is structured differently in the single-sex environment. However, it is difficult to make conclusive claims about this without also looking at male students' engagement in extracurricular activities and leadership positions on the co-educational campuses. If the trend of moderate involvement during sophomore year and attrition from on-campus activities in later years holds true for males at these colleges as well, then it is likely that there is something more at work here than simply the availability of and access to leadership positions for female students.

This chapter has discussed in significant depth a wide range of issues pertaining to students' social experiences while on campus. The most interesting and consistent finding from the first two sections of this chapter is that much of the differences between the two types of colleges emerges during students' first year, even within the first few weeks. Whereas co-educational college students complained about the prevalence of a heavy drinking culture on their campuses, first-year students at women's colleges reported a wider range of social interactions which, in general, were more positive. This is reflected by the finding that only 7.5 percent of women's college students as opposed to 17.7 percent of co-educational college students self-reported being "binge drinkers" (Pascarella & Terenzini 1991). In addition, women's college students did not notice a significant social disadvantage to attending a women's

college. Rather, they seemed to appreciate the ability to be more academically engaged, and their comments reflected this focus on academics. When it came to issues of diversity, women's college students also reported more positive experiences, while first-years at the co-educational colleges were less convinced of their colleges' commitment to diversity. Importantly, minority students at the two women's colleges were less likely to report being made to feel uncomfortable on campus within the first few weeks, something that may be important to how students come to find their place within the college environment.

In later years, however, these prominent first-year trends diminished, perhaps because Andrews and Linden students found alternative social outlets, and Hart and Madison students cultivated stronger criticisms of their college environments. However, the women's college students remained more academically focused than their peers, perhaps to the point of detriment, as reported by several students at Madison, who said that their college environment was a particularly stressful and unhealthy one. On diversity measures, too, it did not seem that there were many significant differences in how women's college and co-educational college students viewed their institutions' commitment to diversity. One difference that should be explored farther is that women's colleges appeared to be somewhat more welcoming of students with a variety sexual orientations and gender-identifications. Overall, though, the finding that most of the potential benefits when it comes to social life may accrue during the first year supports Riordan's (1994) findings that attending a women's college for even one year has positive effects. My results suggest that this may be because of the social culture that embraces diversity and encourages alternative forms of socialization that students encounter during their first year at women's colleges. This first-year premium may continue to benefit students throughout their college careers.

## Chapter Five: Student Outcomes

As we have seen, it is possible that women's college students are looking for a more academic and perhaps rigorous environment which will pay off later in life when they choose where to attend college. How, though, do women's colleges and co-educational colleges affect students differently when it comes to specific outcomes such as major choice and personal aspirations, and how do factors such as faculty mentorship affect these outcomes? Previous research indicates that single-sex education may be particularly beneficial to women in the classroom setting. For example, one study conducted at a women's college during its transition to co-education found that when classrooms became co-educational, there was a decrease in professor-initiated as well as student-initiated interactions, along with female student follow-up interactions; classroom interactions were also affected by the gender of the professor (Canada & Pringle 1995). The authors hypothesize that this may be because the newly mixed-sex classrooms conform to the norms of society in ways that the single-sex classrooms did not; single-sex classrooms may prevent women from being overshadowed by male classmates who are more aggressive and whose opinions may be subtly and unconsciously favored by professors.

An important area in which these classroom-level interactions may make a difference is in the traditionally male-dominated STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields. Though women have made significant strides in these fields in recent decades, women have entered traditionally male occupations at higher rates than men have entered traditionally female occupations, and "female" occupations continue to be devalued, providing both genders with a monetary incentive to enter traditionally male occupations (England 2010). However, it appears that women continue to face barriers to entry and persistence in most of these fields. Within

STEM, women are more likely to leave the field or transition to a more “feminine” field at every educational level; despite the fact that they out-perform their male peers in math and science at the high school level, women are more likely to choose non-STEM majors in college, switch to non-STEM majors during college, leave the field after graduation, and even choose not to work in their field after receiving a PhD or other advanced degree (Blickenstaff 2005). This is reflected by the fact that while women now earn approximately 50 percent of the doctorates in biological sciences, they still earn only 21.5 and 22.4 percent of the doctorate degrees in the physical sciences and computer sciences, respectively (U.S. Census 2011).

A popular explanation for the attrition of women from STEM fields is that women face a “chilly climate” in the classroom; they receive “subtle clues” from professors and peers that they do not belong or are not competent (Hall & Sandler 1982; Pascarella et al. 1997; Ong 2005). This can include condescension from male peers or professors, indications that their remarks and answers in the classroom are not taken seriously, and feelings of isolation and intimidation as a result of being one among only a few women in upper-division classes. Another explanation is that women in math and science experience “stereotype threat,” which involves an individual’s awareness of widely-held negative stereotypes about their group, which in turn causes the individual to suffer anxiety over his or her own actions and characteristics in relation to this stereotype, especially in high-pressure performance-oriented situations such as testing (Aronson & Steele 1995). This means that women, often erroneously, rate themselves as less competent in science and math based on widely-held cultural beliefs about women’s lack of innate ability in these areas. Men, who do not face the same stereotypes, tend to judge themselves more leniently because their abilities in science and math are not questioned by societal beliefs. As a result, there is a higher likelihood that women will doubt their talents and abilities in science, suffer

anxiety about their performance, and feel out of place in the classroom, and thus choose not to enter or stay in traditionally male-dominated fields (Correll 2004). This is reflected by findings in the literature that despite achieving similar math scores on standardized tests such as the SAT and higher grades in entry-level science courses, women are still less likely to major in these fields (Ware et al. 1985).

These types of findings suggest that single-sex education may be beneficial to women in that it eliminates competition between men and women in the classroom and encourages women to fill traditionally male-dominated roles on campus and in academics. Several studies support the hypothesis that women's colleges encourage female students to enter traditionally male-dominated fields (Tidball and Kistiakowsky 1976; Tidball 1986; Sebrechts 1994; Solnick 1995). An important finding which avoids the problem of selection bias is that women's college students are significantly more likely than their peers at co-educational colleges to leave intended female-dominated majors for neutral or male-dominated fields (Solnick 1995). This is interesting because it indicates that these students are influenced by their college environments in ways that encourage them to shift toward non-traditional fields. Thus, women's colleges may eliminate some of the obstacles faced by women at similar co-educational colleges when it comes to choosing and persisting in STEM majors. In addition to the "chilly climate" and stereotype threat explanations discussed above, there is some evidence that female students have more access to important female role models and mentors at women's colleges; this argument was made primarily by M. Elizabeth Tidball in the 1970s. At the time, Tidball attributed this to the higher percentage of female faculty members at women's colleges, but today such differences are no longer apparent (Tidball & Kistiakowsky 1976). In 2013, Andrews, Linden, Hart, and Madison all employ approximately equal numbers of male and female faculty. More recent studies,

however, indicate that both male and female science professors may unconsciously favor male students for mentorship (Moss-Racusin et al. 2012). It is possible that, without men to compete with, women at women's colleges have access to more mentorship opportunities than their counterparts at co-educational institutions.

In this chapter, I discuss how the students in my sample went about choosing their major, focusing particularly on STEM majors and those who either left or switched to these fields while in college. To do this, I have looked at the major that students indicated when entering during their first interview, and then at the major that they indicated choosing during the spring of their sophomore years, when students are required to declare their major choice. Then, I focus on mentorship, looking at whether women's college students report having more faculty mentors, along with the gender of these mentors. The nature of this study does not allow me to make far-reaching claims about the frequency with which students choose STEM majors, have faculty mentors, or develop ambitions for careers or graduate schools. Rather, my goal in addressing these areas is, as with in previous chapters, to attempt to understand the mechanisms by which students make decisions and react to their college environments.

## MAJOR CHOICE

The women in my sample represent a wide range of majors, both within and outside of STEM fields. Though the small size of my sample prevents me from being able to determine whether female students as a whole at the two women's colleges are more likely to major in certain fields, the experiences of those students who switched to or from STEM fields are instructive. By focusing on these students, I have been able to look more closely at the

mechanisms through which students, after arriving at college, decide to pursue or leave science and math. Overall, somewhat similar numbers of students chose to leave or enter STEM at the four colleges, with some differences. Three Andrews students left intended STEM majors; one Linden student did so. At Hart, one student switched away from STEM, while at Madison, three switched to STEM and one switched away. These results indicate that, first of all, it was relatively uncommon for students in my sample to switch from a non-STEM field to STEM, and vice versa, but that it was more common in general for students to drop these majors in favor of social sciences or humanities. Students who dropped their STEM majors did so for several reasons, but most often they cited the difficulty of classes or the inaccessibility of the major as being the factors that discouraged them from persisting in the field.

One such student at Andrews explained that she chose to major in government rather than biology in part because she wouldn't have time to finish a science major in her time left at Andrews after spending much of her first two years exploring a variety of fields in an effort to decide what she liked best. She also explained that her experience with the lab classes that the biology major entails made her second-guess her initial desire to major in the sciences. In addition, she said that although she enjoys science, she does not consider it to be her strongest subject:

I just realized that, I just didn't enjoy [labs] as much. They just seemed so boring. And I didn't want to work in a lab after I graduated. I mean the only reason I really wanted to do sciences I think was just because I wanted to either work with pharmaceuticals or go to med school. And that still hasn't gone out of my mind but I'm definitely, I don't think sciences are also my strongest subject either. Even in high school I've always been okay with them. They were never my best subject but definitely not my worst subject. They were like that in between where I do them and I'm okay. I feel like if I want to pursue it it would have to be something that I was really good at and really want to devote myself to.

This quote illuminates a few of the findings represented in the literature about women in the sciences. This student, despite enjoying some aspects of science, was turned away from majoring in biology because she thought that it was too time-consuming and she did not find the labs to be interesting. She also did not see herself working in a lab later in life; her reason for pursuing science was to go to medical school. Similarly, a Madison student who decided to major in sociology rather than biology or English said that she chose not to do biology because the major was too time-consuming: “I realized just how intense it is and how you must really love it if you want to do that for four years. Especially taking double labs. Like I can’t even do one. I can’t imagine doing two per semester until I graduate. So eventually I ruled that out.”

The cumbersome nature of science majors was something that other students talked about as well. One Hart student, for example, switched from a hard science and economics to a German major mostly because she wanted to be able to go abroad, and said that she already had many of the credits required for the German major. She explained: “I mean, in the end, when I finally decided, it was just like it’s a common sense move, I have the credits, I’m going abroad where I’m going to get most of my requirements done, I might as well do it.” Students reported that humanities and social science majors in general were easier to complete, and this was often the deciding factor for those choosing between majors. Several other students in my sample reported being interested in a STEM major but ultimately deciding not to switch, often because it would have been too difficult or because it was too late to fulfill the typically extensive requirements of the STEM major. One Andrews student, for example, said that while she still planned on completing the pre-med requirements, she, like the Hart student quoted above, decided to major in German:

[B]asically I looked for the major that I was interested in that had the least requirements, which I would not take otherwise. [T]he German major was all these classes which I would want to take otherwise probably anyway, plus two classes that I have to take senior year. And it seemed like it was much easier to do that than to take eleven classes for chemistry or nine classes for biology, including ecology which I'm not very interested in.

This student, who noted that she felt “weird not majoring in a science,” found that while she enjoyed science classes and would have liked to major in one of these areas, it was easier to major in a humanity that fit in with her intended study abroad program and had more flexibility.

Other students mentioned discovering an interest in science or math at some point in their college career thus far, but none of these students ultimately made the switch to that major. One Hart student, for example, said that she was seriously considering a math major: “That was something I never thought of doing, which was math. Partly because I was just never good at math, although I enjoyed it.” However, she later decided not to add the math double major to her existing humanities major. Another Linden student took a geology class and said that she loved it; however, she did not like her second geology class as much and ultimately ended up dropping it. In the end, she decided to stay with her Spanish major and education minor. Similarly, a Andrews student who came to college intending to be a history major said that she had recently developed an interest in the quantitative side of history:

[A] lot of history is very qualitative and while I'm not a big fan of the sciences I understand their value and I feel like they're really important. So I'd kind of like to be able to integrate something more mathematical into doing history. And so I've gotten really interested in mapping and geopolitics and stuff. And I ended up completing my independent study in proving my point through the GIS maps and census data. And so that was really cool, so it kind of opened me up to a whole realm of possibilities as far as doing history.

The same student said that she had also developed an interest in geology during her time at Andrews, explaining that: “[M]aybe a month or two ago I had like this crisis where I wished I was a geology major for about five minutes. I don’t even know why. It just kind of sounded interesting for five minutes.” Ultimately, though, she decided to stick with her intended history major. Another Madison student, who came to college intending to major in geosciences and classics, said that she became interested in computer science (CS) during her time at Madison, but was unable to commit to the major because of time constraints. In the end, she decided to just take classes in the department without committing to the major, saying that “the nice thing about not doing a CS major or minor is that I can take whatever courses in the CS department. I don’t have to take certain courses which is nice. So I have a lot more freedom.”

Other common reasons that students chose to leave STEM fields was because they found that these classes were more challenging, or they did not do as well in them. One Madison student, who initially considered an economics major and then briefly switched to math, said she dropped the math major because she did not do well in a class; “[S]econd semester I was like you know? I don’t have to major in economics. I’ll major in something else... And then last semester math was a disaster. A disaster. And I was like you know what? Why am I punishing myself?” In the end, she chose to major in French because this was something that she was good at and felt comfortable doing; she frames this as a choice not to continue to force herself to do something that she does not enjoy.

Several students also said that they saw STEM majors as being too impersonal or irrelevant to their interests. One Linden student who switched away from math, for example, said that she felt a disconnect between her personal interests and the math major; her approach was to

create an interdisciplinary major that includes some components of math along with her interest in psychology:

I think [the interdisciplinary major] would better fit my personal and academic interests. And I'd like them to be connected, and they kind of aren't at this point, but I think that it's possible that they could be if this switch was made... I guess I really wanted to do something that was more like socially conscious than math.

The sentiment among female students that STEM majors are either uninteresting or not relevant to personal interests is something that is echoed in the literature about women in science. Among the students in my sample, this was much more prevalent than other factors such as negative classroom experiences.

Some students, however, did report being turned off by experiences in classes. One Andrews student for example, said that although she intended to major in chemistry when she arrived, the first chemistry class she took at Andrews discouraged her from wanting to major in the field. Interestingly, one Linden student reported being discouraged from majoring in history because of her experiences in a first-year history class:

[A]ll the people who are history majors are [men], and I guess that kind of made me shy away from it in the beginning as well, like the whole like intimidation factor. Like being in like discussion groups with all these guys who were super masculine and stuff... I guess like just respect wise, like when girls would talk in the class sometimes the guys would be like, no, you're wrong, pretty much, and just like rebuttals of opinions. And I understand like that happens in a lot of classes but I just feel like they didn't respect the girls as much. Because there was just number, there's strength in numbers and there were so many guys.

Though this perspective was not voiced by many of the students in my sample, it is interesting because it indicates that female students are, to some extent, aware of the difficulties faced by

women in certain classroom settings. This particular student's perception that history is a field in which women are not welcome is particularly illuminating because it indicates that even outside of STEM majors, women's experiences in the classroom are affected by their gender. The student quoted above eventually chose to major in women's and gender studies, a field in which she said that she felt that her opinions in the classroom were valued. In addition, she explained that it was more "familiar" and that she felt more comfortable around the women in the major. Thus, even within the co-educational environment of her college, this student found that she felt more comfortable in the relatively more single-sex sub-environment of the women's and gender studies major. Importantly, she noted that she felt as though her opinions were valued in her women's and gender studies classrooms; "this semester I'm actually talking in all of my discussion classes and like some of the professors that I've had before that I didn't really talk in the class have noticed. And they're like oh, I'm so thankful like you're speaking up because you have good things to add to the discussion." Whereas she felt intimidated and discouraged in history classes, she found that her opinions and thoughts were positively received in her women's and gender studies classrooms.

The importance of departmental characteristics was also emphasized by many other students, both in STEM and non-STEM fields. One Andrews student, for example, said that she chose French because: "I love the department. I've enjoyed the classes so much so far that it's something that I want to continue all throughout my Andrews experience." A Madison student who chose to major in Russian shared similar sentiments, saying that, "I really like everything about the major. And like I want to take every class in the department and I feel like I don't feel that way about any other ones." One Madison student, who decided to pick up a computer science major in addition to her intended neuroscience major, said she did so because she "fell in

love” with the department and the major after taking a class. “I love the department. I really think the material’s interesting. I’m doing research this summer that I’m really excited about.” Others stressed the importance of liking the professors in the major. One Andrews student noted that she chose art history in part because it is “such a small environment that I feel comfortable with the majority of the professors... So I think I’m really comfortable talking to them outside of class and asking them questions in class and things like that.” Similarly, a Linden student explained that she chose to major in English because “I just like the department better in terms of the professors rather than the other ones.” Another Linden student said that she was attracted to economics because she found that “the teachers are so intelligent and like I just really respect all of them... I mean I’ve taken like five or six econ courses now and they’ve, just all my teachers have really been on the ball, and like just great.”

Students also chose to major in math and science because of genuine interest in these fields, which fits with previous research that indicates that students choose their major primarily because it matched their interests (Bantham et al. 2008). Importantly, students found that they still enjoyed these subjects after taking classes at the college level, and many of them sounded excited about their majors. One Madison student, for example, explained:

I feel like organic chemistry is really, really speaking to me. Even more this semester than it was last semester. Just because I don’t know, the material is just so interesting the way it works and how you think about these chemical compounds. It’s so different from what I’ve looked at before. So it’s just on a completely different level. A completely different branch of chemistry that I hadn’t really thought about. It was very analytical and now it’s more how to make these. Really it’s like a recipe book.

This student also said that she had started to feel comfortable in the science building on campus, and that she saw it as a place where she could be her “crazy self” without fear of judgment. She

also felt as though she now felt at ease going to talk to her science professors during their office hours. Similarly, a Linden student explained why she chose biology in this way: “Well I just... like science first of all. And I guess chemistry is very, like just very small, looking at small chemical structures, etcetera. And like bio’s kind of like the bigger picture, looking at organisms and how they interact.” A Hart student who said that she “never thought” she would “go into chemistry” said that taking a class her first year convinced her to choose the major; “[M]y first year teacher was really, really interesting and I’d never really studied it, and I liked drawing the structures and things like that, so that drew me to the field.”

Thus, many students who were initially interested in science and math, along with a few who were not originally interested in STEM, decided to major because they found that the classes were interesting and the professors were engaging, something that I will return to when I discuss students’ mentors in the next section. However, it was relatively uncommon for someone who was not interested in science or math to then go into one of the traditionally male STEM fields. It seems that this is due in part to the difficulty of both completing and switching to these majors, especially if students discover their interest too late, and in part because students are unwilling to commit to switching from their existing majors. During their first round of interviews, students were asked which subjects they would likely try to avoid during their college careers. The large majority of students said that they would actively try to avoid science and math classes; approximately 70 percent of Andrews and Linden students, and 58 percent of Hart and Madison students said that they would like to avoid math, science, or both. In comparison, only about 9 percent of co-educational college students and 20 percent of women’s college students said that they would avoid subjects in the humanities or social sciences. The remainder of the students said that they would not try to avoid any subjects in college.

These findings are interesting because they demonstrate the continued aversion to STEM fields among many young women. In my random sample, far more students chose humanities or social science majors, and even some of those who indicated that they intended to pursue a science major said that they would try to avoid taking classes in math or a specific subject within science. One pre-med student at Madison who intended on majoring in neuroscience, for example, said that she wanted to avoid taking physics. In line with this student's opinion, certain fields within STEM, such as biology and medicine, have become somewhat feminized; women who choose science are more likely to be concentrated in these fields rather than those that are still widely considered to be more male-dominated, such as physics and chemistry. In fact, within my sample, only 4 percent of students at Andrews and Linden (one student) chose to major in a STEM field aside from biology, while a further 13 percent (four students) majored in biology. At Hart and Madison, 27 percent (7 students) majored in a "hard science" such as engineering or chemistry, and a further 12 percent (3 students) majored in a biology-related field. To some extent, this is likely a result of the fact that Hart is well-known for its "hard science" programs. However, even at Madison, three of the 14 students chose a "hard science" major, which is more than the total of one student who did so at Andrews and Linden.

Based on my limited sample, then, it is difficult to determine whether or not women's colleges are more supportive of women majoring in science and math. My numbers do, however, indicate that there may be a slight difference, and that individuals who choose these colleges in the first place may see them as positive places to study STEM subjects. Moreover, common trend across the four colleges was that individuals who came to college uninterested in STEM were unlikely to switch to these majors later on, despite occasionally developing an interest. This was typically because the majors are too difficult to pick up later on. In all, only three students

chose to add or switch to a STEM major after initially indicating an interest in a humanity or social science major; all of these students were at Madison. In addition, only two women's college students (8 percent), as opposed to four co-educational college students (17 percent) switched away from intended STEM majors. This evidence, while not conclusive, indicates that women's colleges are, perhaps, better at keeping students in STEM, even if they are not necessarily able to encourage students to switch to STEM. As I will discuss in the next section, faculty mentorship seems to be one important mechanism through which students are encouraged to stay in their majors, and this appeared to be slightly more prevalent among my women's college respondents.

## FACULTY MENTORSHIP

In the interviews conducted during students' sophomore year spring, respondents were asked about whether they had developed any close relationships with faculty members, and whether they considered any of these individuals to be an "informal mentor." The majority of the students in my sample said that they had in fact found a faculty member to whom they could go seeking advice about anything from choosing classes to career plans and personal problems. Perhaps reflective of the approximately equal numbers of male and female faculty members at these four colleges, students reported having male and female mentors in somewhat similar numbers, as is represented in Table 4-1. Interestingly, though, the women's college students were slightly more likely to have only male mentors, and much more unlikely to have one of each gender. One explanation for this may be that in the absence of male students, male professors are more likely to take on a role as a female student's primary mentor. As a whole,

however, students were more likely to have at least one female mentor. Overall, women's college students reported having no mentor in larger numbers, which is surprising given the indications in the literature that female students at women's colleges have more access to mentorship opportunities. This, of course, may also be a reflection of the fact that this question was asked during students' sophomore years, perhaps too early for them to have developed a significant connection with a faculty member. Of those students who said that they did not consider anyone to be their "informal mentor," most said that they had nevertheless made some kind of connection with a current or past professor.

Table 5-1. Percentage of Students with Informal Mentors, Sophomore Spring

	Hart and Madison ( <i>n</i> = 25)	Linden and Andrews ( <i>n</i> = 23)	Total ( <i>n</i> = 48)
Female Mentor	36%	48%	42%
Male Mentor	40%	26%	33%
Both	4%	17%	11%
No Mentor	20%	8%	15%

*Notes:* "Both" indicates that the student reported having both a male and female mentor. Students coded as having a male or female mentor only may have two mentors who are both the same gender.

Among the students in my sample, mentors or influential professors often played a key role in solidifying students' decisions about their major. One Madison student, for example, said

that although she was a “humanities person” in high school, taking a biology class in college convinced her to switch to the major. She explained that whereas she was not engaged by her biology classes in high school, she enjoyed her first class at Madison in large part because she liked the professor:

Biology class in high school I really didn't like. Because we just talked about memorization of you know, all these different components of the cell. And I think every single biology class I had we talked about the cell... Having organismal biology [with a female professor] showed me that there was so much more to biology than the cell. We talked about environmental biology. We talked about global warming and how that affects plants. How animals are affected. And it really got me more interested about opening up my mind to looking at science in so many different aspects besides the cell... And it wasn't the class itself as much as the professor... She's amazing and she really got me excited about biology and it ended up being my major.

Later in the interview, this student went on to say that while she came to Madison, “thinking you know, I was an English major who didn't want to be pre-med, hated science, especially hated physics,” she also ended up enjoying her physics class in large part because the professor “really trie[d] to integrate a lot of medical aspects and practical aspects into the class” which made her realize that there is “more to physics than just looking at experiments.” As demonstrated by this student's experience, professors can make the difference between a student choosing or leaving a subject, particularly in STEM majors. Importantly, this student found that while her high school science classes were uninteresting, her professors at Madison made them engaging and relevant in a way that convinced her to switch her major from English to biology.

Other students, particularly those in STEM at the two women's colleges, reported being encouraged by specific professors. In a similar manner to the Madison student quoted above,

another student said that a professor whose class she took early in her career at Hart was instrumental in her decision to stick with a hard science:

My intro professor for [the subject] definitely, she's a great professor. And I just liked the different projects that we did. And also we didn't just do the projects, she sort of tried to give us a world view on them, which is good because that's something that helps people understand a lot, especially about what [the subject] is if you're not clear. And she also made us do a little assignment in the beginning of the course where it was to define [sub-fields within the subject], and that sort of also tied into my wanting to pursue [a specific sub-field].

Importantly, it seems that this particular professor was able to convince her students of the practicality and relevance of her subject through creative assignments. This is key, because as we saw above, one of the reasons that students often choose to leave STEM is because they do not see these fields as being relevant to their own lives. Similarly, another Madison student said that a female psychology professor was influential in her decision to major in neuroscience: "I took Psych 101 with her and I recommend that course to everyone who wants to and who's in the science... It's absolutely amazing. She really focused more on the biological aspect of psychology, which I appreciated." The same student noted that she was also inspired by a physics professor, about whom she said, "I'm blown away with her intelligence."

Somewhat significantly, most of the students who reported being encouraged to stay in STEM fields by professors were, first of all, women's college students, and additionally reported that these professors were female. However, a few Linden and Andrews students had such experiences as well. One Linden student said that she had been discouraged by the fact that she was getting lower grades in her biology courses than in her social science and humanities classes, but talking to a professor helped to ease her concerns:

And she said, you know, no, I mean like the humanities and stuff, it's very [much] your opinion and if you can support it then that's great and it all works out. But science is very straightforward and you have to know, you know, the basics and get it right. So I mean, I was like, okay. So she kind of helped me with that I guess.

This student, who decided to stick with the major, thus found that talking to a professor - again female - helped her to understand the differences between science and other courses and mitigated her fears about getting lower grades in science classes. A Andrews student who ultimately decided to major in biology and minor in chemistry said that two classes and professors sparked her interests in these fields:

I think my ecology class last fall probably influenced me to be really interested in ecology and I didn't really know quite what it was or how interesting it could be I guess before that class... And then also organic chemistry, my teacher asked me if I was going to be majoring in chemistry, like apparently he thought I did well in the class but I was like, I don't know what's going on. So that kind of influenced me, just from talking to him. Like oh, should I actually be more interested in chemistry right now.

Interestingly, this student is the only one in my sample who reported being encouraged to major in science by a male professor. As is evident in her quote, she seems to have doubted her abilities in chemistry, but her doubts were assuaged by her professor, who encouraged her to consider the major and pushed her to rethink her own abilities in the field.

As a whole, students tended to say that they considered certain faculty members to be mentors because they were especially caring, kind, and took a personal interest in their students. One Madison student, for example, spoke about a Chinese professor who she had come to consider an informal mentor in this way: "I mean she's really a sweet woman. She takes a genuine interest in all her students... I feel like she's particularly nice and very helpful. She's a good person... It's really easy to talk to her and she's always willing to help." Similarly, a Linden

student explained that one of her English professors made an effort to connect with her, something that appears to have improved her self-confidence:

I just am amazed at how he just took an active interest in me. And like he just thinks that I have potential and I could do things that I want. And the thing is that, like I know like maybe a lot of people have told you that you can do anything you want to, but I mean for me, like besides my parents, not many people have said that I can do anything that I want, or anything that I can put my mind to. And he's like the first one of the few people who has said that, and like I'm very, you know, happy and like I'm very fond of that.

Importantly, these types of mentors are seen as supportive figures who are there for guidance and encouragement, and do not necessarily serve as role models. Rather, they are individuals who are, as one Linden student put it, “more of a friend and support system really than a mentor.” Another Madison student said that she appreciated her mentor because “he actually takes an interest [in students],” while another Linden student said that she forged a bond with her mentor because, in addition to being helpful with class materials, “she was very caring.” The large majority of students spoke of their faculty mentors in this way.

A handful of students, particularly those at the two women's colleges, also looked to faculty members as role models rather than simply individuals to go to for advice and support. One Madison student, for example, said of a physics professor, “I'm [so] blown away with her intelligence that I think that if I went in to ask her for advice I would really take it to heart.” Another Madison student said that she looked to one of her professors when thinking about her own future, explaining: “I like the lifestyle she's created for herself. I think it's an enviable one in a lot of ways. I like what she does. I like her research a lot. I like her style of teaching. I like her as a person. Definitely.” Similarly, a Hart student said that she looked to one of her professors as a model of how she would like to be able to structure her life in the future, saying

that, “I just really admire how she has such a busy life but at the same time she’s able to take out an equal amount of time for whatever she has to do. And that’s, like I basically want to graduate being able to do that too.”

A few co-educational college students also said that they looked up to professors as role models. The Linden student I quoted in the previous section who reported switching to women’s and gender studies in part because of her negative experiences in history classes noted that she looked up to several of her professors in the women’s and gender studies department:

This was my third time having a class with [a specific professor] and I just think she’s an amazing person, so passionate. She’s been like protester and activist like since she was born pretty much. Like all these amazing stories. And she’s just so supportive of people getting out there... [two other professors] in the women’s and gender studies department are really helpful... I definitely like look up to them as admirable like strong women that know what they want to do and are passionate about the topic they teach.

This student, like the women’s college students quoted above, looks to her professors for support and advice, but also as role models. She characterizes them as “passionate” and “strong women” who she looks up to. Again, this specific student’s experience is interesting because she appears to have found a discipline and sub-culture at Linden that is female-dominated and supportive of women in ways that she found that other areas of campus were not. Perhaps as a result, when she looks to the female professors in her major as role models, she echoes the sentiments of students at Madison and Hart who also see their female professors as role models.

Overall, I found that while the two groups of students spoke about their mentors in largely similar ways, there were some subtle differences. First of all, the women’s college students were more likely to report having influential professors in STEM fields who encouraged them to choose the major. The large majority of these professors and mentor figures were

women. Second, women's college students, with the exception of the women's and gender studies major at Linden, were more likely to view their female professors as role models who they admired rather than simply as supportive individuals. These findings lend support to the argument that female role models are important for female students, particularly in STEM fields, and suggest that even though women's college students do not necessarily report having more mentors, they may be more likely to see these professors, especially those who are women, as role models. In addition, it is interesting that female students at the two women's colleges reported having more exclusively male mentors. Though it is difficult to tell from this relatively small sample whether this is a significant difference, it does suggest that perhaps the women's college environment allows for more mentorship between male professors and female students. Future research on women's colleges would benefit from examining this finding more closely to gain insight into how access to mentorship affects female students at both co-educational and single-sex colleges.

By the time that students were interviewed during the senior year fall, most of them reported having at least one faculty member to whom they could turn for advice. Often, students reported having had ongoing relationships that had grown stronger over time, along with new mentor-mentee relationships that arose for various reasons, including taking new classes, writing senior theses, and conducting independent research with the guidance of an advisor. Some students reported having particularly close relationships with professors who in turn encouraged them to do things like write a senior thesis. This was the case for one Madison student majoring in computer science, who said, "My major advisor has sort of been like shepherding me along the path of thesis." Similarly, the women's and gender studies student at Linden reported that she felt "a little pressure from the department" when it came to writing her thesis; she said that

various professors in the department had taken an interest in her research and her thesis process. These types of relationships were important for most students as sources of self-confidence, guidance, and support throughout their college careers, and based on my analysis of both sophomore and senior year interviews, the majority of students at Madison and Hart as well as Andrews and Linden were able to forge such connections.

This chapter has explored major choice and faculty mentorship among the students in my sample. I found that women's college students were somewhat more likely to stay in or switch to non-traditional STEM fields, and that this was often facilitated by influential female professors whom these students viewed as both mentors and role models. As a whole, however, students were more likely to leave than enter STEM fields. When it came to mentorship, I found that students at women's colleges, contrary to predictions in the literature, were actually more likely than their co-educational counterparts to have only male mentors. I suggest that this may be because in the absence of male students, male faculty members are more likely to choose female mentees. Overall, I did not find that the gender of the mentor made a significant difference for female students in either setting. A final analysis of the senior year data revealed that students across all four colleges had similar educational aspirations. The large majority of students reported either starting or searching for a job upon graduation, with the small minority of students attending graduate schools immediately. Almost all students had some aspirations for graduate school in the future, if not immediately. These results suggest that the differences between women's college and co-educational college alumnae may not manifest itself until later in life.

## Discussion and Conclusion: Are Women's Colleges Still Relevant?

Through the analysis of nearly two hundred individual interviews with fifty undergraduate students at two women's colleges and two co-educational colleges, this thesis has addressed the question of whether women's colleges are still relevant in the United States today. Ultimately, I found that there are still some concrete benefits to attending a women's college, but that there may also be some amount of selection bias at work. Students who ultimately attended the two women's colleges were more concerned with institutional prestige and, in contrast to their peers who chose co-educational colleges, who were more likely to choose their colleges based on how they felt on campus and other "environmental" factors. This suggests that students who enter women's colleges are, to some extent, already pre-socialized to an academically-focused environment which pushes women to succeed. However, through their time in college, they are also indoctrinated into the campus cultures at their institutions in a way that, I suggest, shapes their self-image in positive ways. The women's college students identify with the "typical student" at their colleges, who they characterize as an intelligent, driven, critical, and strong woman. The fact that they see themselves as embodying aspects of this individual points to an important mechanism which may be at work in cultivating female students' development at women's colleges. Students who are already predisposed to an academically driven environment come to embrace and identify with this culture, and likely carry this with them into their post-graduate lives.

A second set of findings, discussed in Chapter Four, suggests that many of the benefits that students receive at women's colleges may actually happen in the first year. Especially minority students at women's colleges reported feeling more comfortable on campus during their first semester than their counterparts at co-educational colleges. Women's college students also

reported feeling less pressure to engage in particular forms of socialization such as binge drinking and other drug consumption. Rather, they were able to find alternative social outlets and focus on academics, something that they carried with them throughout their college careers. In later years, I found that students were concerned that their colleges created environments in which students felt extreme pressure to excel and overachieve; this was less prevalent at Hart than at Madison, suggesting that perhaps it is an issue isolated to the latter college. However, overall, it seems that women's college students are more academically engaged, and, as demonstrated by their higher rates of participation in leadership positions, more engaged in extracurriculars as well. This may reflect campus cultures which, in the absence of gender bias, support women's involvement and deep engagement in a wide range of pursuits.

Finally, as discussed in Chapter Five, I found that women's college students were somewhat, though not significantly, more likely to persist or switch to STEM majors than their peers at the co-educational colleges, and more likely to start off in these fields in the first place. Female mentors in the sciences appear to have some effect on student persistence, but overall students reported having mentors of both genders in similar numbers. I suggest that the reason that female students at the women's colleges were more likely to have only male mentors is because of the absence of male students, who are not present to absorb the attention of professors. In addition, I found some evidence that women at the two co-educational colleges experienced a "chilly classroom" environment, which in turn encouraged them to enter traditionally female-dominated fields rather than gender-neutral or male-dominated ones. My research also supports, to some extent, the existence of stereotype threat at co-educational colleges, which causes female students to make certain decisions that are more in line with society's expectations of their gender. I contend that one of the primary reasons that students at

women's colleges experience benefits is because of the diminished relevance of stereotype threat in the absence of men, along with an environment that, as Tidball and her colleagues so aptly put it "takes women seriously." At women's colleges, female students are encouraged to be ambitious, intellectual, and driven, without fear of social retribution from male peers. I suggest that the specific campus cultures at Hart and Madison, while different, support the general goal of producing strong, self-assured female graduates.

In a world where women's colleges are on the decline, what is the relevance of research such as this study? I would like to follow Tidball and her colleagues (1999) in suggesting that we not only support women's colleges, but also use them as models by which to improve co-educational institutions. Among the simplest and most effective of these changes would be to create and continue to support existing women's spaces on college campuses. The benefit of such spaces is demonstrated by the experience of the Linden student who, after switching to the women's and gender studies, found an abundance of support from peers and female faculty members both in the classroom and in other aspects of her on-campus life, including prolonged involvement with the women's center on campus. Such spaces allow women to come together to support and encourage one another to challenge gender stereotypes and cultural norms in important ways, and provide women with a space in which to develop their social and intellectual capacities in the absence of men.

A second way that colleges could support all of their students in a more positive way is to open up dialogues about a wide range of "diversity issues;" the majority of the students in my sample, but especially those at the co-educational colleges, expressed a desire to expand the definition of what diversity means on their campuses. Moreover, my results indicate that support and inclusion of minority students, particularly during their first semester and year, is crucial in

making them feel welcome on campus. This can be achieved, to some extent, by orientation events such as the one described by a Madison student in Chapter Four, and a general awareness of the specific challenges that these students face along with policies and practices that are enforced accordingly.

In addition, all colleges would be wise to examine their campus cultures and look for ways to encourage alternative forms of socialization, especially during the first year, in order to create an environment in which students feel encouraged to be academically engaged as well as involved in on-campus activities. Finally, my results support findings that there is still a lack of support for women in STEM fields; however, women's colleges do somewhat better at this by providing more female faculty members who serve as mentors and role models, and eliminating the effects of the "chilly classroom" for women in the sciences. As others (Miller-Bernal 2000) have suggested, making professors aware of unconscious bias may work to counteract some of the negative messaging that women receive in the sciences. If co-educational colleges were to take some of the findings that have come from the research on women's colleges to heart, the benefits that female students receive by attending single-sex institutions may transcend these unique spaces and improve the college experiences of male and female students alike.

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