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## SEX, GENDER, AND COEDUCATION

## MATRICULATION CONVOCATION ADDRESS

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RICHARD WARCH

At best, Amos Lawrence was ambivalent. It was not what he had in mind, and for a time, he acted as if it hadn't happened. But there was no denying it. The Methodists, with whom he had engaged to establish a college in the territory that would be, in his words, "an Oxford or a Cambridge that shall be the glory of Wisconsin," had made provisions for the admission of women to the school. "It is," he wrote to one of his agents, "what I did not contemplate, and it is liable to objections."

And Lawrence objected, though in somewhat tempered terms. "No one can estimate too highly the importance of a thorough female education," he went on; "at the same time, it has proved highly injurious to some seminaries where it has been attempted in connection with that of the males. Besides other bad results it has lowered the standard of scholarship, or has prevented its being elevated as it otherwise would have been: it has made high schools of institutions which were intended for and ought to have been colleges." The admission of women, he thought, would "create an impediment to it becoming a standard College," and a standard college, particularly a college for men that met New England standards, was what Lawrence intended to promote. Should "individuals choose to set up a female school," he wrote on another occasion, "that is no affair of mine."

But Wisconsin was not New England, and Appleton was not Boston, and frontier Methodists were not eastern Episcopalians. William Sampson, whose leadership was most instrumental in launching the college, wrote that he and others had concluded that "a college for both male and female students where each and all should be entitled to equal educational advantages was a desideratum" and that the principle of coeducation meant for them "giving to each student the opportunity of competing for any honor conferred by the University and of enjoying that honor when justly earned."

And so it was. To be sure, there were separate departments for men and women--the women's program variously called until 1865 the Female Collegiate Department, Female Collegiate Institute, Female Branch, and, finally, Ladies Department. But according to Lucinda Darling Colman, a member of the first graduating class in 1857, these different designations were a "myth." As such, they may have mollified Amos Lawrence but they were not to last long. By 1866, men and women were united in one academic program and listed together alphabetically on the student roster, although there still was a Ladies Course that had slightly different requirements from those for the men. And for succeeding decades, there continued to be distinctions at the college between the programs and opportunities for male and female students.

Such, in the most sketchy terms, are the early traditions of the nation's second coeducational college. While it is easy to view Lawrence's coeducational beginnings as flawed and wanting by today's lights, the remarkable thing was that such beginnings existed at all. Only Oberlin, in 1833, preceded Lawrence in this effort, one that was to become a pattern in the western states, and which was, over a hundred years later, to sweep New England as well. If Amos Lawrence is looking down on us now, he will find that all of those men's colleges in New England that he wanted his Wisconsin college to emulate are now emulating his Wisconsin college: every one of them is coeducational.

Obviously, we cannot ascribe to our Methodist founders enlightened values that we would recognize in 1988 as contemporary. Some of their reasons for providing educational opportunities for women, and for having women and men together, were practical: the frontier needed teachers, a role that women could and did fulfill, and it was cost efficient to establish one educational institution rather than two. The college's Wisconsin founders wanted women to attend the institution, but they had no notions that women were being educated for the professions or public life. Women were expected to become mothers, not ministers; their occupational choices outside the home were focused on, if not limited to, teaching. They were to be the bearers of children and of culture, not practitioners of business or the law. But nonetheless, the aim was for men and women to be educated together and to share equal educational advantages.

As Lawrence University was launched as a coeducational college, other movements and motivations were promoting the establishment of the colleges that in 1895 were to become Milwaukee-Downer, which became a part of Lawrence in 1964. Milwaukee Female Seminary, founded in 1848, and Wisconsin Female (later Downer) College, established in 1854, were among the earliest institutions for women in the west. Succeeding the creation of several female academies in the early decades of the century, experiments in collegiate education for women began with the founding of Mount Holyoke College in 1837 and the opening of Georgia Female College in 1839. The Milwaukee and Wisconsin colleges were extensions of this movement.

Owing a great deal to the inspiration and guidance of Catherine Beecher, the ideology of these new colleges centered on the importance of providing an education for the "perfection of the female character" and "fitted for woman and her lofty mission." For Beecher, this aim meant focusing on four fields to which women were by nature adapted and in which they needed more adequate instruction: child care, school teaching, nursing, and "the conservation of the domestic state," or homemaking.

Clearly, though these origins may strike us today as antiquated and irrelevant, we need to recognize that they were, in their time, unconventional, if not radical. Higher education in nineteenth-century America was androcentric. Collegiate education for men was the model and the norm. And even as coeducation spread, especially in the land-grant universities and liberal arts colleges of the west, this male-centeredness persisted. Women students, after all, are the ones called co-eds, as if their presence somehow was and remains the novelty or the exception.

Consequently, the progress of coeducation--and to some degree of women's colleges--has been measured in the main by the extent to which opportunities for and achievements of women approached those for and of men. When the president of Bryn Mawr said--or is alleged to have said--"our failures only marry," she was carrying this form of progress to its final extreme.

We do well to remember, however, that such progress took place in a climate of opinion that was largely suspicious of education for women and widely opposed to the mingling of the sexes in colleges and universities. Physicians, for example, argued that women were physiologically unsuited to the intellectual rigors of higher learning. As Dr E.H. Clarke wrote in the 1880s, "identical education of the two sexes is a crime before God and humanity that physiology protests against and that experience weeps over."

Other nineteenth-century spokesmen opined that coeducation was a sexual accident looking for a place to happen: "The Amalgamation of the sexes won't do," one wrote; "If you live in a Powder House you blow up once in a while." On the other side of the argument, critics of coeducation made the case that it would "unwoman the woman and unman the man--it would produce confusion and all confusion produces corruption." Or, as another male opponent put it, "if you can teach mathematics to a boy when there's a girl in the room, there's something wrong with the boy."

Proponents of women's education and coeducation sought to challenge these prevailing sentiments. A number of leading women's colleges deliberately emulated the curriculum of the older men's colleges as a way of proving the fitness of females for a classical education. Similar movements occurred at coeducational schools. At Lawrence, for example, we find in the latter years of the last century and the early years of the twentieth a steady development of organizations and opportunities for women that mirrored those for men: literary societies, athletic teams, and the like. Similarly, the gradual disappearance of a Ladies Course may be seen as a sign of "progress."

Of greater import, we find that women shared with men participation in and leadership of a variety of college groups. One alumnus of the Class of 1890 recalled that in his day, Bess Wilson and Kate Lummis were "the dominating personalities; the political bosses of the college; what they said went." And an alumna from 1877 reported that women graduates applied their education as teachers, and that many "achieved success in the various lines of literature, art, music and civic and other public work in addition to their domestic duties." For them, she reported, there was no conflict between "matrimony and the college education."

My purpose here is not to offer a history of coeducation generally or even one at Lawrence from our founding to the present. Rather, I want to invite all of us to ask what it means, in the last years of the twentieth century, for a college--specifically, this college--to be coeducational. With the exception of a little under 100 women's colleges and a handful of men's colleges, coeducation is the norm today. In the

late 1960s and early 1970s, a host of prestigious single-sex colleges switched to coeducation, though not, as best I can tell, because of some principled educational philosophy. Indeed, for some, the nature and purposes of coeducation rose little above the level of Annette Funicello in "Beach Blanket Bingo." Even the celebrated Ivies betrayed this kind of mentality. One of the Masters of a Yale College looked forward to the arrival of the women "to save the Yale undergraduates from a continuing cycle of orgiastic weekends after monastic midweek interludes." And a Smith transfer student confessed that "most girls have in the back of their minds that socially this thing could lead to something big."

These are hardly uplifting sentiments and do not give us much intellectual capital to draw on in thinking about coeducation. At Lawrence, we celebrate the fact that we are the second coeducational college in the country. And we might properly wonder, so what? In my mind, that claim is something that we have taken for granted in a rather uncritical fashion. It is not for us a novelty; what was at our founding a bold move has become a convention, at worst merely a social convenience. Surely we can do better than that, and surely we can do better than some of the more recent converts to coeducation. If the unexamined life is not worth living, perhaps the unexamined educational arrangement is not worth promoting. So let us examine our commitment to coeducation and let us ask too: where do we go from here?

In thinking about these issues and questions, we need to recognize that these matters have an urgency and immediacy because of the women's movement of the last quarter century. Coeducation has been a central feature of American higher education for 150 years and a popular part in the last 25, but only recently has it existed in light of such phenomena as the furor over the Equal Rights Amendment, debates about comparable worth, the mandates of Title IX, the presumptions of affirmative action, and policies governing sexual harassment.

These considerations and concerns and the ferment of feminism have informed our thinking and shaped the terms of the debate about coeducation, even as they have revived and revived earlier examples and articulations of women's issues. In other words, we must perforce begin any consideration of coeducation not from some neutral ground, but from the perspective of and with the language of feminism and the consequences of the women's movement.

The crux of the matter, then, lies not only or even chiefly in educational theory, but in attitudes and attributes regarding sex and gender. For the sake of some clarity in what follows, let me say that I am here using the term sex to refer fundamentally to biological differences between males and females and the term gender basically to describe social distinctions between men and women. These terms confront us with yet another version of the old nature versus nurture debate or, in other forms, with yet a further example of the question "is biology destiny?"

These issues are presently apparent within the field of women's studies, where the debate focuses on disagreements between so-called minimalists and maximalists. Put briefly, the issue comes down to a

question of the import of sexual differences. Minimalists acknowledge biological and sociological differences, but argue that such differences are shaped by cultural and historical forces more than cosmic or hormonal ones.

As one scholar has put it, "a growing body of knowledge indicates that, under the same conditions, men and women show similar competence, talent, ambition, and desire in activities that range from running races to doing scientific research. That conditions vary so regularly and decisively from men and women has more to do with divisions of power in society than with innate sex differences." This so-called minimalist position, then, would argue that the educational experiences and career trajectories of women and men ought to be comparable, that sex, as it were, should have nothing to do with these matters.

The maximalists, obviously, stress the other side of the issue, noting that sex differences are fundamentally bioevolutionary and that female characteristics are real, powerful, and ought to be valued as good in and of themselves. For maximalists, child-bearing and child-rearing are uniquely female activities and hence roles. Feminine traits of caring and sharing are real and enduring. They cannot be ignored and should not be devalued.

Simply stated, one position seems to assert that sex differences have little or nothing to do with gender differences, while the other would affirm that they play a vital and telling role. There is, perhaps, no final sorting out of these positions possible and ambiguity on these issues may be the norm. In that respect, then, we might simply acknowledge the view of a former president of Hunter College--and apply his observation to both sexes. "You should not educate a woman as though she were a man," he wrote, "and you should not educate a woman as if she were not."

If we have learned anything from the women's movement, however, it should at least be that--taken to its logical conclusion--the maximalist position is potentially the most inhibiting and regressive. In the words of Catherine Stimpson, "to emphasize difference over similarity [between men and women] polarizes human nature and reinforces sexual duality as a basis for society." What to do? And especially, what to do if the college proudly claims its coeducational heritage on the one hand and has, by merger with Downer in 1964, the traditions of women's education in its midst on the other? It is perplexing--and I will not elaborate on the perplexity--that we have a Lawrence College for Men and a Downer College for Women, one of which has no history or traditions, the other of which does.

Well, perhaps the first thing to do is to recognize that these two versions of higher education--that is, coeducation and women's education--are presently perceived as affording quite dissimilar results for women. The dissimilarity has very little to do with structures--e.g., the curriculum--and a great deal to do with experiences--e.g., what happens to students and graduates. The point was made this way by a don during the debates about the admission of women to Oxford in 1963: "In general," he said, "young men are best educated in the company of young

women. Young women are best educated in the company of their own sex. These two principles are hard to reconcile."

This statement reflects, of course, an old debate, but it is a debate that women's colleges are reopening with vigor these days. Though they have lost many of their number to coeducation in the last two decades, the women's colleges today are forcefully arguing their case. Citing evidence about the career achievements of their alumnae in the professions and in graduate study--particularly in mathematics and the sciences--women's colleges are asserting that women accomplish best in single-sex settings, "free of sexual ambiguities" and of male-centeredness. Former Smith president Jill Conway summed up the women's college critique of coeducation by noting that "although the same persons may be teaching the same male and female students, who have access to the same libraries and laboratories and meet in the same classrooms, these men and women are not necessarily having the same educational experience." Obviously, she believes that the men are getting the better part of the deal.

Other evidence may be adduced to support the point. Over the past five years at Lawrence, for example, roughly twice as many women as men have majored in English or foreign languages, whereas men have outnumbered women in science by 28 to 15 percent. And if we assume that role models can play an affirming and encouraging role in the educational experience, we may well wonder what it means for there to be a male-male student-faculty ratio of 7:1 and a female-female student-faculty ratio of over 35:1. In these findings and circumstances we are not alone. National studies have found similar patterns throughout higher education.

While colleges and universities have sought to provide an environment that makes distinctions solely on the basis of merit, we have now come to realize that the campus community is not immune to our culture's perception of gender differences. Intentional, and more often unintentional, actions that result in differential treatment of individuals based on gender affects life inside and outside the classroom and can interfere with the educational process for both men and women alike.

Studies have shown that our society places more value on the work done by men--rates it more highly and pays more for it. We generally accept male behavior as the norm; often expect a submissive communication style from women; and typically view men as independent achievers who place a high degree of importance on career success, while viewing women predominantly in terms of their relationships to men. The several reports of the Association of American Colleges entitled "The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women?" point out that women's experiences may differ greatly from those of men even when they attend the same institution, enroll in the same programs, and share the same classrooms. Subtle, generally unconscious, actions based on unexamined assumptions about gender--for example, nonverbal cues and patterns of class participation that devalue women's contributions--have the potential to do the most damage since they usually occur without the full awareness of those involved.

Such actions help to reinforce, for both sexes, society's perception of a difference. This reinforcement makes it more difficult for men to perceive women as peers in the classroom, to work and collaborate with them, and to view them as colleagues and equals in the world outside the university or college setting. Research shows that the effect on women is readily apparent as well: in many cases, the academic and career aspirations of women decline during the college years and often women undergraduates feel less confident about their abilities and preparation for graduate school than do men from the same institution--despite the fact that their grades and aptitudes may be as high or higher than their male classmates. In other words, despite what may appear and in many ways is a gender-neutral academic environment, students often persist in or revert to gender-specific behaviors and roles.

The question for Lawrence, of course, is should or need gender differences exist or matter. And the answer, I believe, is no. But that assertion by itself is empty. It may well be, in fact, that Lawrence, as a coeducational college, has been theoretically minimalist but practically maximalist. That is, to return to my earlier assertion, our fidelity to coeducation has been uncritical. We have assumed that the same curriculum provided the same educational experiences for men and women, and that if it did not, the difference was of no concern to the college. We ought no longer live under these unexamined assumptions. We need to ask some questions and figure out the facts.

As we do, I believe that it is imperative that Lawrence be more self-conscious about sex and gender. Sex is a constant--despite the advances and techniques of modern science that enable one, within limits, to change one's sex. At the college, students do not lose their sex, so far have not changed their sex, and, clearly, much of their interactions with one another are sexual in nature. Gender, on the other hand--particularly what has been called "the social architecture of gender, of femininity and masculinity"--is malleable. Put another way, we need to demarcate the two and not permit sex differences to shape or govern gender roles. The college needs to be attentive to the fact that today men and women often have similar expectations about career and family and live in a society in which gender roles are far less clearly defined.

In thinking about this issue, then, I believe that we should draw on the central core of our traditions that predates and subsumes coeducation, namely, liberal education. At its best, we argue, liberal education liberates the self from the various limitations and constraints of time and place, of birth and station, of race and sex. We must affirm anew and think afresh about this last. Liberal education should make it possible for the individual to transcend gender roles and expectations. The college, as college, must have no expectations that are gender-driven. It must, at the same time and vigorously, combat or rectify any behaviors that are gender-biased. And finally, the college is obliged to examine and justify any structures that are gender-based.

What we should be about is to deal with individual selves, selves that transcend gender and whose options and opportunities can be



imagined and pursued without the constraints of gender expectations. Our ambition should be for each student to follow his or her bliss, in academic pursuits and in career choices. And where we find that we are failing in that ambition, we should determine why and change our mode of operation.

In reflecting on these matters with members of the Board of Trustees last spring, I posed these questions as illustrative of the ones we should address:

--how does or should the course of study reflect or support a commitment to coeducation?

--does coeducation bring with it measurable norms and expectations for a balance of men and women in the student body, faculty, and administration?

--how do our residential living arrangements comport with our commitment to coeducation?

--what role do single-sex organizations and entities play in fulfilling our coeducational commitments?

--how can we assure that coeducation provides equal education for men and women?

I am not here posing or proposing answers to these questions, though I have, obviously, sought to prescribe certain principles that ought to govern our queries. But in order to provoke the deliberations I hope will follow, let me offer a few observations.

First, the introduction of an interdisciplinary area in gender studies strikes me as a promising beginning to a reconsideration of the content and purposes of the course of study as they relate to gender issues. The perspectives of women's experiences and of feminist scholarship have made significant intellectual contributions to an array of disciplines and the college would do well to consider and be hospitable to them.

Second, we need to determine whether or not there are any elements in the departmental and curricular structures of the college--or in the attitudes and behaviors of faculty--that induce or impute different experiences and expectations for men and women. If there are, we ought to work to eliminate them.

Third, we should be prepared to review our residential living patterns, our student organization mix, and the campus culture with the purpose of determining whether or not they help the college achieve its best aims regarding individual growth, choice, and liberation. Do they foster or frustrate sexist attitudes and gender discrimination? Do they permit or prohibit personal development and leadership training? Whatever we may discover in this review, we must as a community affirm that any form of gender discrimination or sexual harassment will not be tolerated.

Fourth, do men and women, who ostensibly partake of the same curriculum and participate in the same activities derive equal benefits from those experiences? If not, how can we enable that equality? These questions are the most all-embracing ones, though they are also the most central.

It is clear to me that the answer for which we must strive is an affirmative one. It is an answer that was bequeathed to us at our beginnings, and so I hope that the aim of our founders--however flawed it may have been--will motivate us again as an important and even radical intention: to make Lawrence a place where "each and all should be entitled to equal educational advantages." With that intention, it is my hope that we will articulate and enact a principled commitment to coeducation that will enliven this college for each of us and enable an equal education for all.