

Thu Mar 24 13:59:35 2005 Pacific Time

Are Women's Colleges Still Relevant in Today's Society? -- by Maureen A. Hartford

RALEIGH, N.C., March 24 (AScribe Newswire) -- Following is an editorial by Maureen A. Hartford, president of Meredith College. Located in Raleigh, N.C., Meredith is one of the largest women's colleges in the U.S.

Are Women's Colleges Still Relevant in Today's Society?

Women outnumber men on college and university campuses in the U.S. In fact, a new report by the National Center for Education Statistics says women now earn 57 percent of bachelor's degrees, and demographic projections estimate that this trend will continue for the next several decades.

This shift has created a gender ratio on college campuses that is dramatically different than the one that existed when many of the nation's women's colleges first opened their doors. At first glance, the current scenario may seem to beg the question: If females outnumber males on most college campuses, do women's colleges still have a place in today's society? After all, since state university systems and selective private colleges began recruiting female students in the 1960s and '70s, the number of women's colleges in the United States has dwindled from over 300 to fewer than 70.

As the gender landscape in higher education has changed, women's colleges have expanded on their original mission of providing access to one of providing an educational experience geared specifically toward women's unique learning styles. While most coeducational colleges and universities began (and continued) as institutions designed by men for men, women's colleges were developed to expand options for women through education, leadership opportunities, and exposure to strong role models. In coeducational universities, women are rarely at the center of the educational experience -- in women's colleges they are the reason for our being.

As evidenced by countless studies and surveys, today's women's colleges continue to be innovative higher education institutions that offer women a fundamentally different educational experience than those of women earning degrees at co-educational schools. Research shows that women's college graduates are more likely to:

- Earn baccalaureate degrees in physical and life sciences. Studies have shown that students enrolled in women's colleges are 1.5 times more likely to earn degrees in these scientific fields than women in coed institutions (Sebrechts, 1992).

- Earn doctorates at a higher rate and in a wider array of disciplines. Women's college

graduates are more than twice as likely as graduates of coeducational colleges to receive doctorate degrees. Their doctorates are more likely to be in science, art, humanities, and social sciences while women who graduate from coeducational schools are more likely to earn their degrees in traditional female fields, such as education (Wolf-Wendell, 1998).

- Be high achievers after they graduate. Women's college alumnae are disproportionately represented among women achievers. For example, women's college graduates are more frequently recognized in Who's Who in America or as Fortune's rising business stars than women alumnae of coeducational institutions (Tidball, 1986, Women's College Coalition, 2000).

In a 2004 study of women students at women's colleges and coeducational institutions, Paul Umbach and his team at Indiana University found that women's colleges "appear to have created a climate where women are encouraged to realize their potential and become involved in various facets of campus life, inside and outside the classroom." This study found that women's colleges increase women's participation in their education, provide more leadership opportunities, are transfer-student friendly -- and encourage and provide opportunities for students to interact with people of different economic, racial and social backgrounds.

Women's colleges have become a national model for the effective education of women. Universities as diverse as Duke, the University of Richmond and the University of Michigan are using the teaching and mentoring strategies developed by women's colleges to create more welcoming environments for their female students. They have recognized the persistent chilly environment for women that may exist on their campuses.

As Women's History Month comes to a close, the fact that women are attending colleges and universities and earning bachelor's degrees at higher rates than ever before is certainly an accomplishment worth celebrating. However, even as this trend continues, there is no question that women's colleges will continue to have an important place in American higher education. If this country is interested in educating women to be confident leaders in a vast array of fields -- women who understand and value our diverse population -- a women's college education is as relevant today as ever.

- - - -

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hartford is the first woman president of Meredith College, a private women's college in Raleigh, N.C. She assumed the Meredith presidency in 1999 after serving for seven years as vice president for student affairs at the University of Michigan. While at Michigan, Hartford was also a faculty member of the Center for the Study of Higher and Post-Secondary Education. She has also held senior positions at Washington State University, Case Western Reserve and the University of Arkansas. Hartford grew up in Charlotte, N.C., and holds her bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her doctorate is from the University of Arkansas. Her dissertation was "A Profile of Women Chief Executive Officers," and women's leadership has been a focus for much of her career. She serves as the chair of the board of LeaderShape, Inc., and a member of the board of the Marine Corps University.

NOTE TO EDITORS: The above editorial is available for free and immediate use. If used, please contact Kristi Eaves-McLennan, Meredith College Marketing & Communications, 919-

760-8404, EavesK@meredith.edu, as a courtesy to the contributor. Maureen Hartford can be reached at 919-760-8455, hartfordm@meredith.edu.

Media Contact: Kristi Eaves-McLennan, 919-760-8404, EavesK@meredith.edu Maureen Hartford, 919-760-8455, hartfordm@meredith.edu



AScribe

See the LIVE
newswire

**AScribe
NOW!**

Immediate & Affordable
News Distribution



AdvanceEdition
A Valuable Media Daybook

Look Ahead at the News

AScribe Newswire distributes news from nonprofit and public sector organizations. We provide direct, immediate access to mainstream national media for 600 colleges, universities, medical centers, public-policy groups and other leading nonprofit organizations.

AScribe transmits news releases directly to newsroom computer systems and desktops of major media organizations via a supremely trusted channel - The Associated Press. We also feed news to major news retrieval database services, online publications and to developers of web sites and Intranets.

And AScribe does it at a cost all organizations, large and small, can afford, a fraction of what corporate newswires charge. [Click here to see how we do it](#)

AScribe Newswire / www.ascribe.org / 510-653-9400