



## PERSPECTIVE

## Intro to Empowerment

BY ATTENDING A WOMEN'S COLLEGE, I'VE GOTTEN SOMETHING MORE VALUABLE THAN AN EDUCATION: A REEDUCATION. **BY ELIZA BORNE**

**W**hen strangers ask me where I go to school, I often get the same response after I tell them I attend Wellesley College: *That's the girls' school, isn't it?* Or alternately: *Is that the school from Mona Lisa Smile?* I often find myself defending my choice to be educated with only women, or satisfying the curiosity of my inquisitive female peers at coed schools. Some of them ask me in a mocking tone if I *really* like that there aren't men on my campus. Some ask in an envious tone. I always give the same answer: I like that every student leadership position, every slot in a seminar, and every pronoun might apply to me.

It's not hard to see why someone, particularly a teenage girl in the throes of her college applications this fall, might scoff at a women's college. Her parents might worry a women's college will leave her ill-equipped to work with men in the future. She might think these schools are an anachronism, and note that the only time she hears about women's colleges is when yet another one decides to go coed, like Rosemont College outside Philadelphia, which in June announced it would admit men next year. She might look at our first female Republican candidate for vice president – or the Democratic candidate who almost made it – and think the glass ceiling we always hear about is finally giving way, and the work of women's colleges is through.

To these arguments, I say: “Do the math.” Sixteen out of 100 US senators, eight out of 50 state governors, and one Supreme Court justice are women. I flare my nostrils and utter my least favorite phrase: Wage gap. I ask how many little girls are encouraged to be mechanical engineers when they grow up, or how many people can spontaneously name more than five female artists represented in a major muse-

**Some may think that the work of women's colleges is through. To that I say: “Do the math.”**

um's collection. I cite other statistics, noting that alumnae from women's colleges report greater gains in self-confidence and leadership than their sisters from coed schools. Or that women's colleges are historically more socio-economically and ethnically diverse than their coed counterparts, because, with only half the population to draw from, they have always had to cast a wider net.

And then I take a breath – and digress. Confession: I know a lot of smart, spunky women who go to coed schools, all on the path to success. Do I think these women would be better off at a college without men? Not necessarily. What I *will* say is that a women's college has instilled poise and a hunger for achievement in *me*, and in my friends here, and that these qualities are direct results of our single-sex education.

When I talked to my roommate about what is special about a women's college, she responded with a question: “What do you think of when you hear the word ‘scientist?’” Without pausing, I imagined a composite image of my friends who are bio or neuroscience majors, all women. My roommate's suspicion was confirmed: “You've been re-socialized,” she said. “In your mind, the most natural choice for any profession or role is a woman.”

She's right. And when you've got big dreams and there are people like Larry Summers who suggest a woman isn't as innately capable as a man to do well in science, or a female political candidate is judged for her policy *and* her pearls, it's a good feeling to know you've got an entire campus of professors, administrators, and peers who take you completely seriously. It's encouraging, in a country still run overwhelmingly by men, to look around and see women doing fascinating things – like my friend who helped organize a conference at an interfaith organization in Harlem, or the one who taught Somali refugees at English High School in Jamaica Plain.

At women's colleges, we are encouraged to be successful, and to go for it, whatever “it” may be. When we're at school, *we* get to run the show, and we gain the confidence to be leaders when we leave. That's how I know that my college and other women's colleges remain relevant and valuable – and that they're more than niche schools in the pantheon of higher education. They have taught generations of students to never, *ever*, question whether a woman, properly qualified, can realize her dreams. That's one cliché that can't be taught enough.

*Eliza Borne, a senior at Wellesley College majoring in English and Spanish, is the features editor of The Wellesley News. Send comments to [magazine@globe.com](mailto:magazine@globe.com).*