

Reimagining The Women's College: A Critical Analysis of Historically Women's College Transgender Admission Policies

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ABSTRACT. Historically women's colleges, particularly those which are predominantly white, have a long and complicated history with their relationship to feminism, equity, and transgender justice. Using a trans liberation framework, I have critically analyzed the trans student admission policies from four historically women's colleges. Those institutions are: Bryn Mawr College, Hollins University, Mount Holyoke College, and Smith College. My analysis includes how these policies both perpetuate and reinforce harmful gender and sex binaries. Additionally, my research explores how these policies work to create an environment that ultimately does not best serve trans, nor cisgender students. By calling on scholarship by key figures in women's, gender, and sexuality studies such as Judith Butler and Bobby Noble, I explain how these schools, as well as all single sex institutions, can and should shift from institutions that primarily serve cisgender women, to institutions that serve all who fall under the category of "gender oppressed." This article also calls upon key scholarship produced by Dr. Megan Nanney, the professor of the course from which this project originated.

Using the foundational research done by trans scholars, and scholars of gender oppression such as Bobby Noble, Megan Nanney, and Judith Butler as a reference, the mission of "women's colleges" and how that mission may possibly reinforce the gender binary that subjugates women and trans people in the first place, deserves to be critically analyzed. Using a trans liberation framework, I argue that it is essential for these colleges and universities not only to admit trans students, but also to serve as a space where a "trans-" ideology is foundational to the goals of the institution. To expand, it is key to understand this concept through the words of scholar Bobby Noble, "I am also mapping a universalized practice of 'trans-' (with a hyphen) for how it indexes discursive and intersectional formations of complex embodiment and personhood that must transcend their hegemonic formation, a formation impossible to live. In such a configuration, trans- induces both critical crossings and mobilities of categorically fixed territories (be they bodies or nations), and how they are imagined and materialized" (Noble, 2011). To explore this idea, as well as other questions concerning the presence of "single-sex" institutions, I critically examined the trans admission policies of four historically women's colleges: Hollins University, Smith College, Bryn Mawr College, and Mount Holyoke College. When I refer to a trans admission policy, I am referring to how particular higher education institutions navigate admission and retention for prospective or current trans and nonbinary students.

My information on the trans admission policies comes directly from extensive research done by Dr. Megan Nanney. Trans admission policies for all single-sex institutions can be found on their website. Respectively, Hollins University's trans admission policy can be found under the new student information tab on the Hollins University website and is simply titled "Transgender Policy." Smith, Bryn Mawr and Mount Holyoke's policies can be found on their individual websites located in the admission information section. While Smith and Mount Holyoke seem to lack an official title for their policies, Bryn Mawr's trans admission information is explicitly titled "Transgender Applicants."

Beyond titles, the substance of the Hollins University trans policy emphasizes that it will allow the admittance of any student who “consistently lives and identifies as a woman.” Hollins has not explained what this statement would actually look like to them, nor has it been clarified *who* exactly would decide this. Regarding these inconsistencies, the Hollins University trans policy leaves students and prospective students with more questions than answers. As has been proven through trans and feminist scholarship, “consistently living and identifying as a woman” can mean a variety of different things to different people. In fact, one could argue there is not much consistency in identity for many college students. It should also be noted that Hollins’ policy does not allow for the admittance of non-binary students.

Smith College’s policy is similar to Hollins, providing “[t]he college considers for admission any applicant whose birth certificate reflects their gender as female, or who identifies as female.” While Hollins University makes no mention of the need for legal documentation of gender identity, both schools rely on vague interpretations of sex and/or gender and assume that either the institutions themselves, or someone, has the answer of what it truly means to identify with womanhood, or in this case, to be female.

Bryn Mawr’s policy uses similar rhetoric to Hollins and Smith, yet also admits nonbinary students who were assigned female at birth (AFAB). Distinguishable from Hollins and Smith, Bryn Mawr also admits trans men who have not “taken medical or legal steps to identify as men.” These steps have not been explicitly defined.

Lastly, with arguably the most expansive policy, Mount Holyoke will welcome applications from students who are cisgender women, transgender, and/or non-binary. The terms they use are not explicitly defined; however, the policy implies it will allow any prospective student to be admitted who falls under the label of “gender oppressed,” meaning the student lives outside of the category of cisgender male.

When examining the trans policies of historically women's colleges, it is evident that schools tie womanhood to binary categorizations of both sex and gender. Specifically, this is true in the case of policies similar to Smith and Hollins. By emphasizing their need to only admit students who “consistently live and identify as women,” these institutions define womanhood as something that is innate, static, monolithic, and measurable. To examine this idea even further, I think it’s important to look towards Bryn Mawr College’s trans policy, and specifically their allowance of non-binary students who were assigned female at birth. While it is absolutely true that non-binary students have a place at historically women’s colleges, it is simultaneously not fair to only admit non-binary students who were assigned female at birth. In doing so, like Hollins and Smith, Bryn Mawr’s policy invalidates student identity, and simply labels these prospective students as “woman enough.”

Keeping the implications of these policies in mind, it is critical to explore how the reinforcement of gender as a social institution is being accomplished by these colleges. If the social construct of womanhood has been used for centuries to oppress those who fall under the label of “women,” then does the existence of historically women’s colleges with such trans policies, only enforce this idea and consequently participate in, what Judith Butler would call “doing (and therefore creating) gender” (Butler, 2005)? I believe questions like these will be vital for historically women’s colleges to consider *if* their passions do not end at the equality of the sexes, but instead strive for the liberation of the sexes, and therefore the deconstruction of sex categories and the gender binary. The justification for trans

exclusionary policies (or trans admission policies that are severely limited) from historically women's colleges frequently references the historical oppression of women and those with traditionally female genitalia under patriarchy. While the oppression of women under patriarchy is absolutely something we must consider when looking at educational inequities, I also would argue that these policies are only reinforcing patriarchy through sex and gender essentialism. Not to mention, exclusionary policies that govern a student's genitalia are unenforceable and should not be enforceable.

Gender binaries are further enforced by invoking social structures written into these policies. For example, Bryn Mawr determines student eligibility through medicine and law. Bryn Mawr's decision to admit trans men who have not transitioned medically or legally reinforces this idea that without medical and legal recognition, one is not "truly trans." This is a similar thought process to one articulated by scholar Harry Benjamin in his essay, "Transsexualism and Transvestism as Psycho-Somatic and Somato-Psychic Syndromes" (2013). Though Benjamin had some progressive ideas about the categorization of trans and trans people in his time, the 1960s, he also only truly legitimized trans people following their surgical transition. As has been demonstrated not only by Benjamin, but also by the mainstream media, this belief centers around the institution of science, and by extension medicalizing a diagnosis and prescription for what it means to be transgender. Bryn Mawr's as well as Smith's decision to use legal documents such as birth certificates and name change certifications, reinforce the idea of legal legitimacy. Similar to medical models, this paradigm implies that you have to be "one way" to truly be trans.

It is extremely important to point out how different trans people's access to medical procedures or legal name changes depends on that person's socioeconomic status. Though they were not one of the four institutions fully analyzed here, colleges like Converse and Cottey requiring legal and/or medical changes before allowing trans women into their school plays, indicative of larger capitalist and white supremacist ideologies. Given the fact that the medical establishment in this country is characterized by serving the benefit of middle to upper-class white people, middle to upper-class white people will have easier access to resources such as medical diagnosis, procedures, and name changes. This not only reinforces the elitism and whiteness that lets the academic institution thrive, but it also reflects who predominantly white (or PWI) women's colleges were created for in the first place, white, middle to upper-class women.

It is additionally relevant to analyze each of these schools' statements on their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (or DEI statements), as well as briefly describe how these institutions have historically handled racism, classism, and transphobia specifically in relation to the condition of womanhood. Both of these notions are important to take into account given the fact that systems of oppression are often interlocking. Furthermore, the ability for trans and non-binary students to apply to a historically women's college is equally as important as it is for trans and non-binary students of intersecting identities to feel safe at their school and receive a rich education at said HWC. Transitioning into specific and recent DEI statements from the schools, I have chosen to analyze the Hollins University webpage, "Our Commitment to Inclusivity & Intercultural Competency." The webpage outlines a step-by-step plan to address both its racist roots, as well as the racism and white supremacist ideologies the university has continued to perpetuate in more recent years. In Mount Holyoke's DEI statement, it is noteworthy that

the college explicitly states that they are a women's college that is gender diverse. The school also lays out a DEI initiative that details its strides in "furthering [our] collective commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion through strategic planning and community engagement" (Mount Holyoke, 2021). The Bryn Mawr College website also provides explicit action steps that the school plans on implementing in hopes of eliminating racial bias, and markedly, acknowledges its tumultuous history with institutional racism. While Smith College does not have any easily accessible action plan on their DEI webpage, they do have a tab webpage visitors can click on entitled "Inclusion in Action," which details what the institution is doing semester by semester to create an equitable environment for their students, faculty, and staff. While I believe concrete actions plans like each of the schools have provided are a great start in ensuring any action will take place, they also imply that the institution has struggled with DEI policies in the past. Therefore, the statements demonstrate what I have previously mentioned; PWI women's colleges were not created with the intention of serving their more marginalized students equitably, nor have their goals historically strived for the liberation of all people. Additionally, it is important to note that predominantly white HWCs also were created with a limited, and false understanding of womanhood. Specifically, womanhood that is centered in whiteness and classism. In each of these institutions, as well as several HWCs across the country, the push for anti-racist policies, as well as trans inclusive policies have largely been student-led.

Throughout this paper, I have used many terms to describe Hollins University, Smith College, Bryn Mawr College, and Mount Holyoke College, all of which are most popularly known as historically women's colleges. These terms have included historically women's colleges, single-sex institutions, and women's colleges. The question then, is what is the correct term for these institutions, and what term will propel these institutions forward into a future that focuses on dismantling the gender binary? Though many titles for these institutions have been proposed over the years, the most contemporarily relevant term is *gender-selective* colleges or universities, a term referenced in the scholarly article "Transgender Student Experiences in Single-Sex Colleges" by Dr. Megan Nanney (2020). While I originally thought historically women's college was an inclusive term that also allowed for the acknowledgment of the importance of women gaining an education separate from men, I am now shifting my thinking to believe that this term, while slightly better than the term "all women's college," still enforces a gender binary that hurts women who were AFAB, as well as trans people. If we are to begin shifting from the common understanding of the term "trans," to scholar Bobby Noble's idea of "trans-," I think the smaller scale transformation of gender-selective colleges is a great place to begin, and we can begin by not forcing trans people into a gender binary that they exist outside of.

Ultimately, I assume that another reason the term "historically women's college" sits well with many people is because not only can this term be supported by the legal and medical models I've explained above, but the term also acknowledges this narrative that women's colleges were created to give women a "leg up" in a society that was not created for their success. This narrative, of course, is simply not true. PWI women's colleges were created to teach affluent white women specific skills and give them an education that would make them more desirable wives. However, this does not mean that gender-selective colleges cannot have the goal of providing an extensive and rigorous education to AFAB women, trans, and non-binary people who live under patriarchy now. I believe the best way

to do this is to acknowledge how “womanhood” is not something that is, nor can be, innate, static, monolithic, or measurable. A concrete step towards this acknowledgement, as well as a step that would lead closer to the goal of the deconstruction of gender and sex, is for gender-selective colleges to implement transformative policy change. In writing, I believe a trans-inclusive admission policy would allow consideration of admission to any student who falls under the category of gender oppressed. That being said, it is key that universities not be too limited in their definitions of gender oppression, nor rely on a definition based around commonplace, Eurocentric definitions of gender. Ultimately, such policies would lead toward the conversion of these institutions from colleges “for women” to colleges for all who have been marginalized due to their gender identity. I call on each administration of not only the gender-selective colleges mentioned, but each gender-selective college or university in the United States to reevaluate their current admission policies and decide if said policies truly exemplify the values their institutions have more recently pledged to uphold.

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