

KIRKLAND: FEMINIST OR ANTI-FEMINIST?

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Introduction

Recently the women's struggle for equality has been revived; yet, despite the wide publicity these Women Liberationists have recieved, few people understand what they are actually demanding. Aileen S. Kraditor, in her introduction to Up from the Pedestal, has condensed their demands into one term: autonomy. She goes on further to state that "the grievance behind the demand has always seemed to be that women have been regarded not as people but as female relatives of people. And the feminists' desire has, consequently, been for women to be recognized, in the economic, political, and/or social realms, as individuals in their own right...The essential change demanded has always been that women's 'sphere' must be defined by women."(pg. 8) One way of obtaining this autonomy would be through education: an education that would teach women the realities of oppression that they will face in their lives as well as the confidence and endurance to define their own spheres in the face of these odds.

When was Bennington founded?
Kirkland College was the first independent women's college to be founded since 1926. It claims to meet the needs of a woman in todays society and to "fashion a time for a young woman to look beyond the short horizons her society sets for her."(Info. Booklet, 68-69) in its revolutionary new way of approaching women's education. Kirkland's appearance as a feminist institution may be misleading because the philosophy it was founded on in 1961 was certainly not aimed toward feminist goals. Since then, the definition of a woman's role has changed considerably, and in responding to this,

Kirkland has been plagued by the contradictions of a changing philosophy: some criticize the fact that in being a separate women's institution, it implies a woman is somehow different (inferior) from a man, while others point out that its separateness puts it in an invaluable position to educate women and make them aware of the particular realities of their life. It would be interesting at this point to see how Kirkland measures up as a feminist institution ideologically and in reality.

Founding Philosophies

Kirkland began in the mind of Robert W. McKuen in 1961 when he began to explore ways to expand and update Hamilton college to meet the educational requirements of today's society. He and his associate founders were also concerned with maintaining the advantages of a small liberal arts college, and found their solution in the coordinate college relationship ("separate but equal") as exemplified by the colleges at Claremont, California. In the process, the founders were forced to consider the aims of a liberal arts college and developed a new educational philosophy aimed toward the individual that included the idea of an un-traditional inter-disciplinary curriculum, rather than specific vocational training, which would prepare a person for the demands of involvement in all aspects of society. At this point, the decision was made to build a women's college coordinate to Hamilton using this new educational philosophy. They felt ^{that} women of high intellectual quality would be easier to recruit since few superior women's colleges were in existence at that time. Apparently it was also easier for them to conceive of an experimental women's college for the reasons stated by President Babbitt in his first president's report in 1968:

From the beginning, I think we all realized that being new and also being for women, we had certain opportunities which would not have been ours under other circumstances. For example, there was no reason why we needed to adopt the traditional structures of faculty and curriculum and as a college for women we felt less of the pressure to conform to certain pre-professional characteristics leading to graduate careers in specific disciplines. (pg. 9-10)

Thus, the dramatically new educational philosophy was more easily applied to women. This shift in emphasis toward the fact that Kirkland would be a school for women is evident, for example, ⁱⁿ the statement of educational philosophy ~~stated that:~~

No one would deny that a married woman owes her first allegiance to her husband, her children and her home; nor that she finds her greatest happiness and fullest expression of her talents in meeting her responsibilities to them. However, the nature of these responsibilities is not always well understood.

Therefore, the ^{framers} ~~creators~~ of Kirkland's philosophy believed ^{that a woman} ~~she~~ should be educated to have "enduring attitudes" that would help her adjust to the various starts and stops involved in her life: she needed, in their eyes, "a ^g greater flexibility and ability to adjust to changing circumstances than are usually required of a man." She would strive to "stay alive" during her changing life by being able to do what she liked to do; yet, able to like what she had to do. ("A Woman's Coordinate College for Hamilton", pg.1)

Kirkland's creators did not necessarily wish to push women into roles; however, they saw only the realities of understanding marriage and motherhood and none of the prejudices that prevent women from seeking other occupations. They did not think to question roles, but realized the need for more responsible and active women

in society. This outlook was certainly not feminist, but reminiscent of Emma Willard, who, like many others of the nineteenth century, believed in creating intelligent wives and responsible mothers through an educational institution that would "...possess the respectability, permanency, and uniformity of operation of those appropriated to males; and yet differ from them, so as to be adapted to that difference of character and duties, to which the softer sex should be formed..." (Up From the Pedestal, pg, 82)

{ underline if a published book }

Changing Philosophies

Although Kirkland was originally designed to meet the needs of Hamilton, those associated with it today have come to see its untraditional educational philosophy as a symbolic part of the various movements of the 1960's - including the Women's Liberation movement. This feeling of importance is expressed in one article of Kirkland's Newsletter of April 1970 where it is noted that fourteen colleges had been opened to women since the founding of Kirkland. The article goes on to say that "The evidence clearly describes a radical change in the perspective of educators examining the question of who should be educated by whom. Kirkland College is both a part of this reformation and distinct within it."

I think this is an essential point - Even Hamilton's need to be able to progress

Kirkland has been forced, somewhat, by the feminist movement to reevaluate its function for women, but has never made any clear cut break with the past philosophies. Because of its particular claim to meet the needs of today's young women, it has been accepted as part of the movement to redefine women's roles and the power structure they are based on. President Babbitt has himself recognized the prejudices that went unnoticed by the founders as in his statement in "Particulars" where he says:

- Do you think that's why re-evaluation is going on? I'd like to talk so, but...

...women in American Society continue to be victimized by discriminatory assumptions about their capabilities and "place" in a male-dominated system. This inhibiting and pervasive point of view is particularly damaging to intelligent, talented women whose potential is clearly beyond the provisional expectation of the society and - often - themselves. (pg.2)

He further states:

It is easy to get lulled by all the talk about Women's Liberation into thinking that great change has taken place. Actually, it has not. And until that day comes when society has reached a resolution of its present imbalance we feel that we can best serve women by being an institution particularly sensitive to their needs.(pg. 3)

Again "needs" is not sharply defined and one wonders if and how Kirkland plans to respond to the new attitudes toward women. This vagueness is obvious in all the literature about the school and is hindering the formulation of sharply defined goals for its students. This topic, the goals of a women's school, was finally discussed in the Women's Conference held February ⁶⁻⁷~~sixth and seventh~~, 1972, in which the question of roles and how to deal with them predominated. In workshops such as those titled, "Sex Roles", "Innovation Workshop," and "Revolutionary Perspectives", students, faculty and others related to the school were able to discuss the arguments of the human versus the female approach to education; teaching content versus teaching method; the coordinate school versus the separate school, and many others. Most people felt some feminist awareness should be included in the curriculum and some argued that the school should go a long way beyond this to prepare its women. It is evident from this conference and from all other indications of opinion in the school that among faculty, students and administration "there is no consensus on a definition of Kirkland as a women's college." (Report on the

Institutional Self-Study of Kirkland College, pg. 10)

Tracing the philosophy of Kirkland reveals a rising confusion among all members of the community as to the role of the college's education which is further confused by contradictory opinions concerning women's roles. As it presents itself today, it is ideologically a feminist institution as it claims to prepare young women according to their needs - "needs" meaning a wide range of things. This and several shakily defined concepts must be cleaned up before the college can produce women with the endurance they are aiming for. Meanwhile, how has this affected the workings of the school in reality?

Incoming Students: How do they view themselves and their education?

The ACE survey taken of the freshmen classes of '73, '74, and '75 and published in the "Spectator" of November 17, 1972, gives a good indication of why Hamilton and Kirkland students are in Clinton and what they are like. For example, when the freshmen classes of '75 were asked what initially attracted them to their schools, most Kirkland students answered the "special education program" when most Hamilton students answered "reputation." Even here a basic difference in the images of the two institutions can be seen.

Many Kirkland students aspire to high degrees. Almost 20% of these three classes hoped to obtain a Ph. D., which is slightly under that predicted by Hamilton students. When asked about professional degrees, however, such as M.D., D.D.S., or D. V.M., the interest of Kirkland students is minimal while Hamilton students showed intense interest. In addition to being ambitious, Kirkland students indicated a wish to have control over their bodies and lives by almost unanimously supporting the legalization of abortion. On the other

hand, when asked about the importance of raising a family, the students showed another side of themselves: in the class of '73, 71%¹⁹⁷³ felt it was important, as did 52% of the class of '74¹⁹⁷⁴ and 50% of the class of '75¹⁹⁷⁵ (on the same question, 66% of '73¹⁹⁷³ felt it was important as did 60% of '74¹⁹⁷⁴ and 61% of '75¹⁹⁷⁵). Only 13% of Kirkland students viewed their college experience as an avenue to making money, and the same percentage felt it was necessary to be well off financially. *This is confusing!*

Kirkland students consider themselves, and seemed to be, fairly liberal-minded; yet, I would question if their "consciousnesses" have actually been "raised." That they are not aware or concerned with the feminist attributes of Kirkland is evident in another survey taken for the accreditation committee, which shows that only 7% of those who answered had chosen Kirkland because it is a women's school. Beyond the vague academic goals the freshmen set for themselves, they had little, if no, conception of what they would pursue after college; in fact, they seem to live up to the statement that "one tends to think of getting a good education at Hamilton and a good experience at Kirkland." (Annette Baxter, Women's Conference)

A man shapes his future and his occupation from the moment of his birth; yet, a woman is given encouragement only for an occupation that will "tide her over" until marriage. It is then interesting to note that when the Kirkland students of '75 were asked if they felt their intellectual self-confidence was above average, 52% answered "yes" when their intellectual equals at Hamilton answered "yes" 66% of the time. It is precisely at this uncertainty that Kirkland should aim its education.

Curriculum

Kirkland's curriculum was designed to complement that of Hamilton so that the least possible amount of overlapping would occur. As a result, Hamilton maintained dominance over the traditionally male subjects (particularly science) and Kirkland became strong in the less emphasized subjects (particularly art) which are also the traditionally female subjects. This split in curriculum is clearly evident in the list of courses offered for registration for spring semester at Kirkland: 35% of the courses were in the Art division and only 10% of them were in the Science division. Of course the Kirkland students could find sufficient science courses across the street, ~~and~~ and this situation would be quite satisfactory if Kirkland students were encouraged to enter seriously into the sciences at Hamilton. Unfortunately, very few girls take this step and are sometimes subject to severe prejudices if they do.

Other figures from the ACE survey reveal that this tendency towards "artsy" Kirkland students and Hamilton "science jocks" is inherent in the freshmen classes. Among the freshmen of the classes '73, '74, and '75, the women who predicted they would be art majors outnumbered the men three to one. The only other strongly predicted majors at Kirkland were in the social sciences which is also considered to be a more feminine interest. Conversely, the Hamilton freshmen outnumbered the Kirkland freshmen several times in their prediction of pre-professional majors. The careers predicted by these freshmen were divided along similar lines: the Kirkland students took to the arts and Hamilton students preferred medicine.

Among those students who declared majors by August 1972,

*Really?
Please
talk to
me.*

this tendency remains the same. A fairly equal amount of Hamilton and Kirkland students chose majors in the humanities and social sciences; yet, 17% of the Kirkland women chose art majors as opposed to 4% of the Hamilton men. The science division claimed 13% of the Kirkland majors and 19% of Hamilton's - and there were no female chemistry or physics majors. It is not terribly suprizing, then, to see that in the "Profile of Post Graduate Plans, class of 1972" taken just prior to graduation that of those students going to graduate school, the Hamilton students entering Law, Business, Economics, Science, Medicine and Maths outnumbered the Kirkland students considerably.

The fact that the Arts are so predominant at Kirkland does not mean that they are not important, or that women should ignore them while exploring other fields; yet, it does indicate that even with the science facilities available at Hamilton, the hold over male interests has not been broken. Prejudices such as these run deep and begin in the earliest grades of school and should certainly not be perpetuated by a school with such high ideals as Kirkland. Obviously, the coordinate relationship is in question here, but I find it difficult to see how the "newness" of Kirkland could work effectively with the traditions of Hamilton on such an issue. Furthermore, the students that come to Kirkland and come for its own quality departments and not Hamilton's. In order to offer its new educational outlook to students of different interests, Kirkland may be forced to develop some new departments.

Kirkland Graduates

Many young women have little idea of what their futures will bring beyond college besides attending college.

bring beyond college besides eventual marriage and motherhood.

If Kirkland hopes to give women a new perspective that would replace this blankness, their students should come out of the school with a firm grasp on themselves and a fairly well defined feeling for their future. This feeling of assurance might be reflected in the post graduate plans of the class of 1972, even though it would not show precisely how each individual attitude was affected by Kirkland. For all Kirkland graduates not going on to graduate school 21% had confirmed jobs or some other firm plan. This figure was just about equal to that of Hamilton graduates in the same category; however, a distressing 43% of the Kirkland women were in the category of "Plans Indefinite" as compared to 23% of the Hamilton men. The rest of the graduates, ^{This is quite high} 35% of the Kirkland class and 57% of the Hamilton class, have gone on to graduate school.

These figures are important indicators of Kirkland's success. First of all, although Kirkland is mostly concerned with the undergraduate education, its women must learn to seek qualification and recognition beyond college through many avenues in order to become economically independent and equals to men. One of these avenues is a graduate education and it appears that many Kirkland women were encouraged to take this route. But, the fact that so many students were indefinite about their plans is a distressing indication that beyond the completion of their education, many have not been able to define more sharply what they want for their future. Obviously, Kirkland has far to go before it can claim to produce women with a confidence and a new, brader outlook on life.

Conclusion

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Kirkland, while trying to find its "sense of self", has attempted to remain flexible and respond to the pressures of a changing society. It was in its infancy when the feminist movement gained force and invalidated a great deal of its original philosophy, and, as a result, Kirkland is still trying to define the attitude it should assume towards its women students. Because of its origin, because of its philosophy and because of the nature of its student body, it is clearly necessary for Kirkland to step back and reevaluate its goals. If female oppression is real, and I believe it is frightening real, this women's institution is in an ideal position to show young women the realities they will face and to help them deal with their uncertainties.

There is, of course, the lurking problem of how to make women "look beyond the short horizons her society sets for her" when they often have no idea what this actually means. The "Student Questionnaire for Kirkland Self-Evaluation" shows that few students who attend Kirkland want a special female studies program or feel that it is particularly relevant to teach with special attention to the situation of women in most subjects. The Women's Center, started so optimistically in 1971 is now completely extinct for lack of interest. It seems that if the prejudice is so subtle that most young women will ignore it, Kirkland must respond with a solution that is far from subtle itself. These women must know the history of their struggle in order to understand their position today; they must have more women models to show them alternative life styles; and if they can not be taught the realities, then more opportunities to experience the realities must be made available to them. The

answer to this problem is crucial to the future of the college and will determine whether or not Kirkland can ever hope to live up to its claims.

Martha - Your paper is excellent!!
You write well, your data for the most part is clear, and your paper reflects a good amount of organizing + synthesizing of material. There really wasn't time but I would have liked more about what a feminist college would be like - This is not a criticism only to say I would have enjoyed reading your ideas on the subject -

Celeste

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