

COMMUNITY VOICES

Reinventing Single-Sex Education: The Baldwin Scholars of Duke University

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Women's colleges are a tough sell to the contemporary American high-school student. Most have attended coeducational schools since they were three years old; to them, women's colleges seem as much a relic of their grandmothers' era as girdles and war bonds. Eager for the social freedoms that come with leaving home, young women choose coeducational residence halls - some with mixed-gender bathrooms - and shrug off their parents' suggestion that they consider living in an all-female hall (if one is even available). If asked why they are not considering one of the exclusive American women's colleges (such as Smith, Mt. Holyoke, Wellesley or Barnard), given their academic excellence and impressive roster of graduates, elite students will reply that they'll have to work alongside and compete with men in the "real world," so they may as well practise during their four years of college. Thanks to the legacy of the women's movement, they have been raised to believe they can do anything. Why would they want to isolate themselves in an all-female environment?

The women on my campus - Duke University, a highly selective private research university in Durham, North Carolina - all had multiple college options. Among the smartest and best qualified students in the United States, they beat long odds to get admitted to Duke, with 20,000 applicants for the 1650 slots in each class. Very few applied to women's colleges, and those that did chose to attend coeducational Duke instead. Why, then, did Duke launch the all-female Alice M. Baldwin Scholars program in 2004? And why, in the fall of 2007, did 117 first-year women apply for the 18 spots in the program? The history and success of the Baldwin Scholars

provide insight into the continuing place for single-sex education even within coeducational institutions. In this paper I will describe the reasons for the program's founding, the opportunities it offers and the early data on its success. The program's first class graduated in May 2008.

Founding of the Baldwin Scholars

Duke is a mid-size university in the southern United States, with an enrolment of 6,500 undergraduates and about the same number of graduate and professional students. The undergraduate population has been evenly divided between men and women for many years. Duke became fully coeducational in 1972, but from 1930 -1972 it had separate coordinate colleges for men and women on campuses 1.5 miles apart. The Woman's College, as it was called, had its own library, residence halls, dining hall, gym facilities, student government, and administration. The men's college - called Trinity - did too. Many classes were co-ed, but not all. Women lived under a strict set of social rules that included curfews, housemothers, dress codes, and a system of signing in and out so that their whereabouts were known. Men had much more freedom; indeed, the rules of the Woman's College were largely designed to regulate the access Trinity men had to their female classmates. When the Woman's College was merged into Trinity in 1972, its separate systems and rules vanished, and the campus that was once all women itself became coeducational. In the mid 1990s it became Duke's first-year campus.

In 2002, Duke's then-President, Nannerl O. Keohane, decided to launch a study of the status of women on Duke's campus. She called it the Women's Initiative and appointed a Steering Committee of faculty and administrators to gather quantitative and qualitative data on undergraduates, graduate/professional students, faculty, employees, alumnae, and trustees. I served on the Steering Committee and in that capacity I led the undergraduate research, and worked with two colleagues,

Allison Haltom and Ellen Medearis, on the alumnae research. Allison, Ellen and I traveled to Atlanta, Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and Washington DC; in each city we held focus groups with a stratified random sample of alumnae who graduated Duke between 1954 and 2000. That meant we had Woman's College alumnae sitting at the same table with more recent graduates, and conversation quickly made clear that they had attended substantially different institutions.

I had heard about the complex rules and regulations governing the Woman's College before. Given those restrictions, and the historical fact that most of its graduates had limited career opportunities once they left Duke because of gender discrimination, I expected some bitterness and cynicism from Woman's College alumnae in focus groups. Instead, those alumnae spoke glowingly of their college experience. They praised the leadership opportunities afforded by a separate student government system, and the mentoring provided by the female deans, librarians, and housemothers. They raved about the residential system, which assigned women to residence halls in their first year and then kept them there until graduation so that they built close-knit communities with older students helping younger ones adjust. And though they discussed the sexism they faced in the workplace, most said the Woman's College had imbued them with such high self-confidence that they were able to cope with it.

The praise they lavished on their undergraduate experience in the Woman's College stood in sharp contrast to the experiences of the more recent graduates of coeducational Duke University. Though most also spoke fondly of their college careers and their alma mater, they did not see those four years as a font of self-confidence and mentoring. They had taken amazing classes, studied abroad, done exemplary community service, played in and attended sporting events, and made wonderful friends. But a surprising number reported that their self-confidence had actually declined in college from its peak upon their initial

matriculation. They complained about a lack of female role models due to their low representation among the faculty and administration. And they spoke compellingly of social pressures on women to be thin and pretty as well as academically successful, and the unhealthy competition it sometimes fostered. More than once in an alumnae focus group, after a Woman's College graduate had spoken fondly of her college experience, a younger graduate said "I wish I had attended your Duke."

Data from the recent graduates correlated with the findings from current Duke undergraduates. The undergraduate research consisted of more than twenty focus groups held with a diverse cross-section of more than 200 students. Unlike the alumnae research, the undergraduate research included male students. Some focus groups were single-sex (all male or all female) and some were mixed. Specially trained students helped me to facilitate the groups; those who participated were asked to respond to questions about both academic and social life. Their responses focused far more on the latter than the former, and groups frequently ran past the allotted 90 minutes. All focus groups were recorded on digital video and the recordings were analyzed to identify common themes.

Many students spoke of the social pressures also reported by young alumnae. One sophomore said this:

I feel like there's an emphasis on this campus placed on, like, you're expected to look and act like you don't have any problems, like your life is perfect and like, if you're failing class...you don't really talk about, you don't focus on that. Everybody really expects you to just, like...I feel the look is supposed to be like - I didn't try to look this good - you know, like, effortless perfection is what I think is...the epitome of what Duke students are supposed to be.

The phrase this student coined - "effortless perfection" - perfectly summed up

a complex set of responses. Women students told facilitators that they felt pressure to succeed both in the classroom - with good grades, ambitious career plans, exciting summer internships - and in their social environment. The latter required a more traditionally feminine set of attributes; students sought to be thin, pretty, and well-dressed. All this perfection was supposed to appear effortless ("I didn't try to look this good"), but in fact it exacted a serious toll. Not surprisingly, we heard a lot from women students about disordered eating, distorted body image, compulsive exercise, and declining self-confidence. Women tended to look at their female peers and take their "effortless perfection" at face value, which made them feel bad about their own struggles inside the classroom and out.

"Effortless perfection" was exacerbated by the campus social scene, which relied heavily on "hook-ups" rather than on more traditional dating patterns. Students defined hook-ups as unplanned sexual activity, typically fueled by alcohol, that ran the gamut from kissing to sexual intercourse and everything in between. Most hook-ups did not result in lasting relationships; in fact, students reported a sense of shame and embarrassment following a hook-up that precluded further contact with that person. Neither men nor women spoke enthusiastically about the hook-up culture, but it clearly worked better for men than for women. Women reported that they sometimes made social decisions that conflicted with their personal values in order to be attractive to men: they acted less intelligent, dressed or danced more provocatively than they would typically, and took risks in their sexual decision-making.

Both effortless perfection and the hook-up culture undermined relationships between women. Though many undergraduate women spoke at length about their devotion to their female friends, they also talked about competition - to be the best student, to be the thinnest and prettiest, or to be on the arm of the highest-status man. Such competition left no one feeling

successful, with women constantly comparing themselves to others and feeling that they fell short. They also longed for the kind of mentoring and solidarity that was taken for granted by their foremothers in the Woman's College; they wanted older women, both students and faculty/staff, to guide and support them.

As the research data came in throughout the Women's Initiative, it was clear to President Keohane and the entire Steering Committee that we needed to think of creative ways to intervene on the undergraduate level. President Keohane is a Wellesley graduate, and had been that institution's president prior to her presidency at Duke; she knew the power of all-female educational environments from her personal experience. I knew of a program - Women Involved in Living and Learning (WILL) - at the University of Richmond in Virginia that incorporated an all-female experience into the larger co-educational institution. WILL, founded in 1980, had held several replication workshops for other campuses interested in their model, and I had attended one such workshop in 1999. I proposed to President Keohane that we consider adapting the WILL model to Duke, and she enthusiastically agreed and formed a working group to plan the details. That group began meeting in the spring of 2003 and submitted a proposal for the Baldwin Scholars to the president that fall. She agreed to fund a pilot starting in January of 2004, and the program took its first class of 18 students, all of them freshmen, in October of 2004. That first cohort graduated in May 2008, and they have been followed by four more cohorts since their selection.

Program Description

The Alice M. Baldwin Scholars - named for the founding dean of the Woman's College at Duke - combines academic, residential, co-curricular, and social activities. We call it a leadership program, though we eschew a narrow corporate definition of leadership. Instead, students in the program are encouraged to assess their own strengths and weaknesses, learn to take risks, seek out

mentors and act as mentors to others, and to make change in whatever arenas matter most to them. Among our first graduating class, we have several going into business careers, but also three headed for Teach for America (teaching in some of the country's most underprivileged schools), one going to culinary school, one to a graduate program in African Studies, and several who have applied for international fellowships. They are scientists, engineers, artists, athletes, performers, and scholars. Fully half the group are women of color (in the larger Duke population, students of color constitute slightly more than 40%).

The program spans all four years of their undergraduate career. Students apply in October of their first year through a competitive selection process. Applications have risen steadily from 78 in the first year to 117 in the fall of 2007. With only 18 spots per year, selection becomes very challenging. Students submit a written application that includes three essays. Their academic transcripts are not considered, since they have only been at Duke a few weeks by that point. About 75 women are offered first interviews, conducted by the Associate Director of the program (Colleen Scott) and a current Baldwin Scholar. About half of those women are offered a second interview with the program's co-directors (myself and Emily Klein, Senior Associate Dean of the Nicholas School of the Environment at Duke). Emily, Colleen and I make the final selection of 18 from that pool. We generally look for women with good self-knowledge (of their weaknesses as well as their strengths) and a sense of themselves as agents of change, and for a good mix of majors and backgrounds. We want the students to benefit from the program as individuals, but we also want them to be good citizens of their cohort and the larger program.

We settled on 18 as the size of a cohort because that is the maximum size of a seminar at Duke, and their first Baldwin Scholar experience is an academic seminar. In the spring of their first year, all 18 enroll in a class called "Perceptions of the Self,

Society, and the Natural World." This deliberately vague title represents the three major disciplines in the university: humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Each year we recruit three female faculty to team-teach the course, one from each discipline. The faculty teach one month apiece; the only guideline we give them is that they teach something from their home discipline at a level appropriate for first-year women from a variety of majors. We do not try to link the units together. Instead, we seek to accomplish two goals with the seminar: to force the Baldwin Scholars to stretch academically and try new fields, even those they are less confident in; and to forge connections between them and women faculty in various fields. The seminar has changed every year, with faculty from Biological Anthropology and Anatomy, Dance, Earth and Ocean Sciences, the Medical School, Psychology, Sociology, and Women's Studies.

In the sophomore year, Baldwin Scholars live together in their own section of an otherwise coeducational residence hall. They may bring in roommates - other Duke women who are not in the program. We require all sophomores to live in the section; they may stay past sophomore year if they wish, but they do not have to. A surprisingly large number choose to stay another year or two. We decided to add the residential component based on the data from Woman's College graduates, who were so enthusiastic about their residential experience and considered it foundational to their success in college. Our campus does not have any other all-female residence halls (the rest are co-ed by wing or by floor), so the residential component gets the least enthusiasm initially. However, once in the section the Baldwin Scholars love living there. They talk about the conversations they have late at night, in the common room or in the bathroom. They study together, they plan activities together, and most importantly of all, they rely on one another for moral support and friendship rather than seeing one another as competitors.

In the junior year about half of Duke students study abroad one or both semesters, and the Baldwin Scholars are no exception. The only requirement of the junior year is an internship, usually the summer before or after. The program funds the internship at \$3,000 per student. Students must find their own placement, and they vary as widely as the Scholars' interests. Where possible, we seek to place them with women supervisors. As our own alumnae network grows, we expect to rely increasingly on our graduates for placements. In the past three years Scholars have completed internships on Wall Street, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with Humanity in Action, and with engineering firms. They have conducted research in labs, shadowed physicians and worked for non-profits and for governmental agencies. One student worked for a sports talent agency, and another interned with the National Football League this past summer. We ask both the students and their supervisors to fill out evaluations afterwards, both to give the students feedback and to build our database of opportunities for future students.

In the senior year, each cohort takes a senior seminar in the fall semester. This class, entitled "Women in the Professions," is taught by Dr. Jean O'Barr, founding director of Women's Studies at Duke. As with the first-year class, only the 18 Baldwin Scholars in the cohort may enroll in it. Students do research projects on the history of and issues facing women in the professions they intend to pursue. These four requirements - two seminars, the residential year, and the internship - make up the core of the program, but they are supplemented by frequent social and co-curricular opportunities. We sponsor speakers, invite back interesting alumnae to meet the students, have dinners, do community service projects, send students to conferences, and take field trips. We have also created a peer mentoring program that assigns each new first-year Baldwin to a sophomore Baldwin (who was previously assigned a junior, who was previously assigned a senior). Creating these "families"

of four gives each student a designated mentor and encourages cross-class relationships. It does not preclude students from seeking out mentors outside their "family," and in fact they frequently do. With only 72 women in the program, and with social connectors like Facebook, nearly all of them know one another.

Program Assessment

As our first cohort graduates, we are assessing the difference we have made in their lives. We have lots of qualitative data; this statement from 2008 graduate Kelley Akhiemokhali represents common sentiments:

I always say that there will be two pictures sitting next to my Duke diploma. One will be a picture of the 2008 Baldwin Class from our freshmen year and the other will be a picture of the 2008 class from [the Baldwin senior dance]. I credit the Baldwin Scholars Program, along with my family, for my ability to succeed here at Duke. When I sit in Wallace Wade [stadium] and applaud the various people who will be receiving a Duke degree, I will also be applauding the program that supported me throughout my various endeavors. The Baldwin Scholars' Office was my peaceful spot--the place I could go to sleep, study, and find a sympathetic ear. The Baldwin Program quickly became a place where I could feel rejuvenated before going out to tackle the world again. It was a place where I found courage and hope. When a Baldwin is out revolutionizing the world in the (near) future, I will point people back to that office in East Duke Building. I say blame that space - that is where the revolution began.

Kelley identifies the Baldwin Scholars program as both shelter and instigator, a place of safety and of "revolution." Indeed,

these are the two strands of our work: we want to build the self-esteem and leadership abilities of our Scholars, and then we want them to use these tools to improve their communities.

Assessing the former is much easier than assessing the latter. We have designed an instrument to measure self-confidence and leadership abilities, and we administer that instrument to each entering class of Baldwin Scholars alongside two control groups: women who applied but did not get in to the program, and women who expressed interest but did not apply. We then repeat that assessment with all three groups in their senior year, and once again five years after graduation. Though we are just now getting senior data from the first cohort, we hypothesize that the Baldwin Scholars program will create measurable gains in self-confidence and leadership abilities in its students, gains that will outstrip those in the control group. We also track our Scholars for GPA and for extracurricular activities so that we may compare them to peers. Are they more academically successful? Do they assume more leadership posts? This data gives us more immediate feedback and allows us to make adjustments to the program year by year. The fact that our applicant pool continues to grow also tells us the program meets a need on campus.

Determining the program's effect on the larger campus culture at Duke is much trickier. In the fall of 2008 the Baldwin Scholars will undergo a formal program review, conducted by the President's office. The review committee will consider internal data, but will also likely interview others on campus - faculty, administrators, students - to gather their impressions on the program's impact. They will also ask what the program has accomplished. We can point to lectures held, students sent to conferences, events we have co-sponsored. We can also point to large-scale campus projects our students have taken on. One notable example was the "Images Project" in the spring of 2006. Claire Lauterbach, a 2008 Baldwin Scholar, decided to collect flyers advertising campus parties

thrown by student groups after noticing that many had misogynistic themes (two examples are "Secretaries and Executives" and "Pimps and Whores"). She put the flyers in a collage and then displayed them in the student union, alongside a blank pad of paper. Passersby wrote comments about the posters, some noticing and decrying the misogyny for the first time, others asking why women went to such parties, and still others seeing nothing wrong with them. The collage sparked a dialogue with concrete outcomes; parties with offensive themes have now been banned by some of the sponsoring groups, and such themes are now rarely seen on campus.

We will need to collect longitudinal data over many years to truly understand the impact of the Baldwin Scholars. Early markers indicate that we are meeting our program goals, but we will be interested to learn whether our graduates look more like graduates of women's colleges than like their peers who also graduated from coeducational Duke University. Research - most specifically that of Elizabeth Tidball - has indicated that graduates of women's colleges report greater professional success and personal satisfaction than female graduates of coeducational institutions. Can a single-sex experience embedded within coeducation produce significant differences in educational and personal outcomes? That's the question we will seek to answer with the Baldwin Scholars of Duke University.