

*An Intergenerational Conversation:
Newcomb College and the Newcomb Scholars Program*

Alexa Schwartz
Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana USA



Abstract: “I will not be donating to Tulane until they reinstate Newcomb College! What Scott Cowen did to destroy Josephine Louise Newcomb’s legacy was illegal and wrong. My diploma says Newcomb College and that no longer means anything!” Amelia Conrad, a Newcomb Scholar and a student worker at the Tulane University Calling Center, murmured a quick apology and hung up the phone. This was not the first time that someone had yelled at her for the closing of Newcomb College during her shifts at the Calling Center. Since the consolidation of Newcomb College after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the creation of the Newcomb College Institute in its place, many alumnae were frustrated and angry about the loss of their collegiate home. This anger had led to a lawsuit against the university by one particular alumnae group, which ended in Tulane’s favor in February 2011. Amelia told her fellow Newcomb Scholars about the confrontation during their seminar the next day. As a Newcomb Scholar myself, I felt very upset by the incident. But how could I and other members of the Newcomb Scholars Program communicate *our* Newcomb experience to these women, and how could we show that it is just as valid as theirs? In a public domain dominated by the lawsuit, how could we offer a different interpretation of the “Newcomb spirit” in 2011? This case explores these questions.

The H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College for Women

The idea for a coordinate college for women within a larger university came from Ida Richardson, the wife of a Tulane University board member who was interested in progressive politics for women. At the turn of the twentieth century, groups of wealthy activists founded many women’s colleges to offer women educational opportunities that would help give them purpose and preparation for potential employment—something that would not occur again until at least the late 1970s (Coyle et al. 2011). Richardson and William Johnston, the president of Tulane at the time, felt that the conservative southern city of New Orleans would only accept a women’s educational institution if it did not affect the education of the male students (many people feared that female students would be a distraction for the males). Richardson contacted Josephine Louise Le Monnier Newcomb, a wealthy benefactor, about her wish to found a women’s college in connection with Tulane University (Dixon 1928).

Josephine Louise Newcomb had amassed a large fortune after the death of her husband, Warren. However, when her beloved daughter Sophie died at age 15 in 1870, Mrs. Newcomb wanted to establish some kind of memorial for Sophie that demonstrated her “strength of character and sweetness of disposition,” as well as her outstanding educational ability (Dixon 1928, 7). After Richardson informed her of the growing support for a women’s college in New Orleans, Josephine Louise founded the H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College for Women in

1886 through a personal donation of \$100,000 (Dixon 1928, 10). In her letter of donation, Josephine Louise specified that the money should be designated for the “higher education of *white* girls and young women,” and that the education of the women students “look to the practical side of life as well as to literary excellence” (Dixon 1928, 10). Mrs. Newcomb continued to donate money to Newcomb College until her death in 1901, when she made the Tulane Board the universal legatee in her will. Under Louisiana law, a universal legatee would be able to receive all of the resources, rights, and obligations from the person who created the bequest (a donation without any conditions governing the donation).

The Growth of Newcomb and the “Newcomb Spirit”

With Mrs. Newcomb’s gift, Newcomb College became the first degree-granting college for women founded within a university in the United States. The concept of a women’s college within a university became known as the coordinate college system. Newcomb opened in October of 1887 at Washington Avenue in New Orleans’s Garden District, but moved to the Broadway campus (next to Tulane’s campus) in 1919 (Dixon 1928, 11). The school continued to flourish over the next several years with physical education programs and the famous Newcomb Pottery program. Newcomb Pottery, in particular, helped to give the female students skills that would help them in life after college to produce income, something especially important to women living in the war-ravaged American South. The program even won an award from the 1900 Paris Exposition for its merits (Dixon 1928, 78), and was a great example of one of the tenets of Josephine Louise’s original donation asking that education focus on the “practical side of life” (Dixon 1928, 10).

Overall, during the early years of Newcomb and throughout the rest of the century, the “Newcomb spirit” remained incredibly strong amongst the students and alumnae. Women were proud to be a part of Newcomb College, and their pride and love for their school set them apart from other schools at the time. The decision to remain separate from Tulane University also played a part in bolstering school spirit. In 1916, The Southern Association of College Women invited Newcomb to be a member of the Association, along with seven other southern school (Coyle et al. 2011). Brandt V. B. Dixon, the first and only President of Newcomb College (after his term, the College only had deans), described Newcomb as a “great family” rather than just a college, and he said that “the Newcomb spirit became conscious, and grew to maturity and beauty...this loyalty and devotion of the students was an essential fact, without doubt the greatest of them all, in Newcomb’s final success” (Dixon 1928, 80). This Newcomb spirit became even more apparent during the expansion of Newcomb College and the move to the current Broadway campus in 1919. Many students and alumnae were concerned that this move “might be a step in the direction of absorption of the College, and loss of its independence” from Tulane University. Many alumnae wrote to the Board that “care should be taken to preserve the integrity of Newcomb, to keep their buildings distinct and separate, and not permit its architecture to be influenced in any way by that of the University” (Dixon 1928, 139). Dixon described a feeling of “unrest” and a loss “of the sense of permanence” and Newcomb traditions.

Over the following decades, Newcomb College became one of the leading women’s coordinate colleges in the United States. Still, the school continued to change from its original identity over time. During the 1960s and 1970s, classes became coeducational and students could choose to take classes at Tulane or Newcomb. By 1969, most academic departments had one chair uniting the two schools, and by 1979 there was coeducational housing and a single curriculum for the two undergraduate colleges (Newcomb and Tulane) (*Tulane University Bulletin* 2003-2005). The year 1987 brought about the merging of the two faculties of Newcomb College and Tulane College into the Faculty of the Liberal Arts and Sciences (*Tulane University*

Bulletin 2003-2005), which left single-sex advising as the only remnant of the original College. It became more and more difficult to fill spots at Newcomb, and many alumnae from the '70s and '80s joked about how they would never have been accepted to Tulane during the 2000s due to the lower academic standards for admission (S. Kenney, personal communication, December 9, 2011).

Throughout the consolidating measures, however, the administration attempted to maintain the Newcomb spirit and legacy that had the benefits of a women-only institution and a research university. For instance, the administration established the Newcomb College Center for Research on Women in 1975 as “an expression of Newcomb’s continuing commitment to further the role and status of women in society” (*Tulane University Bulletin* 1991-1993). One alumnae, Jill Zimmermann, talked about how the single-sex advising available to her in the mid-2000s made her aware of a variety of leadership opportunities and how certain activities made her feel like she was part of something. After participating in the Newcomb Big Sis/Little Sis program, she says she recognized being part of something bigger, something connected to “a legacy of amazing women” (J. Zimmermann, personal communication, November 10, 2011).

Considering this period in Newcomb’s history, one may question Newcomb’s status as a “college.” How could a college exist without a faculty? Did the single-sex advising that remained after 1987 make it a college? Was the Newcomb College of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s at all the same as the Newcomb College of the 1900s? If Newcomb College was struggling so much during the last few years of its existence, what does that say for the state of single-sex education in today’s society?

Hurricane Katrina and the Tulane Renewal Plan

On Monday, August 29th, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast. Horrific hurricane damage and loss of life occurred, and authorities recognize Katrina as one of the five deadliest hurricanes to ever affect the United States (Knabb et al. 2011). Tulane University’s campus suffered flood damage and the University closed for the fall semester, forcing students and faculty to flee to all parts of the country. In order to maximize Tulane’s resources and avoid further financial damages, the president of the University, Scott Cowen, and the Tulane Board of Administrators implemented a Renewal Plan in December of 2005. One of the most controversial changes implemented through this Renewal Plan was the establishment of a full-time undergraduate college (later known as the Newcomb-Tulane College) for both women and men, thus eliminating Newcomb College and Tulane College (“Tulane University: From Recovery to Renewal in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina”). Tulane also either consolidated or eliminated many other departments and faculty members, specifically the Department of Engineering.

Scott Cowen and the Board of Administrators were shocked by the response amongst certain alumnae and students. As Carter Flemming, the current president of the Newcomb Alumnae Association, said in a personal interview, other consolidating measures in the past (like the elimination of Newcomb’s faculty or the coeducational classes) had not received a reaction at all like the response to the Renewal Plan (C. Flemming, personal communication, December 5, 2011). Students led rallies to protest the decision (Leslie 2006). Alumnae felt that their identity as Newcomb graduates has been ignored and brushed aside by the University’s “greed” for the Newcomb funds. The Newcomb Dean created a Newcomb Task Force of female student leaders to come up with suggestions and a plan for the Tulane Board Task Force to consider that would address the campus outcry and the questions that many students were posing to the Board. What would happen to Daisy Chain, the Newcomb Big Sis/Lil Sis program, and the Pinning Ceremony? What about Celebrate Newcomb Week, Spring Arts Week and

Newcomb Senate? Most importantly, to where or to whom would the 36 million dollars in funds from Newcomb College go (Watkins 2006)? Members of the Task force stated:

The interplay between Newcomb College and Tulane University has provided us with a unique and dynamic setting that is not available at any other university. Newcomb College has provided us the tools with which to affect the Tulane community, the New Orleans community, and ultimately the world at large (Leslie 2006).

According to two members of the board at that time, Richard Schmidt and Jeanne Olivier, the Board wanted to use the suggestions and help of the women on the Dean's Task Force to determine how to "best capture the spirit of Newcomb" (Watkins 2006). After many discussions and compromises, the Tulane Board of Administrators created the Newcomb College Institute of Tulane University in July of 2006.

One particular alumnae group, The Future of Newcomb College, Inc. (TFoNC), formed in March of 2006 "to protect Josephine Louise Newcomb's mission and endowment in establishing and maintaining Newcomb College and... promote the continued existence of H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College as a degree-granting college for women" ("The Future of Newcomb College, Inc."). This group helped fund two separate lawsuits, with Mrs. Newcomb's alleged heirs as the plaintiffs. The lawsuits focused on the Renewal Plan as a violation of Mrs. Newcomb's will and her original intent regarding her donation, and the plaintiffs wanted the court to force Tulane University to reopen Newcomb College. In February 2011, the Louisiana Supreme Court ruled in favor of Tulane University and endorsed the ruling of a lower court, ending a five-year legal battle (Mangan 2011). The organization still continues today with the mission of "protecting Mrs. Newcomb's intent in establishing and maintaining Newcomb by supporting the connections among alumnae and friends of Newcomb College" ("The Future of Newcomb College, Inc.").

Looking back, the reaction towards the Newcomb College consolidation was not universal amongst all alumnae. Some alumnae were even unaware of the lawsuit and the Renewal Plan. The Future of Newcomb College group remains the main source of information for people who want to know more about the Newcomb lawsuit, in contrast to the response by Tulane (see the handout, *Understanding the Newcomb Litigation*).

The Newcomb College Institute

Since its inception in 2006, the Newcomb College Institute (NCI) has worked to fulfill its mission (articulated in 2010) of "educating women for leadership in the twenty-first century" ("Newcomb College Institute of Tulane University"). The Associate Director of the Newcomb College Institute, Charlotte Maheu, feels that the students and faculty perceive the Institute in a positive way and recognize that the interest of undergraduate women remains at the forefront of all activities and programs by the Institute (C. Maheu, personal communication, October 28, 2011). The focus on women's education, the major tenet of the Newcomb legacy, continues with the Newcomb College Institute.

The NCI is responsible for bringing a variety of speakers, such as Lynn Peril and Linda Sax, to Tulane's campus. Additionally, the NCI plans and implements many well-attended programs, such as "Fridays at Newcomb," a Friday afternoon lecture series covering a range of academic disciplines, and the "Feminist Film Series" that celebrates female-focused films. The NCI also offers substantial grants for research and conferences as well as connections and networking for internships with many different national organizations. For the research-oriented student, the Vorhoff Library specializes in women's higher education and history of southern

women, with over 12,000 books and over 100 journal and newsletter subscriptions. (“Newcomb College Institute at Tulane University”). The Vorhoff Library also offers grants for undergraduate research. According to two members of the board at that time, Richard Schmidt and Jeanne Olivier, the Board wanted to use the suggestions and help of the women on the Dean’s Task Force to determine how to “best capture the spirit of Newcomb” (Watkins 2006). After many discussions and compromises, the Tulane Board of Administrators created the Newcomb College Institute of Tulane University in July of 2006.

The Institute also supports nine different student organizations that cover a variety of causes and interests: Newcomb Senate, Newcomb Sexuality and Gender Alliance, Women in Science, VOX: Voices for Planned Parenthood, Women in Business, Tulane International Society for Women, Women in Politics, African-American’s Women’s Society, Alpha Lambda Delta, and Mortar Board (“Newcomb College Institute of Tulane University”). Charlotte Maheu says that “all of the programs are of interest to undergraduate women, and they are consistent also with the mission of the Institute and carrying forth the legacy of the College of educating undergraduate women for leadership.” As of 2009, one of the most significant programs under the auspices of the Newcomb College Institute has been the Newcomb Scholars Program.

The Newcomb Scholars Program¹

The idea for the Newcomb Scholars program came about after the Tulane Renewal Plan to help further the spirit of Newcomb. In 2006, a faculty committee decided that the University should honor senior women as Newcomb Scholars for outstanding work in their field. After three years, Maheu says that the committee found that “it would be better to work with those students when they enter Tulane, as opposed to when they leave...so they can build connections with one another, as well as with the Newcomb identity and Newcomb legacy.” After researching a variety of honors programs and leadership programs for women in universities across the country, an undergraduate intern discovered the Baldwin Scholars at Duke University, a program designed for women with a seminar in their first year and a seminar in their fourth year. The faculty committee decided that a four-year structure would be best, so “the scholars can be together for all four years, in a consistent, cohesive way, and develop the cohort in a strong, positive way.” Additionally, the committee decided that the Newcomb Scholars program needed to have a commitment to undergraduate research and public service, as those both made up part of the new mission of Tulane after Hurricane Katrina. Therefore, the program was designed as a selective, four-year program where twenty students would participate in an annual seminar and design their own research projects. Additionally, the students would build relationships with faculty as well as develop their own close-knit academic cohort, all while participating in a program grounded in the ideals and values of Newcomb College. In the fall of 2009, 58 first-year women applied to be Newcomb Scholars. In 2010, 60 women applied, and in 2011, 83 women applied.

During their time in the program, the Newcomb Scholars study the role of women in higher education in the first seminar, examine the ways of knowing in various disciplines in the second seminar, and learn about the real-world dilemmas of women leaders and

¹ This account is primarily taken from a personal communication between the author and Charlotte Maheu on October, 28, 2011.

social organizations through case studies in the third seminar. The fourth seminar consists of the research project, which may also serve as an honors thesis for many of the students. For the professors involved in the program, viewing the growth of the students and the program has been very rewarding. Maheu describes seeing the intellectual involvement and growth from the first seminar to the third, and how students have posed thoughtful questions about their research and their role in their research.

As Newcomb Scholars, we always give glowing comments about the opportunities and growth gained from the Newcomb Scholars program and the Newcomb College Institute. The first cohort of Scholars is a tight-knit group that has only gotten closer as the years continue. Amelia put it best when she said to me:

Newcomb Scholars has provided me a multitude of opportunities. It has given me the chance to meet an amazing group of girls who, like me, are focused on their studies, deeply involved in activities and community service, and hope to become leaders in their fields...I have also had the opportunity to get to know faculty, like Charlotte Maheu and Sally Kenney, who have become mentors, guiding me through classes and future plans, encouraging me to challenge myself in whatever I choose to do (A. Conrad, personal communication, October 30, 2011)

The majority of the scholars praise the Newcomb Scholars program for its interdisciplinary nature and the eye-opening academic challenges. Bria Fischer says that the program has connected her “to a group of women with diverse interests, all of whom are ambitious and incredibly motivated to make a difference in their fields” (B. Fischer, personal communication, October 31, 2011). Haley Ade says that her experiences have exposed her to new ideas and course content that she would not have considered in the past. The leadership opportunities and connections made possible by the Newcomb Scholars program and the Institute have also been incredibly helpful (H. Ade, personal communication, October 30, 2011). Amelia Conrad says that through the program, she has been “encouraged to become a leader and an outstanding student,” and that “Newcomb has given me opportunities that I would never have received at other institutions—a summer grant that allowed me to take on an internship in a city hours away from home, funding that helped me travel to Washington, D.C. for a conference, leadership opportunities through Women in Politics and Newcomb Leaders, and connections to incredible faculty members who have become mentors” (A. Conrad, personal communication, October 30, 2011).

What is the “Newcomb spirit?”²

Because the Newcomb Scholars program and the Newcomb College Institute were centered on the ideals of Newcomb College, the discussion always comes back to the “Newcomb spirit” and whether or not the Institute and its programs, specifically Newcomb Scholars, represent that spirit in the same ways as the original college. Is it even possible to recreate that spirit? For us, the Newcomb Scholars program is a wonderful example of what the Newcomb spirit represents. Bria Fischer says that for her, “being part of a cohort is similar to what Newcomb women experienced during their years in college: forming bonds

² This account is primarily taken from personal communications between the author and students, Bria Fischer, Amelia Conrad, Haley Ade, Charlotte Maheu, and Heather Corbett between October-December 2011.

with women both similar and different from themselves, who would expose them to new and exciting ideas and challenges throughout their time together.” For Amelia, the Newcomb spirit is “the dedication to women’s leadership, education, and excellence,” and that the spirit “lives on in so much of what the Newcomb College Institute does.”

Conrad reemphasizes the fact that the spirit of Newcomb College continues through the wide variety of programs and opportunities that the Institute offers, and that “women’s leadership and education are still top priorities at Newcomb...while the name has changed, that commitment has not.” Haley Ade discusses the pride that comes from “being part of an institution with such a rich history,” and laughs about the fact that she cannot wait to order the Mignon Faget Newcomb class ring.

Maheu agrees. She describes Newcomb Scholars as being a new symbol of Newcomb College, like the oak trees and acorns and daisy chains. The program is something “both symbolic and real...that carries forth the traditions and the legacy that Newcomb College had of challenging smart, engaged, intellectually curious women.” Maheu continues by saying that while the physical form of Newcomb College may look a little different, “what stays the same are the ideals, the values and the mission” and that while the “way in which we carry them out might be a little different...we are carrying them out in a new way for the modern college women.”

Overall, Maheu sums it up by stating that “Newcomb lives in the students today.” Brandt V. B. Dixon, the former President of Newcomb College, echoed this sentiment nearly one hundred years earlier when he said that “I believe I am right in saying that the Newcomb Spirit which to me is the greatest achievement old Newcomb ever made is now neither dead nor sleeping, but vividly alive and loveable” (Dixon 1928, 193).

Finding a Balance: Crossing the Intergenerational Divide

Through the Scholars program and the Institute, Newcomb has given me so many incredible opportunities, both academic and social. I have made wonderful friendships and have become a better student and leader. I understand that NCI can never be the exact same thing as Newcomb College, and I can sympathize with alumnae who feel betrayed and hurt by the loss of their college. As Heather Corbett (the Director of the Newcomb Alumnae Office and Annual Giving) said in a personal interview, one can sympathize with the alumnae who suffered the “trauma” or losing their college and that Tulane was “slowly but surely chipping away at Newcomb and Newcomb’s legacy,” but one must also recognize the difficulty of maintaining two admission offices, two faculties, etc.—all of which take time and money.

How do I and other Newcomb Scholars show these women that undergraduate women are still benefitting from the Newcomb legacy? Can time heal all wounds? How can we cross the divide and show that the Newcomb spirit – whether it’s the Daisy Chain, Newcomb Senate, or just a woman unafraid to speak her mind in a male-dominated classroom – is still present on campus?

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