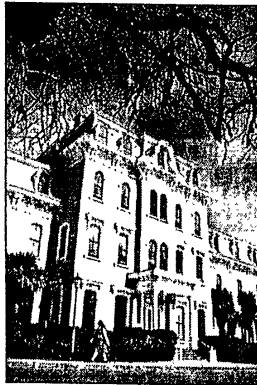


Educating women

Mills College celebrates its sesquicentennial



Tracy Hussman walked in front of the first building constructed at Mills College's present site.

By Tanya Schevitz
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

When Mills College opened 150 years ago, women would still have to wait 68 years before they could vote and the goal of most campuses was to turn out teachers and good members of the community instead of career women.

Even 45 years ago, when Professor Emeritus Charles Larsen began working at Mills, most of his history students went on to be housewives. "They would pass a lighted candle to celebrate the engagement of a student," he said.

"Mills has historically been a pioneer, and we will continue to be."

JANET L. HOLMCREN
president of Mills College

Women's colleges have changed dramatically since then, as opportunities for women have exploded. They have expanded their curriculum to include more career-oriented disciplines, opened graduate programs and focused on cultivating women's talents in math and science.

But in a time when women have so many choices for college, they have also had to actively promote the benefit of learning in a woman-focused environment to keep students coming in.



Photos by KAT WADE/The Chronicle

Women's colleges dropped in popularity around the 1950s, after most of the nation's men's colleges went coed. Coed education was widely embraced, even by feminists, and by the 1970s more than half of the 300 women's colleges had closed.

Now, only 70 women's colleges remain, but this year, as Mills celebrates its sesquicentennial, its enrollment is growing in graduate programs. Enrollment at women's

colleges nationwide has surged in the past decade, from about 100,000 to 160,000.

Interest was renewed after the release, in the early 1990s, of findings that girls and women do better in classes without boys or men, and by the awareness of women's issues raised by the televised hearings of accusations of sexual harassment by University of Oklahoma law

Graduating senior Jeunesse Speed, an international relations major, and senior Ashley Gilmore, a liberal studies major, greeted each other after the Mills College president's colloquium luncheon.

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College celebrating its 150 years

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Professor Anita Hill against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas.

Among other things, the Anita Hill hearings highlighted the tremendous inequality that existed in positions of power, said Jadwiga Sebrechts, president of the Women's College Coalition. The U.S. Senate had only two women then, and neither served on the hearing committee. Americans saw a panel of mostly white men grilling Hill about her relationship with Thomas.

The hearings galvanized women.

"There was a lot of attention paid to the idea of gender inequity in education," Sebrechts said. "The coed institutions did not do much except admit women to make the environment reflective of them. After decades of people thinking coed education was going to lead to access in society, women's colleges suddenly were the focus of a lot of attention."

Women's colleges expanded math and science programs. They developed new programs for "displaced homemakers," older women who dropped out when they got married or never had the opportunity for a higher education. And they expanded opportunities to reflect women's priorities, adding business, science and leadership programs.

John Connolly, acting president of Smith College, a top women's college, said when women's colleges first opened in the 1830s, what they offered depended on the jobs that were open to women. "There wasn't much sense training them for medicine if medical schools wouldn't take them."

Women who were allowed to attend men's colleges for graduate studies usually could not earn a degree and had to sit behind screens.

That changed during World War II. Women moved into jobs vacated by men who went off to

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MILLS PRESIDENT JANET L. HOLMGREN

war. Women also were recruited by graduate programs that desperately needed to fill soldiers' spots.

When the war ended, women were told that they had to make room for the returning men, but there was no way to reverse the strides women had made. Women's colleges boomed.

Now with all the choices available to women, women's colleges have to promote the idea that they offer students a chance to see themselves not only in greater numbers in the faculty but also in the curriculum, Connolly said.

Mills, set in Oakland, has dramatically expanded its offerings to respond to student needs. Although it opened in 1852 as a teacher training ground for the daughters of the Gold Rush Forty-Niners, in the mid-20th century, it added career centered course work, including physical and occupational therapy and fine arts — with the first modern dance department in the West.

In 1974, Mills became the first women's college to have a computer science major. In 1974, it introduced an interdisciplinary political, economic and legal major to train women as future lawyers and civic leaders.

But in the early 1990s Mills faced a crisis. Enrollment was flat and fund-raising, weak. The governing board decided to admit men to the undergraduate program — they were already allowed in graduate programs.

The decision attracted media attention. Students reacted, staging a strike that essentially closed the campus. Two weeks later, the board rescinded the coed concept in favor of a plan to raise more money and boost enrollment.

Much growth has come from broadening graduate opportunities. Noting the low percentage of women in school leadership, Mills initiated its first doctoral program in 1999 in educational leadership. It started a choreography composition and leadership program in 1987 to help raise the percentage of women choreographers. The campus started an MBA program this year, established a public policy major and plans to start a public policy graduate school in the next five years.

"Mills has historically been a pioneer, and we will continue to be," said Mills President Janet L. Holmgren. "We are going to find those areas and fields where leadership is still lacking, and we will craft the curriculum to support women's advancement in those areas."

The undergraduate program is also expanding with an environmental science major next year.

Mills sophomore Julie Rubenstein, 20, a third-generation Mills student, said she was attracted to the school in part because of her positive experience in an all-girls math class in middle school.

"I've always felt that the guys were always shouting out the answers before you could think about it, and they were usually wrong anyway," Rubenstein said. She found the girls-only environment gave girls a chance to shine.

"I wanted to be in a (college) where there were less distractions as well as the fact that it would be a more supportive environment and I would find women with similar interests," she said.

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Above: Media studies and sociology major Rufienna Jones wrote a review on the lawn at the student plaza. Left: Veronica Williams, an ethnic studies major, (far left) played foot bag with graduating senior and English major Ida Cheng in the student plaza at Mills College.