

LET'S STOP WASTING OUR WOMEN

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The year is 1985. The setting is the familiar academic one of green lawns and ivy-colored buildings. The occasion is the twenty-fifth reunion of the class of 1960, Hypothetical Women's College. A stranger driving through the grounds on this June day might think the scene typical of a dozen alumni reunions he has seen and fled from. But for a minute let him listen to these women in their late forties and then judge again.

"...just finished reading your book on..."

"...get my PhD next December, and then..."

"...her third one man show; the Museum of Modern Art has bought..."

"...crucial test of the theory. Our experiments showed..."

These are middle-aged women at their twenty-fifth reunion, and further eavesdropping reveals that many are talking quite normally about church and community, home and children. The odd thing is that so many seem to have been leading double lives:

"...my own graduation from law school came the same day as Junior's from high school, so..."

"...gave the children their lunch so I could get the last chapter in on time..."

Most of the women have husbands and families, and their children are as kempt and cared for as most children. But they have a record of production in other lines too. Books and paintings, histories and theories, experiments and election returns bear witness to their productivity in activities other than the conventional domestic ones. How has Hypothetical managed to produce such a crop?

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It all started with a small foundation grant for an educational experiment. Back in 1957 a group of forward-looking educators, tired of hearing all the talk about "the trouble with women" and "the second sex," and tired, too, of hearing about the need for trained manpower, decided to instigate a program to remedy the manpower and the womanpower situations simultaneously. "Most women," they reasoned, "have two lives to live: one while they are engrossed in raising their families, a second before the children come and after the children are grown. College prepares them for this second part of life, but the value of their college training is often wasted because a number of years may elapse between their graduation and their first opportunity to make full use of what they have learned in school. "What is needed," these educators concluded, "is a program to carry college women through their family years -- a program that will develop and sustain the intellectual interests acquired in college, keep them up to date on new developments, and leave them fifteen or twenty years later mentally alert and educationally equipped. Then they can carry on, at least

no further behind than on the day they left college. What is needed is a rust-proofing program --- let's call it an intellectual oil can."

A lot of thinking and a little money were required to get the program going, but once started the ladies began to pay their own way. So successful were the early results that other colleges joined Hypothetical, with ensuing improvements and enlargements of the experiment. Here is the way the system worked:

First, the program started with the undergraduate. Through counseling and vocational guidance the college encouraged her to make her choice of major field and future vocation with due consideration of the fact that she would probably be, among other things, a married woman and a mother. During her senior year, each student who so desired worked with a faculty member in planning and getting started on some project which she could carry on by herself after graduation. The English major who wanted to write a novel might have spent her senior year developing her characters and outlining her plot; the history major learned the location of the out-of-the-way documents she needed for her research; the physics major had a harder time and was usually encouraged to choose a project involving primarily library research and critical thinking rather than laboratory experimentation. While there was nothing compulsory about this program, lots of Hypothetical students chose to participate.

Second, newly graduated alumnae continued to make use of the services of Hypothetical's faculty. Through occasional visits to the college for conferences and through voluminous correspondence they continued to receive criticism and advice. Older alumnae whose children were partially grown also used the college faculty members as consultants in carrying out creative independent work.

Third, Hypothetical maintained a service bureau to help its alumnae with all the problems that arise in bringing the creator or producer and her public together. Its consultants include patent lawyers and literary agents, art exhibitors, publishers, and specialists in many fields who helped make meritorious work available to the appropriate public in the appropriate way.

Fourth, the college offered financial assistance to exceptionally able women who demonstrated their ability and desire to continue independent work along with their other activities. Small grants were made for the purchase of materials and supplies, for travel and interlibrary loans, for part-time housekeeping help. Much of the money for these grants came from government and industry, which profit directly. A college graduate who pays a cleaning woman a dollar an hour to scrub the floors can do library research worth much more than that dollar. Thus for paying the cleaning woman, government or industry benefits from the work of the college graduate. The "employer," the graduate, and the cleaning woman all profit.

Fifth, Hypothetical, in conjunction with many other colleges, maintained a program of seminars. Their purpose is to help alumnae retain competence in their fields during a period when they cannot keep their training in active use. In Chicago and New York, Northampton and Pomona, husbands sat with their children for one evening a week while their wives temporarily put aside thoughts of nutrition and child psychology and turned to a review of Beowulf or the newest findings in nuclear fission.

Sixth, arrangements were made with many of the learned societies for alumnae to receive professional journals at membership rates rather than at the high prices charged to libraries and non-members. These journal subscriptions, like the seminar program, help women keep up with developments in their fields during their busiest years.

Seventh, Hypothetical's alumnae clubs were organized to assist in carrying out in its program. They arranged seminars in places without colleges or universities, organized joint baby-sitting services, introduced alumnae to the local experts in their fields, provided occasional rides back to the college for conferences with faculty members, and sometimes brought faculty members to their localities.

Eighth, and finally, Hypothetical maintained a program of continuing certification, which recognizes both independent scholarship and continuing active participation in the seminar program. These certificates of accomplishment meant little at first, but then they came to carry considerable weight with both prospective employers and with graduate schools. Employers value them because they found that women in their late thirties and forties who have continued to keep up with intellectual activities, are often better risks than younger ones whose tenure on the job is often questionable. Graduate schools respect them, because they found that women in this age group are better able to put their graduate training into use immediately and without interruption, while younger women are often interrupted and must have considerable retraining before they reach again the stage at which they left graduate school. These certificates are not credits; should a woman decide to undertake graduate training the certificates do not replace any part of that study, but they do make it easier for a woman to be admitted to graduate school and to profit from it once she has been admitted.

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As their college years progress, the students of Hypothetical College see concrete evidence of the plan in action. Each year at commencement they see certificates and grants-in-aid being awarded. They see continual evidence of strange people doing things which they have been told are to aid the alumnae with their work. The name of their college appears with a disproportionate frequency after the names of authors of magazine articles, or of the critical surveys that appear in the professional journals. They see alumnae doing most unalumnaeish things -- like haunting libraries, conferring with professors in front of note-covered blackboards, examining new laboratory apparatus. They are aware that women from the local community gather regularly for evening seminars, and from what faculty members say about these groups the student obtain the impression that the level of discourse is somewhat above that of typical extension courses. By the time the students are ready to start on the program, they are psychologically prepared for it.

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But the year is only 1957, and Hypothetical is just what its name implies. Nevertheless, today's women and tomorrow's women are flesh and blood, and their problems are very real indeed. While public officials make dire pronouncements about the shortage of engineers, of physicians, of psychiatrists, of teachers, a large number of educated and intelligent women complain bitterly that their abilities are being wasted. Young women, a few years out of college, find that their children, while loveable and absorbing, do not replace the intellectual stimulation and discipline that they have recently left behind them. Mirra Komarovsky, in Women in the Modern World, quotes one of these, a former high school teacher:

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I am turning into a vegetable. This is one reason I am seriously considering resuming teaching. What frightens me are signs like the following: As a teacher of economics I used to be able to take part in conversation on general topics at social gatherings; now I lose my self-confidence in groups. I have the time to read the newspaper and I read it but somehow it doesn't register. I used to have to discuss current events in school and now I just meet other housewives in the park and we say, "Isn't it terrible about this or that" and turn to some other topic. In the past, even if the conversation turned to topics of which I was ignorant, there was the comforting thought that I, too, had a specialty, economics. ...Homemaking doesn't put enough demands upon me, I don't have to concentrate, the decisions I make, like a choice between fish or meat for dinner, don't tax me, there is no competition, it is just too easy a life and I feel no challenges to make me grow and develop.

Older women whose children are away from home most of the day find that nothing in their education or their previous life has prepared them for this difficult period. Whatever intellectual skills they once had have atrophied through disuse, yet volunteer or paid jobs that do not make demands upon them are unsatisfactory because they offer no challenge. Furthermore at this time when women must adjust to a more independent, less family-absorbed life, they may also be experiencing the menopause, with its requirements for physical and psychological readjustment. The whole period may present such difficulties that even Lynn White, advocate of a more "feminine" and family-centered curriculum for college women has this to say:

The crisis of the forties, when many women wake up to find themselves idle, often coincides with a physiological shakeup. The combination is so severe that plans to meet it should be laid far in advance. Even in college, girls should be taught to foresee the double event and advised as to how to build their intervening lives so that when it comes they can take it in stride.

The problems of the forties are enough of themselves, but they may be exacerbated by widowhood, with accompanying grief, loneliness, and financial worry. Statistics being what they are, the American woman can anticipate an average of eight years of life without her mate. Today she is typically without any preparation to cope adequately with this emergency.

Recognizing that "something ought to be done about women," educators and reformers have proposed two kinds of solutions. The new "antifeminists," represented by Marya Farnham and Lynn White, have proposed that we provide a college curriculum that increases the emphasis on homemaking and teaches the girl to glory in her biological role of mother. On the other side of the cultural fence are those who propose to solve the problems of women by ignoring the fact that they are women: let every wife hold a full-time job while grandma or a paid substitute for her takes care of the children. Both of these proposed solutions are based on the outmoded assumption that a woman must make a choice between homemaking and a career. Each solution must fail because it helps only half a woman. In 1957 homemaking is not and cannot be a full-time job for life, but in most cases it should be a full-time job for part of a life. The years before there are children, and the many healthy mature years after the children are grown up make the other part; what most women need is some way to utilize to the full the potential of both.

Disturbing as the current wave of feminine discontent may be, its importance is outweighed by the loss to society of educated persons in whom it has invested heavily. Next June 100,000 young women will graduate from the nation's colleges. Each of these has cost society money in the form of endowments, legislative appropriations, and tax exemptions, if not in direct scholarship aid. A

conservative estimate puts the average differential between fees paid by a college student and the cost of educating him at \$600 per year. Thus, on the average, society has invested a minimum of \$2400 in each of these 100,000 women, or \$240,000,000 in one year's graduating class. Surely society has a right to expect a return on that investment, particularly since a college education is not the right of all but the privilege of a few. The 3 1/2% of American women who are college graduates are the intellectual elite, and they have a responsibility over and above that of being good mothers. They have a definite obligation to use to the full the training that society has paid for.

The sad fact is that many of them sincerely want to do so, but society makes the opportunity contingent upon their partial renunciation of the equally important obligations and responsibilities of motherhood. There is no basic reason why a woman cannot be a good mother now and a good engineer - or lawyer or economist - twenty years from now, but at present there is no practical way for women to achieve this dual fulfillment. This is a state of affairs which society as a whole, and its educated female members in particular, can ill afford. To quote Komarovsky:

What society loses in the apparent waste of training facilities it may regain later if we develop ways to bring these women back to their professions after their child-rearing responsibilities are over. It is generally conceded that vast potential resources now lie fallow because middle-aged women do not always find occupations commensurate with their abilities.

The Hypothetical program attempts to provide what is so needed - a link between the college years and the years of maturity, a technique for maintaining intellectual skills and academic discipline in good working order while the major energies are devoted to the important task of raising a family, an opportunity for gradual reenlistment in the ranks of the world's intellectual producers.

The costs of instigating such a program should be surprisingly small. Initially the major expenditure would be for the extra faculty time required for correspondence with alumnae. Some administrative expenses for record keeping and for the certification program would be incurred, and grants-in-aid would cost as much or as little as the available funds dictated. Since it involves the cooperation of many colleges, the seminar program would not be a part of the original experiment, but when it is started it might be expected to be self-supporting. The operation of a service bureau could not only be self-supporting but might bring in financial return to the college in the form of royalties and other forms of profit sharing. Arrangements for journal subscriptions would depend primarily upon the cooperation of the learned societies involved. Compared to the minimum of \$2400 already invested by society in each student, the additional cost of operating such a program, and thus recouping the original investment, should be ridiculously small.

Immediate returns from the expenditure should soon be visible in the form of happier, more mentally alert mothers. The long term gain -- the return to productivity of a high proportion of the intellectual elite -- would admittedly not be apparent until much later. The happy aspect of this educational experiment is that if it turns out to be a complete failure because women simply aren't interested, the costs will soon dwindle to almost nothing. If, on the other hand, it begins to cost large sums of money, we will know that the program is working.

Can we afford to try it? We have found money for programs to conserve our soil and our trees even though it is the coming generations, rather than our own, that will chiefly benefit. Surely, then, we must afford the conservation of our greatest natural resource -- people.