

The Problem That Isn't Ours

Newcomb College Institute: Senior Symposium

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I am beyond honored to be speaking to you all this afternoon. For those of you who don't know me, I had the privilege of teaching two cohorts of Newcomb Scholars (the current sophomores and juniors), and being in the classroom with them was one of the most challenging, invigorating, and rewarding periods of my life.

Just last year, I was sitting in this room listening to Scott Cowen offer his words of wisdom to the Scholars. After a day of fascinating papers given on a range of topics—like today—it was a privilege to have the president of the university sit down and talk to us informally about the history of this school and his thoughts on leadership. He's a big fan of the Scholars program, and he's seen firsthand how women have been rising to new levels of success as undergraduates. When someone in the audience asked him what he thought about some aspect of gender inequality in the workforce—maybe it was the wage gap, or the low numbers of women CEOs—he said that after witnessing the rise of women in colleges and universities, he wasn't worried. As you know, women students now outnumber—and outperform—men at the undergraduate level. So as a university president, what Scott Cowen had witnessed was a burgeoning of brilliant women. And if we think of success as a trickle-up phenomenon, it makes sense that these women would go on to equally brilliant careers. Give them a few years, he said, and the landscape of the American workforce will look drastically different.

The fact is: more women than men have earned bachelor's degrees since 1982. More women than men have earned master's degrees since 1987. And more women than men have earned doctorates since 2006. When people hear about this particular gender gap, they tend to react either positively ("Women are finally equal! Soon they'll be taking over the world!") or negatively—in one article I found that cited this data from the Department of Education, the writer asked, "With those enormous gender imbalances in higher education favoring women, do we really need hundreds of women's centers on college campuses all over the country?" So these are the opposing poles: women are fine, or women are out of control and need to be reined in. Women are equal, or women have become the oppressors. No one seems willing to put college women in the context of their broader lives, which, before and after they graduate, still present layers of obstacles to reaching any kind of parity.

College is an environment where women tend to do well. Why? Because the systems are generally set up by people who tend to believe in progressive societies; because no one in authority is explicitly saying, "I don't think, as a woman, you can do this." That refrain is, however, still prevalent in family settings, in grammar schools, in social groups, in romantic relationships, in office environments, in our own heads. So to say, "Look at how well women are doing in college;

give them five years and they'll take over the world" is not only naïve, it's dangerous in its complacency.

I'd like to spend a few minutes talking about the past and the present in an attempt to identify and reframe the problem that women seem to be facing, even as this sacred college environment is telling you there is no problem. Correcting disparities in women's economic, political, and social status demands concrete solutions, and I want to say upfront that I'm not here to provide any—that's what *your* job is, you Scholars who are carrying the torch for us all. But I do believe education offers us a reprieve, that it can build our confidence while forcing us to ask the questions that we'll spend the rest of our lives attempting to answer.

On the second day of class, the young women share what they're hoping to learn, and one says she wants to know why it was so hard for women to gain access to higher education. She knows all about the struggle of African American students to get into college—those inequalities are still apparent—but what's the big deal about women? She sees them all over campus, in every department. They don't seem to need much activism.

The students in my class are Newcomb Scholars, bright and fiery women who, as first-years, don't yet understand why women's education, even in America, still presents a problem. For most of them, college was a given. They're as smart as they come. Their obstacles may have been financial, or cultural, but their gender was never a barrier. So I tell them a little bit about the past.

In the late eighteenth century, a woman's right to learn was at the center of public debates. What good would geometry do a housewife? Wouldn't a novel stand between a woman and her domestic duties? On the other hand, men argued—for men were the ones doing the arguing—what if learning could be absorbed by women in order to be passed on to their sons? Let our wives be sponges, they said, let them expel their education to the next generation, to men. By 1800, some girls went to neighborhood schools and those who could afford it were sent to young ladies' academies, but most—white, black, and Indian—got their education at home, piecemeal, from their mothers. Turns out women had been educating their children for generations, regardless of their husbands' thoughts on the matter. So in the young United States, when the conversation first turned to women's role as educators, mothers were fully prepared to seize any opportunities afforded them. They didn't just want to teach their sons; they wanted to expand their own intellectual horizons.

Though their societies, particularly those that were white and elite, told girls that any learning beyond what we might call subsistence education was useless, even unsafe, girls often got a different message from the women in their lives. One mother in 1806 told her daughter that she saw "the necessity more strongly every day of girls being instructed." Women's education was not a problem for women; it was a problem for men, for institutions, and for the structure of the nation, which relied on a separation of intelligent action and domesticity, of the mind and the body. Historically, women's education has always been a dangerous proposition.

And somehow, that sense of transgression hasn't entirely disappeared. In class, we talk about the confidence gap: how women tend to outperform men in college but undercut this with apologies and self-doubt, so that their successes in higher education often fail to translate to the workplace. One corollary is the impostor syndrome, the feeling that one's achievements are flukes, which women suffer from disproportionately. I tell them this is merely psychological, it's a cultural standard that's been constructed over centuries. I show them how people who think they deserve success are the ones who go after it, who take the risks that can sometimes work out. This does not have to be gendered, but it is. The women in my class nod.

Here's the secret: as I was giving these speeches to my students, my first novel was set to be published a few months later, and I was convinced that it was a result of nothing but luck. That soon someone would realize I didn't belong. I had fantasies of snatching the book back from the publisher, telling them it was all a mistake, that there's no way the product of my imagination was worth being printed and bound. Should I have told my students this?

I had recently graduated from an MFA program where my male colleagues submitted their work—not all of it worthy—to every literary journal under the sun. My female colleagues, for the most part, didn't submit at all. "I want to keep working on this piece," they'd say. "Why send it out if it's only going to be rejected?" On the one hand, I applauded their perfectionism; on the other hand, I recognized that in an unfairly gendered world, perfectionism was working against them. There's an organization called VIDA that, every year, counts the bylines of women and men published in literary journals and reviewed in newspapers like the *New York Times*. The numbers are predictably and depressingly imbalanced, despite the fact that more women than men enroll in MFA programs, eighty percent of fiction readers are women, and of the twenty New York editors my own book was submitted to, all twenty of them were women. So what is happening between women writing and men being published? The main slippage that I can identify is women not taking themselves seriously: women who read books mostly by men because those are the ones that have been deemed "good"; women who submit to magazines and agents at half the rate of men because they don't believe they're worthy. And I, who know all of these statistics, still can't avoid feeling inadequate.

Fortunately, not all women have my lack of self-assurance, and many women fought for their own intellectual satisfaction long before they were allowed in the halls of academe. How about another dip into the past: Maria DeRieux moved with her husband from Paris to Virginia in the 1780s, had a miscarriage, ran into debt, moved often, had ten or twelve children, became almost penniless, struggled to feed her family, and—in the span of sixteen years—read 1,072 books. That's a little more than a book a week. She read popular fiction, history, biography, philosophy, children's books. She was a ferocious autodidact. Her situation was remarked upon by several friends (all of them men, including Thomas Jefferson), who said she was "corpulent," that she couldn't "move about to help" her husband in the fields, that she begged for "crumbs from my property," that her children were "generally in rags." No one said she was smart, or a reader. The only reason we know about her literary hunger is because Maria herself kept a list of the books she read. Who was that list written for? Not Jefferson, clearly. Maybe it was written for me, so that I could share her with my students, so they could see that the only reason women become educated is that they fight for education.

A few weeks ago, I gave a talk at Washington & Lee University about all the paths that are open to college students today, and I encouraged them to take as many of those paths as possible. To revel in the lack of limitations. I was thinking especially of the young women in the audience, and I was encouraged by how commonsensical my talk must have seemed to them, compared to an audience from the 1950s, or the 1890s.

The following day, I gave a public reading from my novel. I read two scenes that were both told from the perspective of male characters, and that dealt with war, religion, and fatherhood. Afterward, a middle-aged man came up and asked me to sign his book. He leaned down and said in a conspiratorial whisper, "I don't usually read women's fiction, but I guess I'll give this a chance." I could have responded in one of many ways, all of which would have been empowering and would have put him in his place and would, probably, have forever alienated him from books by women. But in the moment, I had no smart reply; I turned a little red and said, "Thank you!"

Since then, however, I've tried to tell this story as many times as possible, if only to bring attention to the fact that something done by a woman inevitably falls into a woman's ghetto, and is never mainstream, universal, unmarked.

A couple of years ago, I was at the house of a poet friend who lived in the Marigny. Her boyfriend was a fiction writer and the three of us often talked about books—what we were reading, who we loved. That night we had come back late from a party and the boyfriend had had a few beers and was slightly more aggressive than usual. Somehow we got on the topic of Jane Austen, who, in the past decade, has somehow been transformed from a critically acclaimed early nineteenth-century author to a vehicle for “chick flicks”—which is a terrible phrase in itself—and thus a symbol for frivolous femininity. I know smart women who avoid praising Austen because now she's met with eyerolls from a certain male demographic. On the night in question, my poet friend said she thought Jane Austen wasn't talented, that she was “too girly.” “What makes her girly?” I asked. “It's nothing but relationships,” she said. So here we are, in the twenty-first century, dismissing Jane Austen because she wrote about human relationships (like Dickens, like Tolstoy), and because her perspective was female, her books have become “girly,” with its automatic negative connotation, as if “girls” equaled “less than.” Before I could grab my friend by the shoulders and shake her, her boyfriend, a creative writing major, admitted he never read Austen. Why not? Because she was a woman, and he had no interest in reading about women, because he was a man. I got so angry that I left the house, and then cried a little, because I was a woman who wanted to be a writer.

You'd think I would gain some confidence after I found out I was going to be published. And it's true that unlike many of the women in my MFA program, at least I was sending stuff out. I knew I could work on my manuscript for years and could continue to pick over every sentence until I thought each was perfect—but in fact they never would be, because as the years go by, our creative minds evolve, so that the sentence you wrote yesterday is never the sentence you'd write today. So I spent a couple of months revising my thesis and then sent it off to agents, one of whom agreed to represent me and then sent it off to editors, one of whom actually turned it into a real book that would get reviewed in the *New York Times*, right alongside books written by men.

So what was left to fuel my self-doubt? How about the fact that my agent and editor spent more time debating my author photo than my book cover? I didn't want to have a smiling photograph because my book wasn't really a smiling book—most of the characters perish—but I was outvoted. I consulted another writer friend about this decision, and she wrote, “I think you're right to worry about being taken seriously because of your relative youth and gender. I'm not sure a smiling photo undercuts your seriousness, but I'm also pretty sure nobody is pushing Jonathan Franzen or Jeffrey Eugenides to pick a smiling author photo. I imagine your agent likes the smiling one because part of his job is to sell you as an author they should be interested in reviewing, interviewing, etc...” Where my agent left off, the online commenters picked up, feeling free to comment on my appearance and casually boxing me into “women's fiction”—a commercial rather than literary genre just shy of romance—not because of what I wrote, but because of what my face looks like. It's no wonder I still worry if my writing is good enough.

Is hesitation hardwired into my DNA? Into *our* DNA? When did I feel most sure of myself? Turns out it was in college. I went to Mount Holyoke, a women's college, where my peers were women and most of my mentors were women, and the people who spoke louder than me in the classroom were women, which was a signal that I could speak louder too. I came out of my shell, and pursued interests—like filmmaking—that I had assumed were men's domain. But at Mount Holyoke, when a bunch of us got together to make a movie, the director was a woman, the crew

were women, we screened it for women. So the summer before my senior year, when I went out to Los Angeles to take directing classes at USC, I was surprised to be one of the only girls. The instructor assigned men to help carry equipment that I didn't need help with. When I interned with a Hollywood production company, my main duties were getting lunch and organizing costumes, while my male counterparts were sent onto the set to help with lighting and sound. Sometimes I wish I'd spent a few extra years in college hardening my shell; I worry I came out too soon, was somehow underbaked. But the reality is you can't stay in college forever. As much as this environment wants to protect us, it's time to start figuring out how to deal with all the other spheres we'll move in.

The confidence gap has been heavily in the news, and all the advice and recommendations are directed at women: we're told to lean in, to be aggressive, but we're warned against negotiating too boldly lest our job offers are revoked or we're fired outright. So we resolve to act more cannily, to wear the shoulder pads to prove our strength and the skirts to show our docility. To strive for the 4.0 because it's a silent achievement, not to run for class president. To conquer everything in our path and then, if anyone notices, to chalk it up to luck. These disparities are still framed as a women's problem. *Women have a problem*, we're told. *They don't believe in themselves*.

But it's not actually our problem, is it? When we look at American education alone, for two hundred years, women have fought in various ways to fit into a system that continually tries to reject us, like a virus fighting for a foothold. We mask ourselves in apologies. We agree to smile in pictures. Like Maria DeRieux, we hide the books we read. And we're still doing it today. Except that we're starting to notice that things change when we define ourselves rather than letting others define us, when we say, "I'm a reader" rather than "I'm corpulent and poor," when we talk about the daily harassments we face as women and, through the amassing of our experiences, slowly realize that we're not the ones who should be apologizing. Women have been turned into a problem, when the problem is so obviously something else. (And it goes by many names: the employers who punish us for masculine traits, the governments that restrict our rights to our bodies, the advertisers who cultivate an unattainable image of beauty, the men who whistle at us in the streets, the men who won't read books by women, the colleges that limit the acceptance of women students so that we won't outstrip men.) To focus on the confidence gap is to unfairly place the burden of change once again on women's shoulders.

So President Cowen was right: here, in this protected space, you're taking over. You've found these amazingly diverse slices of the world to research, and you're adding your voices, clear and golden, to the scholarly conversation. But out there, you're still being told that something in you, or about you, is problematic.

You, the Newcomb Scholars, are the smartest girls I've ever met. I've had the good fortune to be one of the women in your lives, someone who can tell you how much your education is worth. How much you are worth. I can show you the past and the reflections of the past in the present. But what I want to tell you is: you're going to face a heck of a lot of problems in your life, simply because you're women. But *you* are not the problem. Change the conversations so that the real culprits face the scrutiny that you've been under for the past two hundred years. Make *them* the problem, and then solve it.